

*Relationships and
Sexuality Education (RSE)
in the Context of Social,
Personal and Health Education (SPHE):*

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

*Paula Mayock
Karl Kitching
Mark Morgan*

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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 is 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.

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We want to thank our Advisory Committee members (listed below) who assisted in various ways with the planning and conduct of the study and who provided valuable feedback on earlier drafts of the study's findings. Special thanks to Máirín O Sullivan, Frances Shearer, Janet Gaynor, John Lahiff and Sharon Foley who were also participants in the study.

Finally, a number of individual assisted us at various stages of the data collection process. We would like to thank Bernie Collins, Mary Irving, Anna Fiona Keogh, Mary Louise Corr and Kay Garvey for their assistance with the conduct of interviews and focus group discussions.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the sponsors.

Table of Contents

Section I

Literature Review and Research Methodology

Chapter 1

The contemporary context of school-based relationships and sexuality education.....	16
1.1 The sexual behaviour of young people: international & Irish research.....	16
1.2 Sexual knowledge and sexual risk behaviour.....	18
1.3 The school as a site for the delivery of sex education.....	20

Chapter 2

Relationships and sexuality education in Ireland.....	22
2.1 The introduction of RSE in Ireland.....	22
2.2 The content and organisation of RSE.....	24
2.2.1 The content of RSE.....	25
2.2.2 RSE within SPHE.....	27
2.2.3 Whole-school approach/supportive school environment.....	28
2.2.4 Partnership.....	30
2.2.5 Teacher as facilitator.....	30
2.3 RSE policy guidelines.....	30
2.4 Landmarks in the introduction and early development of RSE.....	32
2.5 The implementation of RSE: key developments and progress.....	33
2.6 Research on school innovation and change.....	36
2.6.1 Individual perspective.....	36
2.6.2 Organisational perspectives.....	38
2.6.3 Leadership and change.....	39
2.6.4 Implications for RSE implementation.....	40
2.7 Young people's experiences of school-based sex education.....	41
2.8 Conclusion.....	42

Chapter 3

Research methodology.....	43
3.1 The study aims.....	43
3.2 Study design.....	43
3.3 Stage 1: Methodology of quantitative study (survey).....	45
3.3.1 Aims.....	45
3.3.2 Sample.....	45
3.3.3 Response rate.....	45
3.3.4 Achieved sample.....	45
3.3.5 Questionnaire.....	49
3.4 Stage 2: Qualitative interviews: government, national and regional informants.....	50
3.5 Stage 3: Case study of individual schools.....	51
3.5.1 Selection of schools.....	52
3.5.2 Research instruments.....	52
3.5.3 School sample.....	53
3.6 Stage 4: Interviews with outside facilitators.....	55
3.7 Procedural and ethical issues.....	55
3.8 Data analysis.....	56
3.8.1 Analysis of survey data.....	56
3.8.2 Analysis of qualitative data.....	56
3.9 Reporting the research findings.....	57
3.10 Layout of the report.....	57

Section II

Findings from the Survey Questionnaire

Chapter 4

Survey results	60
4.1 RSE policy statement.....	61
4.2 Context of implementation.....	64
4.3 Overall implementation of RSE.....	66
4.4 Emphasis on areas of RSE.....	67
4.5 Involvement of school and outside personnel.....	68
4.6 Perception of SPHE guidelines.....	69
4.7 Response of students and teachers to RSE	70
4.8 Support and evaluation of RSE implementation.....	71
4.9 Factors inhibiting implementation of RSE	71
4.10 Help and support for RSE.....	74
4.11 The future of RSE.....	76
4.12 Patterns of response and implementation in different kinds of schools	78
4.12.1 Schools designated disadvantaged and other schools	78
4.12.2 Type of community served by school.....	82
4.12.3 School size.....	85
4.13 Presence of an SPHE co-ordinator	88
4.14 Completion of questionnaire	90
4.15 Conclusions 1: Overall findings.....	92
4.16 Conclusions 2: Differences between schools.....	93

Section III

RSE Implementation: The Perspectives of Government, National and Regional Respondents

Chapter 5

The introduction of RSE and early policy developments	96
5.1 Relationships and sexuality education: the early days.....	96
5.2 The value of RSE.....	104
5.3 Summary and conclusion.....	110

Chapter 6

RSE implementation, policy development and support services	112
6.1 Perceptions of current implementation levels.....	112
6.2 RSE policy development and policy implementation within post-primary schools.....	116
6.3 School ethos	119
6.4 The partnership.....	122
6.5 In-service training and other supports.....	125
6.6 Summary and conclusion.....	129

Chapter 7

The school and RSE	131
7.1 Curricular status, interpretation and implementation.....	131
7.2 RSE teaching; professional concerns and the role of outside facilitators	135
7.3 Whole-school approach/supportive school environment	140
7.4 Summary and conclusion.....	144

