# RSE in the Context of SPHE:

An Assessment of the Challenges to Full Implementation
of the Programme in Post-primary Schools

## Summary Report

Paula Mayock
Karl Kitching
Mark Morgan

February 2007

crisispregnancyagency

AN ROINN
OIDEACHAIS
AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA

DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SCIENCE

*Oideachas Caidrimh agus Gnéasachta i gcomhthéacs Oideachas Sóisialta, Pearsanta agus Sláinte: Measúnú ar na dúshláin a bhaineann le feidhmiú iomlán an chláir i scoileanna iar-bhunscoile.*

# RSE in the Context of SPHE:

*An Assessment of the Challenges to Full Implementation of the Programme in Post-primary Schools*

# Summary Report

*Paula Mayock*
*Karl Kitching*
*Mark Morgan*

*February 2007*

# Foreword by Minister for Education and Science

I very much welcome this research on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in our post-primary schools. The partnership between the Crisis Pregnancy Agency and my Department is a particularly welcome aspect of the work.

RSE is an important part of the education of young people, and schools provide a safe context within which young people can learn about themselves and the wider world. Evidence in this study and in the recently published Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships (ISSHR) shows that young people find it difficult to talk to their parents about sex and relationships. This makes access to RSE in schools all the more important.

This report is the most comprehensive study of RSE in post-primary schools to have been carried out since the introduction of the programme in 1995. It combines a wide level of consultation with detailed case studies of nine schools. The research shows clearly that there is widespread support for both the broad principles and the content of the programme from teachers, parents and health professionals. This, when considered along with the strong message from the young people interviewed that RSE should be provided in schools, points to the positive context within which it can be delivered.

The report, while reflecting the complexity of school life at a time of great social and cultural change, shows the immense commitment of teachers and principals to the welfare of the young people in their care. It is noteworthy that the RSE teachers in the case study schools were very positive about the helpfulness of the inservice training they received.

The research shows that significant progress has been made in the implementation of RSE, especially at junior cycle level where it is an integral part of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). However, it also evident from the findings that more is needed to secure the full and appropriate delivery of the RSE programme to all post-primary students.

This evaluation is timely and its recommendations are focused and clear. The evidence it provides, along with the examples of good practice, will be invaluable in our ongoing work to ensure that students in our schools have access to the relationships and sexuality education that meets their needs.

In welcoming this report, I extend particular thanks to the principals, teachers, parents and students who participated in the research, to the researchers themselves and to the members of the steering group.

**Mary Hanafin, T.D.**
Minister for Education and Science

# Introduction by Chair of the Crisis Pregnancy Agency

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome the production of this important research report on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).

The research aimed to explore the barriers and facilitators to optimum implementation of RSE for post-primary school students in Ireland. These issues were explored from the perspective of a wide range of stakeholders in RSE – senior officials in the Department of Education and Science, the support services charged with ensuring RSE is delivered, principals and teachers in schools, and parents and the children themselves. It is thus a very comprehensive report and will be of enormous benefit to all those committed to preparing our children for the adult world.

I would like to thank the authors of the study, Dr Paula Mayock, Mr Karl Kitching and Dr Mark Morgan for their sterling work. Sincere thanks in particular to all who participated in the research, from government to classroom level. Their willingness to participate in a frank and forthright manner means that this research will be a most useful resource for informing policy and practice in this important area.

I am very pleased that the Agency has worked in fruitful partnership with the Department of Education and Science in commissioning and managing this study, and would like to thank the Steering Group for their commitment and guiding the project to a successful conclusion.

One of the very interesting findings in this report was that parents were clear that schools needed to address, not avoid, the real issues confronting young people. The Crisis Pregnancy Agency is committed to just such an approach to sex education and we are confident that the skills of the dedicated professionals in this area can be effectively supported to achieve this aim.

The most valuable resource in any society is its young people. It is my hope that this research, together with other studies commissioned by the Agency regarding young people and RSE, will ultimately be to their benefit.

Katharine Bulbulia
Chair

# *About the authors*

**Dr. Paula Mayock** took up the post of Senior Researcher at the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin in September 2003 where she works primarily on topics and issues that affect to the lives of marginalised or 'at risk' young people (drug and alcohol use, homelessness, early school leaving, social and educational disadvantage). She was awarded a NIDA (National Institute on Drug Abuse) INVEST Research Post-doctoral Fellowship in 2006 and is currently collaborating with Dr. Michael Clatts, National Development and Research Institutes, New York on a study of young people's initiation into 'hard' drug use. Paula holds the post of Associate Research Lecturer at the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, where she teaches research methodology. She is the author of several research reports, book chapters and journal articles and is a member of the editorial board of Youth Studies Ireland.

**Karl Kitching** is a seconded teacher currently working for St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, as a research assistant and part-time lecturer. He has worked as a mainstream class teacher and as a language support teacher for international pupils. He has published work on teaching literacy to pupils learning English as an additional language in mainstream settings and on teacher job satisfaction in disadvantaged settings. His main research interests include diversity and equality in education and the experiences of minority groups in the Irish education system.

**Dr. Mark Morgan** is Head of the Education Department at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin. His research has mainly been in areas of substance use, evaluation of prevention programmes and educational disadvantage. His is an editor and founding member for the European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) and is a member of the Research Institute for a Tobacco Free Society. He is the author of over 70 scholarly publications among which are the report on the International Adult Literacy Survey and the Prison Literacy Survey. He has completed evaluations of several programmes including 'Walk Tall' and 'On My Own Two Feet', as well the RSE programme following its launch in the mid nineties

# Acknowledgements

*Table of Contents*

# *Introduction*

The purpose of this executive summary is to provide an overview of a national study entitled, *Relationships and Sexuality Education in the Context of Social Personal and Health Education: An Assessment of the Challenges to Full Implementation of the Programme in Post–primary Schools,* carried out between November 2004 and January 2006. The study examined the implementation of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Irish post-primary schools. This research is the most comprehensive study of Relationships and Sexuality Education conducted in Ireland to date. This study sought to capture the factors that have helped and hindered the implementation of RSE since the programme was first introduced to post-primary schools in 1995.

The findings of this study are vital to informing future educational policy with regard to the teaching and resourcing of RSE in second-level schools. The research examines RSE implementation levels, identifies facilitators of and barriers to RSE implementation and delivery, and also describes participants' views on the impact of societal change on the RSE curriculum since the programme was formally introduced in 1995. It provides an important voice, not only for education and health and community professionals, but also for principals, teachers and, notably, parents and students in school communities.

This executive summary is presented in seven sections. The document is organised thematically, due to the sheer volume of data considered in the main report (Mayock, Kitching and Morgan 2007). The sections are as follows:

- The contemporary context of relationships and sexuality education
- Relationships and sexuality education in Ireland
- The need for research into RSE in Ireland
- The current study
- Study design
- Summary of key findings
    - RSE implementation levels
    - Facilitators of RSE implementation
    - Barriers to RSE implementation
    - Other factors and processes that impact on RSE delivery
    - The views of parents
    - The views and experiences of students
    - The content of RSE: the views of teachers, parents and students
- Recommendations

The contemporary context of relationships and sexuality education

Becoming a sexually healthy adult is a key developmental task for adolescents. Education, in its broadest sense, is essential for the development of skills that enable young people to cope with the challenge of adolescence and to move comfortably and confidently into the realm of sexual activity. It is widely accepted that young people have the right to sex education, partly because it is a means by which they are helped to protect themselves against abuse, exploitation, unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.[1] Recent research in the Republic of Ireland (Hyde & Howlett 2004, Mayock & Byrne 2004), Northern Ireland (Rolston, Schubotz & Simpson 2005) and in the UK (Lowden & Powney 1996, Measor, Tiffin & Miller 2000, Wight & Scott 1994) indicates that pupils want more detailed information and discussion about sex and sexual relationships both in and out of school.

The small number of available Irish studies on adolescent sexual behaviour in Ireland indicate that up to one-third of 16-year-old school-goers may be sexually active, with young men considerably more likely than young women to be initiated into sex by the age of 17 (Bonner 1996, Dunne, Seery, O'Mahony and Grogan 1997, MacHale and Newell 1997, Mayock and Byrne 2004). Rates of sexual activity among teenagers have increased significantly over the past two decades throughout Europe, and international research suggests that the majority of young people have begun to have sexual intercourse before they leave their teens (UNAIDS 1997). Whilst it is difficult ascertain trends in adolescent sexual behaviour in Ireland based on the available studies, recent research nonetheless suggests a drop in the age of first sex (Rundle, Leigh, McGee & Layte 2004) and a belief among adolescents that sexual debut occurs for many young people during their teenage years (Hyde and Howlett 2004, Mayock and Byrne 2004).

Irish research has repeatedly drawn attention to inadequate knowledge and understanding of sexual health issues among young people (Dunne et al. 1997, Irish Family Planning Association 1997, Mayock and Byrne 2004, Sheerin 1998). Gaps in young people's knowledge may include a lack of understanding of terms such as 'contraception', lack of awareness of potential sources of information and, in the case of Hyde and Howlett's (2004) study, lack of knowledge about condom use. Irish research also indicates relatively high levels of sexual risk-taking among teenagers and young adults. One recent study suggests that early school leavers may be more vulnerable in terms of their lack of sexual knowledge, low awareness of the risks of unprotected sex, and high levels of sexual risk-taking (Mayock and Byrne 2004). The factors associated with non-conformity to safe-sex practices among teenagers and young adults are complex and multi-faceted. Embarrassment about buying condoms and/or alcohol intoxication appear to influence risk-taking behaviour (e.g. Dunne et al. 1997, Mahon, Conlon and Dillon 1998). However, socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity (Hyde and Howlett 2004) as well as issues of reputation and peer appraisal also appear to affect decision-making, in relation to safe sex and condom use in particular. Adolescents' inability to communicate with their sexual partners around issues such as condom use has also been highlighted as a factor that acts as a barrier to safe-sex practices in both Ireland the UK (Coleham and Ingham 1994, Dunne et al. 1997).

Many of the research findings documented here highlight the importance of school-based relationships and sexuality education. There is, in fact, widespread parental support in Ireland for the provision of school-based sex education (Morgan 2000, North Western Health Board

See United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights http://www.un.org/rights/HRToday/; United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child http://www.un.org/rights/HRToday/; United Nations General Assembly, Declaration of commitment on HIV/AIDS August 2nd 2001 http://www.un.org/ga/aids/docs/aress262.pdf ; International Planned Parenthood Foundation http://www.ippf.org/charter/summary.htm.

2004). In addition, research indicates that Irish teenagers strongly support classes that deal with relationships and sexuality (Hyde and Howlett 2004, Mayock and Byrne 2004). As a site for sexuality education, schools have the advantages of having a large captive audience, trained educators, a cohesive curriculum, links with other subjects and parental and student support. While schools do not provide the only means of educating children and young people about sex and relationships, they can nonetheless contribute in very positive ways to the aim of providing young people with the knowledge and skills to move into the realm of sexual activity with confidence.

## Relationships and sexuality education in Ireland

This section provides a brief account of the aim and content of the RSE programme and the recommended approach to RSE policy within schools. It also highlights a number of factors that appear to facilitate RSE implementation, as well as those that hinder the delivery of the programme in Irish post-primary schools.

The aim of the Relationships and Sexual Education programme in Ireland is, according to the policy guidelines (Department of Education 1997: 4), to help children to:

> *Acquire a knowledge and understanding of human relationships and sexuality through processes which will enable them to form values and establish behaviours within a moral, spiritual and social framework.*

The programme does not seek to tell children and young people what they should think, say and do in their sexual lives, nor does it proclaim that sex outside of the contexts of intimacy or marriage is wrong.[2] The RSE Guidelines (NCCA 1997a, b) emphasise *relationships* rather than sexuality and outline a curriculum that is clearly oriented toward helping children to develop self-esteem and self-confidence. The RSE programme seeks to foster students' personal and sexual development *holistically,* with reference to the range of social and societal influences that can potentially impact on how young people think and feel about their personal (family and peer), romantic and sexual relationships. However, as Inglis (1998) notes, the programme does not deal with a number of sensitive topics, such as masturbation. It is also claimed that the definition of sex proposed in the RSE resource materials privileges a heterosexual identity and that the programme promotes a limited kind of sexual subjectivity, which obscures sexual pleasure and desire (Kiely 2005).

