

What leading Irish sex educationalists want taught in our schools



Introduction:

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is currently redesigning the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum for schools. RSE is part of Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE). The new SPHE programme for Junior Cycle students (aged 12-15) has already been launched.

This research brief will look at what key figures in the Irish sex education field want to see taught about **consent**, **pornography** and **gender** in our schools. Some of this has already been incorporated into the State syllabus. Schools are still free to adapt the syllabus to their own ethos. However, it seems clear that the State, and the key figures discussed below, wish those schools to adopt positions that would be incompatible with the ethos of almost all faith schools and many parents.

- **Consent:** No-one objects to education about sexual consent. But when sexuality morality is reduced to consent alone, while a committed relationship, or marriage, are reduced to optional extras, that is a very different matter.
- **Pornography:** Some of the figures we will look at below also believe that pornography can be 'positive' and 'ethical', something many parents will disagree with.
- **Gender:** With regard to 'gender', many parents will also disagree that a person's biological sex and 'gender' can be treated as two completely separate things, but State-sponsored SHPE does make this separation and therefore you might be biological female but really a 'male' or vice versa.

In this brief, we will start with the **Active Consent Unit at NUI Galway**, which is extremely influential. Then we will look at a key textbook called '**Sex Educated**' by Grace Alice O'Shea of WISER (West of Ireland Sexuality Education Resource).

Finally, we will look at the views of Richie Sadlier, author of '**Let's Talk**', and presenter of a recent RTE documentary about how RSE is taught in our secondary schools.



Active Consent unit (NUI Galway)

A team based in the School of Psychology at NUI Galway and lead by Dr Pádraig MacNeela has worked to design and deliver sexual consent programmes ('Active Consent, Smart Consent') for adolescents and young adults.

They train facilitators of consent workshops who then teach in other institutions. Initially, the programmes were aimed at college level or secondary level students but now "consent education" will be extended to primary level.

The *Active Consent Programme* developed in NUI Galway incorporates a "porn literacy" workshop.

Kate Dawson was the expert on "porn literacy" in the NUI Galway team. She has previously worked as a sex-educator with the HSE funded Sexual Health West (former AIDS WEST), Galway. (See more about this unit below).

The topic of her PhD was "Establishing an evidence base for the development of a pornography intervention for young adolescents."¹

In her article about "Promoting porn literacy among parents and children"², Kate Dawson clearly states that "Porn literacy education at secondary school level could reduce the



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– Kate Dawson

stigma around porn engagement" and make it more acceptable. She worries about the "belief in Irish homes and at a broader social level that watching porn is shameful and embarrassing". She wants to bring about a "much needed change in Ireland's knowledge of and attitudes toward porn."

Kate Dawson has said on TV that she believes that children as young as eight should be taught about masturbation³, and kids in school should analyse porn videos to prepare for real-life sex⁴.

She was one of the authors of the "Porn as Pedagogy" event at Tate Modern, in London, where participants were shown a 45-minute selection from "ethical porn" movies. So-called "ethical porn" is defined as pornography in which participants are not exploited, are fairly paid and details of the scenes are pre-negotiated so that everyone consents to what happens. It regards porn itself as morally neutral, if not actually a good thing.

When an NUI Galway report on porn⁵ was launched by the then Minister for Higher Education Mary Mitchell O'Connor, Kate Dawson, who contributed to the report, commented: "it is not good enough to just say that 'porn is bad' because it is not, people really enjoy watching it, there are a lot of positive uses, but people need to have the skills to make their own mind up about the content they see because porn is so varied."⁶

Kate Dawson was part of the team that developed the Active Consent Programme/Smart Consent. The team included Pádraig MacNeela and Siobhán O'Higgins.

Pádraig MacNeela is senior lecturer at NUI Galway and part of the Expert Advisory Group of the Minister of Education. Siobhán O'Higgins has worked for AIDS West.

In a submission to an Oireachtas review of RSE, MacNeela and O'Higgins also took the view that



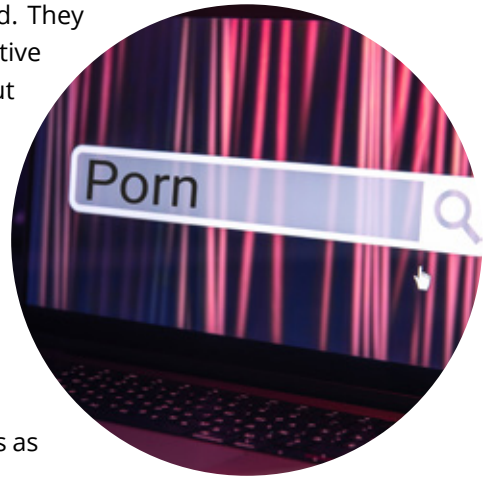
pornography can be a force for good. They wrote: “pornography can have a positive impact in assisting with learning about sexual activity, especially when formal sexual health education is not available.” However, they also allow that “the scripts for sexual activity and role models that young people are exposed to do not map well on to the WHO definition of positive sexual health”.⁷

The WHO definition of sexual health is as follows:

“...a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.”⁸

Together with Kate Dawson and Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, Pádraig MacNeela is the author of the article, “Towards a Model of Porn Literacy: Core Concepts, Rationales, and Approaches”⁹. One of the sections is about reducing the shame of using pornography and increasing its acceptability.

