

Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post- primary schools

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Introduction

In April 2018, the Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, T.D., asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to undertake a major review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools across all stages of education *to ensure that it is fit for purpose and meets the needs of young people today in modern Ireland* (Minister's letter, 2018).

RSE has been a key aspect of curriculum since 1995, when schools were asked to begin the process of developing a school policy in collaboration with parents, teachers and management. The aim of this policy was to enable the introduction of RSE as part of the wider Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum. In 1996, the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Interim Curriculum and Guidelines (NCCA) were introduced into primary and post-primary schools. In 1999, RSE became a mandatory part of the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) and in 2000, a mandatory part of the Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework.

Life in Ireland has changed greatly since the introduction of RSE to schools in 1995. It is timely then to consider the experience of RSE in schools; the relevance of the current curriculum and how it can be supported into the future. The Minister requested that the review *should encompass the curriculum for RSE, the support materials for this area of the curriculum, and also the delivery of the curriculum to students* (Minister's letter, 2018). With regard to the curriculum, the Minister asked that the following aspects of RSE be considered:

- Consent, what it means and its importance
- Developments in contraception
- Healthy, positive sexual expression and relationships
- Safe use of the internet
- Social media and its effects on relationships and self-esteem
- LGBTQ+ matters.

With these in mind and in the context of the broader experience and reality of RSE as implemented in schools, the review set out to answer the following questions:

- How is the RSE curriculum planned for, how is it taught and how are parents involved?
- What is the role of the classroom teacher in teaching the curriculum and the role of external providers in supporting RSE in schools?
- What time is given to it, what resources are being provided, and what support materials are being used?
- How effective are the continuing professional development opportunities which are currently provided by the Department of Education and Skills and other bodies to teachers?

1. The review process

This chapter outlines the review process which was conducted between June 2018 and October 2019.

The review comprised three overlapping strands:

- Drawing on studies and research
- Consultation with key leaders, organisations and individuals with expertise and experience in the area of RSE
- Working with schools.

In the following sections, the purpose and process of each strand is detailed, followed by a description of the data analysis undertaken during the review.

Drawing on studies and research

There has been a growing body of research in the area of relationships and sexuality education in the last decade. As part of the preparatory work for the review of RSE, a desktop audit of research, both international and national, from across the early years in primary up to the age of 18 was commissioned. In line with the Minister's request, a number of specific areas were included for particular attention in the review of research. This work resulted in the publication of *Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Primary and Post-primary Irish Schools: A Research Paper* (Keating et al, 2018). This paper provides the background and context for the review of RSE as well as an overview of relevant research relating to the experience of RSE both in Ireland and internationally. While the paper provided the research framework and set out some key questions for consideration, the review also drew on additional studies into specific aspects of RSE and its implementation in schools. All of this informed the other two strands of the review set out below.

Consultation with key leaders, organisations and individuals

The review consulted with key leaders, organisations and individuals in Ireland and abroad, including government agencies, non-governmental organisations, support services and academics. Their

experiences and perspectives on the contextual reality of RSE in practice in Ireland provided an important evidence base for consideration in the review process. Organisations, interest groups and key persons who are or have been directly involved in the provision of RSE were invited to attend bilateral meetings, roundtable discussions and two symposia consultation events on RSE. The NCCA, through its website, invited other interested groups and individuals to engage in the review process via online surveys and written submissions.

The variety of perspectives provided by the various groups and individuals created rich discourse, focusing on both the current experiences and future opportunities for RSE in primary and post-primary schools. Student voice was central to all elements of consultation with several bilateral meetings involving student groups which provided an additional important opportunity to hear the perspective of students in the review process.

The formats for engagement included:

- Bilateral and roundtable discussions
- Consultative events
- Online surveys
- Written submissions.

Bilateral and roundtable discussions

Between October 2018 and March 2019, the NCCA engaged in consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders working in the area of RSE or with responsibility for the area in schools. Through invitation or an expression of interest, stakeholders participated in bi-lateral or roundtable meetings, sharing their views on RSE. Sixty-two individuals and organisations participated in these meetings (for details, see Appendix A). A cross-section of voices were represented including, school management bodies, those working in the informal youth sector, student representative groups, external providers of RSE and academics working in the area. The meetings gave stakeholders an opportunity to share their perspectives on the current experience and practice of RSE in schools. The discussions were framed by three guiding questions:

- What are the key messages on the current RSE **curriculum** that the review should consider?
- What are the key messages on the **implementation of RSE** that the review should consider?
- What are the key messages on **what supports are needed** for RSE that the review should consider?

Consultation events

There is a wide range of organisations with expertise and experience relevant to RSE and it was important that the review heard their perspectives and experiences. To this end, two consultation symposia events were held - the first symposium on RSE was held in Collins Barracks, Dublin on November 27th, 2018 to discuss the current challenges and opportunities. A follow-on symposium was held in Dublin Castle on September 10th, 2019 with the purpose of facilitating deeper discussion and engagement in the review process and inviting feedback on the early insights and proposed actions arising from the review. Over 70 delegates from 51 stakeholder organisations attended the first symposium and over 120 delegates from 80 stakeholder organisations attended the second symposium (see appendix B for the list of attendees at both).

In addition, the NCCA collaborated with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to organise a one-day consultation event with 77 representatives from Comhairle na nÓg. This was held at the DCYA, March 13th, 2019. An advisory committee of Comhairle members designed the day which was facilitated by DCYA youth participation officers. An independent report writer was commissioned to analyse the notes and generate a short report which fed into the overall student perspectives. This report is available at www.ncca.ie.

Online surveys

The public were given two opportunities to contribute their views via online surveys. The first survey was made open from November 1st 2018 until February 15th 2019 in both Irish and English. There were three parts to the survey; one for students, one for teachers, and one for parents. The survey questions focused on:

- The current experience of RSE
- Important areas, values, knowledge and skills in RSE
- Views on how to improve RSE.

The first phase of the consultation produced a record number of completed survey responses for the NCCA, with 5,883 received during the process. Student responses accounted for 512, teacher/educator responses accounted for 1,333, while parent/guardian responses accounted for 4,038. The respondents were self-selecting and as such not representative, however the volume of responses provides insight into the range of views in relation to RSE in schools.

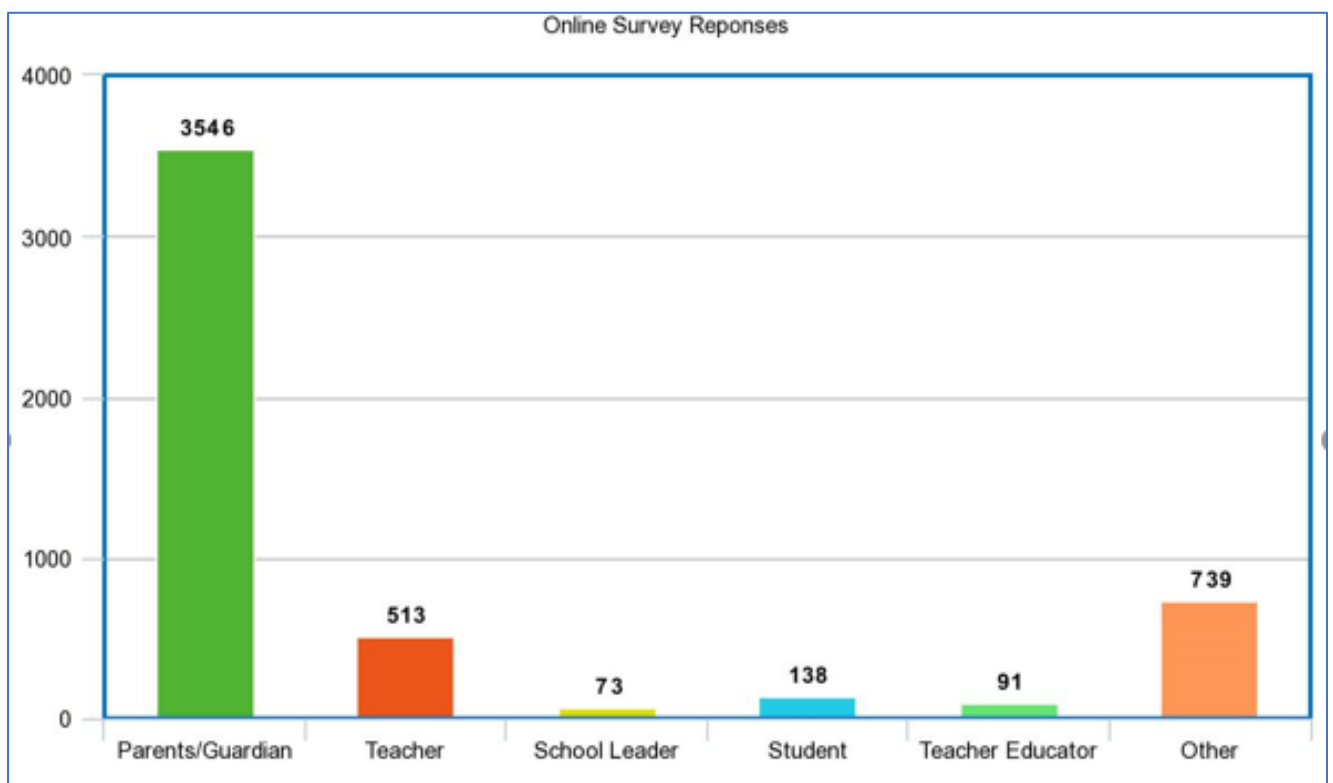
It is also noteworthy that the National Parents Council Primary made a submission to the review based on 3,300 surveys of parents while the National Parents Council Post-primary made a submission based

on 553 surveys of parents. This resulted in a total of 7,891 responses from parents considered at this stage of the review.

A second online survey was open between July 9th and October 25th, 2019 to gather feedback on the *Draft Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools*. A high level of public interest was evident again during this phase of consultation, with 5,100 responses received via the online questionnaire as illustrated in table 1 below.

A number of factors impacted on engagement during the latter phase of the consultation. Firstly, it became clear that many contributors conflated the recommendations of the *Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Relationships and Sexuality Education* and the associated *Objective Sex Education Bill* with the NCCA draft *Report on the Review of RSE*. Another factor was an organised campaign targeting individuals who are opposed to the role of the school and the state in providing RSE. This campaign gathered momentum during final weeks of the consultation with a website launch, leaflet drops in the greater Dublin area and beyond, and visibility on social media platforms.

Table 1: Responses to online survey July – October 2019



Written submissions

Written submissions are an important part of the NCCA review process. Written submissions were accepted from June 1st, 2018 to January 31st 2019 and again from July 9th to October 25th, 2019. In all, 85 written submissions were received from organisations and interest groups during the consultations. A further 145 written submissions were received from individuals. A list of all submissions received from organisations are in Appendix C of this report. Where permission to publish written submissions from the consultation has been granted, those submissions are available online as part of the review. In the last four weeks of the review NCCA received approximately 1,000 submissions using a common template.

Working with schools

Consulting with students, teachers, parents and school leaders within schools was a critical component of the review to ensure that the reality of how RSE is experienced on the ground was represented. With the support of school management bodies, schools were invited to participate in the review. Twenty-three schools were identified - thirteen primary and ten post-primary schools - reflecting a range of school types and locations (see Appendix D).

Primary

To support engagement with pupils in primary schools a range of materials were developed. These materials were reviewed by the Ombudsman for Children office to ensure the activities and approaches were accessible for all children. With consideration to the ethical principle of non-maleficence it was decided to engage with pupils in the senior classes of primary school and to focus on aspects of SPHE rather than the sensitive topics related to RSE exclusively. Parental consent was obtained for all pupils who participated in the review. Overall six groups of 5th class pupils and one group of 3rd and 4th class students engaged in the workshop.

Schools were requested to invite parents to participate in focus groups. In all, eight focus groups were facilitated. These focus groups were framed around three broad questions;

- What are your experiences of RSE in this school?
- What are your views on the current approaches and programmes of RSE?
- What supports or resources are needed for you in this area?

Schools were invited to identify teachers to take part in a focus group. Twelve focus groups were facilitated. In addition, ten focus groups with members of school management took place. For both groups, four broad questions framed the discussion:

- What are your experiences of RSE?
- What are the challenges of RSE?
- What supports are needed for RSE?
- How are parents engaged in RSE?

Post-primary schools

To support engagement with students in post-primary a number of materials were developed to support consultation. These materials were also made available online for schools wishing to take part and contribute to the review. Within each post-primary school, the following student groups were engaged:

- a meeting with one first year class
- a focus group with ten to twelve transition year students
- a focus group with ten to twelve sixth year students.

Students in first year were invited to reflect on their experiences in 5th and 6th class, students in transition year were facilitated in discussing their experience of junior cycle, and 6th year students discussed their overall experience of RSE in post-primary education, with a particular focus on their senior cycle experience. In total over 450 post-primary students participated in the review across 10 schools.

Schools were invited to identify teachers for a focus group meeting. Overall, ten focus groups were facilitated. In addition, ten focus groups were facilitated with members of the school's senior management team. For both groups, four broad questions framed the discussion:

- What are your experiences of RSE?
- What are the challenges of RSE?
- What supports are needed for RSE?
- How are parents supported in RSE?

Schools were requested to invite parents to participate in focus groups. Two focus groups were facilitated in post-primary schools.

Data Analysis

A significant amount of data was gathered across the consultation. Table 2 summarises the level of engagement in each consultation format and outlines the type of data gathered.

Table 2: Data-gathering method, recording of data, and number of contributors

Data gathering method	Recording of data	Number of contributors
Bilateral meetings	Field notes	62
Symposia on RSE	Notes from table discussions	178
Online survey, parents	Self-reported online submissions	7,584
Online survey, students	Self-reported online submissions	650
Online survey, teachers	Self-reported online submissions	1846
Online survey, identified as 'other'	Self-reported online submissions	739
Comhairle na nÓg consultation event	Independent report writer	77 young people
Written submissions from organisations and interest groups	Online and paper-based submissions	85
Written submission from individuals	Online and paper-based submissions	145
Written submission from a common template	Paper-based submissions	Approx. 1,000
Work with schools, focus groups and workshops	Field notes	23 schools, approx. 600 contributors

Bilateral and roundtable meetings

Meetings with stakeholders were generally chaired by a member of the RSE Project Team, with another member of the team undertaking notetaking duties. A written record of key discussion points was made during each meeting. This record was reviewed and finalised through a structured debrief within the project team. On completion of the bilateral and roundtable meetings, the full set of notes was reviewed for the range and frequency of views.

Symposia on RSE

The symposia utilised a structured group discussion approach, guided by key questions related to RSE. Each discussion group was facilitated by an Education Officer, who recorded the key points and statements made by participants. These notes were later analysed for emerging themes and supporting key statements were highlighted.

Online questionnaires

The online surveys, in the main, gathered qualitative data. As with other qualitative data sets, these responses were analysed to identify the range of views expressed and associated emerging themes. A critical friend also reviewed the analysis and identification of themes to ensure the interpretation of the RSE Project Team was accurate.

As with all open-access surveys, the respondents were self-selecting and as such not representative of specific interests. A major influencer on engagement with the online survey was an organised campaign through social media platforms, which called on parents to voice their concerns about the need for and nature of RSE in schools. This campaign contributed to over 70% of all online survey responses as well as reproduced written submissions. Overall, a spectrum of views was evident across the online questionnaire submissions and a key criterion for consideration was their relevance to the questions asked in the NCCA's review.

Written submissions

Each written submission was read and considered fully during the review. They were analysed by the RSE Project Team separately and then collectively to ensure validation and to compare emerging themes that had been identified. A critical friend also reviewed the analysis and identification of key themes to ensure the interpretation of each written submission by the RSE Project Team was accurate.

Working with schools

An independent notetaker accompanied members of the RSE Project Team during visits to each school. A structured debrief was undertaken following each visit to ensure the interpretation of the experiences and views presented was accurate. After the school visits were complete the RSE Project Team and the notetaker met to review the data in its totality and the key themes that had emerged.

The NCCA would like to acknowledge and thank the many students, parents, teachers, principals, organisations and individuals who took time to share their experiences and views.

2. Students' perspectives

A number of recent studies have examined the experience and perceived needs of young people in relation to Relationships and Sexuality Education. Some of the key findings from these studies are included in *Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Primary and Post-primary Irish Schools: A Research Paper* (Keating et al, 2018). A recurring finding across the research is that a majority of students consider their experience of RSE within schools to be poor. This chapter presents additional information about young people's experience of RSE gathered as part of this review.

The findings presented below are based on focus group interviews with students in a selection of schools, meetings with youth representative groups (Foróige, Youthwork Ireland, the Irish Second Level Students Union, and Comhairle na nÓg), and 650 online responses from 12-18-year-olds to a survey received via the NCCA website. It also includes the views of 77 young people who attended a Comhairle na nÓg consultation event organised in collaboration with DCYA. For the most part, the findings in this chapter relate to upper primary and post-primary.

The findings from students are presented under the following headings below:

- What is being taught?
- How is RSE taught?
- What makes a good RSE teacher?
- The role of parents and informal learning settings
- What students would like to change.

What is being taught in RSE?

The findings from the review echo previous studies which demonstrated that, by and large, young people view the RSE they are receiving as inadequate or at best partially meeting their needs. Overall, students expressed frustration about disparities in the content and quality of provision and the absence of a consistent and comprehensive approach to teaching RSE in schools. There is no contestation about the importance of RSE amongst students as they time and again affirmed the critical nature of this learning to their development. However, in many cases students showed little awareness of the range of topics that are included in the RSE curriculum. This is illustrated by

comments such as; *we don't even know what we should know; we haven't a clue; we didn't know until today what we should be learning.*

When discussions took place with 5th class students, it was clear that schools were implementing the *Stay Safe* programme which supports elements of RSE. Students often used this as their reference point when considering what they were taught in RSE. Schools were clearly teaching and emphasising messages around keeping safe, friendship and bullying. When first year students were asked about their experience of RSE in upper primary school they frequently associated RSE with 'the talk'. The topics they most often remembered learning about were puberty, personal hygiene and conception. When asked about other topics they learned about, friendship, bullying and personal safety, referred to typically as the *Stay Safe programme*, were most frequently mentioned. A small number of students felt they had covered a comprehensive range of topics, such as how to manage and express emotions and how to cope with pressures. However, for most students, their recall of primary RSE was almost exclusively related to learning about the biological changes that happen during puberty. A small number of first-year students said they didn't receive any lessons in RSE. Almost all students said they would like to have learned more about feelings and relationships, including romantic relationships and the associated pressures of such relationships, which were not generally discussed. They also felt RSE should be taught from an early age. Many first-year students also commented on the absence of any reference to different kinds of families and different sexual orientations.