There is a lesson on sexual orientation at junior- and senior-cycle level. It is perhaps important to note that the absence of a *series* of lessons on certain topics, such as homosexuality, does not preclude discussion and debate on such topics. In fact, the published resource materials for RSE are not prescriptive; rather, they provide the teacher with a range of options in relation to the delivery of the programme. The *Resource Materials for Relationships and Sexuality Education, Post-Primary: Junior Cycle* (Department of Education and Science 1998a: 7) were compiled "with a view to providing teachers with a range of methodologies and a variety of resources which they can use in implementing an RSE programme in schools." Schools are expected to deliver all elements of RSE so as to ensure that all students have an appropriate range of opportunities for learning. Nonetheless, how these materials and resources are used by teachers depends on:

---

2 This brief description of RSE is based on an examination of the content of the Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Relationship and Sexuality Education (Department of Education, 1995a), the policy guidelines issued by the Department of Education in 1997 (Department of Education, 1997a,b) and the resource materials for post-primary schools published in 1998 (Department of Education and Science, 1998a,b) and is supported by commentary on RSE from other researchers. Since no outcome evaluation of Relationships and Sexuality Education has been conducted in Ireland to date, it is important to bear in mind that the influence of the RSE programme on young people's attitudes and/or behaviour has not as yet been tested, nor has the effectiveness of RSE been subjected to rigorous assessment.

• the school policy on RSE, as drawn up by the staff, principal, parents, board of management

• existing provision for RSE in the school

• RSE needs within the school, given the school's cultural context

• on-going evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the school's RSE programme.

The requirement that each school decide what it should include (and exclude) may be seen as an exercise in local autonomy, in that individual schools are in a position to tailor the programme to meet the specific needs of students. Alternatively, however, it could be seen as a refusal on the part of the State to be prescriptive about particularly sensitive aspects of sexuality education (Inglis 1998). At the very least, it can be legitimately argued that the absence of explicit directives and teaching resources for specific – and often sensitive – topics, such as homosexuality, means that students do not have equal opportunities for learning, discussion and debate on some aspects of sexuality.

The Report of the *Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality Education* (Department of Education 1995a) recommended that RSE be introduced into schools alongside the development of a school policy for RSE. According to the Department of Education (1995a: 11):

> *This policy, which should reflect the core values and ethos of the school, is a written statement of the aims of the programme, its organisation within the school and how it will meet the needs of students, parents and teachers.*

RSE aims to provide opportunities for young people "to learn about relationships and sexuality in ways that will enable them to think and act in a moral, caring and responsible way" (Department of Education and Science 1998a: 6). This takes place within the moral ethos of the school. The requirement of the statement above that school policy reflects "the core values and ethos of the school" is, therefore, an important one. In addition to reflecting the broader philosophy or ethos of the school, the school policy statement on RSE should, according to the *Expert Advisory Group,* address the management of the programme, discuss implications for training, and include a plan for the review and evaluation of the programme.

From the outset, it was recommended that the teaching of RSE be located within a broader programme of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in both primary and post-primary schools (Department of Education 1995a). However, schools were not advised of the introduction of SPHE at junior cycle until 2000 when the Department of Education and Science issued curriculum guidelines (Department of Education and Science 2000a). Circular M22/00 (Department of Education and Science 2000b) stated:

> *The time allocation recommended for SPHE is the equivalent of one class period per week (which most schools currently provide), organised in the manner that best meets the needs of the students and school organisation.*

In practice, it may generally be interpreted in schools that one class period is required to teach SPHE per week. RSE is one of ten modules prescribed by the Department of Education and Science curriculum for SPHE. SPHE is not an examination subject and does not require the appointment of new teachers; rather, existing teachers of other subjects attend in-service training and are either appointed to or volunteer for the role of SPHE teacher. It is important to point out that, at the time of its introduction, SPHE sought to build on and consolidate a number of pre-existing programmes, including the North Western Health Board Life Skills Programme (1979), the Cork Social and Health Education Project (1990), the AIDS Programme (1990) and 'On My Own Two Feet', a substance abuse prevention programme (1991) (see the SPHE Support Service web site: http://www.sphe.ie).

*Supports for RSE[3]*
The following guidelines and actions were designed to facilitate the introduction of RSE:

- 1995: The announcement to schools by Circular of the introduction of RSE (Department of Education 1995b)

- 1995: The publication of the *Report of the Expert Advisory Group* (Department of Education 1995a), which outlined the rationale for RSE and provided guidelines for the development of school policy

- 1995: The appointment of a National Co-ordinator for RSE

- 1996/97: Meetings for parents on RSE organised jointly by the National Parents Council and the Department of Education and Science

- 1996/1997: The launch of the first national in-service training programme

- 1997: The publication of interim curriculum guidelines for RSE at both primary and post-primary levels (NCCA 1997 a, b)

- 1998: The publication of RSE resource materials for junior and senior cycle in post-primary schools (Department of Education and Science 1998a, b)

- 2000 onward: The integration of RSE into SPHE coupled with continued in-service training and support provided by the RSE and SPHE Support Services.

---

3 Since RSE is part of the wider SPHE curriculum, many of the issues facing SPHE as a curriculum subject also impact on RSE. For this reason, RSE and SPHE are referred to simultaneously throughout much of this document.

*RSE implementation: recent research and potential obstacles*

Various studies have been conducted on the implementation of SPHE and, to a lesser extent, RSE in Ireland over the past six years. Morgan's (2000) national survey of primary and post-primary teachers, parents and schools, uncovered overwhelming support for school-based RSE among both teachers and parents. In addition, teachers reported high satisfaction with the training they had received. However, despite a substantial increase in the percentage of schools that had finalised and circulated an RSE policy document between 1999 and 2000 (from 29% to 49.9%), there remained a substantial number of schools where little had been achieved, and an RSE policy committee had not been established in approximately one-quarter of schools. In 1999 less than 30% of second-level schools indicated that they were implementing RSE in all classes, although this figure increased to 42.7% by the year 2000.

A recent unpublished study by the SPHE Support Service (2004) reported on the implementation of SPHE and RSE. This research indicated that approximately 95% of schools had timetabled the subject in first year, indicating a marked improvement in implementation levels since 2002 when Geary & Mannix McNamara (2003) reported an implementation rate of 67%. However, the level of timetabling and delivery decreased to just over one half by third year. This same pattern was apparent in relation to RSE, with the level of delivery largely dependent on the year in question. In particular, the SPHE Support Service (2004) research indicates a distinct tendency for delivery to decrease from first through to third year. Of significance also is that although approximately three-fifths of the schools reported having an RSE policy in place, a larger number stated that they were implementing an RSE programme. Finally, the percentage of schools indicating that RSE was being implemented in the senior cycle was considerably lower (less than half) than was the case at junior cycle.

Previous research has identified the following factors that impact on the implementation of RSE:

• *An overcrowded curriculum* - identified by teachers in Morgan's (2000) study as a chief barrier to RSE implementation

• *Gender issues* - including lower implementation of SPHE in all-boys' schools (Geary & Mannix McNamara 2003, Looney & Morgan 2001) and low male teacher participation in in-service training (Burtenshaw 2003, Millar 2003)

• *Teacher selection for SPHE* - including discrepancies in teachers' (of SPHE) and principals' perceptions of how selection for SPHE teaching takes place within schools (Geary & Mannix McNamara 2003), despite the Department of Education and Science recommendation that, "SPHE should not be assigned to teachers without consultation." (2000: 6)

Internationally, the following issues and factors are recognised as influential in the implementation of health education programmes generally and sexuality education in particular:

• Health promotion may not be seen as the *raison d'être* of schools (Young 2004). Teachers and schools have their own targets and standards to meet and these may not concur with those of health promotion professionals working in other settings.

- Teachers report considerable *anxieties about delivering sex education* programmes (Alldred, David & Smith 2003). Some teachers may feel they are not adequately equipped to teach about sex and relationships (Wight & Scott 1994).

- It *cannot be assumed that all pupils will be at ease with discussing sex* and sexuality with their teachers. Boys and girls may differ in their views on the appropriate content for sex education classes. For example Hyde and Howlett (2004) found that young men tended to prioritise practical guidance that would provide them with the skills and confidence to take the lead in sexual encounters.

- *Teachers' interpretation and personal biases* have been demonstrated to affect the implementation of curricular reform (Spillane 1998, Spillane Reiser and Reimar 2002).

### The need for research into RSE in Ireland

Available research on teenage sexual behaviour, coupled with studies highlighting the complexity of RSE/general curriculum implementation, points to a clear need for the education system to regularly evaluate RSE implementation and delivery. Unfortunately, much of the available research suggests that schools are not necessarily perceived by young people as reliable or valued contexts for learning about sexuality and relationships. Furthermore, there appears to be great variation in both the level and type of formal sex education delivered within Irish schools (Dunne et al. 1997, Hyde and Howlett 2004, Sheerin 1998). Other recent studies have noted that recipients of school-based sex education typically regard it as 'too little, too late' (Murphy-Lawless et al. 2004, Mayock & Byrne 2004). Hyde & Howlett's (2004) findings suggest that a considerable number of the young people in their study received sex education in a once-off and isolated manner and many also complained about the content of the sex education they received, claiming that it focused almost exclusively on biological aspects of sex. Similar findings were documented by Mayock & Byrne (2004) in a qualitative study of early school leavers' sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. This research – based on a combination of individual in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions – revealed great variation in both the quality and quantity of the sex education young people received, with young men far less likely to report exposure to school-based sex education.

Overall, research in Ireland points to a lack of confidence among young people in the school-based sex education to which they are exposed. While there is a danger that some pupils may have difficulty remembering the precise content of the sex education they receive (Schubotz, Rolston & Simpson 2003), and despite a tendency for young people to be critical of school subjects in general, recent studies nonetheless point to significant problems with how young people experience school-based sex education and how they perceive its benefits.

### The current study

This study aimed to comprehensively build on existing research on RSE in Ireland, with a specific focus on the extent of RSE implementation and the factors and processes that impact on RSE implementation and delivery. Taking wider governmental, national and regional views, as well as school-level perspectives, into account the study aimed to:

1. Investigate the extent to which RSE policy is now implemented and the RSE curriculum delivered in post-primary schools nationwide

2. Explore the factors and processes that impact on RSE delivery within schools

3. Identify barriers and facilitators to RSE implementation and delivery.

Study design

This section provides a brief outline of the study design. A full account of the research methodology can be found in the larger and more detailed report of the study's findings (Mayock et al. 2007).

The study comprised a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. A quantitative survey was administered to a representative sample of post-primary schools to ascertain the level of implementation of RSE nationally and to examine a range of factors associated with the implementation and delivery of the programme. The qualitative component of the study involved the participation of a range of individuals and schools and was undertaken in two stages: interviews were first conducted with professionals at government, national and regional levels in order to access a wide range of views and perspectives on the implementation of RSE. Case studies were then conducted in nine carefully selected schools. In addition, a small number of individual interviews were conducted with outside facilitators, that is individuals from outside organisations who engage with schools directly to facilitate the delivery of RSE. Figure 1 below presents the study design as a series of 'stages'.

Figure 1    Study design

| | |
|---|---|
| Stage 1 | **QUANTITATIVE SURVEY**<br>Administered to a representative sample of second-level schools |
| Stage 2 | **QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS**<br>Government-, national- and regional-level informants |
| Stage 3 | **CASE STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS**<br>Interviews/focus groups with school principals, SPHE co-ordinators,<br>teachers, parents and pupils within each post-primary school |
| Stage 4 | **INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS WITH OUTSIDE FACILITATORS** |

There was some overlap in the conduct of data collection and, for this reason, the 'stages' listed did not adhere strictly to the chronology implied in Figure 1.

