<u>**REPORT FOR THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE MINI-INQUIRY**</u>

<u>**THE PROVISION OF RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION (RSE) IN SCHOOLS**</u>

Defining Autism

Autism is a natural and intrinsic variation of human neurology which presents across all ages, stages and walks of life.

Current diagnostic classification defines autism as *"Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction…Restricted, repetitive patterns behaviours, interest, or activities…"*[1] However, these characteristics can often lead to a deficit-based view that overlooks the unique ways in which autistic individuals process the world.

Dr. Peter Vermeulen's scientifically grounded 'predictive brain theory' offers a compelling alternative[2]. He frames autism, not as a flaw, but as a difference in how the brain processes information.

The autistic brain operates by creating rigid, detailed models of the world, heavily relying on predictions.

Unlike neurotypical[3] brains, which adapt flexibly to new information, autistic brains may struggle to adjust to unexpected stimuli or ambiguity. This often leads to heightened sensitivity and difficulty interpreting the world around them.

Predictive brain theory and processing is a widely discussed concept in cognitive neuroscience, perception, and developmental psychology, and has garnered significant attention among neuroscientists. Dr Vermeulen's empathic perspective highlights the unique cognitive strengths of many autistic individuals without disregarding the challenges they face in navigating a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

By shifting the focus away from deficits, we gain a better understanding of behaviours like insistence on sameness or difficulty with change, which can be seen as responses to a different way of interpreting the world.

Understanding autism through this lens is crucial when developing effective support systems.

By creating structured, predictable environments, reducing sensory overload, and providing clear, consistent social cues, we can better accommodate the unique cognitive styles of autistic individuals.

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[1] American Psychiatric Association: Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria From DSM-5-TR. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association, 2022

[2] Peter Vermeulen, *Autism and the predictive brain: absolute thinking in a relative world* (Routledge, 2023)

[3] 'Neurotypical' refers to individuals whose cognitive development aligns with societal expectations and typical patterns of functioning.

RSE Through the Lens of Autism

Adulthood, while inevitable, can feel daunting, unwelcome, and even frightening for some autistic people.

Autistic author and advocate Chloe Hayden describes feeling *"terrified"* by the transition into adulthood, sex and relationships. She describes a fear of *"change, of leaving things behind, of being 'unable' to do the kid stuff that I love doing, of expectations that I won't be able to meet...guaranteed change…"*[4]

Hayden's insights highlight the emotional challenges and anxieties that can arise during the transition into adulthood, especially for autistic individuals. Her experience underscores the importance of addressing these concerns in RSE, ensuring that the approach is sensitive and mindful of individual needs.

Clarity

For autistic people *"nothing is self-explanatory"* and *"nothing is obvious".*[5] Clarity in <u>what</u> is communicated and <u>how</u> it is communicated reduces anxiety and fosters independence.

Concepts within RSE should be explained using unambiguous communication (concrete straightforward language) supported by visualisation (infographics, diagrams, videos) to help the autistic brain to process meaning.

Lessons should be sequential and graduated to build knowledge incrementally and provide context.

The use of 'positive' explanations that state <u>what is expected</u> (instead of what is not), aids clarity and deeper understanding. For example, when addressing personal space the phrase *"Don't stand too close to people"* focuses on what <u>not</u> to do and leaves ambiguity about what is acceptable. However, *"Keep about an arm's length of space between yourself and others when talking to them"* provides a clearly defined expectation and <u>action</u>.

Predictability

The autistic brain finds it hard to predict the stimuli that the brain receives. This creates a lot of uncertainty, and uncertainty creates anxiety.

Consistently using strategies such as the 'P.L.A.T.O.' principles[6] creates clear and reassuring predictability for autistic learners. [**P**eople, **L**ocation, **A**ctivity, **T**ime, **O**rganisation].

Autonomy

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[4] Chloe Hayden, *Different Not Less* (Murdoch Books, 2022)
[5] Peter Vermeulen & Koby Vanroy, *What Really Works for Children with AUTISM* (Future Horizons, 2024)
[6] Peter Vermeulen & Koby Vanroy, *What Really Works for Children with AUTISM* (Future Horizons, 2024).

To navigate social and sexual relationships safely students must have 'opportunities' to experience decision-making, choice and self-advocacy.

Likewise, 'experiencing' respectful responses 'modelled back' to them, within the safety of a learning environment, is equally important.

Offering autistic students choice within a defined and predictable framework can provide a sense of autonomy and self-determination.

It should be noted that autistic adults often report difficulties in asserting boundaries as a result of 'masking' to conform to social 'norms'. This has been well documented amongst autistic adults, and as one autistic woman describes:

> *"All women are taught to obey, conform, to act in an agreeable manner; we're taught that being tiny and vulnerable is wanted and valued. For autistic women, who have had to mask and take on a new persona to fit in, these standards can take over our entire beings. We're master maskers, chameleons, and we often take things to extremes, even when it's to our own detriment."* [7]

Social-Emotional Learning

Two harmful stereotypes about autistic people are that *"(1) [they] do not want human connections and that (2) [they] cannot relate to others – but this is not the case."* [8]

Autistic people need social connections as much as anyone else - sometimes *"the form these connections take often looks different."* [9] However, there are often challenges in navigating unwritten social rules, cues, facial expressions, body language, and other nuances that accompany these connections.