I was given no RSE in primary. (Post-primary student, Comhairle na nÓg consultation event)

It needs to be done gradually through primary so then by the time it comes to 5th and 6th class you're less awkward. (First year student, post-primary focus group)

You shouldn't have to wait till 5th and 6th class for everything. (First year student, post-primary focus group)

When speaking about their experience of RSE, students frequently said it was limited to a narrow range of topics and overly influenced by teachers selecting the topics that they felt most comfortable teaching or considered to be of relevance to the students. This was true for both primary and post-primary students.

Looking specifically at post-primary, many students said that their SPHE teachers, in junior cycle, focused mainly on health and nutrition, bullying, substance misuse and physical changes associated with puberty. For senior cycle students, these topics were frequently revisited, and some additional biological topics addressed, in particular conception, contraception and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). A small number of students said they had discussed consent in the context of SPHE/RSE and where this occurred it was limited and unsatisfactory. Students feel they need to learn

about sexual consent and the associated skills to negotiate consensual relationships that are respectful and enjoyable, not just the legal basis of consent.

Generally, students said they were more likely to learn about the scientific facts (whether via Science or SPHE class) and they felt the most critical aspect that was lacking in RSE was the emotional and relational aspect. They also spoke about the need to talk about values such as respect and rights and responsibilities and they spoke of the link between self-awareness, self-esteem, body image and positive mental health. Students recognised that these topics are intrinsically related to RSE, but seldom discussed.

Students frequently mentioned the lack of opportunities to learn about different sexual orientations within RSE. In focus group settings, students in a number of schools expressed a desire to learn about dealing with teenage pregnancy while students in other schools said that sexting (which they referred to as *sending nudes*) was a big issue that needed to be addressed. In some all-girl schools, students raised concern about the impact of porn on boys' expectations in relation to relationships and sexual activity. The following quotes give a sense of the range of issues that students raised in relation to current concerns and needs.

We just talked about sex like the kind of diseases and protection but not about the relationship things like how to break up with someone. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

We never learned about relationships and what's a valuable relationship and that's more important. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

We just did about diet, nutrition and bullying all the time. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

We only learned through Home EC and Biology, which is factual and emotionless. (Post-primary student at Comhairle na nÓg consultation)

Important to discuss how we feel about ourselves and self-esteem, so for example an anxious and nervous person might agree to things they don't necessarily want to do. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

The way women and men look in porn, it's not realistic. Boys expect it to be that way and it's not that way at all... people can look up porn at any moment on their phones...women are objects – that's the reality. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

The topics identified through the focus group meetings correlate closely with the online survey responses from 12-18-year-olds. The most important topics identified by students who responded online included: LGBTQ+ and sexual orientation (61), healthy relationships (58), consent (40) followed by frequent mention of contraception, STIs, safe sex and protection.

How is RSE taught?

Students in primary schools made interesting observations about the way they like to learn, with most children favouring a dialogical style of learning. Many children discussed the resources that are used in school and preferred resources that reflected children *like themselves* which are presented in an interactive approach. When first year students were asked to reflect back on how RSE was taught in 5th/6th class of primary school they felt it did not get the amount of time or emphasis that is needed.

Felt it was done quickly just to get it done. (First year student, post-primary focus group)

They just told us and didn't explain it. (First year student, post-primary focus group)

About half the students recall having *the talk* in primary school from an external provider or from a teacher other than their main classroom teacher. Many students remarked that it is better to learn about some topics separately (boys/girls) and then come back together in class with their peers for broader discussion. Others questioned this approach and wondered if this leads to the topic becoming secretive and taboo. When 5th class pupils spoke about how they would like RSE to be taught most often they expressed a preference for being taught by someone they know.

The class teacher or a different teacher but definitely not a stranger. (5th class student, primary school focus group)

Someone we are comfortable with and someone who is trustworthy and who is good at giving out information. (5th class student, primary school focus group)

Some students in first year, especially boys, reflected on *feeling awkward* in front of the classroom teacher, and therefore finding the external provider helpful. In relation to external providers some students also said they had the advantage of being *trained for this work*. On the other hand, both primary and post-primary students suggested that there needs to be a move from 'the talk' to more regular classes in RSE. The infrequent nature of the experience currently means that it ...

Creates a culture of awkwardness and builds up an uncomfortable atmosphere leading people not to take it seriously and laughing during the 'talk'. It needs to be a regular class to stop this. (Post-primary student, Comhairle na nÓg consultation event)

Different approaches to teaching RSE are described in the literature ranging from an Abstinence-only approach to Comprehensive and Holistic approaches (Keating et al, 2018). Post-primary students were very forthcoming when explaining the dominant approach they have experienced in RSE. With the exception of one school, students who participated in focus groups all spoke about an abstinence and problem-based approach to RSE being the prevalent model experienced; one predominately

concerned with the risks and dangers of sexual activity rather than focusing on the positive aspects of relationships and sexuality. Within this 'risk and danger' approach, students say that contraception and STIs are given frequent attention. Students believe very strongly that telling them not to do something or merely pointing out the dangers of sexual activity is unhelpful and misguided. Instead young people say they need to be able to talk about the pressures that lead to sexual activity, the reasons for sexual activity and where to go for help when they need advice in relation to their sexual health.

Why does sex ed always have to be about the negative? (Post-primary student, online survey)

They go over things that you already know like STIs again and again. The message is don't get them and don't do it! (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

Same message – avoid it at all costs. Out of touch with the fact that we are going to be doing it. It's easy to say don't do this and don't do that but that's not enough. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

People are going to have sex without condoms and going to get STIs and we need to be able to talk about it and take away the taboo aspect (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

We're never told about the emotional side... It's too much about the dangers. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

Students in post-primary schools commonly perceived that teachers were often assigned to teach SPHE/RSE but not interested or trained in the subject. Students made observations on the common practice encountered in assigning class tutors and RE teachers to teach SPHE and RSE. While many students see pastoral benefits to meeting with their tutor each week for SPHE they also observed that not all tutors are suited to teaching SPHE and can be uncomfortable teaching RSE in particular. In this context, they feel they miss out on meaningful learning. Both the advantages and disadvantages of tutors teaching SPHE/RSE are reflected in the comments below.

Feel we can go to somebody if we have a problem. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

A lot of teachers don't want to teach it. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

RSE is something we should be doing but isn't done. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

It sometimes feels like the teacher is scared of stuff like RSE. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

For students, the alignment of RSE with teachers of Religious Education (RE) can sometimes work very well, and in other cases it presents difficulties. In two schools, the students felt their RE teachers did

an excellent job in teaching RSE because of their open disposition and skills in handling discussion and questions. In both cases, students felt that there were no restricted areas or questions that could not be explored and the aim was very much focused on enabling young people to think for themselves and be able to make sound decisions.

Religion teachers are easier to talk to. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

It's not fear-based here... we're taught how to look after ourselves rather than don't do it. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

In a number of schools where the RE teachers took responsibility for RSE, students felt that it created difficulties, particularly where they perceived that RE teachers brought their own moral values to bear on the discussion. This restricted the students' ability to engage in honest and open discussions.

It's confusing for me when it's taught in Religion class. I'm thinking why am I learning this here? (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

Teachers beliefs and opinions can get in the way...can make you feel ashamed. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

It's not possible to be yourself or honest with some teachers. We feel sometimes when we answer it's the wrong answer. So, we end up giving the answers the teachers want... because they're RE teachers that influences how they are. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

Frequently students expressed frustration as they felt they were not receiving the education they require in this important area.

It was hit and miss depending on the teacher and how comfortable they are. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

There would be public outrage if there was such a disparity of experiences in any other subject. (Sixth year student, focus group)

The letter went home, and we were looking forward to it, but it didn't happen. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

Looking back, it was a bit of a joke. I had expectations coming into secondary school but it just wasn't taken seriously. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

RSE is something we should be doing but aren't doing. It's often used for other things such as career guidance or last year it was all about drugs and alcohol. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

Students across both primary and post-primary would like to learn about RSE in a more in-depth and participative manner. They frequently talked about teachers *tip-toeing around topics* or introducing a topic and then not allowing students time to fully engage or discuss the topic.

We just touched on it for the sake of it. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

There were topics started and just left. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

We were only scratching the surface in RSE... and it's straight into the next topic. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

While students acknowledged the range of stages of readiness and stages of development within different student groups, they felt that overall there is a tendency for teachers to presume innocence and students think most teachers are out of touch with their lived experience and questions.

I think the junior cycle RSE should involve more detail because it's too late for some students to learn about it in senior cycle. (Post-primary student, online survey)

Needs to be done at the right time and done repeatedly – right throughout the school. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

Teachers need to be realistic and know what is actually happening. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

When 5th class primary school pupils were invited to talk about their experience of RSE it was evident that they often associated it with an awkward lesson or experience. Often the pupils had no previous conversations about puberty. Many spoke about how ongoing conversations would be easier than having it all taught in one day or at one time of the year. With regards to the timing of lessons on puberty, some children said that the lessons came too late in their experience in primary school.

It's happening to me already and I need to know about it. (5th class student, primary school)

I want to know what I am going through is normal. (5th class student, primary school)

Students of all ages consider the heteronormative lens through which RSE is taught as problematic. They spoke about the need to have opportunities to learn about and normalise the diversity of relationships and sexual identities that exist.

When you're taught one thing, and you're another, you feel like you don't fit in. (Post-primary student, online survey)

We had no education of same-sex relationships or about questioning gender identity. (Post-primary student, online survey)

SPHE books need to be more inclusive, more balance, not just one perspective. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

What makes a good RSE teacher?

There is a clear consensus amongst both primary and post-primary students regarding the characteristics needed to be a good RSE teacher. Students responding to the online survey strongly agreed that good teachers of RSE are open (219), understanding (94) and non-judgemental (94). They are also confident (48) and comfortable (49) teaching the subject matter. Students also feel they should be approachable (36), a good listener (31), caring (25) and calm (14). Being trustworthy and confidential (13) is another important characteristic. In focus group settings students reiterated all of these as essential characteristics as well as strongly pointing out the need for the teacher to be *trained* or *qualified* and to have a positive disposition to teaching the subject.

It's offensive that someone is put up there teaching topics they don't know about.
(Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

Want the teacher to be positive. (Post-primary student, online survey)

[it is] Obvious when the teacher is not comfortable teaching it. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

In addition, students want someone who has the skills to be able to facilitate classroom discussion around real-life scenarios. In focus group meetings students also strongly emphasised the importance of a teacher who can be open and honest without imposing their personal values or viewpoint. They find it difficult when a teacher's personal agenda or beliefs dominate the discussion.

Want a teacher who doesn't impose their own views. (Post-primary student, online survey)

Doesn't preach or tell us what to think. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

Senior cycle students also frequently talked about the importance of a teacher being able to break down taboos and normalising discussion about sexual issues.

If we don't normalise talking about sex, then young people will take risks.
(Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

The role of parents and informal learning settings

Primary school pupils considered their parents, teachers, older brothers and sisters and sometimes friends as those they would trust to talk to about questions related to RSE. When post-primary students were asked about the role of parents in RSE, they agreed that it would be desirable to be able to talk to parents about these topics, although when questioned about parents' involvement, their typical response was *no way, disastrous, it would be so awkward*. This was true across all types of schools and age groups. A minority of students said they would feel comfortable talking to parents about questions related to RSE. Students say that *parents think it's being done in school*, even though this might not always be the case.

In the absence of timely RSE, post-primary students said they get most of their information from each other. Older students also said they go to the internet for information while younger students expressed some caution as they were unsure where to go and were fearful of what they might find. In all age groups, students say they want face-to-face learning in RSE framed around an open discussion on topics of relevance to their lives. The online survey asked respondents to say where they went looking for answers to questions related to RSE and the responses from 512 twelve- to eighteen-year-olds are summarised below.

Table 3: Where young people look for answers to questions related to RSE

	Friends	Internet	Parents	Teachers
Always	206	347	65	50
Sometimes	324	57	216	229
Never	91	218	341	343

It appears that ignoring or not teaching topics in a timely manner drives young people to find other sources of information, which might not always be helpful or appropriate.

Everything I know about sexual relationships is from my own sources; from friends and other places. (Post-primary student, online survey)

We talk to our friends to learn about sex. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

I knew everything about sex from the internet by the time I was seven. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

When it comes to informal spaces for learning about relationships and sexuality, youth clubs and youth services were mentioned by some students as offering excellent experiences of RSE. Students who

accessed workshops in these contexts spoke very positively about both the content and methodologies. One inner-city Dublin school visited has a close relationship with a local youth health service and facilitators from this service provide RSE workshops over several weeks to students in the school each year. This provides a helpful link for students as they then know where to go for further support if needed.

I learned all about sex from a youth project. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

We learned how to put on condoms in the youth project. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

We need more conversations like what we have in our youth club happening in schools. (Post-primary student, online survey)

What would you like to change?

When asked to name what needs to change in order to improve the experience of RSE in schools, students most commonly spoke about the need for a dialogical approach to RSE, in smaller groups, and with specially trained teachers. They also called for more time for RSE, with dedicated timetabled space on the curriculum. In terms of curriculum they advocated for a comprehensive, inclusive, incremental, relevant and positive approach to RSE that is provided for all students. Furthermore, they spoke about the need to prioritise RSE and give it the status it deserves in the school curriculum.

Some quotes are provided below which illustrate this view.

It would be good to have blocks of time for RSE. Forty-minutes-long class isn't enough and by the time you get into things the class is over. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

It's a lot easier to learn and to have a discussion in smaller groups. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

If a teacher had to do a qualification in RSE they would have to be educated in both the biological side and the relationships side. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

Start it at a young age and introduce all the key concepts and language at an early age and then add incrementally. (Post-primary student, online survey)

It shouldn't matter whether you live in Cork or Donegal, you should be getting the same RSE at school. (Post-primary student, online survey)

RSE is more important than exams but it's not valued. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

Summary

There is unanimous agreement among students about the importance of RSE. While students frequently cite friends and the internet as sources of information about relationships and sexuality, they were aware of the shortcomings of these sources. They want schools to provide comprehensive, relevant and age-appropriate RSE throughout all stages of education. Students have a sense that this is hindered by RSE's low status and low priority in schools. They express frustration that they are not receiving comprehensive RSE and that their needs are not being met. There is a strong perception among students that provision of RSE is uneven both within and between schools which means that students cannot be guaranteed the same quality of experience in RSE as they can expect in other subjects.

The most notable feature of RSE for students is the tendency for schools to adopt an approach that students say is *too biological*. Within both primary and post-primary contexts, students are unhappy with RSE that focuses mainly on biological facts (for primary students 'the talk' and for post-primary students, information on conception, contraception, STIs) and fails to provide opportunities to discuss the emotional aspects of growing up and forming healthy relationships. They also observe an emphasis on the risks and dangers associated with relationships and sexual activity at the expense of exploring the healthy, positive or enjoyable aspects. Students want a safe and inclusive environment where they can discuss, ask questions and talk about all aspects of relationships and sexuality. They want more than scientific information and facts (which they say they can access readily). Older students spoke about the need to discuss 'real-world' topics openly and honestly within the context of rights and responsibilities, attitudes and values (with respect being most frequently mentioned). Across all ages, students felt that lessons were often *babyish* and *out of touch* with their needs. Furthermore, they remarked that they find lessons in RSE overly repetitive, with themes such as bullying and alcohol revisited from year to year without suitable progression being built in.

For students, the key enabler to a quality experience of RSE is the teacher. Students recognise the importance of a teacher who is comfortable and confident in teaching the subject, has a good relationship with the students, and can facilitate learning in a positive and participative manner. Students' preferred teacher profile for the teacher of RSE is a person who is open, understanding and non-judgemental. Students question the notion that any teacher can teach SPHE/RSE and feel specialist training is needed to enable teachers to develop the dispositions, knowledge and skills required.

On a positive note, those students who have experienced good RSE say that they now feel more confident about being able to deal with situations in their own lives and capable of helping their friends too.

3. Parents' perspectives

This chapter presents the perspectives of parents on provision of RSE, gathered during the review process. The volume of responses received by the NCCA online surveys demonstrates the keen interest that parents and guardians have in this area of their children's learning. This was also evident in the focus group meetings conducted in ten schools. From analysis of the datasets, the range and diversity of opinion on both the content and approach of RSE in schools becomes apparent. There are parents and guardians who are in full support of implementing the RSE curriculum in all schools and wish the content of the subject to be as far-ranging as possible; there are also parents who are adamant that their children should receive age-appropriate knowledge in the subject, but that parents and guardians should be equal partners in the process; and there are parents who are opposed to RSE being taught as part of the school curriculum, seeing this area of education as the sole responsibility of parents. It was evident that a large number of online submissions arose through an organised campaign targeting members of the public who are opposed to the role of the school and the state in providing RSE. Key emphases from this point of view centred on protecting the innocence of children, the right of parents to act as the sole providers of sexuality education and the need for all such education to be rooted in the religious beliefs and values of the family.

The school should not teach my child values, I should. (NCCA online response)

It's not the education system's responsibility. (NCCA online response)

It is a matter that must be taught within families not by school teacher. It is a subject that is unnecessary. Teachers are not therapists, they are there to teach the academic knowledge. RSE is a personal matter. (NCCA online response)

The most common themes and views emerging from focus group consultations and from the remaining parents' surveys are summarised below.

The role of RSE in schools

Many parents clearly recognise their role as the primary educators of their children, which includes a responsibility in relationships and sexuality education. Many expressed the view that the home is the most appropriate place to teach children about relationships and sexuality. That said, parents expressed a desire to be supported in this role by the school and affirmed the importance of RSE as part of the school curriculum. Eighty-eight per cent of responses to the NPC primary survey indicated

that parents saw RSE as a vital part of the school curriculum across all ages and stages of children's education. Specifically, many parents highlighted the importance of RSE in enabling their children to take care of themselves and others; gain awareness and acceptance of self and others; develop responsible decision-making skills; and learn how to build and sustain healthy and respectful relationships.

