

“THE APPROACH: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE IRISH AND SWEDISH SEX EDUCATION PROGRAMS”

Introduction

A comprehensive and aware sex education program along with an empowering approach has the magnitude to alter the society in which it inhabits. This extends to such models as Sweden with a long-established program focused on developing the sexual integrity of their youths and adults (UNESCO, 2017), however in countries such as Ireland a deeply religious country rooted for centuries in catholic guilt and shame the development has not been as swift or always as abroad (Ferriter, 2009 .pg.9). By comparing and contrasting Irish and Swedish sex education programs, we begin to gain an understanding how these organisations implement these systems within their education departments. A correct and informative teaching of sex education should be implemented across the world as an element of human nature and instinct indisputably taught with respect and discovery in mind.

By doing this it fosters a positive mentality around the idea of sex and relationships consequently shaping our society to become aware and responsible. Sex education should be taught accurately, safely and wholesomely with inclusivity at the centre; this follows the psychological law of primacy by Thorndike stating the first learning experience has a huge influence on progressive learning and memory, this law therefore states that the environment, approach and vocabulary used can have a lasting impact of how that student sees and understands this vital topic (Gluck et al., 2008) such as how we first learn, experience and are exposed to a topic as vital as sex stays with you for your life. The differences in this study are vast and the approach both countries take along with how their program influences are heightened under the effect of social, cultural and societal factors. The way in which these countries teach and guide students through the turbulent and taboo subject of sex education has a life-long effect on these individuals and in consequence contributes to the societal atmosphere of the view of sex in that country.

Area 1 - Ireland, Sex and Sex Education Curriculum

Ireland is a country deeply rooted in respect and admiration for tradition and faith, however, this trait along with history allowed the society of Ireland to become under the heavy influence of the Catholic church. By combining the strict moral beliefs of the church with the state, the institution had a great effect on society, transforming Ireland into “... shameful, guilty and communicatively incompetent about sex”(Ferriter, 2009. p.g 24). This toxic

association with sex and the inability to discuss topics such as contraception, sexual assault, abortion and sexuality etc lead to intercourse only being discussed in terms of “the natural law of god”(Ferriter, 2009. p.g 24) leading Ireland into a turbulent time of abuse to unmarried mothers, children, assault of members of LGBTQ+ and in-family sexual assaults(Ferriter, 2009. p.g 77)

Along with the death of Anna Lovett and the Kerry Baby in the year of 1984 (McGuire, 2014) only to name a few tragic incidents due to a lack of compassion and education of the society and with the rise of STI Ireland had no choice but to start educating their people (Nolan, 2018). The introduction of The Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) was established in 1995 and made compulsory in educational environments such as primary and post-primary schools (Nolan, 2018).

The Department of Education established the sex ed program of RSE within the subject of SPHE which “provides the context within which students can learn about the important moral, physical, social and emotional issues around relationships, sex and sexuality including where to get reliable information from trusted sources.”(NCCA, 2021) With the aim of “enhancing personal development, self-esteem...acquire understanding and respect for intercourse and reproduction” (PDST, 2022). This subject allows students to fully explore and become aware of themselves and the world around them.

The program covers junior infants [beginning of primary school 4-5 years old] through to 6th year [end of secondary school 17-18 years old], The Primary school curriculum revolves around the idea of body science, looking after themselves and feelings, The program for primary level contains strands such as myself, growing and changing and taking care of my body (PDST, 2022). In relation to parent involvement, parents are informed when enrolling their child in the primary school of the RSE policy and it is a procedure for all parents to be informed of RSE lessons and it is optional, parents do have the choice and power to withdraw their children from RSE classes as long as it is accompanied by a written withdrawal (PDST, 2022). The students are guided through the “Big Talk” by a teacher who has access to documents, training and workbooks to help guide the children through exposure to the alien topic, these documents are a collaboration between the HSE [Health Service Executive], Sexualwellbeing. ie and the PDST [Professional Development Service for Teachers] under the NCCA [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment]. The earlier years' resources/information are quite informative since the review of RSE in 2019, with two documents one for 4-7 year olds

and the other 8-12 year olds the process is broken down for parents to discuss puberty, conception, sexuality and much more. The introduction of Tom's Power Flower gently introduces younger children to conception by relating the process of growing a flower and teamwork (HSE and SHCPP, 2018).