Integration of social-emotional learning into RSE through social scripts / role-play activities can support autistic students to recognise and interpret emotions in themselves and others. This in turn scaffolds the confident development of personal boundaries, self-protection and informed choice.

Any social-emotional learning program must centre on encouraging autistic individuals to embrace their authentic selves, free from the expectation to conform to societal norms.

A Trauma-Informed Approach

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[7] Chloe Hayden, *Different, Not Less* (Murdoch Books, 2022)
[8] Jennifer Kemp & Monique Mitchelson *The Neurodivergence skills Workbook for Autism and ADHD – Cultivate Self-Compassion, Live Authentically, and Be Your Own Advocate* (New Harbinger, 2024)
[9] Ibid

The widespread portrayal of autism as *"persistent deficits"*[10] in social communication and interaction, or as an impaired ability to take *"part in normal social interaction"* and form *"social relationships"*[11], often fosters self-blame among autistic individuals for their difficulties in establishing safe relationships.

This lack of self-compassion can hinder the development of respectful and secure connections.

RSE programs should foster self-compassion and encourage students to let go of unhelpful self-stories [12] through trauma-informed practices.

Strategies that equip students with specific phrases or actions to assert boundaries, can support confidence in handling social interactions and in maintaining emotional safety.

Person-Centred

Sir Ken Robinson emphasises that education should enable young people to engage with both *"the world within them and the world around them,"* highlighting that education is *"deeply personal."*
He asserts that *"engaging students as individuals is key to raising achievement".[13]*

This principle is especially important for autistic students, who benefit from tailored strategies to grasp complex topics.

Overstimulating environments or uncomfortable teaching methods may lead to anxiety, disengagement and / or distress behaviours, especially for autistic students who experience sensory sensitivities.

Creating sensory-safe settings where students can participate in a way that feels comfortable to them can help support sensory needs.

Preventative

Autistic individuals experience abuse at significantly higher rates than their peers which underscores the importance of robust RSE as a part of a 'preventative curriculum'.

It should be noted that restrictive practices and behavioural interventions on autistic students *"often remove a child's bodily autonomy, rather than empower children to develop skills related to consent and agency over their own bodies…"* meaning that the student doesn't *"learn how to protect*

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[10] American Psychiatric Association: Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria From DSM-5-TR. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association, 2022
[11] Disability Discrimination Act, 1995, c. 50. (1995). Retrieved from Disability Discrimination Act 1995
[12] Jennifer Kemp *The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism:Build Your Best (Imperfect) Life Using Powerful Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Self-Compassion Skills* (New Harbinger, 2021)
[13] Ken Robinson & Lou Aronica *Creative Schools* (Penguin Books, 2016)

themselves from unwanted touch...[and] deprived of learning the skills to communicate consent or denial of unwanted touch."[14]

Training and Professional Development – Teachers, Support Staff and Parents

"<u>Non-autistic people</u> often have difficulty understanding and interpreting autistic people's behaviour, emotional states, and social cues"[15].

Delivering RSE must therefore be a 'whole school' learning opportunity.

Schools must also be trained and resourced to support autistic learners as well as their parents, families and carers. Encouraging parents to talk more openly with their children is critical and should form part of RSE delivery.

Consideration of International Best Practice

While consultation and co-design are crucial, it is equally important to consider international best practice. This ensures that the content and delivery of RSE meets the highest standards, pushing us as a society to move beyond our current understanding and expectations.

It is essential that the formulation and delivery of RSE is seen as dynamic, rather than static or fixed. In addition to the challenges of a constantly evolving world, we are continually learning how to better support autistic learners through neuro-affirming research and insights from the autistic community itself.

Recommendations

As the Independent Autism Review for Northern Ireland, I recommend that the Health Committee specifically consider the needs of autistic students in their Mini-Inquiry, particularly in relation to the following areas:

- o Clarity
- o Predictability
- o Autonomy
- o Social-Emotional Learning
- o Trauma Informed Approach
- o Person-Centred

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[14] Meghan Ashburn & Jules Edwards *I Will Die On This Hill* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2023)

[15] Rosanna Edey, Jennifer Cook, Rebecca Brewer, Mark H. Johnson, Geoffrey Bird & Clare Press *Interaction Takes Two: Typical Adults Exhibit Mind-Blindness Towards Those with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Journal of Psychopathology and Clinical Science, 2016).

- o   Preventative
- o   Training and Professional Development
- o   International Best Practice

I also respectfully ask the Committee to consider these recommendations across the whole of the RSE curriculum, rather than viewing them as solely 'autism-specific'. This approach aligns with the principle of universal design, which involves creating environments, systems, and practices that are accessible, usable, and inclusive for all people, regardless of their abilities or needs.

The delivery of RSE should consistently address the needs of autistic students, regardless of whether there are diagnosed or identified autistic individuals in the learning environment.

Furthermore, these recommendations are no-cost or low-cost, with the exception of 'Training and Professional Development' which should be incorporated into mandatory whole-school training.