*Research strategies, sampling and study participants*
In November 2004 a random sample of 250 schools was identified and a letter was sent to the principal in each school explaining the purpose of the study and requesting the co-operation of the school in the completion of a questionnaire (Stage 1). A response rate of 76% of the 246 eligible schools was achieved.[4] Different kinds of schools (boys, girls and mixed voluntary secondary schools as well as vocational schools and community colleges, and community and comprehensive secondary schools) were represented in the survey sample, as were schools of all sizes. Table 1 outlines the types of schools participating in the survey.

Table 1 Types of post-primary schools participating

| Type | Number targeted | Number responding | Percent |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Voluntary secondary school (boys) | 40 | 31 | 77.5 |
| Voluntary secondary school (girls) | 50 | 38 | 76.0 |
| Voluntary secondary school (mixed) | 60 | 46 | 76.6 |
| Vocational schools /community colleges | 79 | 53 | 67.0 |
| Community and comprehensive schools | 27 | 19 | 70.4 |

The proportion of disadvantaged schools participating was quite similar to the estimated national figure (approximately 27%). The survey included a mix of urban, town/rural and mainly rural school communities.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select key informants at government, national and regional levels for interview (Stage 2). In order to enlist the co-operation of nine schools for in-depth study (Stage 3) the combined strategies of 'information-oriented selection' and 'strategic selection' (Flyvbjerg 2004) were utilised. In relation to the former strategy, schools were selected from the sample of surveyed schools in order to capture diversity in relation to key criteria including school type, size and geographical area (urban versus rural), and to reflect different stages (or levels) in their implementation and delivery of RSE. 'Strategic selection' was then used to enlist the co-operation of one school with high implementation of RSE. This step was taken on the grounds that the selection of a school with high implementation of the programme could potentially yield important data on how effective RSE implementation works in practice. Finally, early analysis of the qualitative data suggested that schools' use of outside facilitators – and their role in the delivery of RSE – was an issue worthy of attention. It is important to note, however, that these interviews cannot be considered to be representative of the views of all outside facilitators who work with schools and that this component (Stage 4) of the research is largely exploratory.

---

4 See Chapter 3 in the full report of this study (Mayock et al. 2007) for a detailed account of the survey sampling process.

Table 2 below outlines those individuals and groups represented in the qualitative phase of the study.

Table 2 Interview/focus group participants

| Level | Organisations/agencies represented | | Number of participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| Government | Department of Education and Science; Department of Health and Children; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA); Crisis Pregnancy Agency. | | 6 |
| National | Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI); Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI); Joint Managerial Body; National Parents Council; Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools; RSE Support Service; SPHE Support Service. | | 7 |
| Regional | Health Promotion Officers, Regional Development Officers. | | 14 |
| Schools | School participant | N | 170 |
| | Principals and vice-principals | 9+2 | |
| | SPHE co-ordinators | 7 | |
| | Teachers* | 32 | |
| | Parents* | 24 | |
| | Students* | 90 | |
| | Outside facilitators** | 6 | |
| **Total participants** | | | **197** |

*Denotes focus group interviews of between 2 and 5 participants
**While one outside facilitator agency involved a focus group of 3 participants, the other three agencies had individual representatives.

## Summary of key findings
### *RSE implementation levels*
Two-thirds of the schools (66.6%) surveyed felt that RSE implementation levels had improved since RSE was initially introduced during the mid- to late 1990s. This view was largely corroborated by the study's governmental, national and regional interviewees. However, many respondents also recognised that implementation was a slow process and that curricular change can be difficult and challenging, irrespective of the subject area in question.

Many of the findings of this study indicate that the aim of capturing and representing rates or levels of RSE implementation is highly complex. For example, RSE policy development within schools might be reasonably assumed to be an indicator of RSE implementation: in this study 60% of the schools surveyed reported that an agreed RSE policy statement was in place. However, upon closer scrutiny, approximately 90% of schools reported teaching RSE in first year, suggesting that a significant number of schools may be delivering RSE in the absence of an RSE policy. No major differences emerged in relation to policy development within the schools surveyed in terms of school type, size, location, or disadvantaged status. Yet, there was a perception amongst government, national and regional interviewees that boys' schools were lower implementers of RSE, a finding which corresponds broadly with previous research on SPHE (Geary & Mannix McNamara 2003).

A number of additional survey findings are significant in relation to the implementation of the RSE programme. RSE was taught as part of SPHE in first and second year in 81% of the schools surveyed, with 11% of schools reporting that they did not teach RSE. However, the number of schools not teaching RSE increased to 20% in third (Junior Certificate) year, and the number teaching RSE as part of SPHE in this year dropped to 58%. Added to this, 30% of schools reported not actually teaching RSE lessons (as opposed to having a programme) in third year, a figure that rose to 43% in fifth year and 48% in Leaving Certificate year. There are three key issues worthy of note in relation to these findings. First, they suggest that Junior Certificate year *may* impact adversely on the delivery of RSE.[5] Indeed, 71% of the schools surveyed felt that it was now harder to allocate time to non-examination subjects than previously. Secondly, given Mayock and Byrne's (2004) finding that early school leavers are more vulnerable in terms of their lack of sexual knowledge, the decline in RSE teaching during third year is a significant concern for this group in particular. Finally, the low rate of RSE implementation at senior cycle signals a pressing need to formally introduce senior-cycle SPHE/RSE. Significant in this regard, and particularly in terms of future efforts to facilitate the implementation of RSE, is that that SPHE's introduction at junior cycle in 2000 was identified consistently in this study as having a positive impact on RSE implementation (see the findings on facilitators of RSE documented later in this report). It is likely, therefore, that the formal introduction of SPHE/RSE at senior cycle would go some way towards enhancing overall implementation levels within second-level schools nationally.

The case-study research provides important insights into the complexity of RSE implementation. This in-depth investigation of RSE within nine schools reveals considerable diversity and inconsistency in RSE implementation and delivery. While a number could be said to be implementing RSE in a similar fashion 'on paper' – that is, in terms of having devised an RSE policy statement and in their approach to timetabling of SPHE/RSE – each had, in fact, a unique approach to the implementation of the programme. What emerges strongly is that both *individual* and *internal* school issues impact on the extent to which policy and timetabling actually translate into *effective RSE teaching.* These issues are multi-faceted, but for illustrative purposes it is useful to cite examples that highlight some of the problems that impact on the delivery of RSE within individual schools. Here, examples are used from the case-study data on two schools, referred to here as St. Ita's and St. Mark's:

- St. Ita's had experienced problems finding a replacement for a former SPHE co-ordinator who appeared to have provided strong leadership in the early development of RSE within the school. In contrast, other schools had the advantage of having a long-standing SPHE co-ordinator who brought continuity to the development of RSE by supporting teachers and compiling resource materials consistently over several years.

- Teacher discomfort with RSE was identified as a barrier to RSE teaching in St. Ita's, while in St. Mark's, the presence of a small core group of trained teachers (supported by the SPHE co-ordinator and principal) helped to circumvent many of the challenges associated with teacher discomfort.

5 The consistent finding that RSE teaching decreases from first through to third year may in part reflect the phased introduction of SPHE by schools since the subject became mandatory in 2003. Future studies will be better positioned to draw clear conclusions on the precise impact of Junior Certificate year on RSE.

These and other *qualitative* findings strongly suggest that if RSE implementation is assessed within schools in terms of basic or factual criteria such as the presence or absence of a policy statement and/or SPHE co-ordinator, a large number of schools may appear similar in their progress and approach. However, when schools are examined from the broader perspective of a 'supportive whole-school environment' (i.e. with closer attention to levels of teacher training, leadership, parental involvement and pupil perspectives), these same schools may, in fact, have quite opposing approaches to and perspectives on RSE. In short, the case-study research uncovered many inconsistencies in RSE delivery both within and across the nine schools, suggesting that the implementation of the programme is a complex matter indeed. Furthermore, within a number of the schools studied RSE implementation and delivery was inconsistent and patchy at best.

Amidst the diversity of approaches to RSE across the nine schools, it was possible to identify a number of core characteristics (and related approaches and actions) that influence how RSE is viewed, approached and delivered. In Table 3 we describe these characteristics along a continuum from low to high implementation. Although we only define opposing ends of the spectrum for each of the eight characteristics identified, it is, of course, possible for a school to be 'midway' along a continuum of development in its management of one, several, or all of the areas listed.

Table 3 Continuum of implementation/delivery of RSE in post-primary schools

| Characteristic | Low level implementation | High level implementation |
|---|---|---|
| Co-ordination of SPHE/RSE | Low-level co-ordination of SPHE within the school/sometimes no SPHE co-ordinator. | Appointed and committed SPHE co-ordinator who works with SPHE teachers and the entire staff to prioritise SPHE and RSE. The co-ordination of SPHE is designated a Post of Responsibility by school management within the school. |
| Parental involvement | Little or no consultation with parents on the content of RSE or when formulating policy. | Parents consulted at the time of drawing up policy. Parents regularly informed about the content of RSE. |
| Status | Within the school community the value of SPHE/RSE is not recognised. The co-ordinator and teachers struggle in an atmosphere of ambivalence towards the subject. | SPHE/RSE is prioritised and valued by all staff members. The subject enjoys status in the planning of school 'business' generally and also among the students. |
| Teacher training | Few or no teachers trained while teaching SPHE/RSE, little awareness of training. Lack of access to extra training services. | A pool of well-equipped teachers using experiential learning methodologies for RSE. School provides additional funding for staff-wide training. Teachers using personal time to train in SPHE/RSE. High level of access to extra training services. |
| Teacher comfort | Virtual avoidance of RSE by teachers due to personal discomfort with the topic of sexuality. Lack of an RSE policy within school and a reluctance to use experiential learning methodologies. Fear of parental misgivings due to poor communication and lack of clarity on the matter of school ethos. | Positive confrontation of all RSE issues. Trained in facilitating openness and confidentiality amongst students. Personal level of confidence in negotiating any ethos issues. Supported by a clear RSE policy, school management, and a clear and open relationship with parents. |
| Clarity among teachers about what can be taught | Teachers are extremely nervous about the topics they can 'safely' address and consequently avoid certain or all aspects of RSE teaching. | Teachers are confident about the boundaries of acceptability within RSE teaching and move comfortably through all aspects of the RSE programme in accordance with the school's RSE policy. |
| Student perspectives and understanding | Students feel that teachers are disinterested in and uncomfortable with RSE; they are dissatisfied with what is taught and are not accustomed to open discussion of relationships and sexuality. They are not consulted on RSE policy or the programme. | Students have confidence in their RSE teachers and enjoy RSE classes. They are reasonably or very satisfied with the programme content and generally feel comfortable and able to discuss relationships and sexuality. Students are consulted about RSE policy and the programme, possibly through the mechanism of the Students' Council. |
| Whole-school support[6] | Lack of personal interest in RSE for many staff. Low levels of communication and awareness around SPHE/RSE training and personal development. Major difficulties around teacher selection. Little or no parental involvement. | A large number of staff trained in SPHE/RSE. High level of openness and flexibility around RSE teaching and timetabling. Regular planning and evaluation of RSE progress, sharing of ideas, and 'moral support'. Actively and explicitly outlining to parents how RSE is taught. |

6 To a considerable extent, the notion of 'whole school support' embraces many of the other core characteristics identified. Nonetheless it is a characteristic that merits specific attention both as a core facilitator to RSE and as a guiding principle to effective implementation of the programme.

This table highlights the factors that distinguish those schools with low-level implementation from those with high implementation of RSE. What is particularly interesting, however, is that no individual school or teacher characteristic is singled out; rather, the continuum highlights numerous features that relate to the *whole school community.* Furthermore, the table does not suggest that one characteristic is more important than another; rather, implementation is facilitated by the presence of all or several of the factors as defined at the higher end of the continuum.