RSE is part of the education of the whole person. It should be carried out as part of the holistic education which seeks to form as well as inform young people in preparation for adult life. (NCCA online response)

It is essential that our children learn about this, and discuss it in a guided, factual and mature way with their peers. (NCCA online response)

Other parents pointed out the value of children and young people having multiple opportunities for learning and stressed the importance of both home and school working together to provide education in relationships and sexuality.

The effective teaching of the subject will be best achieved through school and home combining and working together to deliver the knowledge required to empower the pupils. (National Parents Council Post-primary, written submission p 1)

Evidence-based, up-to-date RSE is critical to equip young people to look after their health and well-being over the course of their lives. Delivered well, young people will be better able to navigate sexual relationships, avoid abusive relationships and avoid hurting others. (NCCA online response)

A number of parents shared the perception that not every child is guaranteed education in relationships and sexuality at home.

Every child has a right to RSE but not every child will be taught by their parents. (NCCA online response)

School is actually the best place for this to be taught...parents have their own inhibitions. (NCCA online response)

Some parents said that embarrassment or discomfort, both on the part of children and parents, can make conversations about sexuality and relationships challenging. This was especially so with teenagers, and comments such as *my son just won't talk to me about these things*, were common. This is one reason why some parents said it was important that students are facilitated in having informed conversations in school. Many parents who responded to the online survey expressed the view that RSE was not given due status within schools. A further reason why parents look to schools for support in this area is that *some parents suggest that they are not themselves aware of many of the facts in a world where understanding the pressures relating to relationships and sexuality and the influences and pressure surrounding them, on and off line, are changing so fast that they struggle to keep up* (National Parents Council Post-primary, written submission p. 2).

Curriculum and implementation

The views of parents are quite divergent with regard to the appropriate time for children to begin learning about relationships and sexuality. For many parents, RSE is seen as something that needs to be taught incrementally from an early age. Others express the view that children should not be exposed to concepts or language which they are not ready for and may even find upsetting. This view was most frequently expressed in online contributions as illustrated by this comment: *Let children be children and don't bombard them with too much at a young age.* This view was balanced by many parents who suggested that children may be more vulnerable if they do not have opportunities to learn about RSE. The importance of learning in RSE in an age-appropriate manner with sensitivity to the diversity of needs and readiness was highlighted by parents throughout the review.

Knowledge is a protective factor not only for unintended pregnancy and STIs, but also for sexual violence. The earlier children know about and feel comfortable talking about their bodies, health and sexuality, the earlier they will be able to seek help and advice in relation to all areas of reproductive and sexual health. (NCCA online response)

Parents are in agreement that children are under considerable pressures today, particularly when it comes to dealing with challenges presented by the online world. Protecting and promoting children's physical and emotional safety is a crucial concern for parents and many see RSE as playing an important role in this regard. Not surprisingly, many parents would like to see RSE addressing the dangers of the internet and social media and doing so at an earlier age. Parents of primary school children frequently commented that puberty and the physical and emotional changes associated with growing up also need to be addressed at an earlier stage, with many referencing the fact that children go to school later nowadays and often mature earlier.

Start talking from a young age and regularly to make it normal, not taboo. (Focus group response)

I think it's important to teach our children about all aspects of this in a mature, safe environment. They should be familiar with their bodies, they should be taught about respect for others, they should be educated on consent and on self-worth. (NCCA online response)

Body awareness needs to be taught from a younger age than is currently being done. (Focus group response)

When asked to name the content knowledge that they feel is important for their children to learn in RSE the following topics were most commonly mentioned by primary school parents (3433) through the first online survey; respect (2542), relationships (1060), consent (374), safety (306) and social media (120). In focus group meetings with primary parents, these topics were also referred to as well

as others including; self-awareness, acceptance of self and others, relationship skills, coping skills and how to stay safe. A number of primary parents expressed a wish for the RSE curriculum to be more inclusive, specifically when it comes to reflecting the variety of families and relationships that exist. While many parents strongly expressed the view that conversations and awareness about LGBTQ+ issues need to part of the primary RSE curriculum a small number expressed equally strong opinions that it should not.

This ensures these parents are not worried about the invisibility of their family in school and its effects on their child. (Focus group response)

Acceptance of gay parents needs to be introduced more at primary level. (Focus group response)

I don't want my child to be taught about the 5%, who are gay. (Focus group response)

There should be no talk of sex or LGBTQ+ on school grounds. Sex is a private matter and talking about it at school is only normalising it. (NCCA online response)

When it came to naming the learning that post-primary parents (n = 604) considered being most important, online responses to the first survey frequently mentioned STIs (243), respect for themselves and each other, consent (166), sexual orientation (79) and contraception (51). In addition, many post-primary parents (echoing primary parents) thought it was important that RSE would enable their children to learn about healthy relationships; grow in awareness of themselves and others; develop self-esteem; learn how to cope with different pressures and be able to recognise the risks associated with the online world. The importance of learning about substance misuse and pornography was also mentioned by post-primary parents.

RSE shouldn't be just about heterosexual education. It should be about love in all its aspects. (NCCA online response)

Absolutely vital that our kids understand healthy relationships, the meaning of consent from a young age, to respect one another. (Focus group response)

Respect for one another and knowing when to say if something doesn't feel right. (Focus group response)

How to enjoy each other physically and emotionally in a respectful way. (NCCA online response)

Overall, parents agreed that teaching RSE requires skilled teachers and specialist training. They frequently questioned whether the classroom teacher (in the case of primary school) or someone trained to teach another subject should be expected to take on this role in the absence of significant CPD and supports.

Post-primary parents are generally supportive of schools bringing in external providers and health professionals to complement a school's RSE programme. However, they also mentioned the need for such contributors to be carefully checked in advance regarding their message and approach. Primary parents were less supportive of the use of external providers. This is reflected in the National Parents Council Primary survey where over 50% of parents felt that *a teacher in the school who has special interest, skills and training in RSE is best suited to teaching RSE*, followed by *the classroom teacher* (23%) and just under 20% favouring *an external provider*.

Finally, when it comes to the kinds of learning approaches that are needed in RSE, a continuum of perspectives was evident among parents. Views ranged from those who said that the approach should be *cold, hard, objective information, and religion has no part to play in the teaching of RSE*; to those who said *RSE in Catholic schools needs to reflect Catholic values*.

Through the NCCA online survey, parents were given the opportunity to consider what values should underpin an RSE programme in schools and over half of all respondents named respect as the most important value. Other values included openness, kindness, inclusiveness, nurturing and being informed.

On balance, the message that comes through most strongly from both the online responses and the focus group meetings is that the majority of parents desire an approach to teaching RSE that is broad, balanced and supportive of all children and young people.

Need to approach it from a perspective of care... we all care about our children and scare approach is not the way to go...important to get the balance between the risks and joys of sex. (NCCA online response)

Teach the child so they are aware of the repercussions and/or dangers but also not to have fear of it in any way...have a healthy respect and understanding. (Focus group response)

Parental engagement with school

Communication with parents about the RSE programme varied greatly, from parents saying they were not informed at all, to those who felt quite knowledgeable about the content of the programme in schools. While primary school parents were more likely to feel informed (through letters, emails, parent meetings), it appeared to parents that communication about RSE diminished as their children moved into post-primary school. In the NCCA online survey, more than a third of all respondents across primary and post-primary said they received no communication about RSE from the school.

Most parents expressed a desire for better communication and information from schools in relation to what their child is learning in RSE. This was reiterated by respondents to The National Parents Council post-primary survey who wished to be more informed about the content in order to be prepared to answer questions from their children and to add to the content where they felt there might be a gap. Parents across focus groups and online survey responses felt it would be helpful to have this information on an ongoing basis as this would help them to support their children's learning. Many of the focus groups of primary parents suggested that more links through homework in the area of RSE would be helpful, as this would help continue or even initiate the conversation at home. One focus group of post-primary parents expressed the view that communication with parents in relation to RSE should be no different from communication about other aspects of SPHE. They suggested that just as their school website includes information about mental health and substance abuse, similar information about RSE should sit alongside this.

Many parents expressed a desire to work in partnership with schools and suggested ways of enhancing home-school collaboration in this area. Suggestions included online surveys, group meetings with parents in the school, email updates on what's being taught and the sharing of resources (stories, videos, web links) that could be used to prompt discussion at home. One group of post-primary parents suggested joint parent/student RSE workshops led by external providers would be helpful, similar to one they had recently participated in as part of the school's alcohol education programme.

It would be great if parents had information on different supports that are available for young people in the whole area of SPHE/RSE. (Focus group response)

I need help to know how to start the discussion at home. (Focus group response)

There could be more communication between home and school. (Focus group response)

Summary

There is a significant range of views presented by parents in relation to RSE. Parents are generally in agreement on the importance of providing age-appropriate and relevant relationships and sexuality education, both at home and in schools; although there are also parents who strongly believe and promote the view that schools and teachers should not provide such education.

In the main, most parents are unaware of the scope of learning within the RSE curriculum and many would like schools to do more to involve and inform them in this area of their children's education.

Many parents feel strongly that the RSE programme needs to be taught in an incremental and sensitive manner. They are keen to ensure that the timing of RSE is appropriate for their children. They also are

acutely aware of the many pressures faced by young people growing up today and most regard schools as uniquely positioned to provide a space where children can discuss these issues in an informed, thoughtful and open manner alongside their peers. In this context, parents say it is important that their children are taught RSE by teachers who have been adequately supported to teach the subject.

Although most parents regard RSE as an important part of their children's education, interviews found many parents struggle to know how to approach conversations with their children at home, and they would welcome support in this regard.

4. School principals' perspectives

As part of the review, principals, and in some cases deputy principals, were interviewed in ten primary schools and eight post-primary schools. The purpose of these meetings was to discover the experience and reality of RSE in schools, specifically focusing on questions related to:

- Curriculum and planning
- Professional development and other supports
- Parental engagement
- What is needed to improve RSE.

Curriculum and planning

A range of approaches to both the planning and teaching of RSE were evident in schools consulted for this review. For the most part, school leaders expressed a belief in the value of RSE and saw the need for a review of current provision. When it comes to planning for RSE, the picture is quite different across primary and post-primary contexts. In primary schools, planning for SPHE and RSE is integrated into classroom planning and all primary teachers are expected to be RSE teachers. In practice, RSE is predominantly associated with *the talk* as it was often referred to, that occurs in 5th and 6th class. Most principals spoke of a narrow approach to teaching RSE in 5th and 6th classes, with lessons taught in short blocks of time and mostly once-off in nature. In this context, aspects of the RSE curriculum (particularly, the biological aspects of growing up and information about reproduction) are frequently taught by an external provider or a teacher other than the class teacher. Many principals spoke about the challenges of having on-going conversations around RSE with children. Principals highlighted teacher discomfort, lack of time, lack of adequate guidance and challenges in progressing from the traditional model of once-off inputs.

Many primary principals recognise the role positive relationships between teachers and children play in RSE. It was remarked that it is unrealistic to expect external providers to establish a trusting relationship in a once-off visit. Conversely, other school principals indicated that external providers provide a useful service and would like to see them work in partnership with the school on an ongoing basis. Some primary school principals said that they avail of the services of external providers due to

custom and a perception that children may respond better to an external person. The following illustrates the range of perspectives of primary principals.

I've been drafted in twice when teachers don't want to give the talk. It's not ideal. Teachers have the relationship. (Primary principal)

Growing seeds takes more than one day so why do we give the talk all in one day? (Primary principal)

We currently have an outsider coming in but I would like to move towards doing it in-house but that would need more teacher training which would improve teacher confidence. (Primary principal)

In post-primary schools, a diversity of practice is evident when it comes to planning and teaching of RSE and the use of external expertise is also common. Again, post-primary school principals expressed the view that external providers should support rather than replace the role of teachers in RSE. Like their students, they often talked about the specific subject expertise and facilitation skills that external providers can bring, which are valuable when working with students in RSE. Some post-primary principals spoke very positively about working in partnership with local health and youth services. Others said they would appreciate knowing where to go to access relevant external support and felt a register of accredited external providers for RSE would be helpful to schools. In post-primary settings, some principals felt that planning for RSE should fit within planning for Wellbeing and saw the introduction of a Wellbeing programme in the junior cycle as an opportunity for this to happen.

Here in this school we look at RSE within the global picture that is Wellbeing and see RSE as an integral part of Wellbeing. (Post-primary principal)

Some post-primary principals expressed a hope that the review of the senior cycle would provide scope for the extension of a Wellbeing programme into the senior cycle.

We need to move to a model where students have fewer subjects in Leaving Cert leaving space for learning in SPHE/RSE and other important life skills (Post-primary principal)

While primary school principals discussed the integrated nature of RSE within SPHE, they also discussed the whole-school approaches that were needed to support effective RSE. In some schools RSE was not confined to the discrete learning in the area of SPHE. When it comes to enacting the RSE curriculum within schools, the main challenge, as perceived by both primary and post-primary principals, was teacher confidence. Primary school principals considered this a bigger issue in the upper end of primary school, when teachers were called on to teach sensitive aspects of RSE such as puberty and reproduction.

Principals also mentioned the lack of time afforded to RSE and the diverse views of parents as being particular challenges in the context of planning for RSE. Structured time for regular planning of RSE is

a particular challenge in post-primary schools where many teachers are teaching SPHE/RSE as a third subject and where there are often large numbers of teachers involved in teaching the subject. As a result, even when planning meetings are organised not all teachers can participate due to a clash with other subject meetings being held at the same time. In one post-primary school, there were two coordinators of SPHE with one class period per week of dedicated time for coordination, both teachers were newly qualified, without training in SPHE or RSE and were in need of guidance on how best to use this time.

The amount of time for SPHE is one of the biggest challenges. (Primary school principal)

Time is the biggest challenge because priority is given to Math and English (Primary principal)

Not enough time for SPHE/RSE – new wellbeing curriculum in junior cycle might help here. (Post-primary principal)

SPHE/RSE needs more space in senior cycle. This should come as part of senior cycle reform ...junior cycle Wellbeing will have paved the way. If this model works in junior cycle, why not senior cycle? (Post-primary principal)

Amongst post-primary principals there were mixed views and practices when it came to the deployment of teachers and perceptions regarding who is best suited to teach RSE. Just one principal expressed the view that *every teacher can be an SPHE teacher* and by extension can teach RSE too. Most principals agreed that it was desirable to have a core group of interested and trained teachers of RSE and said they were working towards achieving this. All post-primary school principals said they assign teachers who have expressed interest in teaching this area, although this is contrary to the views of teachers where in at least half of the schools teachers did not concur that this was the practice. Frequently, principals said they tried to assign class tutors or RE teachers as SPHE/RSE teachers, as they were seen as uniquely disposed to having positive and open relationships with students. A number of principals assumed that RE teachers were trained in SPHE/RSE as part of their initial teacher education¹ and this was sometimes cited as a reason for assigning RE teachers to teach RSE, especially in senior cycle.

Some principals expressed the view that it was not guaranteed that the class tutor or RE teacher is the best person to teach RSE. The example of senior cycle RSE was highlighted as a particular space in which skilled facilitation and teacher confidence were required in dealing with a range of sensitive topics. Some expressed a fear that in some cases teachers focused on topics they felt comfortable

¹ St Angela's College, Sligo is currently the only post-primary teacher education college in which teachers who qualify to teach RE have an optional elective module in SPHE as part of fourth year.

with resulting in some aspects of RSE being glossed over or ignored altogether. The points referenced above are illustrated in the following quotes:

It's becoming that kind of subject where you might fill up a teacher's time with it to make up hours. (Post-primary principal)

Timetabling for SPHE is always negotiated... Not a filler! We also try to avoid timetabling teachers for one class only – think it's better if a teacher has them for another subject and can get to know them. (Post-primary principal)

It has to be delivered with great empathy but also clear boundaries. (Post-primary principal)

Sometimes assigning tutors as SPHE teachers has its down side ... you're not sure that RSE is always taught. (Post-primary principal)

Both primary and post-primary principals expressed the view that RSE needs to be taught in a comprehensive and inclusive manner. In both contexts, principals expressed the view that young people today are faced with a range of challenges and choices – many of which were unknown to their parents and they need to develop knowledge, attitudes and skills to be able to make healthy and informed decisions. The following areas of learning that should be included in a revised curriculum in an age and developmentally-appropriate manner were widely agreed by principals:

- All family types including same-sex, single parent, foster, and grand-parent and types of relationships (including LGBTQ+)
- Exploration of gender identity, gender roles and stereotypes
- Consent and what it means in a range of scenarios – within a context of examining healthy relationships, rights and responsibilities, communication and negotiation skills
- The effects of social media and the internet on relationships, self-esteem and sexual identity.

When asked whether 'school ethos' was a barrier to providing comprehensive RSE all post-primary principals but one said school ethos was not a barrier. They were strongly of the view that students need to be educated in all aspects of relationships and sexuality education so that they can understand and appreciate themselves and others, enjoy healthy relationships and make informed decisions. They spoke of students having a right to information and said no topic was *out of bounds*. However, some principals encountered criticism from parents who regarded aspects of the RSE programme to be incompatible with the school ethos. One principal said that Catholic school leaders need to show strong leadership in regard to RSE on these occasions. He cited a recent example of being challenged when the school organised a *LGBT Stand Up Week* and said that he needed to be able to explain how this was entirely compatible with the school's Catholic ethos. He suggested that principals might

appreciate opportunities to come together to share their experiences of supporting RSE in schools, including how they deal with negative reactions.

Is school ethos a barrier, not at all, there is no topic they don't address in RSE. (Post-primary principal)

We are proud to be a Catholic school... Our ERST Charter is very important to us... ERST Trusteeship is not in conflict in any way with a holistic ethos... we have a duty of care and this includes a duty to provide good RSE. (Post-primary principal)

There is no issue with providing RSE...It's all about making students responsible. (Post-primary principal)

School ethos is not a barrier here but for some principals it does need to be clarified that it's okay. (Post-primary principal)

In primary schools, principals were more likely to talk about school ethos being a possible barrier to teachers adopting a comprehensive approach to RSE. For example, school ethos was seen to pose challenges in opening up discussion about different kinds of families and same-sex relationships, or in responding to questions that arise about contraception in the context of learning about conception. Principals expressed this as a disconnect between what they felt was expected of them based on their school ethos and addressing the reality of the classroom and the needs of their pupils. The lack of sharing of practice among schools also led principals to believe they are working in a grey space or in some cases *doing it wrong*. Principals frequently expressed the view that clearer direction would be helpful. They felt this could facilitate greater alignment between curriculum, policy and ethos. Often such alignment, it was suggested, would minimise issues arising.

