RCNI Submission to NCCA

on

Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

3rd Nov 2023

Introduction

Overall RCNI feel these specifications are a strong holistic framework in line with the redeveloped junior cycle and we congratulate the NCCA for their skilful work on this to date. The shift in this senior cycle, into critical and reflective capacity to engage with and navigate life as agentic adults is evident across this draft. It is well articulated in the rationale section and in the nuance articulated in the competencies. Our focus is largely on ways to further enhance this aspect and we have made suggestions below. We strongly welcome the explicit references to misogyny, specifically pornography. We welcome the references which acknowledge context and structural violence and inequality and their constraints on young people's agency, which is well articulated on pg 11 (under thinking critically and empathetically) could go further and make the following suggestions.

The aim

'This course aims to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

This aim encompasses well the scope of the course. We would offer some thoughts.

- At first reading, 'disposition' strikes us as not plain English and may be open to interpretation. That said it is a rich word, not easy to replace. It includes the meaning of a practice of discernment towards making agentic choices within a complex context. Well informed and robust disposition is exactly the depth of mature and complex skills that we need in the population in order to prevent and protect against sexual violence. It is what we would hope to be the outcome of the SPHE and a theme we return to below.
- 'resilience' is a word that carries potential unhelpful connotations. At worst it implies a child has responsibility to stoically withstand unacceptable conditions. What we think we are aiming for here is a person with critical thinking and self-reflective skills. Perhaps these words, already used in the Rationale section, can be used instead of 'resilience'? Self-confident or self-assured are also possible replacement words.
- Throughout we would recommend more emphasis on context and matters we encounter and must adapt to rather than can control. For that reasons we suggest that after 'opportunity' we add 'challenges', after 'life' add 'as part of community/society'.

A note on language and terms:

Under Exercising Rights, Responsibilities and Inclusivity and elsewhere a range of phrases are used to name and/or list some of the axis of discrimination and difference central to sexual activity. We would suggest arriving at one encompassing formulation and using that consistently: our suggestion is 'sex, gender and sexuality' or if preferred 'sex, gender identity and sexuality.'

Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Our feedback here is on the 'Factors' as outlined in 1.1 - 1.3

We feel the socio-economic factors, material realities and resources should be explicitly named in either 1.1 or 1.2

1.3 We appreciate that this section is focused on addressing consumption itself and not primarily the choices engaged in after consumption. However, it has become impossible to separate norms and expectations around alcohol and drugs from those surrounding sex, gender and sexuality. In terms of consumption, attitudes to alcohol and drugs are gendered, judgment regarding risk behaviour in consumption remain highly gendered. In addition, expectations of behaviour once under the influence, invariably facilitate and excuse speech and behaviours around sexual desire, sexual activity, harassment and violence. We would therefore advocate strongly for the addition of the words, 'sex, gender and sexuality' to be added alongside 'alcohol and drugs.' both in terms of consumption choices and in terms of enabling and excusing risky and harmful choices around sexism and sex.

Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

We would recommend reordering some of this strand.

Section 1

2.2 remove 'their'

Section 2

Section titled 'gender' should be retitled 'Culture and norms'

2.4 replace 'gender' with 'sex, gender and sexuality'

2.7 should be moved to section 2 and the word 'influence' changed to 'impact'.

In section 2 add a learning outcome around identifying and responding to peer pressure and trends and separating out own needs and desires from same. It is also possible that this learning outcome belongs after 2.2 in section 1

Section 3

2.5 add 'sexual exploitation' after 'relationships'.

The third section is discussing crime but makes no reference to the law. Introducing the law directly here would likely act to limit the open and exploratory conversation so we do not recommend leading the conversation with the law, however, the information that should be available to both teachers and students in plain English for reference. For an example see the Foróige Real U sexual violence modules where RCNI provide this resource and keep it updated.

2.6 we note this outcome includes culture (explain the root causes...) and identifying and responding (outline the supports available). Should this outcome be divided into these two aspects? And if divided does the discussion on VAWG belong in section 2 now renamed 'culture'?

Section 4

2.9 add 'reproductive rights' into the list and add 'and proactive sexual healthcare.' at the end of the sentence.

Strand 3: Into Adulthood

We feel there is an important missing outcome

3.5 concerns standing up for oneself and 3.6 concerns allyship to stand up for others, but there needs to be a step before that where we discern and respect disagreement and difference that is not hate or discrimination but is an enriching fact of life. These differences are aspects we might choose to acknowledge, respect, engage with or ignore rather than automatically defend against.

Therefore, before 3.5 we would add a new outcome on how to respect difference and critically engage with difference in opinions and behaviours. The critical skill is to be able to distinguish between things we tolerate in an inclusive and pluralistic society and things that we should stand up against. Treating all difference as intolerable is the opposite of inclusivity.