*Facilitators of RSE implementation*
*RSE policy: development and implementation*
A very considerable number of government, national and regional participants regarded RSE policy development within schools as critical to the implementation process. However, misgivings were also frequently expressed about how schools devised and utilised their policy statements, and claims that policy development within (some) schools was merely a 'paper exercise' were not unusual.

The case-study findings confirm the importance of RSE policy and highlight *effective* policy development and its associated engagement with stakeholders as a critical enabler of RSE implementation and delivery. However, simply 'having' an RSE policy document is insufficient; rather, the *process of policy consultation* with teachers, the school management, students and parents emerged as the major determinant of the speed and effectiveness of RSE implementation. Interviews with school principals, teachers and SPHE co-ordinators also strongly suggest that the recommended consultative process outlined by the Department of Education (1995) facilitated discussion amongst teachers, thus raising the profile of RSE within the school and clarifying the school's thinking and stance on RSE content. Additionally, staff within case-study schools where policies were developed using a consultative process – and where teachers were familiar with the RSE policy – frequently commented on how a policy statement devised in this manner assisted them in their work. This was particularly apparent in one school where the RSE policy was highly visible within their RSE teaching 'manual'/materials and thereby easily accessible to all RSE teachers.

Overall, the findings strongly suggest a number of problems with RSE policy development within second-level schools nationwide. The survey data indicate that 40% of schools have not yet finalised an RSE policy. Furthermore, only a small number of case-study schools drew regularly on their policy statement for direction in the delivery of RSE. It is perhaps significant that teachers and principals within many of the schools studied were quite critical of the manner in which the Department of Education and Science communicated RSE directives to them. In particular, they felt that adequate resources and supports were not in place to develop RSE policy and to promote and expand appropriate teaching methodologies.

> *I think the Department hands things down and says, 'do it', and really it doesn't recognise what we have to do to implement things.*
>
> Co-ordinator

> *These programmes, they all sound great when they're developed and they are great. And the NCCA will come out with great guidelines, but to actually get them implemented is a different story.*
>
> Principal

In general, case-study schools where an RSE policy statement was not in place cited time constraints and the need to prioritise other school business as barriers to policy development. However, fears over parental misgivings and objections to RSE emerged as perhaps the greatest barrier to policy development within schools that did not have a written policy statement. On the other hand, schools where policy had been developed found that the vast majority of parents were supportive of the teaching of RSE. Furthermore, the majority of schools surveyed nationally did not rate 'traditional attitudes in Ireland' as a major barrier to RSE implementation. It is difficult, in light of these findings, to understand the position of school personnel who harbour fears about parental objections to RSE and consequently fail to engage with parents on the matter of RSE. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study, in fact, suggest that when parents are consulted and feel informed about RSE within the school they fully endorse the teaching of the programme.

### *School leadership*

The leadership of the school principal and (as mentioned in the previous section) the SPHE co-ordinator, were frequently cited across all qualitative interviews as vitally important to the initiation of a consultative policy-making process, releasing teachers for training, creating an SPHE/RSE awareness within the school, and ensuring the subject had status and recognition within the whole school community. Across the nine schools studied in depth, those without strong leadership and commitment to RSE were far less likely to have cultivated a 'supportive school environment' for RSE. Teachers within the schools consistently identified the principal as playing a lead role in the implementation of RSE. Certainly, the principals interviewed during the conduct of case studies were in a position to:

- influence SPHE's place on the timetable

- reduce class size to accommodate experiential learning methodologies

- raise the status of SPHE/RSE within the school

- prioritise in-service training for RSE.

Finally, it is significant that the survey data indicates that schools with an appointed SPHE co-ordinator are more likely to have an RSE policy in place.

### *Outside facilitators*

There was some debate as to the merits of outside facilitators among government-, national- and regional-level respondents. Many considered trained teachers to be the best suited to deliver RSE. Others, however, highlighted difficulties with the staffing and timetabling of RSE and considered outside facilitators to be an extremely useful resource. A number of government-level respondents felt, therefore, that the role of outside facilitators in the delivery of RSE merits further development and expansion. On the question of how outside facilitators work and integrate within the school community, it is noteworthy that several regional respondents expressed strong views on the need for outside agencies/facilitators to complement the school's existing RSE programme as a way of ensuring that holistic and consistent messages are delivered to students and to avoid an over-emphasis on preventive messages. This view was, in fact, expressed equally strongly by the outside facilitators interviewed and all articulated a perceived need for the work of outside agencies within schools to be embedded within the principles of the SPHE programme. However, only four such agencies are represented in this study, and firm conclusions cannot be drawn on the basis of this limited number of interviews with outside facilitators.

Given the level of teacher discomfort with the subject matter of RSE within the case-study schools, it is perhaps unsurprising that at least five of the schools studied identified outside agencies as an important resource. It is also significant, however, that only one of these schools reported using outside facilitators to complement an existing comprehensive in-school approach to RSE teaching. It seems, therefore, that where RSE is poorly developed and teachers feel uncomfortable with the subject matter of RSE, schools may develop an over-reliance on outside facilitators and, consequently, assign *all* RSE teaching to outside agencies. The survey results indicate that while approximately 40% of schools reported using outside facilitators, almost 80% of schools felt having more outside facilitators in schools would help 'a lot' or 'somewhat' in enhancing the future implementation and delivery of RSE.

*SPHE Support Service and teacher training*
Teachers within the case-study schools advanced very favourable accounts of the in-service training they received. Those who had participated in SPHE and/or RSE training provided by the SPHE Support Service were generally positive about the experience and felt that the training they received helped them to develop skills specific to the teaching of RSE. Of considerable importance, nonetheless, is that there was some variation in how schools approached and accommodated in-service training for SPHE/RSE. For example, two of the schools selected for case study (both high implementers of the RSE programme) had allocated additional time and resources to teacher training, which extended to the majority of teachers, thereby cultivating an appreciation and awareness among *all* teachers of the importance of SPHE/RSE. This approach in turn appeared to play a considerable role in the development of a supportive school environment for RSE. Once again, it appears that - irrespective of the supports available - much hinges on how the development and implementation of SPHE/RSE is prioritised by individual schools. That notwithstanding, governmental, regional and national respondents viewed the SPHE Support Service as critically important in terms of advancing and sustaining RSE. Indeed, a large number of respondents identified training as a key support that could potentially enable a more uniform approach to RSE delivery nationally.

Table 4 presents the survey findings on school perspectives on what would help 'a lot' or 'somewhat' in the implementation of the RSE programme in the future. Clearly, the SPHE Support Service and in-service training are important to schools in terms of the support they provide. However, it also seems that schools perceive a need for greater assistance from outside experts or facilitators in the delivery of RSE.

Table 4 Factors that would help 'a lot' or 'somewhat' in implementation of the RSE programme in post-primary schools

|  | % of schools agreeing |
| --- | --- |
| An expanded SPHE Support Service | 87% |
| Increased in-service provision | 84% |
| More outside facilitators in schools | 80% |
| Greater involvement of parents | 58% |
| Changes in the RSE programme | 37% |

*Supportive whole-school environment*

A positive whole-school perception of SPHE/RSE was found to be crucial to implementation within the case-study schools. A whole-school approach or supportive school environment can be said to involve:

- an appreciation within schools that every member of the school staff needs to take some degree of ownership of SPHE/RSE

- greater consistency with regard to planning across the curriculum

- greater parental and student involvement in decision-making about RSE, which a number of government, national and regional respondents considered to be mere tokenism as currently approached by some schools.

In at least two of the case-study schools, SPHE did have a status as a subject. SPHE and RSE were far more likely to succeed where there was whole-school support for the subject. However, it needs to be recognized that additional effort and commitment on the part of staff, students and parents is necessary for SPHE and RSE to gain status and success within schools. Our data certainly suggest that a supportive whole school environment cannot be realized without very considerable investment and initiative and that the quantity and quality of RSE within individual schools currently depends largely on the interest and commitment of school principals, SPHE co-ordinators and teachers.

*Barriers to RSE implementation*
*Curricular and time constraints*

Table 5 presents the survey results on factors rated by schools as 'very important' or 'important' in preventing the full implementation of RSE:

Table 5 'Very important' or 'quite important' factors preventing full RSE implementation in post-primary schools

| | % of schools agreeing |
|---|---|
| The overcrowded curriculum | 82% |
| The need to complete so many courses in so many subjects | 71% |
| Discomfort of some teachers in teaching RSE | 71% |
| The pressure of examination subjects | 67% |

This table indicates a heavy emphasis on the combined pressure of other (examination) subjects, an overcrowded curriculum and consequent constraints on time as key barriers to RSE implementation. Indeed, these findings, combined with the figures pertaining to RSE implementation during examination years (discussed earlier), may go some way to explaining the marked variation in RSE implementation and delivery uncovered within the case-study component of this research. It appears that RSE frequently does not receive the required attention amidst the perceived pressure of an already 'overloaded' curriculum within second-level schools. When combined with teacher discomfort with the subject matter of relationships and sexuality education, RSE may be easily sidelined, a point made frequently by regional respondents:

> *I don't know if RSE or SPHE fits culturally within schools at the minute because of the culture within schools. Exam preparation and examinations dominate and any subject that doesn't prepare kids for an exam is not valued. Culturally, schools have become very task orientated. And everything has to have an outcome, a result.*
>
> <div align="right">Regional Development Officer</div>

Constraints on teacher time were also viewed as a problem by government, national and regional respondents who felt that teachers do not have sufficient time to develop the requisite SPHE/RSE teaching skills and/or to source appropriate resource materials. It may, indeed, be difficult for teachers to commit to a non-examination subject that is allocated only one hour a week for each year group, given the combination of timetabling and exam pressures that exists. While SPHE was timetabled in all of the case-study schools, it nonetheless competed for time, space and recognition with a large number of academic subjects.

### SPHE status and perceptions of RSE

The low status of SPHE emerged as significant negative influence on the schools' implementation and delivery of RSE. Across all of the schools selected for case study, SPHE struggled to varying extents to gain recognition. It was commonly asserted by teachers, for example, that students were disinterested in SPHE because it is not an examination subject. The students we spoke to, on the other hand, were acutely aware of the low status of RSE within their schools and often challenged the notion that they did not take SPHE seriously.

> *It's not an exam subject so, like, teachers don't take it seriously. It's not the students that don't take it seriously; it's that they don't teach it.*
>
> <div align="right">JC Student</div>

At government, national and regional levels, several respondents raised specific concerns about the status of RSE *within* SPHE. While the integration of RSE into the broader SPHE programme was viewed as appropriate and valuable, this arrangement was not viewed as unproblematic, given the challenges that SPHE may itself face in gaining status and recognition within schools. Some made the point that the absence of a formal SPHE curriculum at senior cycle greatly diminishes the perceived importance of SPHE as a subject, and it was frequently claimed that the benefits of RSE cannot be fully realised in the absence of a senior-cycle SPHE curriculum. Concern was also expressed about the tendency for some teachers to omit or ignore the RSE module within SPHE, due in part to the challenging nature of the subject matter of RSE:

> *Teachers who are maybe not comfortable with it shy away from RSE within the SPHE. So they can say, 'Yes we're doing SPHE', but they never quite get around to the RSE section; it might be a fast thing towards the end of the school year or, 'I'll get someone in, I'll get the local GP or I'll speak to the public health nurse or something'. So in that regard it can get swallowed up and SPHE can disguise it so that it's not actually being done properly in schools.*
>
> <div align="right">Health Promotion Officer</div>

Among government, national and regional respondents, teachers' professional standing with regard to the teaching RSE and SPHE was thought to require attention, and the absence of a comprehensive approach to pre-service accreditation for these subjects in Ireland was an issue raised on numerous occasions. Traditionally, RSE and SPHE have not featured within the professional profile or career path of teachers, and our data also suggest problems with the status of SPHE/RSE among teachers themselves. This issue is again linked to the prioritisation of academic subjects within the second-level system. As one principal suggested:

> *The vast majority, the English and Irish, the history and geography teachers, they're subject-oriented - they're exam-oriented. Unfortunately, that's the points race and the points system has forced us to be that way. So the general teacher would only barely be aware that a programme like SPHE/RSE was even going on.*
>
> Principal

It was not unusual for teachers of SPHE to state that they felt that many of their colleagues viewed the subject as an 'add-on' or a 'doss'. Some teachers went as far as to suggest that teaching SPHE, or being asked to teach it, can be perceived by some as a subtle or not-so-subtle demotion or downgrading of their professional status. The views of one SPHE co-ordinator provide a useful synopsis of the negative consequence of the current low status of SPHE and RSE within many schools:

> *If the subject hasn't got a status, forget it. I mean, you know, the curriculum is absolutely jam-packed, and I mean everybody is pushing for their own subject area to be looked after. And if a thing isn't treated with respect … a lot of it is lip-service. And if it's treated like that, well then - how is it going to be regarded by the students, or by other teachers?*
>
> SPHE co-ordinator

## *Teacher comfort with RSE*

As stated in Table 5, schools frequently cited teacher discomfort with the teaching of RSE as a barrier to the implementation of the programme. International literature has similarly drawn attention to the negative impact of teacher anxiety on the delivery of relationships and sexuality education (Alldred et al. 2003, Wight & Scott 1994). Much of this study's qualitative data suggests that lack of teacher comfort with the subject matter of RSE constitutes a very significant barrier to the delivery of the programme. Government-, national- and regional-level respondents frequently drew attention to problems with:

- teachers' level of personal embarrassment with teaching about sexuality

- teacher fears about parents' views or misgivings about RSE, which they attributed to lack of communication between schools and parents on the content of RSE

- teachers' ability to communicate effectively with teenagers on the subject of sexuality

- teacher anxieties about what can be 'safely' addressed in the context of RSE delivery

- reluctance among some teachers to use experiential learning approaches to RSE.

Reports of a large number of students and parents suggest that there was marked variation in teacher comfort with the teaching of RSE both within and across the schools selected for case study. The varied experiences of RSE reported by students were frequently attributed to individual teachers' level of comfort with open discussion about sexuality. Parents also communicated an awareness of marked disparity in how teachers (and schools) approach RSE.

> *What is taught in that, as far as I'm aware, it's down to the teacher and that's actually the programme for what they cover, which is, again, an Irish solution to an Irish problem.*

*Parent*

It is perhaps significant that students frequently attributed their school's (inadequate) approach to RSE to the school's Catholic or religious ethos, which they felt defined and constrained the parameters or boundaries of what teachers and pupils were permitted to discuss.

> S1: *It's [RSE] completely jumped over. Well, because I don't think we're allowed to talk about it because it's a Catholic school.*
>
> S2: *There are a few teachers who'd be brave enough now.*
>
> S3: *They [teachers] said it's kind of an iffy subject because they're not supposed to talk about it. But, in general, in schools I don't think it's touched on anyway. Parents might not want their kids to know despite what age they are.*

*Senior-cycle students*

The case-study component of this study provides many useful insights into factors that affect teacher comfort. For example, within three of the schools, the absence of a written policy on RSE impacted negatively on teacher comfort and on their sense of confidence with the delivery of RSE. A number reported feeling vulnerable because of the absence of a formal in-school support structure (including a written RSE policy) in the event of parents objecting to aspects of the RSE programme. In these schools, the absence of a written policy appeared to generate anxiety for teachers, who felt they had little or no guidance from management on what precisely could be appropriately taught and discussed in the context of RSE classes.

Apart from teacher discomfort with the subject matter of RSE, there was identifiable reluctance among (some) teachers to use the recommended experiential or active learning methodologies within a considerable number of the schools selected for case study. While this approach to teaching is recommended across the second-level curriculum, it appears to cause significant anxiety for some teachers, within RSE teaching in particular. Fears about losing control or respect appear to strongly influence teachers' willingness to subscribe to experiential learning methodologies in their teaching of RSE. Again, the subject matter of RSE is likely to be a factor here. Only one of the nine schools had adopted experiential teaching approaches within RSE on a school-wide level. The co-ordinator from one school described why this approach may cause anxiety for teachers:

> *A lot of teachers have problems with the subject area [RSE] because they're not facilitators, they're not trained facilitators. They're trained to walk in, stand in front of the class and act like dictators. And it's talk and chalk still … When you facilitate, you have to be prepared to give a little bit of yourself, and that's kind of scary for some people.*

*Co-ordinator*

Finally, a number of outside facilitators felt that many second-level teachers were not equipped to deliver RSE in this manner: "It's just stepping too much out of their role for teachers."

*Discrepancies in training*
The absence of pre-service training was an issue raised by teachers in at least four of the case study schools, and this gap was felt to directly affect SPHE/RSE's status within the teaching profession. It seems reasonable to suggest that pre-service training would also go some way towards alleviating resistance to moving from the traditional 'chalk and talk' approach to a more active learning approach to SPHE/RSE teaching.

While RSE training was generally viewed as successful by government, national and regional respondents, there were also concerns that many teachers had not yet participated in any RSE training. Release time for teachers was viewed as a major barrier to teachers receiving adequate training, and the attitude and leadership of the principal were identified as crucial to how in-service training was managed and approached within individual schools:

> *Principals are still working on that assumption that if one teacher goes [to training] they can tell the others and I think it is the responsibility of SPHE support services to get the right message out to principals: that there is very much a personal development aspect to RSE training and that one teacher can't come back and tell others about it.*

> Regional Development Officer

At national and regional levels, concerns were also expressed about the adequacy of current in-service training provision, and a number of respondents were critical of what they described as a 'one-off' approach to training. As mentioned earlier, two of the case-study schools had allocated time and resources to additional training for RSE and appeared to benefit greatly from this investment.

Even when training is well planned and resourced, teacher turnover within schools may pose significant challenges to the creation of a pool of trained SPHE/RSE teachers. Added to this, timetabling restrictions may lead to the deployment of untrained teachers to SPHE/RSE, even when there are other trained teachers on the staff. In other cases, teachers who have undertaken training may opt not to teach the programme. One principal described some of the problems with RSE training and the more general challenge of selecting teachers who are prepared to teach SPHE/RSE:

> *We're whittled down to three RSE teachers, and whittled is the word because at one point we had six or seven trained teachers. We've got two people upstairs who are fully trained and who won't do the programme. And it is down to, it's hugely down to the personality of people who will take part in this programme in schools.*
> Principal

It is also important to state that not all schools can be said to be on an equal footing with regard to training, due to the varied availability of the SPHE Support Service across Health Service Executive areas. Finally and importantly, the commitment to fund follow-up training did not exist in most of the case-study schools and cannot be assumed to be present in a majority of second-level schools nationwide. Combined, the issues and factors found to impact on RSE training strongly suggest that, at the present time, effective RSE implementation and delivery depends to a far greater extent than is desirable on the *personal initiative and commitment* of school principals, SPHE co-ordinators and teachers.

*Teacher selection*

School management, teachers, parents and students within the case-study schools frequently stated that teachers needed to be "suited" to working with SPHE and RSE as subject areas, and it was frequently suggested that not all teachers had the degree of openness, confidence and/or comfort to deliver classes in RSE in particular. Many school principals and SPHE co-ordinators also stated that not all teachers were suited to or sufficiently interested in SPHE/RSE, and this situation posed significant challenges when it came to teacher selection for SPHE. The need to have trained teachers involved in the programme was a consideration that posed further challenges:

> *I really do think it's a very special thing and I think only people who wish to do it should be given a chance. I don't think it should be just, 'Oh, you've a spare gap in the timetable, I'll put you in'. It doesn't suit everybody and the kids pick up on that in ten or fifteen minutes: they know who is comfortable with it and who isn't.*
>
> <div align="right">Deputy Principal</div>

The task of allocating teachers to SPHE/RSE was such that a number of principals admitted that there was considerable temptation to select a teacher or teachers who had available class periods on their timetable: "Particularly when you look and say, 'God it's not actually an examination subject'. That's the reality of the examination fodder we produce" (Principal). In keeping with this comment, the academic orientation of the second-level school system was felt to pose major problems for teacher selection, as evidenced by this comment from the co-ordinator in another school:

> *I think it's very hard on Management, to be quite honest with you. We're an academic school, like. There's something wrong with Irish schools where they're out to get points and places - that's the priority over social education. It's a terrible lack in our society.*
>
> <div align="right">Co-ordinator</div>

It seems that the principle of voluntary SPHE/RSE is compromised in many cases by the very real constraints of timetabling and by broader staffing difficulties. As one vice-principal stated, "People are asked but sometimes your hands are just tied, you know. You don't have enough people to go round." This situation is clearly not desirable, much less an ideal, given the personal demands associated with RSE. While all schools were fully aware of the desirability of voluntary participation in SPHE, only three schools could be said to adhere to a voluntary policy on the matter of who assumes responsibility for the subject. These schools had a greater number of teachers who attended in-service SPHE and RSE training and they monitored the comfort level of teachers through regular planning meetings. They also appeared to communicate more effectively and with greater openness about the programme. The outcome of this approach in some cases was that teachers did not feel pressured to teach *all* aspects of SPHE.

> *Some teachers will take SPHE and be quite happy to do the programme, apart from the sex education end of it, you understand. They will do everything right up to values and self-awareness and all the rest of it but will feel uncomfortable with this [RSE] end of it. And they sometimes will opt out. And then, as we say, we co-opt other teachers who have been doing it for a long time, but who may not be involved in the programme now, and they help us out.*
>
> <div align="right">Teacher</div>

*Other factors and processes that impact on RSE delivery*
*School ethos*

School ethos was reported by Norman (2006) to have a major influence on how schools interpret and approach homosexuality within the second-level sector. Our findings suggest that the issue of school ethos, and its impact on RSE, remains shrouded in ambiguity, leading to personal interpretations of 'ethos' on the part of teachers, differences in how they approach the content of RSE generally and, in particular, in how they approach topics such as contraception, condom use and homosexuality. At government, national and regional levels, a considerable number of respondents felt that RSE teachers felt constrained by (a generally Catholic) school ethos, with some claiming that the absence of clarity on what precisely could be taught and discussed created a great deal of uncertainty for teachers. However, others felt that concerns about school ethos constituted a 'smoke screen', which, in today's world, had little bearing on the reality of what was accepted and demanded (by parents, society at large and, perhaps, the church) from school-based RSE.

> *As I said, it's like we've had such profound cultural change over the last ten or fifteen years. It's a red herring to suggest that Boards (of management) would be very gravely considering the content of this programme, you know - I don't think they would.*

> Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland

Interviews and focus groups with teachers within the schools selected for case study indicate that teachers adopt various approaches to school ethos. These data also suggest that relatively few teachers felt confident in their approach to selecting 'safe' and appropriate topics within the teaching of RSE. As the comments below suggest, some teachers find themselves in the position of having to manage anxieties and possible fears related to what can and cannot be safely responded to in light of the school's Catholic or religious ethos:

> *I would usually mention that the Church's view is this and that this is a Catholic school. But the fear of hellfire and damnation through all eternity hasn't stopped youngsters having sex, and you have to live in the real world as well. So I would include it [Catholic stance] in my introduction and get around it that way.*

> Teacher

> *I don't find [ethos and RSE] difficult to balance, I just find it awkward. Like, just in practical terms I had a student who came out to me as being gay, and I was left in a terrible situation of dancing this line between what was appropriate on the religious side of things but even in terms of information for him.*

> Teacher

Both of the accounts above illustrate the lack of clarity that can exist among teachers about the role of school ethos and the impact that this situation can potentially have on how teachers deliver RSE and/or respond to specific questions or queries on the part of students. The second account, in particular, raises critical issues concerning the potential constraints imposed on teachers and their ability to respond appropriately to the needs of at least some of their students. Ambiguity of this kind is clearly undesirable and ultimately compromises some of the core objectives of RSE.