I feel I have to be brave all the time. It's on my shoulders if the patron isn't happy. (Primary principal)

In essence, teachers have to be supported by the curriculum, the patron and the principal. (Primary principal)

There are discrepancies between ethos, parents, teachers and what is actually needed by the children. (Primary principal)

Ethos is used as an excuse (not to teach certain topics/areas). We have a pastoral Christian ethos and teach within that framework. (Primary principal)

In the context of some hesitancy in teaching certain sensitive topics associated with RSE, a number of primary school principals said it would be helpful if the curriculum provided more clarity on what should be taught. In addition, it was recommended that it would be helpful if schools could share their good practice in RSE, in particular in relation to teaching some of the more sensitive topics.

Professional development and supports

In general, principals showed an appreciation of the dispositions and skills needed for teaching RSE within primary and post-primary schools and spoke about the importance of providing continuous professional development (CPD) that supported both the professional and personal development of the teacher. They all agreed that *teacher confidence is key* and both pre-service and continuous professional development is crucial in building this confidence. They also agreed that the nature of RSE requires more than a transmission approach to CPD and *teachers need to sit down and talk about it* both with school colleagues and with expert facilitators. At post-primary level, there was considerable agreement on the need to establish and professionally develop a core team within schools which could offer teachers the opportunity for professional support and collaborative planning and provide students with a consistent and positive experience of SPHE/RSE.

Many primary school principals discussed how whole-school CPD was useful, especially to develop a more consistent approach. Some principals commented that a model of support where a number of visits to their school could support their needs, addressing policy, planning, methodologies and resources, would be beneficial. While they affirmed the value of CPD and noted that teachers report positively when they participate in CPD days, they identified a number of challenges in relation to it including:

- The difficulty teachers experience accessing training events due to lack of spaces on courses
- Teachers having to travel long distances to access training
- Difficulty in finding substitute teachers to replace teachers wishing to attend training
- The one-off nature of training and a lack of ongoing support.

Training is good but you shouldn't have to celebrate when you get enrolled in training. There just isn't enough! (Post-primary principal)

Substitution is a big problem; there are no teachers available to enable us to send teachers to training. (Primary principal)

It's all about good training being available and currently it just is not enough. (Primary principal)

PDST (The Professional Development Services for Teachers) training is needed on an ongoing basis because teachers always have questions in the days after training. The staff training needs to be an organic experience... sustained support is needed. (Primary principal)

Some primary school principals discussed ways of developing the confidence of teachers in RSE, through initiatives such as mentoring and team teaching. During their focus groups teachers affirmed the value of this, highlighting that these opportunities for time, peer support and reflection at a school level had developed their confidence to teach RSE. Some school principals also mentioned that they would like the opportunity to participate in training for school leaders in the area of RSE. Some suggestions included support for principals on a regular basis, such as professional learning clusters, where practice and learning can be shared. Other examples included training for Boards of Management on the best ways to provide for RSE in school. Finally, a number of post-primary principals mentioned an aspect of the recently introduced Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections that has the potential to improve RSE within schools; namely that students themselves will be asked about their experience of RSE as part of the inspection process.

Parental engagement

All principals affirmed that parents are the primary educators of their children in RSE and schools must be sensitive to and respectful of parental values. In most primary schools, parents were communicated with via letter and, in some cases, invited to a meeting to explain the content and approach of RSE in 5th and 6th class. Some primary principals indicated meetings organised for parents were usually not well attended, and over the years were discontinued for this reason. In post-primary schools, a letter was often sent home to 'alert' parents about the teaching of sensitive topics. Some post-primary principals took the view that such letters were unnecessary and unhelpful as they send a message to parents that this area of the curriculum is different than other areas of the curriculum or somehow problematic.

Across all schools, principals identified challenges in developing home-school links in relation to RSE, these include: a lack of time, a lack of RSE resources for parents, low literacy levels in some parent groups and negative experiences of some parents of school. Primary school principals indicated that the diversity of backgrounds, cultures and religious beliefs created different expectations and suggested that resources and supports were needed to help teachers in communicating the school's approach to RSE with parents.

Overall, principals indicate that parents strongly support the provision of RSE in schools and very few parents request that their children be removed from lessons. Where this occurred, principals said it was most likely amongst parents of children from a Traveller background or parents of children from minority faiths. In these instances, teachers are encouraged to follow-up with parents and explain the

approach and content of RSE, and this was usually effective in creating understanding and ensuring that students did not miss out on important lessons in RSE. In general, principals indicated that all children participate in SPHE/RSE lessons on an ongoing basis throughout the school day/year. However, they noted that when specific communication seeking consent is provided to parents on the teaching of puberty and reproduction, or the use of an external provider, a greater number of parents opt their children out of the lessons. In general, principals said they rarely encounter negative feedback from parents in relation to topics raised or approaches taken in class.

Parents are happy for us to do RSE. (Post-primary principal)

Parental involvement is good at junior end but dwindles towards the senior end (Primary principal)

The partnership should be kept to the fore but difficult to achieve when parents themselves were early school leavers. (Post-primary principal)

I can only remember one time when a parent phoned in ... But if we were to teach it more comprehensively, we could get more reaction from parents. (Post-primary principal)

What is needed to improve RSE?

When asked to sum up the main enablers to improved RSE within schools the principals interviewed as part of this review suggested the following:

- Enhanced pre-service education for teachers in SPHE/RSE, including the possibility of a professional qualification
- Locally-based CPD and professional learning communities where teachers and school leaders can support each other in SPHE/RSE
- Need to address CPD and resources in the context of children with intellectual disabilities
- Updated curriculum with enhanced guidance and resource materials to improve the quality of teaching in SPHE/RSE
- Communication with parents
- Smaller classes

Summary

Principals agreed that teacher confidence and enhanced CPD is the key enabler to providing a better experience of RSE in schools. They also agreed it would be valuable to create professional learning communities where teachers can learn from and support each other in SPHE/RSE (both within and between schools). They also affirmed the value of a pre-service professional qualification. They reiterated that pre-service education in SPHE/RSE is needed as without this it is difficult to make up the deficit through in-service CPD.

Principals agreed that SPHE/RSE needs more time and requires its own space on the timetable. Some principals expressed a hope that current curriculum review processes will raise awareness about the need for relationship and life skills to be given more attention.

Principals said that the deployment of teachers to teach SPHE/RSE is always discussed in advance with teachers. However, teacher's perceptions on this differed across the majority of schools visited. Principals generally saw a role for external speakers in supporting the school's RSE programme, particularly when such inputs are integrated and allow for follow-up with the class teacher. Some raised concern about an over-reliance on external providers (especially in 5th/6th class and transition year) and suggested that a register of approved facilitators would be helpful to schools.

The challenge of working in partnership with parents surfaced in meetings with principals. Most principals see parental engagement in RSE as an enabling factor although some are aware that a small number of critical voices can exert undue influence and have a negative impact on what is taught. Some principals asked why RSE should be treated differently to other aspects of SPHE. Or indeed why it should be treated differently to other parts of the curriculum?

Irish principals are keenly aware of the need for strong leadership in this area based on an understanding of the importance of RSE as part of holistic education and as integral to a whole school culture of care. Those interviewed are hopeful that the review of RSE will lead to clearer guidance to schools, stronger policies, and enhanced opportunities for the development of teacher competencies, with the result that schools can work with parents and other agencies towards providing a more relevant and comprehensive experience of RSE for all students.

5. Teachers' perspectives

International research is unequivocal in identifying confident and competent teachers as the key enabler to quality Relationships and Sexuality Education. Throughout this review the critical role of teachers was affirmed by school leaders, students and parents. This chapter considers the perspectives of teachers.

In order to gain an insight into the experience and perspective of teachers of RSE, 20 focus group consultations were held with teachers around the country (12 in primary schools and 8 in post-primary schools). In the case of post-primary focus groups, participating teachers included both junior cycle and senior cycle RSE teachers. In addition, over 1,333 teachers submitted their views via the first online survey - 75% primary, 20% post-primary and 5% identified as other (most working in special education settings) and 513 teachers responded to the second online survey.

This chapter presents an overview of the perspectives of teachers, specifically focusing on questions related to:

- Planning and implementation
- The curriculum
- Professional development
- Resources
- The approach to teaching RSE
- The role of parents in RSE
- What is needed?

Planning and implementation

Primary school teachers highlighted the integration of RSE in SPHE and the associated short- and long-term planning requirements as a strength in providing RSE. Many teachers described how planning supported their teaching of RSE in the classroom and created a greater sense of collegiality when a whole-school approach is taken to planning. Indeed, many teachers expressed a renewed need for whole-school approaches to RSE in recent times because of the revision of related programmes and

policies including, the Stay Safe programme, and the new Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections.

Our whole school RSE policy is very helpful, we know what to teach at each level.
(Primary teacher)

Similarly, post-primary teachers recognise the need for planning time and professional collaboration. However, this presents a challenge in many post-primary schools, due to the number of teachers involved in teaching SPHE/RSE. Often, for most teachers of SPHE/RSE, it is not their main teaching subject which creates added challenges when scheduling subject planning meetings. Teachers report that it is difficult for teachers to meet even during Croke Park hours when exam subjects are demanding their attention. Language used to describe SPHE and RSE, such as *my 2nd subject, my 3rd subject*, convey how SPHE/RSE ranks in the hierarchy of subjects. Teachers all agreed that there was a need for time and space to plan collaboratively, to be able to discuss challenging topics and support each other in this work. Teachers frequently said that SPHE/RSE is not valued and is the Cinderella of school subjects.

Teachers remarked that coordination and communication across junior and senior cycle RSE is not the norm with some teachers saying that the focus group presented the first opportunity for them to talk about what they were doing across different classes. Even where coordination exists, teachers say it rarely goes beyond making resources available.

In addition to needing time for planning, both primary and post-primary teachers say more time is needed for teaching RSE. In primary schools, teachers felt that a half-hour per week is not adequate for SPHE/RSE while at post-primary, teachers also felt that the curriculum was far too ambitious for the time available. In post-primary schools some teachers also said that one-hour classes are needed as *with 40-minute classes you're just getting into a topic and you have to leave it hanging*.

While post-primary teachers saw themselves as part of a core team, in most cases this team was supplemented by a larger group of teachers, most of whom did not choose to teach SPHE and may only teach one SPHE class. In such cases, teachers expressed concern as to whether the RSE elements of SPHE were taught.

In post-primary settings, teachers maintained that assigning the class tutor as SPHE teacher only works when teachers are willing to teach SPHE. Equally, there are mixed views among teachers on whether RSE should be taught within Religious Education (RE). Some felt this worked well, especially where RE is not taught as an exam subject. However, most teachers, including many RE teachers, felt it would be desirable for both subjects to have separate timetabled space in recognition of their separate and

distinct aims. In this context, some teachers suggested that SPHE needs to be timetabled in fifth and sixth year in order for it to have a safe space.

I found it on my timetable when I started here, and it wasn't even on my radar when I was at college that I might be asked to teach SPHE. (Post-primary teacher)

RSE tends to be left till last and very much depends on the comfort level of the teacher whether it's taught or not. (Post-primary teacher)

Haphazard ... that's how I'd describe planning. There's no awareness of what's happening across junior cycle and senior cycle RSE. (Post-primary teacher)

I wouldn't have a positive experience as I'd rather not be teaching Leaving Cert SPHE. I don't feel comfortable or qualified to teach RSE at this level and so I've never done it... I have a scheme of work to cover myself but if you asked the students what I'm doing they'd say not much. If I could opt out of teaching SPHE at senior cycle I would. ... It needs substantial training. (sixth year tutor and SPHE teacher, post-primary)

In two post-primary schools visited, where SPHE and RSE were exclusively taught by a small team of interested and trained teachers, formal coordination as well as informal planning and peer support happened more easily. In both schools, strong leadership support for RSE was also evident and teachers and students alike spoke positively about their experiences of RSE.

The curriculum

Teachers across all groups affirmed the importance of RSE within the school curriculum as demonstrated by comments such as the following:

It's central to a child's development and identity. (Primary teacher)

RSE is a lifelong experience and school plays a pivotal role. (Post-primary teacher)

It is fundamental to the holistic development of the child. (Primary teacher)

A minority of the online responses from primary and post-primary teachers expressed the view that RSE was not appropriate or needed within the school curriculum.

Primary school is too early for this. (Primary teacher)

We are not the parents. This is the parent's responsibility. (Primary teacher)

Commonly, when asked to comment on the curriculum, teachers in post-primary focus groups showed little awareness or familiarity with the curriculum itself. Instead they referred to resources or textbooks and these were used as the basis for both planning and teaching. Teachers at primary level often considered RSE as exclusively related to topics addressed in 5th and 6th class and often associated it with *the talk* usually provided by external providers. Notwithstanding a general lack of familiarity

with the curriculum, teachers agreed on the need for an updated SPHE/RSE curriculum across primary and post-primary education that would meet the needs of children and young people in our current context. The ubiquity of the internet and social media in young people's lives as well as the recent media focus on consent and sexual harassment prompted many post-primary teachers to comment on how these and other topical issues need to be addressed within the RSE space.

In the primary RSE curriculum, teachers most frequently suggested the following additions - the impact of the internet and social media on children's safety and self-identity; different family types; different kinds of attraction; and different sexual identities. They felt that conversations about these and other topics need to begin in primary. They also said they would appreciate guidance and resources on how to introduce these topics in an age-appropriate way. Teachers also asked for greater guidance around language and boundaries within topics to ensure that *they didn't go too far*, thus upsetting parents or in some way being out of sync with the school's ethos.

Many primary teachers, reflecting on the way RSE is taught in 5th and 6th class, said that conversations about puberty needed to start earlier in recognition of the fact that children are going to school later. Primary school teachers acknowledge that a challenge exists in creating a more relevant curriculum while also recognising the individual differences that exist in classes, especially where children are learning in multi-grade classrooms. Similarly, post-primary teachers said that the RSE curriculum needed to be updated to include, for example, discussion about consent and pornography, and like their primary colleagues, they too would appreciate guidance on how to approach these topics in the classroom. Likewise, they felt that many topics currently taught need to be addressed earlier and expressed a concern that RSE was offering young people *too little, too late*.

Although teachers suggested the addition of real-life issues that relate to students' lives, they also contend that it is not possible to keep adding topics to an already extensive curriculum. They felt that a curriculum review of RSE would be useful if it resulted in an updating of content as well as a sharpened focus on relevant topics across different stages of children's development. Teachers said they felt there was currently too much content and this allows the teacher to 'cherry-pick' some topics and ignore others. Overall, many teachers suggested that it would be helpful if there was clearer guidance and conciseness on the content of SPHE/RSE as this would ensure greater consistency of learning for students as well as offering teachers greater confidence. This view was expressed in many ways, ranging from those teachers looking for *greater clarity* to those seeking *a mandatory core curriculum*.

If you (NCCA) tell me that I should be teaching about sexual orientation in Junior Cycle then I've no problem doing it. But if it's not in the book then I'm reluctant to go there! (Post-primary teacher)

I think we need a clear outline of boundaries of what you can and cannot teach at each level. It gives us protection. (Primary teacher)

Someone telling me "You went too far". That's my biggest fear. (Primary teacher)

Lack of prescription leaves us very confused about what should be taught. (Post-primary teacher)

Many teachers said that a strong school policy supports them and gives them confidence in what to teach, especially when this is shared with parents and clearly states what is taught across all areas and level of RSE.

Our whole-school RSE policy is very helpful...We know what to teach at each level. It's very specific. It's an ongoing conversation among staff. There is a general openness... We are able to say when we are struggling. (Primary teacher)

Professional development

The most critical enabler to successful implementation of RSE that teachers identified, across the review, was professional development. Time and again teachers said, *it all comes back to training*. Teachers who had the opportunity to attend CPD in the area of RSE affirmed its value. In the main, teachers look to the PDST when seeking support, although teachers also affirmed the contribution of the Health Service Executive (HSE), BeLonG To, Foróige and other agencies in supporting teacher professional development in this area. Post-primary teachers conveyed a strong view that only teachers who express an interest in teaching RSE and are trained in this area should be asked to teach it. Most teachers considered this was not the way teachers were deployed in their schools.

In primary school, every teacher is seen as an RSE teacher. However, often in 5th and 6th class, teacher confidence becomes an issue and teachers no longer see themselves as best placed to teach this area. Many teachers expressed a lack of confidence in managing questions and were unsure of the boundaries when addressing certain topics such as reproduction and sexual orientation. The teachers who had confidence in this area typically attended training and spoke about the immense privilege and responsibility attached to having conversations with children around RSE. Teachers from across primary and post-primary stated that accessing CPD is challenging. They pointed to a number of contributing factors including:

- Release time from school. Teachers are aware of difficulties in getting substitute teachers to cover their classes and sometimes also expressed reluctance to leave their 'exam' students.
- Demand for courses exceeds the spaces available. This means that teachers sometimes have to wait for more than a year to attend an introductory course.

- Location of courses. Courses are conducted regionally which means that sometimes teachers have to drive long distances and stay away overnight. This is a particular barrier to training in some parts of the country.
- The high turnover of SPHE/RSE teachers in post-primary schools. This creates an ongoing demand for introductory courses
- Lack of professional pathways in SPHE/RSE. Many teachers who contributed to the review attended introductory RSE courses many years ago and regretted that there was nowhere they could go to further develop their knowledge and skills in SPHE/RSE. In addition, teachers felt there should be opportunities for practicing teachers to pursue a professional qualification in the area of SPHE/RSE by building credits.

Many teachers said that the model of training needs to be reviewed to move from a model that is once-off to one that provides on-going support both at the school level and through professional learning communities of RSE teachers meeting within cluster groups. In this context, some teachers spoke of opportunities in school that supported them in gaining competence and confidence, such as team teaching and mentoring. However, these initiatives were generally once-off and informal rather than embedded in school practice. It was also noted that there is currently no CPD available in RSE for teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities.