In Secondary school the focus is on "abstinence" and the "risk and danger" approach of sex (NCCA, 2019 p.g 18/19) During the years of junior cycle and senior cycle it is mandatory for students to cover the ten-strand programs of RSE including self-management, relationships and sex, substance abuse, etc and they must have an awareness of conception to birth, sexually transmitted diseases and peer pressure (Nolan, 2018). However, in a 2019 review issued by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as mentioned above, several secondary school students were interviewed all sharing their experiences of inadequate information on sex, teachers not participating in the RSE curriculum and the curriculum only focusing on the risks (NCCA, 2019). In some schools, they require a third party to deliver a class or day of RSE and in many cases, this agency is ACCORD [Catholic Marriage Care Service] the country's largest provider of RSE education in the country and favoured by catholic ethos secondary schools for a slightly modern experience while staying within the bounds of their beliefs. Their programme centres on sex in a loving committed relationship and bodily changes (McGuire, 2018) Other agencies such as Love for Life and Pure in Heart have come under heavy criticism due to the backward nature of how they conduct their RSE workshops, with one book they are known to use saying "Sex before marriage often causes guilt, shame, broken hearts, shattered dreams, bad self-esteem, lost innocence, bad reputations, family problems, feelings of being used, depression, regret for losing one's virginity, embarrassment and humiliation"(McGuire, 2018) This book "On Track: Direction in Your Life" is used in many Irish secondary schools for RSE even though it has been found that the authors of this book have direct links to Youth Defence an Irish organisation which is opposed the use and legalisation of contraception and abortion.

The sheer importance as to who delivers the sex education within the school setting is vital, most schools expect teachers or a third party to conduct this. Unlike a third party, teachers receive very basic training on the RSE program and are responsible for dealing with norms, stereotypes and harmful practices, which they aren't always trained for. (Nolan, 2018) Many young people say they felt unable to openly discuss sex or ask questions in the presence of a

teacher adding it was embarrassing and highlighting the ongoing relationship with the teacher can prohibit them from asking questions openly (Nolan, 2018). In the NCCA review of the RSE Program published in 2019, students when asked about their RSE experience stated that the RSE program was "limited to a narrow range of topics and overly influenced by teachers selecting the topics they felt most comfortable teaching" (NCCA, 2019). Students mentioned the lack of scope to discuss different sexual orientations and the impact of porn, specifically on boys (NCCA, 2019). This highlights the lack of adequate material and comfortability to discuss sex concerning the LGBTQ+ community, an ongoing and isolating factor in Ireland's RSE program. In 2013 the Department of Education, HSE, BeLonG and GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) created the "Growing up LGBT: A Resource for SPHE and RSE" a document detailing the strain of coming out, gender identity and healthy relationships, it doesn't discuss sex in a heterosexual sex ed resource, there is no safe sex agenda, no statement about pleasure or the emotional/physical consequences of meaningless sex. (DES et al., 2013) Leaving many students to feel sex education within schools is "gendered and heterosexist" (Dr. Nolan, 2018) with students who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community feeling invisible and alienated.

According to a study conducted in 2010 by The University of Galway, the study found that many teens wanted to be accurately informed by someone they could trust to inform them with correct information and with a level of discretion. They discovered many areas of the curriculum are not based on the student's needs but are in line with the school ethos, morals and beliefs of the state (O'Higgins and Gabhainn, 2010). During the analysis of the data gathered from 364 participants ranging between the ages of 15-18 across 3 levels of the study, from a variety of schools ranging from same-sex schools, rural area schools, urban area schools and co-educational schools. To discover the most prevalent issues and how they would like to see them taught. The results showcased the lack of comfort in discussing various topics, such as condoms. Students ask questions such as "how to use them", a suggestion from a student showing them in class to remove the awkwardness and one student even mentioned the embarrassment of "buying johnnies" (O'Higgins and Gabhainn, 2010). Even the use of language highlights just how uncomfortable it can be navigating a conversation about sex as a young adult in a country where adults find it difficult to discuss sex.