## *Resources*

The introduction of the RSE programme in the absence of comprehensive teaching resources was identified by government, national and regional respondents as an early weakness and barrier to the implementation of RSE. Furthermore, several pointed out that current resource material for the teaching of RSE is inadequate and, in some cases, outmoded. For instance, not all schools have access to contemporary audio-visual resources to support the teaching of RSE.[7] As a result, teachers have no option but to use materials which they often feel are outdated.

> *Shortage of resources - that's my huge problem. I think if there was a video or a DVD that is up to date, that's dealing with, you know, the pressures that young people are under now; not something that was made like fifteen or twenty years ago, which is the case with the one I'm using.*

<div align="right">Teacher</div>

Students within schools where outdated video material was used were also critical of its content, which they considered to be moralistic and largely irrelevant to their lives and experiences.

> *She [video actor] said, 'God would forgive you', and all that. Like, some people don't care, some people don't care about religion and all, like. They wouldn't even take the video seriously, and all.*

<div align="right">JC Student</div>

It is noteworthy that teachers were less likely to simultaneously raise the issue of resource materials during interview, perhaps reflecting a preoccupation with human resource concerns and with broader structural issues that impact on RSE teaching. However, the impact of large class sizes was quite a significant barrier, particularly to taking an active learning approach. It is important to note that one school stood out from the others because, amongst other reasons, it made a conscious decision to cut SPHE class sizes to 14/15 pupils. The following section also refers to the issue of class size and resourcing.

A large number of school participants felt that RSE resource materials needed to more adequately acknowledge the reality of adolescents' social experiences and the challenges they face. One teacher drew attention to the dearth of specifically tailored resources for 'weaker' students, whilst other teachers bemoaned the absence of teaching materials that might assist them deal with all-boys' or, alternatively, mixed classes of students. In other words, teachers rightly identified the need for a range of materials that address diversity and difference among their students.

---

7 A DVD entitled 'Busy Bodies', developed to complement the SPHE curriculum, is available to all primary schools for use with children aged approximately 10-14. A DVD to support RSE for older children will be made available to post-primary schools in the near future.

## Perceived lack of commitment from the Department of Education and Science

The introduction of RSE was an important development within the Irish educational system and signalled a major commitment on the part of the Department of Education and Science (DES) to the provision of school-based sex education. At this time, very significant resources were invested in teacher training and (probably less so) in the provision of information for school principals, teachers and parents in an effort to propel the implementation of RSE. This level of investment in RSE was identified by a considerable number of government, national and regional respondents as having facilitated the introduction of RSE. However, at school level, teachers, school principals and SPHE co-ordinators drew attention to aspects of the Department's management and resourcing of RSE that they perceived to signal a lack of commitment on the part of the DES to the programme. Earlier reference was made to complaints - made by principals in particular - about how the DES communicated the introduction of RSE to schools. Linked to the notion that programmes like RSE are imposed on schools, principals and teachers frequently asserted that the Department of Education and Science had a poor grasp of the day-to-day obstacles facing schools in their attempts to implement and deliver such programmes. Hence, whilst many acknowledged the Department's very considerable investment in in-service training, the release of teachers for training purposes was claimed to pose problems that went largely unrecognised.

> *It is weak, very definitely. They don't seem to have any appreciation of the day-to-day running of the school and the constraints that are on subjects, teachers, the curriculum itself … The Department are inclined to impose these programmes and then they've in-service afterwards, and sometimes the teachers don't get the training that they need. And training is a very disruptive thing. One of our teachers was gone for two days there on the training and we had to organise a substitute to come in. And a lot of principals say, 'I don't need the hassle'.*

<div align="right">Principal</div>

Others were critical of the timetabling directive (i.e. the equivalent of one class period of SPHE per week), suggesting that this minimum requirement reflected only a minor commitment to the programme on the part of the Department of Education and Science.

> *I think that if the Department was really serious about it, they would give it enough of a profile on the curriculum. One period per week is just a token gesture.*

<div align="right">Deputy Principal</div>

According to one principal, the consequences for schools across the country of this mismatch between Departmental rhetoric and the supports they offer to schools to deliver the programme is that RSE continues to be treated as a "tag on" to the existing curriculum.

> *I believe that when it [RSE] was placed on the curriculum, there was great concern with the schools as to how are we going to implement this. And it was viewed, if we are being honest, as a tag-on to our existing curriculum. And I think that is still very much the case within schools.*

<div align="right">Principal</div>

Without question, the most critical resources for RSE within schools are effective teachers and sufficient time. Whilst this same claim might be made for all subjects, the level of personal investment that RSE demands means that the human resource challenge is likely to be greater for RSE than for many other areas of the curriculum.

> *The resources have to be there to match the programmes, that time has to be there if these programmes are going to work, you need to be able, particularly with boys, to actually have three teachers banded at the one time and, in an ideal world, taking small groups and get them talking. RSE in a class of thirty is very very difficult.*

> Principal

Finally, two principals stated that if the Department was to demonstrate a strong commitment to RSE, it would invest to a far greater extent in the provision of additional staff, reduce the SPHE class size, allocate more classes to SPHE and allow time for teachers to plan and reflect on their practice.

### Support and evaluation

The survey results indicate that the SPHE Support Service is the only available support perceived as significant in relation to monitoring the implementation of RSE.

Table 6 How much interest do the following groups take in RSE implementation?

| | Tries to ensure that RSE is implemented | Takes some interest in implementation | Takes no interest in implementation |
|---|---|---|---|
| DES Inspectors | 7.1 | 31.9 | 61.0 |
| Board of Management | 9.0 | 45.2 | 45.8 |
| Parents (individual) | 3.1 | 58.5 | 38.4 |
| Parents' Association | 2.1 | 43.2 | 54.8 |
| SPHE Support Service | 48.6 | 39.9 | 11.6 |

One may legitimately question whether the potential benefits of RSE training for teachers can be fully realized if a large proportion of school personnel believes that the Department of Education and Science has limited interest in what happens with RSE 'on the ground'. Inspection and evaluation are key functions of the inspectorate, which appear to be unsatisfactory in relation to SPHE/RSE at present. Two government-level respondents drew explicit attention to the importance of school inspection of RSE.

> *We have a lack of clarity around the message to schools about RSE if we have ad hoc support and ad hoc in-service. But, in that respect, inspection plays a very important role.*

> Department of Health and Children

> *Another area that I would see needs to be looked at is the whole inspectorate and how RSE is inspected. Inspection can establish whether schools are doing RSE or not and should be an integral part of the inspection system.*

> Crisis Pregnancy Agency

It is significant that the topic of whole-school evaluation was raised only once during the very considerable number of focus groups and interviews conducted within the nine schools selected for case study. Teachers spoke at length of being evaluated by parents, students and by the community, but rarely referenced the inspectorate in this regard. This perceived absence of evaluation on the part of the inspectorate arguably contributes to ambivalence, thereby affecting not only the quality of RSE delivery but, more broadly, the status of SPHE/RSE within schools.

### The views of parents

The focus-group discussions uncovered varying levels of awareness amongst parents about the RSE programme, ranging from those who were completely uninformed to others who were very knowledgeable about the content of the programme. All of the parents interviewed knew that RSE was being taught and a considerable number had been invited to the school to participate in an 'information night' on SPHE and RSE, most commonly when their child was in first year. One group of parents felt the information they received at the meeting arranged by the school, which included information on all subjects for first years, was "very vague". Another group explained that the school had discontinued parent information nights. These parents felt strongly that they need opportunities to access information on RSE: "There isn't any other way of being aware, really, other than an information night." Parents in two other schools stated that they had received no communication from the school on the matter of RSE.

The pressure of parents' own working and personal lives, coupled with possible embarrassment or discomfort with discussing RSE, appeared to impact on their willingness or ability to request clarification on what is taught in the area of relationships and sexuality. Many parents felt that asking their children what was taught was unsatisfactory, due in part to the embarrassment such questioning might create and/or because teenagers – and boys in particular – tended not to volunteer detailed information on what precisely happens at school:

> *Lads are a bit scrappy with the information - you have to drag it out of them, you know; they're not inclined to tell you very much - just snippets you get here and there.*

<div align="right">Parent, School 4</div>

Many felt that schools needed to do more to involve parents and to inform them about RSE. On the other hand, parents in some schools were critical of what they perceived as a high level of apathy towards RSE/SPHE on the part of parents:

> *There are meetings, but then again you are only going to get the same people that come to meetings. The likes of us that volunteer to do these things.*

<div align="right">Parent, School 7</div>

> *The information is there, it's in black and white but sometimes parents don't take the time.*

<div align="right">Parent, School 8</div>

While there are apparent difficulties with how communication about RSE takes place between parents and schools, responsibility for these difficulties cannot be attributed to schools alone. Schools may, in fact, face significant challenges in their efforts to involve and communicate with parents. The following suggestion was advanced by one parent as a possible means of overcoming some of the communication problems between parents and schools:

> *Any help you can get would be useful because it is an embarrassing subject to discuss with your child. Any help with how to approach it and how to portray it with young people, I certainly would say. And maybe if we got a small booklet or one sheet of paper from the school with all of the topics that they are going to discuss within the SPHE or something. So that even parents who don't attend meetings get this information.*

<div align="right">Parent, School 2</div>

There was unanimous agreement among parents about the importance of RSE. The position of parents on this matter can be summarised as follows:

• Young people need accurate knowledge about sex and relationships, and without school-based RSE there is a risk that they will depend on friends and other unreliable knowledge sources.

• Relationships and sexuality are not openly discussed in the homes of all children.

• Young people need skills to enable them to make informed choices and to cope with peer pressure.

• RSE addresses a range of issues that affect the lives of young people (e.g. puberty, emotional issues, romantic relationships and so on).

However, despite this open acknowledgement of RSE's importance, some parents admitted that they themselves often prioritise academic performance over non-examination subjects such as SPHE:

> *I think a lot of the time we forget about the SPHE side of things. You think of getting your kid in there and getting the studying done, you know, getting on well in subjects for the exams.*

<div align="right">Parent, School 3</div>

Parents viewed the home as the most appropriate place to teach students about relationships and sexuality but they also recognised that not all children received home-based sexuality education. Many also felt that there were many advantages to children learning about relationships and sexuality in the company of their peers under the guidance of trained teachers and facilitators. Indeed, one parent suggested that the majority of parents are likely to feel relief, rather than anxiety, about the school's role in RSE delivery. Overall, there was overwhelming support among parents for school-based sex education. The school's ability to foster a caring environment for students became the central focus of many responses to questions about the perceived effectiveness of RSE teaching. However, parents in only three schools expressed genuine satisfaction with the programme as it is currently delivered. The most frequently cited source of dissatisfaction among parents was the school's lack of adequate communication with them on how RSE was approached.

*The views and experiences of students*

As *Pathways Through the Junior Cycle* (Smyth, Dunne, McCoy and Darmody 2006: p. 2) has suggested, capturing the student voice is important, as it "enables policy makers to make school life more meaningful for students and informs opinions among school staff with regard to school development." There was unanimous agreement among students about the importance of RSE. In support of this assertion students referenced the following advantages of school-based sex education:

• The need to have accurate information about sex and relationships.

• The need for teenagers to understand the potential negative consequences of uninformed sexual activity.

• The benefits of learning RSE alongside their peers.

• The fact that schools have a 'captive audience' in students.

Students frequently cited friends and the media as sources of information about sex but were highly critical of the accuracy of these knowledge sources. Many also felt that opportunities to talk about such issues with parents were often limited and, in any case, embarrassing. For a large number, the school created a more neutral 'zone' in which to discuss a range of issues related to sexuality and relationships.

A number of students referred to SPHE/RSE as a 'doss' class. While this term was used derogatorily at times, in most cases this terminology simply reflected the less pressurised, and more discursive, emphasis within RSE and SPHE classes. The vast majority of students claimed to take RSE seriously, although they were aware that teachers often assumed that this was not the case. Hence, although students sometimes described SPHE and RSE classes as a "doss", they did not trivialise, much less discount, the content or value of RSE.

[And the students take it [RSE] seriously?]