I looked on the PDST website and found one date, but it was booked out. It's like Ticketmaster – you have to get on straightaway or you won't get a place... It's a huge problem. (Post-primary teacher)

It can be difficult to take a whole day out for CPD when it's not your main subject. (Post-primary teacher)

It needs to be whole school training. (Primary teacher)

The year I learned the most was when I worked with another colleague. We did team teaching and it was amazing. To see how someone else frames it, is great. (Post-primary teacher)

A model of CPD I'd love would be a cluster model working with teachers in the same area, like maybe with other teachers who work in boys' schools. (Post-primary teacher)

I've done the training days years ago.... Now I'd like to be able to take it to the next stage. (Post-primary teacher)

A qualification would be a good thing. The subject deserves that recognition – without it, will it ever be taken seriously? (Post-primary teacher)

Resources

Teachers are using a wide range of resources to support them in teaching RSE. In primary schools, the main resources in use include RSE manuals, *Busy Bodies*, anatomical dolls and picture books. Many primary teachers commented on how pupils react positively to the resources used in the revised Stay Safe programme. However, some primary teachers expressed uncertainty in relation to what resources they should or should not use, with teachers commenting that they were told not to use certain resources in the past. One example given was the *Different Family, Same Love* poster, that was produced to support schools to make visible and support all families in their school communities, including same-sex families.

Post-primary teachers frequently said they used a textbook, particularly for junior cycle SPHE/RSE. At senior cycle, the TRUST resource, B4UDecide resource, and various online resources are most commonly used. Some teachers also spoke about generating their own resources using YouTube clips, magazine articles, etc. as a stimulus for discussion. They said that students favoured working with real-life scenarios although these need to be credible and relevant to students as otherwise students do not take them seriously. Teachers emphasised the need for engaging and up-to-date resources that will present opportunities for students to talk and have meaningful discussions about questions that matter to them.

Overall, teachers spoke of the need for more resources and supports. In addition, specific resources are needed for teachers teaching through the medium of Gaeilge and those working with students with SEN. The idea of a portal site where teachers could access all RSE resources surfaced frequently in focus group meetings.

We need more child-friendly videos and interactive material online. (Primary teacher)

The current RSE materials are dated and it's very hard to engage children with lessons created for a classroom 20 years ago. (Primary teacher)

Realistic video clips and stories around RSE topics which are age-appropriate to use for discussion are needed. (Post-primary teacher)

Resources get dated very quickly. If the kids are wearing the wrong clothes in a video they will switch off quickly. They need to be updated very regularly. (Post-primary teacher)

It's inappropriate to be using primary school RSE worksheets with an 18-year-old student with SEN. (Post-primary teacher)

The approach

Teachers and students agree that RSE should be taught in an open, interactive and non-judgemental manner. Many teachers said that teaching RSE requires a different set of skills to those required for teaching other subjects. The capacity to facilitate group discussions and allow questions to emerge was regarded as very important. Teachers frequently noted that this demands a lot of confidence and skill, as well as requiring a positive and open teacher-student relationship.

In post-primary focus groups, teachers often said that they tended to approach RSE from a *risks and dangers approach*, where the focus was on discussing unhealthy relationships as opposed to discussing how to create and maintain healthy ones, and where the dangers of sexual activity (including STIs) were frequently highlighted. They said this was motivated by a desire to protect young people from danger although they generally agreed that a more holistic and positive approach was desirable and in keeping with students' needs and changing societal attitudes. In primary focus groups, teachers also expressed a desire to adopt a more positive and holistic approach to RSE but they agreed that RSE tends to be associated with specific lessons in the senior classes of primary, which contributes to its being seen as separate from the rest of learning and a taboo subject.

There were mixed views on the use of external providers. Among primary teachers, at times, concerns were expressed about the practice. Firstly, concern was expressed about the lack of a prior relationship with the pupils. Secondly, it was highlighted that after the inputs some teachers felt disempowered from having follow-up conversations. A further limitation mentioned was that it can lead to teachers holding off on discussions with children for when the speaker arrives, and consequently teachable moments are lost. Many primary teachers felt that external providers were often used to do *the talk* without school management really questioning this approach to RSE.

Conversely, many other teachers, both primary and post-primary, saw external providers as playing an important and complementary role, particularly where the learning was set in a context and there was a structured follow-up. In particular, post-primary teachers saw them having a useful role in facilitating specialist workshops with senior cycle students. The following comments reflect a range of views commonly expressed by teachers in relation to the use of external providers.

I find with the external provider that there is a disconnect between them and the class. There needs to be a relationship which needs to be built. (Primary teacher)

Experienced facilitators are needed! It's a topic that most teachers I know steer well clear of and principals ignore. (Post-primary teacher)

The best way is if it's a backup, but schools need time to think about how the speaker is used, and they are not just parachuted in and that's it. (Primary teacher)

Some online respondents expressed the view that external providers should not promote a particular religious viewpoint and suggested that health professionals are best placed to provide balanced and non-judgemental support in the area of RSE. Some teachers also said it would be helpful to have a list of approved external providers that could be drawn upon.

Parental engagement

Teachers were asked about parental involvement and how schools might work in partnership with parents to build a collaborative approach to RSE. Overall teachers saw the benefits of building a partnership with parents and expressed a desire to do so. Having said this, teachers were also aware of the challenges of building more meaningful collaboration with parents. Some teachers cited time pressures experienced by both parents and teachers, while others expressed nervousness about communicating about RSE with parents because of the scrutiny that it could give rise to. Other teachers felt if this area is to be viewed like other curricular areas, then communication must be in line with other curriculum areas and wondered if shining a light on RSE was problematising the subject.

In general, teachers felt that parents were happy for schools to take responsibility for RSE, especially as students progressed through post-primary school. Some felt parents would welcome advice on how to frame conversations with their children and would appreciate support or resources to facilitate them in addressing topics in tandem with the school. Specific suggestions for ways to build better communication and collaboration between school and home in relation to RSE included the use of the school website/phone messages, the development of parent-friendly resources and the provision of parent RSE workshops.

There needs to be far more input from home. The family should be the primary educators in such sensitive topics. (Primary teacher)

Online resources and links for parents would be good. (Post-primary teacher)

More regular communication about what we are doing in school ... That will allow parents to continue the conversation at home. (Primary teacher)

What is needed to improve RSE?

There is no contestation about the importance of RSE as part of children and young people's learning among teachers and they believe that all students should have a high-quality experience of RSE, beginning in early childhood and extending throughout their time in school. Teachers suggested a variety of ways that the experience of RSE across both primary and post-primary could be improved.

These included:

- Enhanced pre-service and in-service professional development including improvements in access and type, as well as the introduction of a professional qualification in SPHE/RSE
- Opportunities for planning and coordination within schools alongside opportunities for networking and collaborative learning with teachers in other schools
- More time for SPHE/RSE on the timetable and smaller classes
- A framework for partnership between schools and external providers
- An approach to RSE that enables young people to learn about themselves and others in a positive and participative process
- An up-to-date curriculum taking into account the reality of students' lives today
- Enhanced guidance and clarity on topics to counter cherry-picking and teaching within the safer topics of SPHE/RSE coupled with some flexibility for teachers to respond to their students' specific needs
- Updated and engaging resources that include real-life scenarios and are relevant to students' needs
- Specific CPD and resources for teachers working with SEN students
- An online portal site for RSE teaching and learning resources
- Supports for parents to enable home-school collaboration.

Summary

Echoing the perspectives of students and school principals, teachers spoke about the importance of teacher professional development for effective teaching of RSE. They would like to see enhanced training at both pre-service and in-service levels. In addition, post-primary teachers suggested that SPHE should be introduced as a recognised teaching subject in the Professional Master of Education (PME) which would allow teachers to be qualified to teach this subject in the same way as other subjects. For those teachers currently in the system and interested in the area, the idea of a postgraduate professional qualification in SPHE/RSE was also supported.

In post-primary schools, teachers are in agreement that many issues of concern associated with RSE, including the low status of the subject, could be addressed if they could opt to teach the subject and access appropriate professional development to support them in doing so. Within primary schools, where all teachers have a role in RSE, the establishment of a small skilled core team is strongly endorsed by teachers.

Teachers unanimously identified the need for time for planning, coordination and communication within their school teams. It appears that structured time for planning in RSE is not the norm within schools. SPHE/RSE teachers would also value opportunities for networking and collaborative learning with teachers in other schools.

A further priority for teachers is an updated curriculum focusing on the important learning needed to navigate growing up in the world today. Teachers would like greater clarity as to what topics teachers should address at different stages of children's learning in RSE. Enhanced curriculum guidance and clarity would be welcomed by teachers although some pointed out that clearer prescription needs to be balanced with allowing for some degree of flexibility to enable schools to respond to their specific students' needs.

Teachers also advocated the use of smaller class groups for the teaching of RSE as this supports the kinds of pedagogies needed in teaching SPHE/RSE topics. Finally, all teachers would welcome updated and engaging resources with the possibility of accessing these via a portal website. Specific resources for working with children with SEN and in Irish medium schools were also specified.

6. Stakeholders' perspectives

In addition to learning about the experience of schools, an important part of the review of RSE involved gathering the views of key stakeholders who have a role in overseeing, supporting and/or inspecting RSE in schools. These views were gathered in three ways:

- Bilateral and roundtable meetings were held with 64 organisations and individuals
- A symposium on RSE was held in Dublin in November 2018 with 51 stakeholder organisations represented and a follow-up symposium was held in September 2019, attended by 70 stakeholder organisations.
- Written submissions were invited via the NCCA website and 85 submissions were received from organisations and groups during the review process.

Through the various formats, ideas regarding the strengths and challenges of current experiences of RSE were shared along with suggestions for how RSE could be improved. The volume of submissions received provide a vast range of perspectives on RSE in schools. This chapter presents an overview of this range under the following themes:

- Curriculum and implementation
- Classroom resources
- Approaches
- Professional development
- Parental involvement.

Curriculum and implementation

This section presents stakeholder perspectives on questions related to curriculum content, the time needed to teach RSE effectively, and the deployment of teachers. It also presents views on how school ethos influences the implementation of the curriculum.

Among stakeholders, there was broad agreement that RSE plays a central role in a young person's education. Many who contributed remarked that the curriculum is titled *Relationships and Sexuality Education*, which positions education about *relationships* at the heart of what is envisaged.

Furthermore, various stakeholders affirmed the importance of situating RSE within the context of developing healthy relationships and stressed that RSE is more than informing young people about sexual activity. Frequently the view was expressed that the starting point and overall purpose of RSE is to enable children and young people to be able to create and sustain healthy relationships, express and manage emotions, develop skills of self-awareness and self-regulation, cope with the pressures of growing up, and make good choices. Therefore, many pointed out that good RSE cannot be separated from good SPHE.

Curriculum content

Historically the development of various curriculum documents, guidelines and resources for SPHE and RSE seems to have led to some confusion, with many stakeholders indicating that schools are not sure where to look to when planning for SPHE/RSE. Some suggested that the existence of a separate RSE curriculum² that sits apart from but is linked to the SPHE curriculum is unhelpful and complicates the planning of RSE in schools. Both written submissions and bi-lateral discussions emphasised that RSE and SPHE need to be seen as a single entity.

According to many stakeholders, the curriculum itself is not the central issue. Although in need of some updating, many feel the current RSE curriculum, if fully implemented, would provide worthwhile learning experiences for students. However, there was considerable discussion about the apparent disparity of experiences of RSE and the lack of a consistent approach across schools. *The TUI has a concern that RSE is not available equally in all school settings* (TUI written submission). In this context, many stakeholders would like to see the requirements on schools related to RSE (especially post-primary schools) fully implemented and monitored.

Many stakeholders questioned the use of learning outcomes that are very broad when it comes to the RSE curriculum and suggested that greater specificity is more helpful in providing direction on what needs to be taught in RSE.

Curriculum and resources become exactly what is taught...Therefore we need to ensure that the topics that have to be addressed are explicitly named in the curriculum. (Health Services Executive Education Programme and Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme bilateral contribution)

When asked to suggest **additional content** that might be included in any revised RSE curriculum the following themes were most commonly suggested.

For primary:

² As set out in the *Interim curriculum and guidelines for RSE, primary and post-primary, 1996*

- Consent (introducing consent as a core principle relevant to all interpersonal relationships)
- Safe use of the phone/internet
- Different family structures, including LGBT families
- Love and attraction, including same-sex attraction
- Gender identity (how a person sees themselves as male/female).

For post-primary:

- Consent
- Healthy positive sexual expression
- The effects of the internet and social media on relationships and self-esteem
- Pornography
- Gender and sexual discrimination and violence
- Social and cultural norms and expectations as they relate to relationships and sexuality
- LGBTQ+ matters.

Underscoring these suggestions there was widespread agreement that simply addressing aspects of learning in isolation or in a purely fact-based or scientific manner would not meet the needs of students. The emotional and relational aspects of RSE need to be emphasised too:

Social and emotional learning must be recognised as core competencies within the RSE curriculum, with a particular focus on self-awareness and distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy relationships, from as young an age as possible.
(Joint NGO, written submission p.1)

Furthermore, it was pointed out that many of these themes cannot be taught effectively as stand-alone topics or on a once-off basis. In particular, the risks of teaching LGBTQ+ matters in an unintegrated way were highlighted by some contributors. Such an approach misses the opportunity to apply an inclusive lens to teaching the entire curriculum and risks ‘othering’ LGBTQ+ people and presenting them as a homogenous group. An integrated and nuanced approach is required in teaching about LGBTQ+ identities and experiences.

Many stakeholders suggested that the RSE curriculum should be informed by international best practice. In addition, it was suggested that the curriculum should be fully aligned with Irish

government health policy including *Healthy Ireland: A framework for improved health and wellbeing 2013-2025* and the *National Sexual Health Strategy 2015–2020*.

Time

Many felt that more classroom time was needed to adequately teach RSE especially in the context of increased attention being given to topics highlighted in the review. There was strong agreement that the thirty minutes allocated to SPHE each week in primary schools was not enough to comprehensively address the SPHE/RSE curriculum. Equally, in the case of post-primary there was consensus that the minimum requirement of six lessons per year for RSE was both inadequate and unhelpful as it often led to schools simply meeting the minimum requirement or RSE being ‘pigeon-holed’ into a once-off workshop. In addition, many stakeholders expressed regret that there is no requirement to timetable SPHE for senior cycle and felt that, as a consequence, RSE has no distinct space. Some expressed a hope that RSE would feature in a revised senior cycle, pointing out the critical importance of RSE for young people at this point in their lives.

Frequently in bilateral meetings, the many issues and challenges that young people face were discussed, such as the use of social media, the influence of pornography, the effect of peer and other pressures on behaviour and wellbeing, as well as the normal ups and downs of relationships and growing up. Stakeholders highlighted that these topics need time for in-depth discussion and participative methodologies. Due to the sometimes-sensitive content of RSE and the participative and dialogical pedagogies that underpin it, many stakeholders also made a case for smaller class sizes. Some of the groups who provide specialist workshops in schools in aspects of RSE felt that class size had a significant impact on the delivery of RSE programmes. This was reiterated by others who recommended that, *allocation of teachers needs to be increased specifically to implement an effective RSE programme in schools* (Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland, written submission p5).

Deployment of teachers

Across all forms of consultation, the importance of deploying teachers who were skilled and confident in teaching RSE was emphasised as the single most critical thing. Many stakeholders were concerned about an over-reliance on external providers in primary schools and equally concerned about the deployment of teachers to teach post-primary RSE who are not trained or have not expressed a wish to teach the subject. (See the section that follows ‘External providers’ for a detailed discussion on this). Frequently contributors to the review described SPHE as a timetable-filler in post-primary schools. Others observed that teachers could be deployed to teach SPHE this year and not next *which can create inconsistent experiences and fragmented learning for students* (Symposium on RSE contribution). These observations contributed to a common view amongst stakeholders that SPHE has

a low status and is not a priority in many schools. School leadership was identified as a key lever for effective implementation of the RSE curriculum. Almost all stakeholders emphasised the critical role school leaders play in creating a supportive environment where RSE can be implemented in a confident, consistent and inclusive way.

Principals act as key levers for effective RSE and are pivotal in the success of RSE. (Symposium on RSE contributions)

The principals, they're the gatekeeper to a lot of what goes on in the classroom; they need support and guidance to change practices. (Symposium on RSE contributions)

Ethos and curriculum implementation

Before considering the views on ethos expressed by stakeholders, it is notable that, among the many agencies, institutions and organisations, there is virtually unanimous agreement on the need for and purpose of the RSE curriculum. Given the substantial common ground that is evident in positions as set out by various stakeholders, a high degree of consensus might be expected to emerge. However, it is in the consideration of the role of school ethos that perspectives diverge. Two strongly divergent positions become apparent, one seeing ethos as an aid to assisting schools in the area of RSE, and the contesting perspective viewing ethos as hindering the fully comprehensive provision of RSE.

Those representing denominational school trusts and management bodies highlighted the importance of the holistic development of young people and in this context considered RSE to be an important part of a child's education, stressing that school ethos can never be a barrier to this. A number of faith-based representatives voiced the view that a comprehensive programme of RSE is essential for all young people to help them navigate the complex world in which they live and contended that school ethos enables teaching of the full range of content and topics in the RSE programme.

We are really keen to address the myth that Catholic schools are standing in the way of good RSE. Le Chéile is of the view that schools' first duty is to educate and care for students. Students need to get information and have a right to this knowledge so that they can make informed decisions. (Le Chéile bilateral meeting)

...(while) the ethical and moral frameworks underpinning what is taught within RSE classes must be congruent with Church teaching on sexual morality, this does not mean that an embargo exists around any truly human experience or that faith schools will not discuss or engage with any particular aspect of the curriculum. The exact opposite is the case. (Joint Managerial Body, written submission p.2)

None of the various issues listed by the Minister should be avoided; all should be explored in RSE in an open, values-rich, student centered and age and stage appropriate way in line with the expressed wishes of parents. (The Council for

Catechetics, Education (Irish Bishops Conference) and the Catholic Schools Partnership, written submission p.13)

RSE as part of the school curriculum will include age-appropriate information, debate and discussion about contraception, sexually transmitted infections, same sex attraction and unions, and the full meaning of consent. (Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools, written submission p.6)

A further clear message from the perspective of faith-based bodies is the need for an RSE curriculum that is age and stage appropriate and developed in partnership with parents.

