

## **AOIFE NEARY, THREE MINUTE OPENING STATEMENT**

### **Introduction**

My name is Aoife Neary and I am Lecturer in Sociology of Education at the School of Education, University of Limerick. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

For almost a decade now, I have been doing research in the area of gender and sexuality in education, all funded by several awards from the Irish Research Council.

### **Summary of Key Points Made in my Submission**

The following is a summary of the changes I proposed in my written submission related to RSE *content*, *teaching methods* and *structures*.

#### ***Content Changes***

The RSE content changes I propose include:

- Firstly, there is an urgent need for comprehensive RSE that responds to the lived realities of children and young people's lives – what Renold and McGeeney (2017) call a 'living curriculum' that assesses the needs of and meets children and young people where they're at.
- Secondly, there is a necessity to uncover the deep silences that have surrounded lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities in RSE.
- Thirdly, I propose a move from sexuality as isolated and individualised towards critical consideration of sexuality as intersectional and caught up in broader power relations and cultural norms.

#### ***Teaching Methods Changes***

The teaching methods changes I propose include:

- Firstly, a move from the over-emphasis on risk to creating safe and ethical teaching and learning spaces that facilitate open and frank dialogue across and amongst children, parents and school staff.
- Secondly, I propose that children and young people are more heavily involved in the co-construction of RSE. Creative, arts-based methods have huge potential here.
- Thirdly, I suggest a critical approach to RSE that would avoid assumptions about young people or their lives, avoid tokenistic 'inclusion' and be at peace with not having all the answers in advance.

#### ***Structural Changes***

Finally, the structural changes I propose are as follows:

- Firstly, we must take account of how fears around ‘childhood innocence’ act as a barrier in ways that don’t account for the capabilities of children or the wants of parents. To be effective, comprehensive RSE must begin in early years — from as young as three — in partnership with parents.
- Secondly, we know that many teachers and principals lack knowledge about and are uncomfortable with RSE. And so, a comprehensive system of in-service as well as new RSE specialist pathways in initial teacher education will be crucial here.
- Thirdly, uncertainties around religious ethos continue to constrain RSE. There is an urgent need for clarity on how religious run primary and post-primary schools can meet the RSE needs of all children equally.
- Fourthly, there is a necessity to ensure that there is strong RSE leadership in schools to steer a whole-school, spiral, sustained and meaningful approach to RSE in partnership with relevant local organisations.
- Finally, on an on-going basis RSE should be informed, supported and evaluated by an RSE research, practice and education network that includes representation from key education stakeholders and expertise spanning the various topics encompassed by RSE.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

- To conclude, I suggest that the recent developments in RSE in Wales and the recommendations made by the expert panel outlined in Renold and McGeeney’s (2017) report should serve as an exemplary signpost for changes to RSE in Ireland. Many of their recommendations are echoed across my written submission.

### **Reference**

Renold, E. and McGeeney, E. (2017) Informing the Future Sex and Relationships Education Curriculum in Wales. Cardiff University. ISBN 978-1-908469-12-0 Available at: [https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/1030606/informing-the-future-of-the-sex-and-relationships-education-curriculum-in-wales-web.pdf](https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/1030606/informing-the-future-of-the-sex-and-relationships-education-curriculum-in-wales-web.pdf)