Kate Dawson previously worked for Sexual Health West. Sexual Health West is an organisation based in Galway, primarily funded by HSE West. The WISER (West of Ireland Sexuality Education Resource) team provides youth and community education on sexual health.



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'Sex Educated'

by **Grace Alice O'Shea**
(West of Ireland Sexuality
Education Resource (WISER))

Grace Alice O'Shea is 'Relationship and Sexuality Educator' at WISER¹⁰ and she recently authored *Sex Educated*¹¹, a guidebook for sexual education, with extensive contributions from Kate Dawson, Nicole McGuinan, Hayley Mulligan, Lorraine O'Connell, and Meagan O'Neill. The book is based on "over thirty year's-experience of delivering sex education in Ireland, working with tens of thousands of young people" and is addressed to teenagers and their educators.

The book fully accepts the controversial theory that a person's biological sex and their 'gender' are unrelated.

For example, it says: "Biological sex can also be called assigned sex. Assigned



sex is a label a baby is assigned or given at birth, usually by a doctor, who decides what sex will be placed on a baby's birth certificate. Assigned sex is considered to be a more accurate term as a person's sex is sometimes not so easily defined, complex creatures that we are!" (p. 10)

This means a person's biological sex is not simply taken as a given and declaring a baby is either a boy or a girl at birth or in the womb is somehow seen as an arbitrary act.

In a similar vein, the book says: “The idea of assigned sex as a spectrum rather than binary (which is something that can be broken into two categories) allows for all the variations in between these two ends. If you can imagine the male end of the spectrum as red and the female end as violet, just think of all the shades that are in between the two colours.” (p. 14)

The book endorses polyamory as an alternative to monogamy. It states: “Some people have multiple intimate partners and everyone involved has agreed to this situation. This is known as polyamory, and it has been around for long time. The most common type of relationship we see in Ireland involves monogamy. Monogamy refers to an ‘exclusive’ intimate relationship between two partners, where no one else is involved. Monogamy can be perfect for some people but may not suit other people and their relationships. There are many different types of non-monogamous relationships. For example, people may engage in ‘open’ relationships, in which

partners can typically have sex with other people but not have romantic relationship with others. Again this must all be talked through in detail between the two people in the relationship, with everyone’s wishes and feelings being heard and considered.

This is different from cheating. Being in a non-monogamous relationship is not the same as being single and having multiple sexual partners.”. (p. 377)

The book defends having multiple sexual partners. “It is not bad to have a ‘high’ number of sexual partners. This number is subjective anyway, and what one person considers a ‘low’ number may seem ‘high’ to someone else. What matters is that all sexual encounters are fully consensual and as safe as possible. You may have only one sexual partner for your life, or you may have many. There is nothing wrong with this, and there should be zero shame attached. The only person you need to talk to about your number of sexual partners is a medical professional if they ask, e.g. during a STI check. Apart from that, it is no one’s



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business but yours, and it certainly does not define your worth". (p. 255)

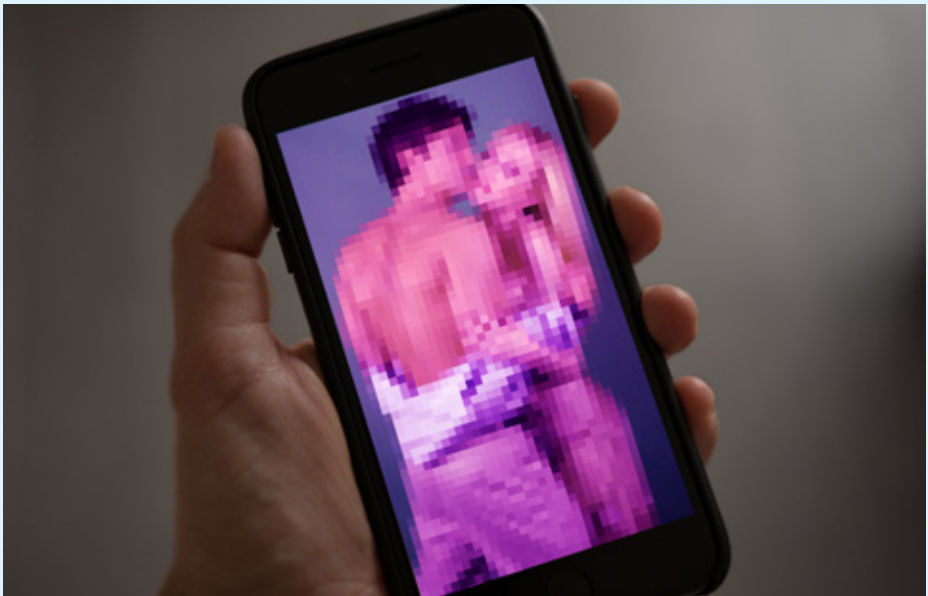
It is worth recalling again that the book is based on sex education lessons aimed at teenagers.