Those who expressed concerns regarding the influence of school ethos on the way RSE is implemented suggested that some faith-based schools prohibit teaching certain topics and overlay the curriculum with a particular moral vision or set of beliefs. The Sexual Health Centre, Cork, for example, expressed a view that information on contraception was not being provided by some schools due to school ethos. The submission by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) expressed the hope for teachers *that the new review will supply answers to the dilemma they face regarding the ethos of their school and what resources they wish to use.* The written submission from the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) states that

the ethos of the school, religious or otherwise, should not determine the manner in which the RSE programme is provided to students. Students have a right to objective and factual relationships and sexuality education regardless of the type of school they attend. (p.3)

Stakeholders perceived that the influence of school ethos was more evident in primary schools. Some contributors suggested that school ethos was an important factor in informing the selection of external providers and, to a lesser extent, others cited incidents where it impacted on the selection of resources used and content taught. Some stakeholders also felt that Boards of Management and parents were more likely to be engaged in discussions about the RSE curriculum in primary than post-primary and it was noted that at times a minority of vocal conservative parents can exercise undue influence on the content of what is taught.

When discussions about the development and introduction of a revised curriculum took place, many stakeholders were of the view that tensions in relation to school ethos may surface when concrete proposals for curriculum change are mooted. In particular, they identified possible tensions arising from:

- different understandings of what school ethos means and how school ethos should influence curriculum planning and pedagogy
- different understandings of what 'holistic' RSE means

- different perspectives on what content should be taught and when within the SPHE/RSE classroom.
- the challenge for schools of mediating with parents who hold a wide spectrum of views on the role and scope of SPHE/RSE and the way in which school ethos should influence its delivery

Some groups consulted as part of the review advocated amending the Education Act (1998) to ensure that the religious ethos of a school cannot interfere with the enactment of the curriculum and the right of every child to a factual, critical and comprehensive education in the area of relationships and sexuality. Changes to the Education Act (1998) have also been recommended by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills *Report on Relationships and Sexuality Education* (2019) and by a number of youth and student representative groups, and other organisations.

As it stands now, a parent has no grounds to challenge a school under the Equal Status Act, if the RSE course is delivered through the religious ethos of the school.
(Atheist Ireland submission, Nov 2019)

On balance, while divergence exists in relation to the perceived influence of ethos on the experience of RSE in schools, there is a broad consensus that school ethos should not be a barrier to students receiving a comprehensive curriculum in RSE and there is much common ground amongst groups in asserting the importance of RSE within a holistic education, grounded in an understanding of the human person as relational as well as sexual.

External providers

A spectrum of opinion was also evident in relation to the role of external providers in supporting RSE in schools. Some stakeholders queried the value of once-off and short inputs that often characterise these interventions in schools. Many stakeholders talked about the various reasons for schools using external providers including the sensitive nature of the content, teachers' own level of comfort in teaching RSE and, in some cases, a school policy that includes the use of external support.

Some stakeholders felt that the significant use of external providers, particularly in 5th and 6th classes in primary school, needs to be reassessed. Several student representatives expressed the view that handing over the teaching of RSE to external providers contributes to the subject being seen as taboo and students spoke about feeling anxious in anticipation of *the talk*, often leaving with more questions, *feeling ignored or not visible* (bilateral contribution). However, some written submissions argued for the continued involvement of external providers at primary: *there is value for external providers to handle some aspects of the programme in schools as it encourages children to ask*

questions they may not ask of their class teacher (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, written submission p.10).

While most stakeholders regard the classroom teacher as ideally positioned to teach RSE many stakeholders believe that external providers are a valuable resource and can reinforce or complement the RSE curriculum, particularly at post-primary level. Furthermore, some bilateral discussions contended that because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter and the increasingly fast-moving and complex world we live in, external providers could play an important role, bringing specialist and up-to-date information to schools. Representatives from NGOs (such as BelongTo, ShoutOut, The Rape Crisis Network, Women's Aid) and community-based health education services (such as Aids West and Squashy Couch, Tusla Adolescent Health Waterford) all shared positive experiences of working in schools. Some external providers expressed concern that they were invited in to provide the only RSE lessons that students received. Others suggested schools invited them in order to maintain a hands-off approach. However, where there was a partnership between the school and external provider this was regarded as leading to highly impactful and effective RSE.

Meetings with stakeholders also highlighted the expertise in relationships and sexual health education that is available within the youth sector and in local adolescent health services. It was noted that when schools form links with these services it can greatly enhance their RSE programme. The review also found that some organisations found partnerships with local schools difficult to maintain due to lack of funding or the fact that their grants were specified for uses that did not include work in schools.

There is a wealth of knowledge in the community and voluntary sector to address the Minister's specifically considered issues. (Clare Haven Services, written submission p. 4)

Working in partnership with schools to complement the SPHE curriculum supports evidence that acknowledges the value of a package of interventions using a variety of measures, giving complementary messages. (Cork Sexual Health Centre, written submission p.5)

Notwithstanding a wide range of opinion on the topic of external providers of RSE, the general consensus was that external providers currently play an important role in supporting schools and will continue to do so until teachers are enabled to develop the skills and confidence to teach all aspects of the RSE curriculum.

Resources

The core resource materials that most schools use to support teaching and learning in RSE are almost 20 years old. There is widespread stakeholder agreement that the updating of current resources and the creation of additional resources is now needed for both primary and post-primary settings. Suggestions included up-to-date scenario-based stories, videos and resources that could be used to support conversations and engagement with children and young people. The use of an online space where such resources could be curated was suggested numerous times.

The RSE resource materials and other resources need to be updated and presented in a modern, more user-friendly style. (SPHE network, written submission p.6)

We would recommend a supplementary online restricted access platform with a suite of resources. (Faculty of Public Health Medicine, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, written submission p.4)

Some bilateral discussions highlighted the considerable amount of resources available at post-primary level which teachers are not always aware of. It was also noted that many excellent resources are used in non-formal youth education settings which could be equally valuable and useful in school-based RSE. The bilateral meetings also pointed out the importance of negotiating learning in RSE with the students themselves and seeking their views on resources and methodologies that work best.

In addition, there was a suggestion for resources to be made available for parents to support them in engaging in RSE with their children. These resources could complement the school curriculum and enable parents and schools to work in partnership.

Approaches

A small number of submissions contended that an abstinence approach should be the focus of RSE in Irish schools, however, most stakeholders recommended comprehensive and/or holistic approaches as meeting the needs of young people today. It is important to note that these terms were sometimes used interchangeably and were understood differently by different stakeholders. Also, while many stakeholders advocated for a more comprehensive or holistic approach many observed that current practice lies towards the abstinence end of the spectrum, characterised by a strong focus on the risks associated with sexual activity. They wondered if schools and parents would be universally accepting of schools taking on a more holistic approach to RSE.

CSE (Comprehensive Sexuality Education) facilitates the development of accurate and age-appropriate knowledge, attitudes and skills. It promotes positive values, including respect for human rights, gender equality and diversity. It offers attitudes and skills that contribute to safe, healthy, positive relationships. (Irish Family Planning Association, written submission p. 1)

We cannot just move overnight to a holistic approach to RSE; we need a stepped approach. (Symposium on RSE contribution)

Regardless of how stakeholders name the approach that should be taken there was strong agreement that the approach taken should be:

- Student-centred
- Holistic
- Inclusive
- Age and developmentally-appropriate
- Whole-school

These are set out in further detail below.

Student-centred learning

There was broad agreement among stakeholders that all children and young people have a right to a quality experience of SPHE/RSE that is responsive and relevant to their lives. To achieve this, young people must be enabled to identify their own learning needs and influence the selection of questions and topics that are discussed in RSE. Some external providers shared examples of how they work with students in co-constructing the learning. In addition, it was suggested that not only should young people be able to influence their day-to-day learning in RSE but also the curriculum itself.

Meaningful youth participation in the review, revision and redesign of the curriculum is a human right and is vital to ensuring the relevance and success of the curriculum. (Amnesty International Ireland, written submission p. 6)

It was remarked that student-centred learning also requires a pedagogy that enables students to examine behaviour, attitudes and values and participate openly in classroom discussions without judgment. Many stakeholders at roundtable discussions suggested that this means *...facilitation rather than teaching...breaking traditional forms of teaching... teachers dealing with their unknowingness*. The role of teacher identity and teacher self-awareness was frequently highlighted in bilateral meetings as well as the dispositions that a teacher needs to bring to the RSE classroom.

We need to teach in a way that's non-judgemental and value students as having something to contribute... give students a voice and look at making the classroom space more conducive to discussion. (Symposium on RSE contributions)

Holistic

While there were varying interpretations of what a holistic approach means, the need to adopt a more holistic approach to RSE was raised repeatedly. Accordingly, RSE is seen as a life-long process that *spans from early childhood to post-primary and needs to be seen on a continuum* (Symposium on RSE contribution). To be truly holistic some bi-lateral discussions suggested that the role of RSE in early childhood needs to be examined too.

Furthermore, a holistic approach to RSE balances and connects both the relationship and sexuality dimensions and, in this regard, stakeholders echoed strongly the voices of students who said it was important to learn about both. Some stakeholders suggested that a holistic approach requires a shift away from a topic-based approach in which issues are taught in a segregated manner (e.g. lessons on consent, gender identity, etc). Rather, they saw a holistic approach enabling students to make connections across topics and to explore topics from a range of perspectives - biological, emotional, cultural, and social. Finally, stakeholders agreed that a holistic approach covers the full range of topics that are important for children and young people at each stage of their development and is positive in approach.

The facts around fulfilment and joy, as well as the responsibilities, dangers and complications of relationships and sexuality should be presented and discussed to ensure effective and balanced learning in this area. (National Parents Council Post-primary, written submission p. 1)

Inclusive

Many stakeholders stated that successful RSE affirms the identity of all learners and suggested that inclusion should be at the core of any approach. Many contended that the current experience of RSE is not inclusive of all students, specifically referring to LGBTQ+ students and students with SEN in this regard. Many stakeholders referred to the heteronormative approach to teaching RSE that is evident in the curriculum and teaching resources. Student representative groups expressed particular concern about the silence that can exist in both primary and post-primary schools around LGBTQ+ issues and spoke about how this impacts on their LGBTQ+ peers. In the primary context, many suggested that all children need to see themselves and their families represented in the curriculum. It was highlighted that directly placing LGBTQ+ issues just within RSE at primary level would be a disservice to the broad and inclusive way the topic could be approached through SPHE.

At primary it was suggested that the SPHE Curriculum could be used to explore different families through the strand unit 'Myself and my family' while gender identity and expression could be introduced through the strand unit self-identity. Such approaches can support and enhance a school's RSE programme especially in upper primary. It was highlighted that some of the approaches which

schools use to build inclusion for LGBTQ+ issues through weeks like *Stand Up* (a homophobic and transphobic anti-bullying awareness campaign run by BeLonG To) were positive initiatives but could not be the only approach used. Some student representatives remarked how discussing LGBTQ+ issues in school *were often set up as 'for' and 'against' debates*. Furthermore, they cautioned against debating gender identity and sexual orientation in class pointing out *you can't debate a person's identity*. Others referred to the LGBTQ+ Youth strategy which specifically recommends that schools (including primary schools) develop a whole-school policy to ensure the inclusion of LGBTQ+ lives in the teaching curriculum.

...shame, mixed messaging and too often, silence surrounds the areas of gender, sexuality and relationships in many classrooms across Ireland. (BeLonG To, written submission p. 1)

Teaching about gender identity really needs to be threaded throughout the RSE programme rather than condensed into one or two lessons plans and never spoken about again. (Transgender Equality Network of Ireland, written submission p. 4)

Children need to see what healthy LGBTQI+ relationships look like as well as heterosexual ones. (Symposium on RSE contribution)

Another area of concern highlighted through the review was RSE provision for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN). Bilateral discussions highlighted that the personal and sexual identities of young people with SEN were often overlooked. The impact of poor RSE for vulnerable young people and adults with SEN was highlighted through discussions with Adult Services in the area, and advocacy groups such as Inclusion Ireland and As I Am.

Some special education bilateral discussions highlighted practices where children with SEN may be withdrawn for resource hours during SPHE classes. Bilateral discussions highlighted how RSE is often only considered from a safety perspective when discussing children with special educational needs. However, stakeholders pointed out that children with SEN have sexual identities that need to be respected too. It was suggested that schools need to consider what are the best environments for learning for children with SEN, whether with their peers in class or in smaller groups. It was noted that schools should identify what the RSE needs are in consultation with parents.

Students with SEN or English language deficit or those at particular ends of the maturity scale should be provided with a differentiated model of teaching and engagement with this critical subject area. (Joint Managerial Body, written submission p. 3)

Age and developmentally-appropriate

There was a strong consensus that RSE must be age and developmentally-appropriate and responsive to the needs of the child and young person as they grow. The tendency of adults to assume children's innocence and be out of touch sometimes with the reality of young people's lives was frequently

mentioned. In one roundtable meeting it was remarked, *do not confine your children to your learning, as they are growing up in a different age.*

Equally, some stakeholders were conscious of the skills needed by teachers to discern what is appropriate or inappropriate and to differentiate learning in the sensitive aspects of RSE in a class of 30 children representing different stages of development.

Principals value a measure of flexibility in delivering the programme which allows them to tailor it to the age and maturity of their students. A one size fits all model is not desirable or practical. (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, written submission p. 10)

RSE must be age-appropriate and must take into account the different levels of maturity that will be encountered in the same classroom. (The Iona Institute, written submission p. 2)

Whole-school approach

The importance of a whole-school approach to RSE was highlighted throughout the review. Many bilateral discussions affirmed the importance of a whole-school approach in which a culture of shared responsibility is nurtured to support RSE both within the classroom and on the corridors. That said, stakeholders also balanced this with a need for schools to establish a core team of teachers with specialist expertise who can support a whole-school approach.

Some examples from the informal youth sector work illustrated how a collaborative and cross-curricular approach could be built into approaches taken. In these examples it was suggested that RSE is most effective when it is normalised and integrated into ordinary conversations in the classroom because *teachable moments* arise both within SPHE and in a cross-curricular manner.

Professional development

Professional development was identified as the most critical factor in building the confidence and skills of teachers to improve the quality of RSE in schools. In fact, it was stressed numerous times that successful implementation hinges on the *investment in effective CPD for teachers* (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, written submission p.14). All stakeholders agreed that there was a hunger among teachers for professional development in this area. The PDST welcomed that substitute cover had been provided for courses in 2018 and 2019 and said it had contributed to a considerable uptake in courses with demand for courses now far exceeding places available. There was a consensus across the stakeholders that a continuum of professional development is required spanning initial teacher education and in-career professional development.

Stakeholders frequently talked about the fact that there is no professional qualification in SPHE/RSE (on a par with other subjects) offered within the universities and colleges of education³ and therefore teachers who find themselves teaching RSE in schools are starting out from a deficit position. Those involved in supporting SPHE and RSE training highlighted the challenge in making up this shortfall in knowledge and skills in two days of training. One person said it felt *like pouring water into a bucket with a hole*. It was also observed that the support service for SPHE/RSE was different from other subject support services where it was commented *we're not doing CPD. It's initial teacher education we're doing*.

The introductory nature of most CPD in the area of SPHE and RSE contributes to a tendency for courses to focus on providing an introduction to the curriculum and to teaching resources. It was observed that a topic-led and resource-driven approach to CPD dominates which focuses on the 'what' more than the 'how' of teaching RSE. It was acknowledged that this is difficult to avoid when there is low teacher confidence and consequently heavy reliance upon and demand for resources. Those engaged in supporting teachers would like to be able to extend the experience of CPD in RSE to enable teachers to develop the skills, attitudes and dispositions needed for skilful facilitation of RSE. However, lack of time for CPD and the high turn-over of teachers involved in teaching the subject in post-primary schools are among the factors that mitigate against this. It was also noted that an enhanced professional development experience would be needed to provide the kinds of CPD that teachers and school principals identified. In this regard some bilateral meetings suggested that an inter-agency approach to providing CPD to SPHE/RSE teachers at both primary and post-primary merits consideration. It was also highlighted that support offered to schools also needed to encompass whole-school CPD as whole-staff sessions are helpful in creating a shared vision and approach.

Finally, many stakeholders were unhappy with the optional nature of CPD for teachers currently teaching SPHE/RSE and contended that CPD should be mandatory. In addition, there was strong agreement among stakeholders on the need for professional accredited pathways to be incorporated into ITE (initial teacher education) and ongoing professional development.

There is no excuse for the lack of mandatory teacher training for RSE when a teacher must obtain a degree to teach another subject. (Irish Second Level Students Union, written submission p. 4)

Specialism in the area of SPHE is an important step. (Symposium on RSE contribution)

³ The review found considerable disparity among colleges with regard to the provision of time for SPHE and RSE training to primary school student teachers and just a small number of colleges offer students preparing for post-primary teaching the option of short elective modules in SPHE. No college offers training on a par with other curriculum subjects.

There needs to be more than one or two-day courses to become an SPHE teacher.
(Symposium on RSE contribution)

Parental involvement

Parental involvement in developing a school's RSE policy and ongoing communication about how it is enacted was considered to be important across all stakeholders. Stakeholders shared the view that parents are generally not aware of schools' RSE policies or programmes and also commented on how schools generally tend to approach communication with parents about RSE, usually *just before an input* and by written communication. The value of face-to-face meetings with groups of parents or individual parents, as needed, was supported. This provides an opportunity not only to share information about what is being taught but also to raise awareness about the value of RSE and how RSE is protective of their children. Some stakeholders said that it was their experience that when parents understand the programme, they are less likely to ask for their child to be withdrawn from class. In cases where parents request a child's withdrawal, some written submissions emphasised the need for schools to handle such withdrawals sensitively.

Overall there was a consensus that parents need more information about a school's approach in order to build the trust and partnership approach that is desired. It was suggested that schools might learn from the experience of the informal youth sector as educators in youth group settings would always try to ensure that parents were aware of RSE programmes in which their children were involved. The view of representatives working in this sector was *you'll get nowhere unless you start with parents first* (Symposium on RSE). Some submissions suggested that the development of a revised or updated curriculum might provide an opportunity to strengthen parental involvement.

There is an opportunity to strengthen further parental involvement particularly for hard to reach children and schools communities where RSE teaching might be restricted. (Faculty of Public Health Medicine, Royal College of Physicians, written submission p. 4)

In addition, many written submissions highlighted the need for more significant support for parents by way of resources and information to help them to play their part in this important aspect of their children's education.