S1: *Yeah.*

S2: *Most of them.*

[Even though it's not an exam subject or anything like that?]

S1: *People are more interested because you don't have all the pressure of having to learn [i.e. study] it.*

Junior-cycle students, School 8

Students were anxious to learn from SPHE and RSE and were very receptive to topics and material that are relevant to their lives and experiences. It is worth noting, however, that a large number felt that their parents did not view RSE (or SPHE) as a priority and that they placed by far the greatest emphasis on academic achievement.

*Parents are more focused and more geared towards study … [but] when you finish school, like, you're released into the world and you don't know, you're at a disadvantage.*

Senior-cycle student, School 5

The students interviewed reported very varied experiences of RSE, and inconsistency of RSE delivery emerged as a major theme during group discussions. Some students stated that RSE was not given any attention within SPHE; others reported that relationships were discussed but sexuality was not addressed comprehensively, if at all. In other words, there was a strong perception amongst students that RSE was *selectively addressed.* Overall, strong evidence of inconsistent delivery of RSE emerged from student reports. In the following discussion between students in School 4, for example, students agreed that their only common experience of RSE related to a day-long lesson in first year, which was attended by all students.

[You seem to have different views on what you have actually been taught …?]

S1: *We're all in different classes with different teachers.*

S2: *It's very inconsistent what you're actually taught and what the book …*

S1: *The only thing we have in common is that one day in first year.*

<div align="right">Senior-cycle students, School 4</div>

Similar accounts to the one above emerged from our discussions with students across several schools. Arising from a somewhat similar discussion in School 5, one student suggested a need to 'standardise' RSE:

> *There should be a programme for every teacher, a standard that they all teach … because the way it is now, some stuff doesn't get covered if the teachers think people know about it, you know. And some of the class would and others would have a vague idea of what they're talking about. And they'd move on fairly fast and that wouldn't be covered.*

<div align="right">Senior-cycle student, School 5</div>

It is significant that a number of students had vivid memories of their primary school RSE teaching, which often consisted of a 'one off' day devoted to the topic (usually in fifth or sixth class). Students who had this experience often suggested at they were "too young" at this time to learn about sex, a view which was often followed by an account of the "giddy" or "immature" behaviour of the students. 'Giddy' reactions were, in fact, also commonplace in *second*-level schools where RSE was sporadically addressed and/or ineffective. This finding strongly suggests that the 'one off' approaches to RSE have a negative effect on student responses to the subject[8]. However, not all students had negative experiences of RSE in primary school.

[You all had it (RSE) in primary school?]

S: *Yeah.*

[Did you have a positive view of it then when you started into post-primary-school age or did it make a difference?]

S: *It's kind of a base of knowledge to build on then.*

<div align="right">Senior-cycle student, School 5</div>

---

8 The national RSE programme for primary school can be appropriately described as cumulative, sensitive and holistic, and certainly does not recommend a 'one off', sporadic approach to the topic.

In light of this data, students' experiences of primary school RSE and its subsequent impact on their openness to RSE at second level is an issue worthy of consideration in the recommendations arising from this report.

Students often expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of openness about sex and sexuality within their schools, which they attributed in many cases to the school's Catholic or religious ethos. Much of their commentary on the quality of RSE focused on the demeanour of their teachers, who many claimed were all too often "too closed", "embarrassed" or "not able to handle the class". From a student perspective, the most important teacher qualities for 'good' RSE were comfort with the topic of sexuality, openness, and the ability to encourage trust in pupils. Many students also felt strongly that not all of their teachers were suited to teaching SPHE or RSE:

> *I don't think some teachers would like to teach it anyway. Those that put their names forward are probably the best ones because they obviously feel comfortable teaching it.*

> Senior-cycle student, School 8

Students needed to feel that teachers of RSE could maintain confidentiality and were sufficiently open to allow pupils to discuss personal and/or difficult topics or areas of experience. To a large extent, our data indicate that young people consider that some teachers are not adequately trained or prepared as relationships and sexuality educators. Indeed, students were adept at sensing teachers' apprehension, a situation which in turn inhibits learning:

> [How did you feel about the first (RSE) class you had?]

> *The teacher wasn't [pause] … she didn't feel, do you know what I mean, comfortable because of such a large class and then with a large class she felt quite uncomfortable.*

> Senior-cycle students, School 6

> *There's a big chunk of the book all about sex ed. but the teachers just skip it.*

> Junior-cycle student, School 4

Overall, what students appear to want from the RSE teacher is a safe environment where they can learn, discuss and explore various issues and questions related to sexuality and relationships.

### *The content of RSE: the views of teachers, parents and students*
66% of the study's survey respondents stated that there was a greater need for RSE today than five years ago. Across a range of case-study participants there was also general agreement that the RSE programme needed to deal more explicitly with the topics of safe sex, contraception and condom use, sexually transmitted infections and sexual orientation at junior cycle, certainly by third year. Much of the justification for this stance rested on the perception that a significant proportion of young people may be sexually active by their mid-teenage years.

> *In third year they are well ready for it. I mean, I suppose years ago the Department of Education didn't want to introduce these issues to students too young. But I think society has changed and their experiences have changed. Students, they're very experienced by third year.*

> Teacher

Within many schools, junior-cycle students stated emphatically that it was important for young people to learn about contraception and safe sex, condom use, STIs and sexual orientation at junior cycle. This level of consensus suggests that the junior-cycle RSE curriculum requires review and that consideration needs to be given to the formal incorporation of these topics. While a small number of parents expressed concern that students might interpret information about condom use as consent to have sex, the majority agreed that the topics of contraception and condom use needed to be addressed with junior-cycle students:

*I don't think these issues should be avoided. They're out there; they're in the world. And I do think they should be discussed and then within the context of the home you can talk about the views, your own views, your personal views on all of the issues.*

Parent, School 7

It is interesting that a number of students challenged the view that giving information to young people encourages sexual activity and most believed that several topics, including condom use, need to be dealt with within RSE at an earlier age:

*It's just information, it doesn't have to mean everyone is going away doing it [having sex].*

Senior-cycle student, School 8

S1: *There's not much awareness, though, about, like, what protection, precaution.*

[How to not get pregnant?]

S1: *Yeah, stuff like that, yeah 'cos generally they [adults] say, "Oh don't go off and have sex" and stuff but they don't give you, like, what could happen to you.*

S2: *To protect yourself.*

S1: *They shouldn't be, like, telling them that, 'cos they're going to go off anyway and do it. Should be, like, telling them what to do so they don't get pregnant and don't catch diseases.*

Junior-cycle students, School 4

A number of teachers explained that they covered topics and issues that were not explicitly included in the junior-cycle curriculum in response to the needs of their students:

*Homosexuality is one issue I address now in second year because, you know, I hear it all the time, "He's gay" and all of that stuff. And you can actually see lads that you think, "Yeah, ok, either they are gay or will be", or whatever. And the greatest insult in the school is to call anyone gay. So I always bring up the issue of homosexuality.*

SPHE co-ordinator

While some teachers were satisfied with the current content of RSE at junior cycle, the majority felt strongly that student needs must be met and that this aim was unlikely to be realized by the RSE curriculum as it currently stands. One vice-principal felt strongly that RSE needs to respond realistically to the experiences of young people and that students need access to information that will help them to make informed choices:

> *I think students also need to be informed about the options that are out there, and there's no point in us kind of hiding behind the bushes and saying they're not sexually active. They are. We've had a number of teenage pregnancies. So at least if the kids have the right information, they can then make informed choices.*
>
> Vice-principal

Parents felt strongly that the RSE programme needed to be introduced to students incrementally and sensitively. They were also critical of 'one-off' or sporadic approaches to the teaching of RSE. A number of students also stated that RSE content needed to be presented gradually and then revisited at regular intervals. In many cases, students and parents placed greater emphasis on the *way RSE is approached* than the timing of RSE, *per se.* As one student put it, RSE should be dealt with "when it matters". A large majority of parents felt that the topics of contraception, safe sex and homosexuality needed to be addressed at junior-cycle level. More than anything, parents were clear that schools needed to address, not avoid, the real issues confronting young people in a way that enabled them to deal with the decisions they were likely to face in an informed, comfortable and confident manner. In keeping with this, the focus of one parent's comments on teaching about homosexuality was on openness and acceptance:

> *If they [students] have the opportunity to discuss it … if they're in a classroom with a teacher that they're comfortable with, a person that can draw opinions out of them and that can be discussed in an open forum. Like, you talk about homosexual relationships, I know my very youngest child who's in primary school, she is aware that that 'happens'. It doesn't affect her in any particular way. Rather than hiding things and covering their ears, covering their eyes, it's better that it is discussed.*
>
> Parent, School 6

Although a small number of parents were reluctant to fully endorse open discussion of homosexuality with junior-cycle students, the majority felt that silence around the topic of sexual orientation was both unacceptable and potentially damaging to students. The ambiguity surrounding the topic of homosexuality as it is currently addressed within the RSE curriculum requires attention: some teachers appear to be 'filling the gaps' that exist, while others are uncertain about how precisely to approach the topic. Our discussions with teachers strongly suggest that the Department of Education and Science needs to provide more explicit and transparent guidance on this matter.

Finally, in the context of a changing society, schools need an updated, clear policy statement from the Department of Education and Science on what teachers can address with junior-cycle students. The following account of one school principal provides a useful synopsis of the level of uncertainty that has been generated by the current approach to RSE content:

> *If a principal is going to worry each time they decide to try something new and worry that the Department will not back them, then that makes everything a lot more difficult. And I don't know just how many principals or RSE teachers would be willing to take those steps [to teaching more progressive content].*
>
> Principal

*Recommendations*

The following recommendations for the future development of RSE have been identified following careful consideration of the research findings. These recommendations are targeted in some instances at the Department of Education and Science (DES); others relate to the SPHE Support Service and several are directed specifically at schools. Some of the listed recommendations are relevant to more than one of the relevant stakeholders.

## RSE implementation

- The DES needs to restate to schools the requirement to ensure the full implementation of RSE in the context of SPHE at junior- and senior-cycle levels.

- Full RSE implementation requires the urgent introduction of SPHE at senior-cycle level.

- To address apparent difficulties related to the timetabling and delivery of RSE within SPHE, the DES should issue guidance to schools on what constitutes a broad and balanced RSE programme for junior- and senior-cycle students.

- Renewed efforts to implement RSE fully at post-primary level should be co-ordinated with due regard to current implementation levels and barriers to RSE delivery within second-level schools (as documented in this report). These efforts need also to consider the implementation and effectiveness of RSE at primary level. However, as yet no research has been undertaken on the delivery of RSE within primary schools. This gap in existing research on RSE needs to be addressed by the DES.

## RSE policy development within post-primary schools

- The importance of a written RSE policy statement, developed in consultation with the board of management, teachers, parents and students, needs to be re-iterated to schools in a re-issue of RSE guidelines and materials by the DES to schools (see later recommendations).

- The benefits of the *process* of policy development for RSE implementation and delivery (in terms of providing clarity and generating shared ownership and commitment) need to be re-iterated by the DES to schools.

- Schools need to ensure that their RSE and SPHE policies are used as a basis for the annual and longer-term planning and delivery of SPHE/RSE.

- Schools need to subject their RSE policy to systematic review, and this process should involve all stakeholders in the RSE programme.

- Schools need to be aware of how RSE policy development relates to the obligations of managerial authorities and school leaders with regard to meeting the needs of students as outlined in the Education Act (1998).

- School policy needs to state clearly how school ethos relates to the content and delivery of the RSE programme.

## Teaching, learning and RSE content

- RSE guidelines need to be re-issued by the DES to provide renewed direction to schools and teachers in relation to the delivery of RSE. This should include:

    - A clear statement on the importance of policy development and the obligations of managerial authorities and school leaders with regard to meeting the needs of the student body as outlined in the Education Act (1998).

    - A re-iteration of experiential teaching methods as the most appropriate to the teaching of RSE.

    - Advice on trust, confidentiality and child protection issues in the context of RSE teaching.