The study goes on to discuss more topics of concern for the students such as sexual skills "how to give pleasure" "how to get pleasure" "to realise the

risks...having sex...but realise...it can be a good thing". Again this poses the embedded only risk factor approach of the RSE program. Such questions posed about sexually transmitted infections were "how to prevent them" and "who to tell". Information about sex in general, the students wanted to understand the age of consent, and how alcohol impairs decisions (O'Higgins and Gabhainn, 2010). The analysis of the data goes on to discuss concerns about contraception, relationships, pregnancy, confidence etc.

Area 2- Sweden Sex Education And Sex

Sweden has a fresh and completely contrastive approach to sex education as a country that has a historically thriving liberal outlook along with a steady society of trust, prosperity and innovation. The reputation of sex positivity comes hand in hand with the modern stereotypical Swedish persona however, this was not easily obtained (Sherlock, 2012). Within every country comes a past of indignity and even the most enlightened of countries aren't exempt from that misdemeanour, from 1934 to 1974 over 62,000 Swedish citizens were sterilised under the Eugenic Sterilisation Program. Mostly young girls who were seen to be "rebellious or promiscuous, of low intelligence or perhaps of mixed blood (mixed-race)" (Balz, 1997) were sterilised against their will, many individuals who carried out these heinous procedures believed they were bettering their growing state, influenced by fascist rule, Sweden established an institute of racial biology in 1922 which lead to the legalisation of sterilisation to mentally condemned individuals by 1934. Comparable to Ireland and its horrific past of sexual damnation, Sweden altered what their country stood for and progressed to be one of the world's leading sex education providers.

Nevertheless, over the years the country as a whole developed a sturdy foundation for acceptance and support of gender identity, and positive sex connotations and began to reshape any adversity towards sex being a taboo topic (Sherlock, 2012). This was aided by a strong sentiment that sex education is on a constantly developing scale and must be addressed. How Sweden educates their population is highly progressive and sought after especially when it comes to their sex education programs and initiatives. In comparison to the Irish model of sex education, the Swedish program is advanced and open, constantly developing for the sake of the full comprehension of their youths.

Their compulsory comprehensive sex education program was established in 1955 (Skolverket, 2014), forty years before an Irish model was established and one of the first and longest-standing programs in the world (UNESCO,

2021). A pioneer in sexual health and education Sweden has created many futuristic measures to ensure their youths have access to the highest quality of sex education and is regularly reviewed when a sexual issue or problematic initiatives arises within the country and or world. Their program is aimed at “preventing social problems; everything from HIV/AIDS, chlamydia and rising abortion rates, to the use of sexual language, sexual exploitation, honour-related violence and oppression” (Skolverket, 2014), while enhancing gender equality and dignity. Their approach is vast and looks at sex from a multitude of perspectives such as historically, in terms of social media, literature, religion, Swedish legislation and advertising (Skolverket, 2014), with no one perspective seen as right or just, it allows their students to become well-rounded individuals.

Skolverket, the Swedish National Agency for Education is one of the key figures in the development of the sex education program within Sweden (Skolverket, 2014), similarly, in Ireland the Department of Education and Skills and the Minister for Education and Skills develops the curriculum for sex education (BZgA, 2018). Such organisations as the Swedish RFSU (RFSU, 2017) and the Irish SpunOut (SpunOut and HSE, 2023) also contribute valuable content for young people from these two nations. These are reliable sources of information for youths and are in correspondence with the health care organisations and education departments within each country to provide another safe and comprehensive model of sex education if the traditional educational environment is not accessible or comfortable.