Summary

Stakeholders agreed that RSE is a critical component of the curriculum at primary and post-primary levels and identified a number of challenges in relation to the current curriculum and its implementation. Concurring with the different school voices reported in previous chapters in this report, they identified teacher professional development as the key enabler to improved RSE. Stakeholders highlighted gaps in current pre-service and in-service provision and advocated for a continuum of professional development in RSE to span initial teacher education and in-career development.

The necessity for skilled facilitation of RSE was frequently raised and in this context the role of external providers was regarded quite positively. Some stakeholders felt there was an overreliance on external providers, most significantly at primary; at post-primary, partnerships between external providers and schools were generally seen as having the potential to enhance a school's RSE programme.

Aware of the range and the wealth of expertise that exists in the field of RSE, stakeholders would also like to see greater collaboration and partnerships established between the various agencies, organisations and NGOs, to enable cooperation in provision of CPD and in the development of up-dated resources (including the curation of an online space).

Pressure of time and an overloaded curriculum also featured in stakeholder discussions about RSE. Despite this, it was generally agreed that additional topics need to be taught as part of RSE today in order to address contemporary challenges in young people's lives. There was also a lot of support for the idea that core topics in RSE be clearly specified and set out as required learning.

Ethos was raised as a possible issue in the teaching of a comprehensive RSE curriculum, although views were divergent in this. Some contended that school ethos facilitates a comprehensive curriculum while others saw school ethos as sometimes inhibiting the teaching of certain topics or presenting topics through a narrow lens.

There was broad agreement that RSE at its best is approached in a manner that is holistic, inclusive, and age and developmentally-appropriate. In addition, it is seen as a whole school enterprise and the learning is student centred.

7. Advice on future directions

Relationships and sexuality are central to being human and at the same time among the most challenging aspects of living a happy life. The experience of coming to understand and navigate these aspects of life proves complex and challenging for every individual. It follows that educating children and young people in these areas is enormously challenging too; perhaps one of the most challenging tasks in education. This task is particularly challenging in societies and school systems that are changing, whether consciously or through circumstance, from a time when religious values provided a guiding framework to a shifting landscape in which diverse values and behaviours are evident and individuals can access almost any content on the internet, regardless of their age or developmental stage.

Where personal and societal values come into play, it should come as no surprise that RSE becomes a contested topic. Questions about what should be taught and when, who is best suited to teach it, and what approach is most effective were ardently discussed and contested throughout the review and the range of perspectives and views articulated are evident in this report. However, the review also features strong agreement on a number of questions. Firstly, there is a clear consensus that school-based Relationships and Sexuality Education is an important part of children's and young people's education, and schools, in partnership with parents, have a responsibility to take this seriously. Furthermore, the review has found a convergence of views on the need for improvement in relation to the conditions needed to support effective RSE within primary and post-primary schools. In addition, there is a good deal of agreement on what the challenges are and how they need to be addressed.

The scope and scale of engagement in the consultation process is a signal of the level of interest and concern that people share in relation to this aspect of children's education. Informed by the many voices heard and submissions received during the review, this chapter sets out the NCCA's advice on the key challenges to be addressed to improve teaching and learning of RSE in Irish schools. This advice is presented under the following headings:

- The approach to RSE
- The curriculum
- Creating the right conditions for effective RSE
- Other considerations.

Approach

The approach to provision for RSE set out here is grounded in the rights and needs of children and young people as set out in numerous international human rights treaties and instruments that refer to the right to education and to the highest standard of health. These include the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*; the *UN Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*; the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*; the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*; and the *UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*.

These foundational agreements form the basis for comprehensive sexuality education in all countries that ascribe to upholding these rights. During its last review under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 2016, the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Ireland:

*Adopt a comprehensive sexual and reproductive health policy for adolescents and ensure that sexual and reproductive health education is part of the mandatory school curriculum and targeted at adolescent girls and boys.*⁴

This was reiterated in 2018 in recommendations from the *Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, calling on Ireland to:

*Integrate compulsory and standardised age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights into school curricula, including comprehensive sex education for adolescent girls and boys covering responsible sexual behaviours and focused on preventing early pregnancies; and ensure that it is scientifically objective and its delivery by schools is closely monitored and evaluated.*⁵

The evidence from this review suggests that there is considerable variation in the provision of RSE across schools in terms of what is being taught, how it is taught, who teaches it and the time allocated to it. For most students their experience of RSE can be summed up as *too little, too late and too biological*. Furthermore, the dominant approach is concerned almost exclusively with the risks and dangers associated with relationships and sexuality and does not allow for sufficient discussion of the positive, healthy and enjoyable aspects of relationships as well as the challenges. Most people agreed that moving towards a more holistic and positive approach is desirable. In addition, there is agreement that RSE should be developmentally-appropriate, culturally and contextually relevant, and scientifically accurate. To achieve this, a shared vision and understanding of what good relationships and sexuality education is, is required. For the purpose of this review and for future work in primary

⁴ Committee on the Rights of a Child (2016), Concluding Observations on the combined third and fourth period of Ireland, CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4, para 58(c)

⁵ Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (2017), Concluding Observation on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of Ireland, CEDAW/C/IRL/CO/6-7, para 38(c), pg. 10

and post-primary curriculum developments, the NCCA describes RSE as a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of relationships and sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to develop self-awareness and self-esteem, realise their health, wellbeing and dignity; develop positive and respectful, social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own wellbeing and that of others; and, understand their rights and responsibilities in relation to themselves and others⁶.

This description meets the expressed needs of primary and post-primary students consulted within the review who say they want an experience of RSE that balances the relationships and sexuality dimensions of learning in this subject with the emotional and cognitive dimensions. It also recognises that RSE includes, but is more than, the factual sharing of scientific information. Like all education, it involves values and attitudes; the RSE class provides a safe space for these to be discerned, discussed, examined and questioned.

Any approach adopted to support the future development of RSE should be underpinned by core principles, including those upon which stakeholders found common ground in this review (set out on pp.63-66 of this report). These are all grounded in a commitment to promoting the right of every child to quality education in RSE and can be summarised as follows:

- **Student-centred** – a student-centred approach is participative, dialogical and responsive to students’ identified needs. This empowers children and young people to build the knowledge, skills and positive values needed to have healthy and fulfilling relationships and to take responsibility for their own and other’s sexual health and wellbeing.
- **Holistic** – a holistic approach to RSE starts early in childhood and progresses throughout post-primary education, balancing and connecting learning about both the relationship and sexuality dimensions of RSE. It recognises the social, cultural, political, religious and economic context that influence norms and behaviour as well as the personal and interpersonal aspects of relationships and sexuality. It is also characterised by a capacity to link RSE topics across learning in SPHE and other subjects on an ongoing basis.
- **Inclusive** – an inclusive approach embraces a view of the individual and individual differences as a resource that can enrich the lives and learning of others. It respects diversity as an aspect of human life and human sexuality, and it enables all children and young people to feel valued and

⁶ This description is informed by UNESCO, *International technical guidance on sexuality education*, 2018, p.16

included through teaching and learning. Within an inclusive SPHE/RSE classroom difference can be the basis for meeting, listening and learning from each other. Such a space is inclusive across the domains of sexuality, gender, culture, ethnicity, dis/abilities, faiths and beliefs.

- **Age and developmentally-appropriate** - this means that RSE is in tune with and relevant to the lives of children and young people and supports learning in a timely and developmentally sensitive manner. Such an approach identifies core learning that all children and young people should encounter at different stages of their learning while also allowing flexibility for the teacher to respond to the local context and specific student needs.
- **A whole-school approach** – this approach recognises the opportunities for promoting RSE both within and beyond the classroom. It requires a culture of shared responsibility and a vision of RSE that enables students to explore learning through an interdisciplinary approach. It also takes into account the characteristic spirit or ethos of a school which for some schools may place emphasis on the spiritual dimension of relationships and sexuality.

The Curriculum

The curriculum is the main vehicle for ensuring consistency and progression in learning in RSE. The historical development of different RSE and SPHE curricula and guidelines since the mid-1990s has been less than ideal. At school level, it has led to the separation of RSE from SPHE when it comes to classroom planning and teaching, while at system level it has led to the separation of CPD for RSE and SPHE. The review has highlighted the need to create one integrated curriculum that sets out the learning for SPHE/RSE as one subject. While separate SPHE specifications for primary, junior cycle and senior cycle learning are likely to emerge as part of future developments, the key difference would be the merging of SPHE and RSE into one subject and one programme. This would create opportunities for greater coherence across all aspects of SPHE and across the different stages of learning, leading to a continuity of experience in SPHE/RSE from early childhood education⁷ to post-primary.

The need to review the curriculum and bring it up-to-date is clear. In redeveloping the curriculum, the following aspects of SPHE/RSE (as highlighted by the Minister, April 2018) need to be addressed:

- The effects of the internet and social media on relationships
- Self-identity and self-esteem

⁷ As part of its 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, the NCCA will commence a review of the evidence base for early childhood care and education to inform future developments of the Aistear Framework. This work will help to ensure that the framework continues to provide appropriate early foundations for this aspect of children's learning and development.

- Consent and its relevance to all interpersonal relationships
- LGBTQ+ matters
- Healthy positive sexual expression
- Developments in contraception.

In addition, we need to provide clarity on topics which need to be addressed at different stages of children’s development. That said, we cannot keep adding to an already overcrowded curriculum and there needs to be some scaling back through, for example, the removal of unnecessary overlap and duplication of content across levels/years. There is also a need to review the allocation of time that is recommended for SPHE/RSE at both primary and post-primary levels to ensure that the important learning in this subject can be adequately addressed.

Creating an up-to-date and relevant curriculum must always be balanced with the necessity for schools to be able to respond to their specific local context and the needs of their students. In this context, it is important that schools consult regularly with students to identify their real and expressed needs in this area of education.⁸

Creating the right conditions for effective RSE

When an evaluation of the implementation of RSE was conducted in 2007 it stated that *the low status of SPHE emerged as a significant negative influence on schools* (Maynock et al.) The low status and prioritisation afforded to RSE was reiterated as a barrier to effective RSE by many throughout this review. There are factors at school level and system level that contribute to this. **At school level**, the role of the principal was cited across all the consultations as critically important in creating the conditions for providing an effective and enabling RSE curriculum in the school. School leaders are uniquely positioned to influence the ‘architecture’ that supports RSE within schools; namely,

- the time given to SPHE/RSE
- the deployment of teachers with skills and interest in this area
- the putting in place of a specialist/core team
- the provision of time for planning and coordination of SPHE/RSE

⁸ See Nell Noddings, where she discusses the danger of basing a curriculum on adults’ perceptions of what students need rather than their self-identified needs. Noddings, N (2005). *Identifying and responding to needs in education. Cambridge Journal of Education, Volume 35(2)*.

- the release of teachers for continuous professional development and collaborative learning
- the facilitation of RSE policy review at regular intervals
- meaningful engagement and a partnership approach to learning about RSE with parents.

Furthermore, principals can support an understanding of RSE as happening within a whole community and whole-school setting. **At system level**, the findings of this review have identified a number of key levers for building more effective RSE in Irish schools. These are considered under the following headings: Professional development, Resources and Partnerships.

Professional development

The findings from this review concur with international research which identifies the professional development of educators as one of the critical factors in supporting an improvement in the quality of relationships and sexuality education. Teacher professional development, at pre-service and in-service levels, is key to addressing most of the issues identified in this review. So what exactly is needed?

Most immediately, there is a need for increased training in SPHE/RSE content and pedagogies within both primary initial teacher education (ITE) and post-primary PME programmes in order to improve teacher capacity in this area. In initial teacher education all student teachers should be given the opportunity to interrogate their own understanding of human relationships, wellbeing and sexuality and how their own attitudes, values and experiences impact on their teaching. For student teachers wishing to specialise in teaching SPHE/RSE at post-primary level or who might see themselves taking on a coordinating role in relation to SPHE/RSE in primary school settings, discussions need to begin about how to establish professional pathways and qualifications in this area. The fact that SPHE is the only subject at post-primary level that can be taught without any qualification or accreditation from the Teaching Council impacts negatively on the status of the subject and on teacher confidence.

The review has highlighted the unique knowledge, skills and dispositions that are needed by teachers of SPHE/RSE. This makes specialist training for educators, and in particular for upper primary and post-primary teachers, crucial. Furthermore, professional development for RSE is unlike other subjects, not only because teachers generally come to CPD with limited pre-service training in this area but also because CPD in RSE requires teachers to develop not only their knowledge and skills but also to reflect upon their own attitudes, values and experiences. The provision of a specialist post-graduate

qualification in SPHE/RSE would represent a major step forward in providing for effective SPHE/RSE in schools in the long-term as this would allow current teachers to upskill in this area.

In the shorter term, the approach to CPD requires consideration. A topic-led and resource-driven approach to CPD that focuses on the 'what' rather than the 'how' of teaching will only go so far in building teacher competence and confidence and is unlikely to build the facilitation skills that teachers need when teaching this area of the curriculum. As many have pointed out in the review, teachers need more than two days CPD to become an SPHE/RSE teacher. Consideration should be given to moving from a model that is once-off in nature to one that supports ongoing teacher professional development. And teachers need to be able to access such support at school and local level. The establishment of locally-based professional learning communities of SPHE/RSE teachers also merits attention as research indicates that teachers learn best when they have opportunities to discuss questions of common concern and share practice. Ongoing professional development for those facilitating CPD with teachers is also important.

To support developments in CPD, an inter-agency approach, with the involvement of a wide range of agencies with expertise in this area, is necessary. As a first step, a meeting of the Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST), Health Services Executive Health Promotion Unit, Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) would be beneficial, to discuss the findings of this review and explore new ways of building capacity in this important area of education. The role and contribution that different actors can play in providing CPD in this area should also be looked at, including those with expertise and experience working with young people in non-formal education settings.

Consideration of how best to meet the needs of students with intellectual disabilities should also be included in any future programme of teacher professional development, as well as how school principals can be supported through CPD in this area.

Resources

There is a recognition that resources in themselves are not a panacea for many of the issues identified in this review. However, a further support that has been identified through this review is the need to take stock of what current resources are available, assess whether they are up-to-date and fit for purpose and to identify resource needs in the area of RSE. In addition, the development of a set of overarching guidelines to inform the creation of future resources will be developed to ensure that resources align with the curriculum and with the approach underpinning it. The NCCA will collaborate with a number of agencies from within the DES and the HSE to create an online portal site where current and new resources can be maintained and moderated.

Partnerships with external facilitators and agencies

The role of external providers in supporting school-based RSE has arisen throughout the review. In acknowledging the sometimes uneven and relatively low base of teacher competence and confidence in teaching RSE, the need for schools to be able to draw upon external expertise arises. In such circumstances, the value of external providers' inputs when they are planned in partnership with the school and are complementary to the wider SPHE/RSE teaching and learning taking place, is acknowledged. The development of additional guidance for schools on how to develop effective partnerships with external facilitators and outside agencies (including local youth and health services) will be undertaken on foot of this review.

Further considerations

In discussing the conditions needed to enable effective RSE we must acknowledge the role that **school ethos** plays. In 2007, Maynock et al., concluded that

the issue of school ethos, and its impacts on RSE, remains shrouded in ambiguity, leading to personal interpretations of 'ethos' on the part of teachers and differences in how they approach the content of RSE. (p. 30)

Likewise, this review found a degree of ambiguity in regard to how people perceive school ethos and how it affects a school's approach to RSE. A spectrum of views was expressed, from those who contend that school ethos is a barrier to effective RSE to those who express school ethos as an enabling framework for effective RSE; although it is interesting to note that across all school types, advocates for a comprehensive and holistic approach to RSE were in evidence and vocal.

While the review acknowledges that school ethos can be a source of tension and uncertainty for some schools/teachers when it comes to addressing some aspects of SPHE/RSE the review concludes that at this point school ethos cannot be separated out from other factors that influence the teaching of RSE. The key enabler to more confident and comprehensive teaching of RSE is the development of teacher competence and confidence. In addition, teachers need to be supported by a clearly articulated curriculum which all schools are supported in enacting and a clear RSE school policy that is enabling and supportive. Enhanced support materials and opportunities for teachers within schools and across schools to share practice are also required. When these elements are not in place, there is inevitable doubt about what teachers should be teaching and school ethos can then be used as a way of avoiding sensitive topics in some instances.

Overall, the review found that understanding of the purpose and role of RSE in broader society has moved on since the original RSE curriculum was conceived and there is a sense that schools now need

to be better supported to provide effective programmes in this important area of education. When those working on RSE in schools were considering the connection between school ethos and their RSE programmes as a factor in future developments related to RSE, school ethos seemed to come well down a list in which teacher qualification, teacher professional support, time allocation, an up-to-date curriculum and support materials, attracted greater priority.

The focus on **student wellbeing** across education policy and practice provides both an opportunity and a challenge for schools. The place of *Wellbeing* as one of four key themes in *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009), the introduction of wellbeing as a curriculum area in the new *Framework for Junior Cycle* and more recently, the publication of the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (2018-2023) provide spaces and opportunities within which to review the role of SPHE/RSE in supporting students' wellbeing. Schools may need further guidelines and support in making the links and grasping this opportunity.

The role of the Inspectorate, and Department of Education and Skills (DES) circulars, in supporting good practice in SPHE/RSE should also be emphasised. An aspect of the recently introduced Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections that has the potential to improve RSE within schools is that students themselves will be asked about their experience of RSE as part of the inspection process. Increased **inspection and monitoring of SPHE/RSE** at both primary and post-primary levels would also be welcome.

A further issue arising from the review that merits consideration is **the role of parents** in educating their children about relationships and sexuality. Schools cannot do it alone and parents must be encouraged and supported in assuming their responsibility in relation to this area of their children's education too. Submissions from across all perspectives and stakeholder groups are supportive of the value and necessity of parental involvement in implementing the school's RSE programme. Ways of enhancing communication about what is being taught in RSE as well as supports for parents to enable them to open up conversations with their children at home are important considerations for further developments. In this context the development of multi-media resources merit consideration. On a wider front, the engagement of parents is a matter for consideration by parent bodies in partnership with relevant government departments and might include consideration of how to build on work already being undertaken by the National Parents Council and the development of a public education and information campaign to provide accurate information about the content and scope of SPHE/RSE and its benefits for children and young people.