- A review needs to be undertaken by the DES of the content of the RSE module within the SPHE curriculum at junior cycle, taking account of equality legislation, the age-appropriate needs of adolescents and the perspectives of teachers, pupils and parents documented in this report.

- A clear and unambiguous statement on RSE content needs to be made by the DES for the benefit of all second-level schools.

- Any future RSE materials issued need to give increased emphasis to the role of formative assessment (i.e. assessment for learning) in the teaching and learning of SPHE/RSE.

## School leadership

- The critical role of school leadership in the implementation and delivery of RSE needs to be addressed by the DES and Support Services and communicated to schools. There is a particular need to engender an appreciation among principals of the significance of RSE/SPHE in young people's development and to promote skills among school leaders that facilitate the effective implementation and delivery of RSE.

- In-service courses for principals need to emphasise:

    - The critical role of the principal and SPHE co-ordinator in RSE implementation

    - The importance of raising the profile/status of SPHE/RSE across the school, in conjunction with guidance on how this status can be established and maintained

    - The importance of a supportive whole-school environment for RSE

    - The significance of timetabling and the release of teachers for RSE training

    - The importance of engaging in a process of consultation with teachers when assigning teachers to teach SPHE/RSE

    - The importance of building an SPHE/RSE team within the school

    - The positive impact of RSE policy development and review.

## RSE teacher training and support services

- The current partnership between the Departments of Education and Science and Health and Children should continue. However, this partnership requires review to ensure greater clarity in relation to roles and responsibilities.

- The support services need to provide a balance between out-of-school in-service training and in-school support in order to ensure the full implementation of RSE/SPHE at individual school level.

- Teachers need formal accreditation and recognition as SPHE teachers. Ways in which teachers can be formally accredited as SPHE teachers need to be identified and implemented by the DES.

- Consideration needs to be given by the DES to the benefits of all post-primary teachers experiencing some training in SPHE/RSE during their pre-service courses.

- Increased levels of teacher in-service training are required, with particular attention to the participation of principals. Current RSE teacher-training courses should be expanded to include:

  - More widespread/frequent in-service training days for RSE.

  - More widespread/frequent whole-school RSE/SPHE in-service provision.

- Consideration should be given to the expansion of the SPHE website to include a forum for discussion for teachers and mechanisms for sharing ideas about good practice within RSE.

## Teacher and in-school support for RSE

- The DES and school management authorities need to consider the following in relation to supporting RSE teachers and overcoming barriers to the implementation of the programme:

  - A reduction of class sizes to facilitate experiential teaching methodologies.

  - The provision of teacher release time to attend RSE training, compile resources and plan for RSE.

- School management authorities and leaders need to consider the following in relation to supporting RSE teachers within their schools:

  - Mechanisms and approaches that promote whole-school support for SPHE/RSE teachers.

  - Increased levels of teacher in-service training need to be co-ordinated alongside a commitment from schools to ensure that teachers are adequately consulted prior to being assigned to RSE/SPHE teaching.

- Additional teaching resource materials (e.g. audio visual material) appropriate to the needs of contemporary young people are required to assist teachers with RSE delivery.

## The use of outside facilitators

- In schools where outside agencies are involved in facilitating RSE, greater care should be taken to ensure that their input is line with school policy. Schools also need to ensure that the work of outside facilitators complements, rather than substitutes, the work of RSE teachers in the school.

- Schools should be encouraged to seek advice from the SPHE Support Service and RSE co-ordinator on assessing the benefits of having an outside facilitator teaching RSE in the school.

- Further research is required on the role of outside agencies in the delivery of school-based RSE. This research needs to address the apparent lack of co-ordination/ standardisation in this area and take account of who is doing this work and how often. Consideration also needs to be given to the content (and emphasis therein) of outside-agency teaching within RSE.

## Evaluation and inspection

- The DES needs to take an active role in evaluating and supporting the implementation of SPHE/RSE in the context of Whole School Evaluation and other inspection.

- The perception among school personnel that the DES takes little interest in the evaluation and inspection of SPHE/RSE at school level is problematic and needs to be addressed by the DES.

- There needs to be on-going evaluation of SPHE/RSE at school level and this should take account of the perspectives of principals, teachers, parents and students.

- Consideration needs to be given by the DES to the conduct of evaluative research on the *effectiveness* of school-based SPHE/RSE in Ireland.

## Parent and student involvement

- Parents need to be given clear information on RSE school policy and on the content of the SPHE/RSE programme.

- The views and experiences of students need to be systematically taken into account in developing and reviewing RSE policy and in maintaining consistency of RSE teaching at school level.

## Gender issues

- Special attention needs to be given by the DES and Support Services to the full implementation of SPHE/RSE in schools serving mainly boys.

- Schools need to ensure that the team of teachers teaching SPHE/RSE represents an appropriate gender balance.

## Student specific or special needs

- There is a particular need to develop an RSE programme that caters for specific groups of children and young people including sexual minority youth, early school leavers and students with learning disabilities.

- There is a need to develop appropriate teaching resources and materials to cater for students with specific needs within SPHE/RSE. These resources need to reflect the needs of various groups, including children from diverse (ethnic, linguistic and/or religious) backgrounds.

*References*

Alldred, P., David, M.E., & Smith, P. (2003) Teachers' views of teaching sex education: pedagogy and models of delivery. *Journal of Educational Enquiry,* 4 (1): 80-96.

Bonner, C. (1996) *A Report on the Sexual Practices of 16-18 Year Olds in the Midland Health Board.* Department of Public Health, Midland Health Board.

Burtenshaw, R. (2003) *Report from the Review of Social, Personal and Health Education at Junior Cycle by the SPHE Support Service Post-Primary.* http://www.sphe.ie/review2.pdf

Coleman, L.M. & Ingham, R. (1999) Exploring young people's difficulties in talking about contraception: how can we encourage more discussion between partners? *Health Education Research,* 14, 6, 741-750.

Department of Education (1995a) *Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality Education.* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education (1995b) *Relationships and Sexuality Education.* Circular 2/95 to Boards of Management and principals of National Schools. Athlone: Department of Education.

Department of Education (1997) Relationships and Sexuality Education: *Policy Guidelines.* Dublin: Department of Education.

Department of Education and Science (1998a) *Resource Materials for Relationships and Sexuality Education, Post-Primary: Junior Cycle.* Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

Department of Education and Science (1998b) *Resource Materials for Relationships and Sexuality Education, Post-Primary: Senior Cycle.* Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

Department of Education and Science (2000a) J*unior Cycle, Social, Personal and Health Education.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2000b) *Circular M22/00.* Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

Dunne, M., Seery, D., O'Mahoney, E. & Grogan, M. (1997) *What On Earth are they Doing?* Cork: Cork AIDS Alliance.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2004) Five misunderstandings about case-study research. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium & D. Silverman (eds.) *Qualitative Research Practice.* London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. pp. 420-434.

Geary, and Mannix McNamara (2003) *Implementation of Social, Personal and Health Education at Junior Cycle.* University of Limerick. Report commissioned by the SPHE Support Service.

Hyde, A. & Howlett, E. (2004) *Understanding Teenage Sexuality in Ireland.* Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

Inglis, T. (1998a) *Lessons in Irish Sexuality.* Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Inglis, T. (1998b) *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland.* Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Irish Family Planning Association (1997) *A Young Peoples' Health Service for Dublin: Research, Recommendations and Proposals.* Dublin: Irish Family Planning Association.

Kiely, E. (2005) Where is the discourse of desire? Deconstructing the Irish Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) resource materials. *Irish Educational Studies,* 24, 2-3, 253-266.

Looney, A. and Morgan, M. (2001) A Gendered Curriculum? An investigation of Some Aspects of Curriculum Provision in Post Primary Schools. *Irish Educational Studies,* 20, Spring, Dublin: Educational Studies Association of Ireland.

Lowden, K. & Powney, J. (1996) *An Evolving Sexual Health Education Programme: From Health Workers to Teachers.* Glasgow: The Scottish Council for Research in Education.

MacHale, E. & Newell, J. (1997) Sexual behaviour and sex education in Irish school-going teenagers. *International Journal of STD & AIDS*, 8, 196-200.

Mahon, E., Conlon, C. & Dillon, L. (1998) *Women & Crisis Pregnancy.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Mayock, P. & Byrne, T. (2004) *A Study of Sexual Health Issues, Attitudes and Behaviours: The Views of Early School Leavers.* Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

Mayock, P., Kitching, K. and Morgan, M. (2007) *RSE in the Context of SPHE: An Assessment of the Challenges to Full Implementation of the Programme in Post-Primary Schools.* Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

Measor, L., Tiffin, C. & Miller, K. (2000) Y*oung People's Views on Sex Education: Education, Attitudes and Behaviour.* London: Routledge Falmer.

Millar, D. (2003) *Preliminary Review of the SPHE Needs Analysis Survey (2000-2001).* http://www.sphe.ie/review4.pdf

Morgan, M. (2000) *Relationships and Sexuality Education: An Evaluation and Review of Implementation.* Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

Murphy-Lawless, J., Oaks, L. & Brady, C. (2004) *Understanding How Sexually Active Women Think About Fertility, Sex and Motherhood.* Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (1997a) *Relationship and Sexuality Education: Interim Curriculum and Guidelines for Primary Schools.* Dublin: Department of Education.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (1997b) *Relationship and Sexuality Education: Interim Curriculum and Guidelines for Post-primary Schools.* Dublin: Department of Education.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2001) *Social, Personal and Health Education: Junior Certificate Guidelines for Teachers.* Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2005) *Social, Personal and Health Education: Draft Curriculum Framework for Consultation.* Available from NCCA web site, www.ncca.ie. Last accessed 02/05/2006.

Norman, J., Galvin, M. and McNamara, G. (2006) *Straight Talk : Researching gay & lesbian issues in the school curriculum.* Dublin: Centre for Educational Evaluation, DCU.

North Western Health Board (2004) A Little Bit of Respect: *Sexual Health: A Consultation with Young People, Parents and Professionals in the North West.*

Rolston, B., Schubotz, D., & Simpson, A. (2005) Sex education in Northern Ireland schools: a critical evaluation. *Sex Education,* 5, 3, 217-234.

Rundle, K., Leigh, C., McGee, H. & Layte, R. (2004) *Irish Contraception and Crisis Pregnancy (ICCP) Study: A Survey of the General Population.* Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

Sheerin, E. (1998) Life As It Is: *Values, Attitudes and Norms from the Perspective of Midland's Youth.* Midland Health Board.

Smyth, E., Dunne, A., McCoy, S. and Darmody, M. (2006) *Pathways Through the Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second Year Students.* Dublin: The Liffey Press in Association with The Economic and Social Research Institute.

SPHE Support Service (no date) *The SPHE Story: An Example of Incremental Change in the School Setting.* Dublin: Social, Personal and Health Education Support Service, Post-primary.

SPHE Support Service web site; http//:www.sphe.ie.

Spillane, J. (1998) State Policy and the Non Monolithic Nature of the Local School District: Organisational and Professional Considerations. *American Educational Research Journal,* 35,1, 33-63.

Spillane, J., Reiser, J. and Reimer, T. (2002) Policy Implementation and Cognition: Reframing and Refocusing Implementation Research. *Review of Educational Research,* 72, 3, 387-431.

UNAIDS (1997) *Impact of HIV and Sexual Health Education on the Sexual Behaviour of Young People.* Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.

Wight, D. & Scott, S. (1994) *Mandates and Constraints on Sex Education in the East of Scotland. Glasgow:* MRC Social & Public Health Sciences Unit.

Young, I. (2004) Exploring the role of schools in sexual health promotion. In E. Burtney & M. Duffy (eds.) *Young People and Sexual Health: Individual, Social and Policy Contexts*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 172-189.

*Oideachas Caidrimh agus Gnéasachta i gcomhthéacs Oideachas Sóisialta, Pearsanta agus Sláinte: Measúnú ar na dúshláin a bhaineann le feidhmiú iomlán an chláir i scoileanna iar-bhunscoile.*