Sweden handles their secondary level sex education delivery very futuristically with no one individual teacher carrying the sole responsibility of distribution of key information; it is a subversive program with sex education included as a key area in every subject. (Skolverket, 2014) Under the Skolverket broad sex curriculum, it states that the 3 key areas consist of subject integration, where teacher- led group discussions are introduced to discuss sex in a variety of ways. This may include relationships and their effects along with gender and emotions (Skolverket, 2021). The second element, Catching the issue collaborates this the idea of well-being and allows students to naturally draw on unanswered questions or queries, some issues may present themselves around “sexuality, family, conflicts, bodily integrity and relationships”(Skolverket, 2021) Third element is individual lessons and themed days, this element may allow students to develop a new understanding of a previous issue or concept. This may include National Pregnancy and Infant Loss Day and World AIDS Day. These three aspects of

the sex education program come under the international guidelines for sex education and direct that “people are born as sexual beings, even if children's sexuality in several ways differs from that of adults”.(Skolverket, 2021).

Under section five of the Swedish Education Act, “Education is to be designed in accordance with basic democratic values and human rights, such as the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal dignity of all people, equality and solidarity between people.”(Skolverket, 2014). These beliefs are brought into the bones of their education system at playschool/ preschool age, usually 4-6 in Sweden. They focus on independence, dignity, gender and how to combat gender roles. There is a heavy importance put on the freedom to move fluidly between stereotypical gender roles without any limitations, this is also guided and supported by the teacher. As the students progress in age, maturity and development the idea of breaking traditional gender roles becomes even more prevalent and is a key element in the Swedish curriculum. The subject-integrated sex education delivery is overseen by the principal and is their responsibility to ensure students are becoming aware of sex education and broader areas of life such as environment consumer issues, traffic, puberty, gender equality, alcohol and substances, sex and relationships (Skolverket, 2014).

Moving into Upper Secondary school the outline for the subject-integration curriculum continues around the same topics but develops and has room to facilitate the discussion of taboo subjects such as “puberty, body development, love, self-image, “the first time”, masturbation, condoms and preventive methods, gender, sexual orientation are some important topics.”(RFSU, 2017). The Swedish sex education curriculum is known to be so open-minded it is normal for teachers to bring students to youth clinics (RFSU, 2017) or invite speakers such as mothers or youth clinic workers to bring a new scope and remove embarrassment from the students.

The Swedish curriculum documents state that their sex education policy although is subject integrated, some subjects do require greater leadership in this area and are distributed through the years in school, such as Biology and Science studies which are required to educate students in school years 4-6 on puberty, reproduction, gender equality and gender roles. Moving on to years 7-9, the students begin to learn about STI and prevention, pregnancy and prevention along with past perceptions of these topics, identity and relationships and finishing in upper secondary school the students begin to learn about and develop menstruation, infatuation, pleasure, health and

sickness. (Skolverket, 2014). Each subject has designated areas of development and knowledge for sex education that each student should be learning each year, across many subjects such as history and religion, where students learn about women's rights, traditional gender roles and the struggles for equality, the moral questioning of your identity, the purpose of life, sexuality and love. (Skolverket, 2021) All subjects encourage students and teachers to integrate sex education into the syllabus, to pose questions and to gain clarity.

The lengths to which the Swedish system goes to fully ensure that their young people are informed sexual beings is astounding. They aim to create a healthy balance between the risk and pleasurable side of sex, they make students aware of casual sexual relationships, unwanted pregnancies, self-esteem, STDs and sexual harassment and or assault. However, they also advocate for their youth to be responsible but enjoy and own their sexual identity by giving them the environment to discuss and identify love, desire, the role of self-esteem, healthy relationships, boundaries and pleasure. (Skolverket, 2021)

Comparison Between Sweden And Ireland

In this broad comparison of the sex education systems of Ireland and Sweden, the contrast and similitude are immeasurable. As two nations that both experienced turbulent beginnings on their journeys to becoming well-educated sexually responsible countries, their policies and foundations around sex education still differ. Both ultimately aim to end at a comprehensive sex education program that allows their youths to be aware, proud and safe sexual beings as they grow.

These sex education programs also aim to never repeat the atrocities each country experienced at the hands of individuals with a shameful and vile approach towards sex, such as Ireland and their horrific history with mother and baby homes (Sherlock, 2012) likewise Sweden and their eugenic sterilisation programs. Both of these countries dehumanised individual in light of the product and transaction of sex. Degrading these individuals' sexual experiences because they were out of wedlock and inhibiting the choice of reproduction. Each country never fully versed their youths in pleasure, love, feelings, types of sex, protection and the shame surrounding sex until the past few years. Slowly these countries have begun to unravel the shame and guilt carried through history, bad teaching and naive uninformed experiences by directing themselves in the view of informed inclusive sex education. A

positive decision which has and will continue to benefit youths for years to come.