Finally, in recognition of the important role of parents in this area of education and the significant engagement and interest of parents in the review process, the NCCA will continue to work with parent

representative groups to create opportunities for dialogue and consultation as the curriculum development work progresses.

Future directions

This review builds on a substantial body of research that has already highlighted significant issues related to the implementation of SPHE/RSE in schools⁹. It has found that many of the issues identified in previous reports remain unchanged and indeed there are new challenges too, not least because of the changing social and technological context within which RSE is now happening.

The review sets out a range of issues which impact on the provision of effective RSE for all students, but aims to avoid confusing the symptoms of a curriculum area struggling to establish comprehensive and meaningful experience for all with the deep complexity of the cause of the difficulty – the absence of a full cohort of skilled and confident teachers and a lack of prioritisation of SPHE/RSE in a number of ways at both school and system level. Nor should we ignore the complexity and scale of what is involved in improving the experience of SPHE/RSE for students by reaching for easy, quick or short-term solutions only. That said, students in our schools cannot wait.

It would be unhelpful to paint the landscape with all its problems, without suggesting steps that can be taken to improve the provision of RSE in schools. In this section both immediate and longer-term actions are identified (See appendix E for indicative timeline of actions). These also need to be considered within the context of the broader reviews currently taking place in the NCCA, notably the redevelopment of the primary curriculum and senior cycle review.

Actions

Prioritisation of SPHE/RSE for curriculum redevelopment

The current reviews of primary and senior cycle education offer an opportunity to consider the place of SPHE/RSE within the curriculum and to discuss questions relating to its purpose, approach, content and time allocation. Given the consensus that has emerged on the need for an up-to-date and integrated curriculum combining SPHE and RSE from early childhood to the end of post-primary education, the NCCA will prioritise work in this area as part of the wider curriculum developments across these sectors. The amount of time allocated to a curriculum or subject is often perceived by

⁹ Referenced in Keating et al, (2018) *Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Primary and Post-primary Irish Schools*.

teachers as an indication of its status. Curriculum reviews underway at primary and post-primary levels will consider the allocation of time needed for effective provision of SPHE/RSE.

Interim guidelines

It is evident that a review and revision of the SPHE and RSE curricula is required to provide a single integrated curriculum that meets the needs of children and young people today. This curriculum development work needs to take place within the context of the review of the primary curriculum and senior cycle review currently underway, both of which will take some time to complete. Meanwhile, the NCCA will develop and publish Interim Guidelines to support the teaching of SPHE/RSE in the shorter term. These Interim Guidelines will provide guidance on how the current curriculum can be approached in a more holistic way, provide clarity on how topics can be taught to incorporate themes identified by this review and suggestions for how the topics can be taught in a fully inclusive manner. They will also include examples of a range of practice in relation to planning and teaching of SPHE/RSE at both whole-school and class level to support the sharing of good practice in this area of education. In addition, the Interim Guidelines will provide enhanced guidance to schools on how to partner with external providers of RSE in developing a comprehensive SPHE/RSE programme.

Resources

The NCCA will work collaboratively with relevant agencies and stakeholders to take stock of current resources and identify resource needs in this area. In addition, the NCCA will develop a set of overarching guidelines to inform the development of future resources. The NCCA will also collaborate in the development of a portal site where current and future resources in SPHE/RSE can be accessed by teachers and school leaders.

Review of initial teacher education programmes

The time allocated to SPHE/RSE in initial teacher education (ITE) as well as the approach taken in developing teacher capacity in this area should be reviewed. A research project is currently being undertaken by the TEACH RSE research team, DCU, to examine the experience and needs of student teachers in relation to their professional development in SPHE/RSE. The findings from this project are due to be published in June 2020. These findings and the ongoing development by the DES of an Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement, will be helpful in informing a review of SPHE/RSE within initial teacher education.

Accreditation of SPHE at post-primary level

The provision of a specialist undergraduate and/or post-graduate qualification in SPHE/RSE would represent a major step forward in providing for effective RSE in schools in the long-term. It is

recommended that the development of courses for accreditation in the teaching of SPHE/RSE at post-primary level be prioritised by the DES, relevant education partners and stakeholders.

Enhanced professional development for teachers

The programme of professional development for SPHE/RSE should be extended and deepened. Access to professional development needs to be enhanced with consideration of how different agencies can collaborate to provide a negotiated multifaceted, sustained and coherent programme of professional development in SPHE/RSE through to a multi-modal and multi-agency approach. The programme should also consider the geographical spread of opportunities for teachers to participate in face-to-face collaborative learning. Specific CPD for teachers working with children with ASD and intellectual disabilities and for school leaders is also required. Opportunities for CPD should be front-loaded in preparation for a redeveloped curriculum.

Interagency collaboration

The NCCA will contribute to facilitating interagency collaboration and linkages between the formal and non-formal education sector to enhance the sharing of expertise, learning and resources related to RSE. NCCA will also initiate networking between groups/agencies working to support schools on targeted initiatives, such as consent and LGBTQI+ issues.

Wellbeing

The NCCA will undertake an examination of how schools are planning for wellbeing as part of junior cycle and find out to what extent opportunities for enhancing students' learning in SPHE/RSE are happening and what further supports are needed.

Summary

Approaches to RSE should be grounded in the rights and needs of young people

1. The foundation for agreeing an approach to the provision for RSE must be grounded in the rights and needs of children and young people as set out in numerous international human rights treaties and instruments that refer to the right to education and the highest standard of health.

RSE should adopt a holistic approach

2. RSE needs to move towards a more holistic approach. In addition, RSE should be student-centred, inclusive, age and developmentally-appropriate and whole-school.

Schools need to consult regularly with students to identify their real and expressed needs in the area of RSE

3. The review emphasises the importance of schools consulting regularly with their students to identify their real and expressed needs in this area of education and consider these in planning for teaching and learning.

RSE should be part of a single integrated SPHE curriculum and updated to include areas identified by the review

4. The review has highlighted the need to create one curriculum that sets out the learning for SPHE/RSE as a single subject and incrementally provides a continuity of experience in SPHE/RSE from early childhood education to post-primary. In addition, topics identified by the review and highlighted by the Minister need to be included in an updated SPHE/RSE curriculum.

Specialist training and pathways for professional development must be developed in the area of SPHE/RSE

5. The review has highlighted the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are needed by teachers teaching RSE. Access to professional development needs to be enhanced across a continuum from initial teacher education to in-service education, through a collaborative,

multi-faceted and multi-agency approach. Such an approach should be front-loaded in preparation for a redeveloped curriculum.

Development of Interim Guidelines

6. The NCCA will develop and publish Interim Guidelines to support the teaching of RSE. These will provide guidance on how the current curriculum can be approached in a more holistic way, provide clarity on how topics can be taught to incorporate current themes identified by this review and suggestions on how they can be taught in a fully inclusive manner.

Review of current resources and development of up-to-date resources

7. The NCCA will work collaboratively with relevant agencies and stakeholders to take stock of current resources and identify resource needs in this area. In addition, the NCCA will develop a set of overarching guidelines to inform the development of future resources and collaborate with other stakeholders in the development of a portal site where resources can be accessed.

Support schools in the enhancement of SPHE/RSE within the context of planning for Wellbeing within a new junior cycle

8. The NCCA will work collaboratively to provide support and guidance to schools in planning for wellbeing in junior cycle.

DES oversight of SPHE/RSE

9. Comprehensive oversight of and support for SPHE/RSE on the part of the Inspectorate and the DES is required in order to meet the needs identified in this review.

Resources and supports for parents in the area of SPHE/RSE

10. Improved communication with and engagement of parents will be an important feature of future development in this area and is vital for the successful enactment of any updated curriculum. Resources to raise awareness about SPHE/RSE and to support parents as partners in education should be developed.

Appendix A: Attendees at Bilateral and Roundtable consultation meetings

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Accord, Dublin Catholic Marriage Care Service ▪ Adult Services, Stewarts Hospital, Dublin ▪ Aids West, Galway ▪ Atheist Ireland ▪ As I Am ▪ Association of Community & Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) ▪ Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools (ATCC) ▪ BeLonG To ▪ Catholic Education and Ireland Schools Trust (CEIST) ▪ Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) ▪ Comhairle na nÓg Cork ▪ Community National Schools ▪ The Council for Catechetics, Education (Irish Bishops Conference) and the Catholic Schools Partnership ▪ Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) ▪ Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate ▪ Department of Human Development, Dublin City University ▪ Department of Nursing and Human Sciences, Dublin City University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inclusion Ireland ▪ Institute of Education, Dublin City University ▪ Irish Council for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) ▪ Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) ▪ Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) ▪ Joint Managerial Body (JMB) ▪ LGBTI Youth Advisory Panel ▪ Le Chéile Schools Trust ▪ Loreto Education Network ▪ Mary Immaculate College, Limerick ▪ Middletown Centre for Autism ▪ Muslim Primary Education Board ▪ National Centre for Guidance Education ▪ National Council for Special Education (NCSE) ▪ National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) ▪ National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) ▪ Pavee Point ▪ Professional Development Service for Teachers Primary (PDST) ▪ Professional Development Service for Teachers Post-primary (PDST) ▪ Rape Crisis Network Ireland ▪ School of Education, University of Limerick
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Department of Social Science and Health, Queens University ▪ Dublin Rape Crisis Centre ▪ Edmund Rice Schools Trust ▪ Educate Together Primary and Post-Primary ▪ Education and Training Boards of Ireland (ETBI) ▪ Former SPHE Support Service Advisors ▪ Former Director SPHE Support Service ▪ Former Team Leader of Health and Wellbeing Primary and Post-primary PDST ▪ Former Director of RSE Support Services ▪ Foróige ▪ General Synod Board of Education ▪ Health Services Executive (HSE), Education Programme ▪ Health Promotion Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School of Education, Hibernia College ▪ School of Psychology, National University of Ireland, Galway ▪ The Sexual Health Centre, Cork ▪ Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme ▪ ShoutOut ▪ SPHE Network ▪ SpunOut.ie ▪ Squashy Couch, Tusla Adolescent Health Waterford ▪ St. Nicholas Montessori College, Dublin ▪ Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) ▪ Tusla Services for Sexual Violence ▪ Youth Work Ireland
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Appendix B: Stakeholders who attended symposia consultation events

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Accord, Dublin Catholic Marriage Care Service ▪ Aids West, Galway ▪ An Foras Pátrúnachta ▪ Association of Community & Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) ▪ Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) ▪ Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools (ATCS) ▪ BeLonG To ▪ Catholic Education and Ireland Schools Trust (CEIST) ▪ Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) ▪ Centre for School Leadership ▪ Church of Ireland General Synod Board of Education ▪ Community National Schools ▪ The Council for Catechetics, Education (Irish Bishops Conference) and the Catholic Schools Partnership ▪ Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) ▪ Department of Education and Skills (DES) ▪ Dublin Rape Crisis Centre ▪ Edmund Rice Schools Trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mary Immaculate College, Limerick ▪ Mercy Secondary School, Inchicore ▪ Muslim Primary Education Board ▪ National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals ▪ National Centre for Guidance Education ▪ National Council for Special Education (NCSE) ▪ National Parents Council Primary (NPCP) ▪ National Youth Council of Ireland ▪ National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) ▪ National University of Ireland, Galway ▪ The Ombudsman for Children (OCO) ▪ Professional Development Service for Teachers Primary (PDST) ▪ Professional Development Service for Teachers Post-primary (PDST) ▪ Queens University, Belfast ▪ Rape Crisis Network Ireland ▪ School of Education, Hibernia College ▪ Scoil Etchen Naofa, Kinnegad, Westmeath ▪ Scoil Gráinne Community National School, Ongar, Dublin ▪ Sexual Health Centre, Cork ▪ ShoutOut ▪ SPHE Network
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Educate Together Primary and Post-primary ▪ Education and Training Boards of Ireland (ETBi) ▪ Foróige ▪ Faculty of Public Health Medicine, Royal College of Physicians ▪ Gender, Orientation, Sexual Health and HIV, Limerick ▪ Health Services Executive (HSE) Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme ▪ Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) ▪ Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) ▪ Inclusion Ireland ▪ Institute of Education, Dublin City University (DCU) ▪ Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) ▪ Irish College of General Practitioners ▪ Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) ▪ Joint Managerial body (JMB) ▪ Junior Cycle Training Support Service (JCT) ▪ Le Chéile Schools Trust ▪ Loreto Education Office ▪ Maynooth University, Frobel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SpunOut.ie ▪ Squashy Couch, Tusla Adolescent Health, Waterford ▪ St Catherine's N.S, Donore Avenue, Dublin ▪ St. Marys N.S, Dorset Street, Dublin ▪ St. Paul's CBS, Stanhope St, Dublin ▪ Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) ▪ The Teen Parents Support Programme ▪ Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) ▪ Union of Students in Ireland (USI) ▪ University College Dublin ▪ University of Limerick ▪ Women's Aid ▪ Youth Work Ireland (YWI)
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Appendix C: List of Written Submissions¹⁰

Interest groups and organisations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Abortion Rights Campaign* ▪ Accord, Dublin Catholic Marriage Care Service ▪ Alliance for Defence of Family and Marriage ▪ Amnesty International, Ireland ▪ Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) ▪ Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools (ATCS)* ▪ Atheist Ireland* ▪ Blanchardstown Baptist Church ▪ BeLonG To ▪ Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA)* ▪ Cavan Baptist Church ▪ Clare Haven Services, Co.Clare ▪ Christian Association Ireland ▪ Consent Matters Ireland ▪ COPE Galway ▪ The Council for Catechetics, Education (Irish Bishops Conference) and the Catholic Schools Partnership* ▪ Cybersmarties Ltd ▪ Diocese of Elphin, Sligo* ▪ Dublin Rape Crisis Centre* ▪ Educate Together ▪ Faculty of Public Health Medicine, Royal College of Physicians ▪ Foróige* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Joint Non-Governmental Organisation NGO submission (SpunOut.ie, BeLonG To, ShoutOut, NYCI, USI, HIV Ireland, Teen Parents Support Programme, ISSU, IFPA , Foróige) ▪ LGBT Ireland* ▪ Lumen Fidei ▪ Maynooth University, Frobel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education PMEs Group 1 ▪ Maynooth University, Frobel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education PMEs Group 2 ▪ National Parents Council Primary (NPC) ▪ National Parents Council Post-primary ▪ National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) ▪ Outcomer Youth, Dundalk ▪ Professional Development Services for Teachers Health and Wellbeing Team (PDST) Primary ▪ Rape Crisis Centre, Ireland* ▪ Ruhama ▪ Safe, Ireland ▪ ShoutOut* ▪ Solidarity, the Left Alternative ▪ SPHE Network* ▪ SpunOut.ie* ▪ Squashy Couch, Tusla Adolescent Health Waterford

¹⁰ Organisations with an Asterisk made a submission during both phases of consultation. Where permission to publish written submissions from the consultation has been granted, those submissions are available online <https://www.ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/consultations/review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Friends for Life, Loughrea ▪ Gender Orientation Sexual Health HIV, Limerick ▪ Human Life International ▪ Inclusion Ireland ▪ Institute of Guidance Counsellors ▪ Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) ▪ Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) LGBT group* ▪ Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) ▪ Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) ▪ Joint Managerial Body (JMB) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ St. Cecilia's N.S ▪ Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) ▪ TEACH RSE, Dublin City University ▪ The Sexual Health Centre, Cork* ▪ The Iona Institute ▪ The Teen Parents Support Programme (TPSP) ▪ Transgender Equality Network of Ireland (TENI) ▪ Turn2me.org ▪ Tusla Services for Sexual Violence, The Manuela Project * ▪ Union of Students of Ireland (USI) ▪ Uplift ▪ Youth Work Ireland
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Appendix D: Working in schools

Primary	Type	Patron	Context	Location	Size
1	Mixed	Community National School	Urban	Co. Dublin	c650
2	Mixed	Church of Ireland	Urban	Co. Dublin	c250
3	Mixed	Catholic	Urban DEIS	Co. Dublin	c150
4	Boys	Catholic	Urban DEIS	Co. Dublin	c108
5	Mixed	Catholic	Rural Gaeltacht	Co. Meath	c203
6	Mixed	Catholic	Rural	Co. Limerick	c208
7	Mixed	Catholic	Urban Special School	Co. Dublin	c 20
8	Mixed	Catholic	Urban Special School	Co. Limerick	c 50
9	Girls	Catholic	Urban	Co. Dublin	c 500
10	Mixed	Catholic	Rural DEIS	Co. Dublin	c 80
11	Mixed	Educate Together	Urban	Co. Donegal	c 200
12	Mixed	Catholic	Urban DEIS	Co. Waterford	c 350
13	Mixed	Catholic	Urban Gaelscoil	Co. Waterford	c 200

Post-Primary	Type	Patron	Context	Location
14	Boys	Voluntary Sec DEIS	Urban	Co. Dublin
15	Girls	Voluntary Sec DEIS	Urban	Co. Dublin
16	Boys	Voluntary Sec	Urban	Co. Monaghan
17	Boys	Voluntary Sec	Urban	Co. Tipperary
18	Girls	Voluntary Sec	Urban	Co. Monaghan
19	Mixed	ETB	Urban	Co. Cork
20	Mixed	ETB	Urban	Co. Dublin
21	Mixed	ETB	Rural	Co. Louth
22	Mixed	Community School	Urban	Co. Louth
23	Mixed	Community College (ACCS)	Urban	Co. Meath

Appendix E: Indicative timeline for NCCA actions

This timeline represents start and completion dates for a number of key proposed actions from the Review of RSE. These dates are indicative due to the following factors;

- Some of the actions are subject to interagency collaboration and timelines and the development of the technological supports and infrastructure
- The schedule for curriculum development in this area is subject to wider curriculum processes such as Primary Review and Redevelopment and senior cycle review.

Proposed Action	Start date	Indicative completion date
Interim Guidance for primary and post-primary RSE and development of an overall framework to inform future developments in SPHE/RSE	Q1 2020	Q4 2020
Examining the opportunities for SPHE/RSE within JC Wellbeing	Q1 2020	Q3 2020
Portal site for resources	Q1 2020	<i>To be agreed with agencies involved</i>
Redevelopment of junior cycle SPHE/RSE specification	Q4 2020	Q4 2021
Redevelopment of senior cycle SPHE/RSE specification	Q4 2021	Q4 2022
Redevelopment of primary SPHE/RSE specification	Q1 2021	<i>To be published at the same time as the full redeveloped primary curriculum</i>

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