The book normalises porn consumption among young people, including those under the age of 18.

"Watching porn does not have to be bad. If someone watches porn and enjoys the experience, knows that porn is not like real sex, understands that it is all acted out and unrealistic, and knows when to switch off and look for help if they see something that felt wrong or they are worried about something, then that is a great starting point for looking at porn in a safe and healthy way. Watching porn can become a problem if someone uses it a sex education tool, feels under pressure to re-enact, feels bad, ashamed

or distressed in any way during or after watching it, pressures others to watch it, or feels that their experiences of body image, masturbation, orgasm, or sex is negatively affected. In a nutshell, watching porn can be bad for someone, depending on how it is affecting them, but watching porn in itself is nothing to feel ashamed about. If people feel shame about something, then they are less likely to talk about it and look for advice or support if/when they need it. So, it is important that you know you can and should talk about it if you ever have any problem with porn." (p. 183)

It adds: "Ethically produced porn can be defined as porn made legally, respecting the rights of performers, with good working conditions, shows both fantasy and real-world sex and celebrates sexual diversity". (pp. 183-84)



'Let's Talk'

by Richie Sadlier

Another prominent voice in the field of sex education is Richie Sadlier, former professional football player and well known sports commentator for RTE. An accredited psychotherapist, he has taught sex ed in schools and also created an online sexual health course for senior cycle students. He recently presented (September 2023) a documentary about the matter on RTE.

He is the author of *Let's talk* (2022)¹² and the following quotes are from that book.

"Remember, it's OK not to want a romantic connection with someone. It's OK to want sexual experiences too, so it shouldn't be necessary to present yourself to potential partners as someone you're not." (p. 46)

In other words, commitment need not be part of a sexual relationship.

Like the other authors quoted in this brief, he believes that pornography can be a good thing. He says to the teenage audience his book is aimed at: "This may be the first time you've read about the positives of porn. After all, it's not a topic people spend much time writing about, particularly in books written for lads your age. Most people prefer to warn young people about the negatives of porn and leave it at that, but that would leave out a big and important chunk of the conversation. Like a lot of things in life, there



are good and bad elements to porn, so it's important to acknowledge that and discuss what they are". (p. 108)

"Like everyone else, you get to decide for yourself what kind of relationship you have with porn. You might ignore it, watch it occasionally or watch it a lot. You might be sickened by it or excited by it. Whatever your approach to porn or your attitude towards watching it, please remember that wings won't appear from your arse if you try to fly out a window". (p. 121)

Sex Ed
Curriculum



CONCLUSION:

Consult parents about what their children are taught

Much of what these experts want is already in the SPHE course for junior cycle pupils and is proposed for senior cycle students, especially with regard to how gender issues and consent will be addressed. As mentioned, faith schools can still adapt the programmes to better suit their ethos, but we still see what key figures in the sex education field, plus the Department of Education itself, want.

The big question is, what do parents want? Do they want their children taught that consent alone is enough before having sex, and that a relationship is simply an optional add-on? Do they want them taught that pornography can be 'positive'? Do they want them to hear that their biological sex and their gender are totally different things?

It is notable that the views of parents do not seem to count for much in this debate. They must be made central, and that means parents must be properly informed, and consulted, before anything as radical as leading voices want is taught in our schools.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-kate-dawson-885ab645/>
- 2 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23268743.2018.1518727?journalCode=rprn20>
- 3 <https://www.thesun.ie/tvandshowbiz/television/3646219/expert-claims-8-year-olds-should-be-taught-about-masturbation-leaving-this-morning-viewers-outraged/>
- 4 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/8194741/porn-lesson-school-kids/>
- 5 <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/smartconsent/PornReport-PrintReady-A5.pdf>
- 6 <https://www.thejournal.ie/porn-report-nuig-4168032-Aug2018/>
- 7 https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/reports/2019/2019-01-29_report-on-relationships-and-sexuality-education_en.pdf
- 8 https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab_2
- 9 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00224499.2018.1556238?journalCode=hjsr20>
- 10 <https://bewiser.ie/>
- 11 <https://sexualhealthwest.ie/product/sex-educated-by-grace-alice-oshea/>
- 12 <https://www.gillbooks.ie/information-reference/information-reference/lets-talk>

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