It could be said that Sweden has excelled in taking hold of their responsibility to move at a fast pace towards comprehensive sex education continuing to develop their stance on sex education and constantly progressing with the introduction of access to condoms in schools and their full efforts to bring the conversation of healthy sex (UNESCO, 2023), relationships and consent into every subject to create a network of positive conversation away from the taboo stereotypes. However, in relation to Ireland, they have moved at a slower pace of development nevertheless making progress and hitting milestones in terms of their advancement with primary school curriculum with their Tom's Power Flower initiative (HSE and SHCPP, 2018) which aims to explain conception to birth in an age and stage friendly. It's also clear to see that the development of the Irish mindset towards sex and equality such as students speaking out about their sexual needs, the introduction of free contraception (Department of Health, 2022), gay marriage (Electronic Irish Statute and House of Oireachtas, 2015) and legalisation on abortion (to a degree) (De Londras and Enright, 2018). This delayed and in some areas, hesitant move towards a more aware sex education program should take into consideration the role which religion has played in Irish society (Sherlock, 2012), Ireland has advanced in many ways that some never thought possible, however, the roots of religion in Irish culture are strong. Meanwhile, Sweden has introduced a new phase of their cohabitation and sex curriculum beginning autumn of 2022 the newest of their innovative curricula with mention of pornography and sexuality presented in different media (UNESCO, 2023) the biggest development since 2011 when they introduced sexuality and gender norms (Skolverket, 2014).

Ireland's sex education program was updated in 2023 after twenty years due to the raised issue that the LGBTQ+ aspects were entirely outdated. With the reform of the RSE, the program came with such topics as "cross-dressing and transgenderism" (Foxy, 2022) which attracted huge pushback from The Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools, stating that the catholic school's ethos must be accommodated to run schools from a faith-based viewpoint (O'Brien, 2023) and with concerned being shown from parents stating the new curriculum is "sickening" and contributing to the "nation's immorality" with accusations of the Department of Education being accused of highly sexualising content and brainwashing children (Foxy, 2022). This clear example of backward thinking is exactly the reason why Ireland's sex education is not on the same level of comprehensiveness as Sweden's.

Conclusion

Both Sweden and Ireland have made monumental developments which have undoubtedly altered their societies in the most positive of ways, this comparison has highlighted the harrowing undertakings of the countries when they had no direction with sex education. However, both have progressed despite these circumstances to better their education systems for their population, to ensure no child, teen or adult is left unknowable about their bodies, sexual relations or reproduction which is vital to our nature, both have begun to facilitate a discussion around sex through their curriculum which consequently has begun to diminish the taboo aspect of sex.

Ireland's wide and unpolished sex education program covers the foundations of reproduction and the basics of sex but hasn't reached the level of Sweden to develop students' emotional attachments to sex and feelings. Both of the countries' approaches to educating children are extensive and very radical with their techniques in how to introduce the idea of the self as a sexual being that they will develop into. Concerning secondary school both Ireland and Sweden have distinct differences in how they progress students' understanding of sex, with Sweden taking the more futuristic approach of developing their knowledge in a free yet directed approach of intertwining sex education through all subjects while Ireland stuck in its stagnant ways of a class of sex education once in a while with an air of shame and disapproval surrounding it only every educating on the bare minimum due to the taboos of the topic for both student and teacher.

To conclude Ireland and Sweden aim to continue their work to provide a comprehensive approach to sex education to better the societies in which they foster. Both have made significant strides towards this goal and with it have clearly begun to understand the sheer importance of comprehensive sex education, and the value of good quality education especially when it comes to an instinct as vital as sex should be conducted and expressed with the utmost care, respect and understanding. Ensuring that the populations are aware sexual beings are placed with the responsibility to freely and safely love and lust.

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