Section IV

Case Study of Individual Schools

Chapter 8

RSE within the schools: policy, practice and the teaching of RSE	148
8.1 Profile of participating schools.....	148
8.2 RSE within the schools: an overview.....	149
8.3 A comparative analysis of RSE within two schools.....	150
8.3.1 The co-ordination of SPHE.....	151
8.3.2 The status of SPHE/RSE.....	151
8.3.3 Teacher comfort.....	152
8.4 Towards an understanding of RSE implementation within post-primary schools.....	153
8.4.1 RSE policy	153
8.4.2 The commitment of the school principal	154
8.5 RSE policy development and implementation.....	157
8.6 The status of SPHE/RSE.....	162
8.7 Classroom delivery of the SPHE/RSE curriculum.....	166
8.7.1 Teacher selection	166
8.7.2 Teacher comfort	169
8.7.3 School ethos	170
8.7.4 Teaching using experiential or active learning methodologies.....	172
8.7.5 The use of outside facilitators	174
8.7.6 Training, programme content and teaching resources	176
8.8 Summary and conclusion.....	184

Chapter 9

High-level implementation of RSE: a case study	189
9.1 School background	189
9.2 Stage I: Effective leadership.....	191
9.2.1 The principal and the SPHE co-ordinator.....	191
9.3 Stage II: Whole-school support	193
9.3.1 Policy development, initial implementation and programme content	193
9.3.2 Teacher training	195
9.3.3 Timetabling, resourcing and outside facilitators	197
9.3.4 Student and parental involvement	198
9.4 Conclusion.....	199

Chapter 10

The views of parents and students	201
10.1 The views of parents.....	201
10.1.1 Awareness of the RSE programme.....	201
10.1.2 The importance of school-based RSE.....	204
10.1.3 Views on RSE programme delivery and programme content	206
10.2 The views of students.....	209
10.2.1 The value of RSE	209
10.2.2 Experience of RSE	212
10.2.3 Teachers and RSE	214
10.2.4 The timing and content of RSE	217
10.3 Summary and conclusion.....	224

Section V

Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 11

Summary and conclusions	228
11.1 RSE implementation levels.....	229
11.2 Facilitators of RSE implementation.....	230
11.2.1 RSE policy: development and implementation	230
11.2.2 School leadership	231
11.2.3 Outside facilitators	232
11.2.4 Support services and teacher training	232
11.2.5 Supportive whole-school environment	233
11.3 Barriers to RSE implementation.....	233
11.3.1 Curricular and time constraints.....	233
11.3.2 SPHE status and perceptions of RSE	234
11.3.3 Teacher comfort with RSE	234
11.3.4 Discrepancies in training	235
11.3.5 Teacher selection.....	236
11.4 Other factors and processes that impact on RSE delivery in post-primary schools.....	236
11.4.1 School ethos.....	236
11.4.2 Resources.....	237
11.4.3 Perceived lack of commitment from the Department of Education and Science	237
11.4.4 Support and evaluation	238
11.5 The views of parents.....	238
11.6 The views and experiences of students.....	240
11.7 The content of RSE: the views of teachers, parents and students.....	241

Chapter 12

Recommendations.....	243
References.....	250
Appendix.....	259

List of tables

Table 3.1	Types of post-primary schools participating	46
Table 3.2	Comparison of participating schools with sampling frame (list of recognised post-primary schools of DES).....	47
Table 3.3	Size of schools participating.....	47
Table 3.4	Schools designated disadvantaged and other post-primary schools	48
Table 3.5	Perceived percentage of children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in post-primary schools.....	48
Table 3.6	Community served by school.....	49
Table 3.7	Government, national and regional informants.....	51
Table 3.8	Number and range of participants within schools.....	54
Table 4.1	Policy development in relation to RSE.....	61
Table 4.2	Policy development in different kinds of post-primary schools.....	62
Table 4.3	Process of developing RSE policy	63
Table 4.4	Organisation of RSE in post-primary schools.....	64
Table 4.5	Number of class periods in RSE in a year.....	65
Table 4.6	Number of class periods in RSE in a year in different types of post-primary schools	66
Table 4.7	Implementation in different kinds of post-primary schools.....	67
Table 4.8	Emphasis on topics in RSE.....	68
Table 4.9	Involvement of post-primary schools and outside facilitators in RSE.....	69
Table 4.10	Usefulness of DES guidelines.....	69
Table 4.11	Response of post-primary students to RSE programme (perception of teachers).....	70
Table 4.12	Challenge of RSE programme to post-primary teachers compared to other features of SPHE.....	70
Table 4.13	Evaluation of implementation of RSE.....	71
Table 4.14	Perceived importance of various factors in preventing full implementation of RSE in post-primary schools	73
Table 4.15	Perceived support of parents for RSE	74
Table 4.16	Extent to which SPHE context helps implementation of RSE	75
Table 4.17	Extent to which implementation of RSE has changed in post-primary schools.....	75
Table 4.18	Perceived need for RSE in post-primary schools	76
Table 4.19	Non-examination subjects on the timetable	77
Table 4.20	Factors helpful in the implementation of the RSE programme in post primary schools.....	78
Table 4.21	Policy development in relation to RSE.....	79
Table 4.22	Perceived challenge of RSE programme to teachers compared to other features of SPHE in disadvantaged and other post-primary schools.....	79
Table 4.23	Discomfort of some teachers as a factor in implementation of RSE: breakdown of disadvantaged and other post-primary schools.....	80
Table 4.24	The 'overcrowded curriculum' as a factor in implementation of RSE: breakdown of disadvantaged and other post-primary schools	80
Table 4.25	Involvement of post-primary schools and outside facilitators in RSE.....	81
Table 4.26	Perceived support of parents for RSE: breakdown for disadvantaged and other post-primary schools	81
Table 4.27	Perceived need for RSE in schools in disadvantaged and other post-primary schools.....	82
Table 4.28	Policy development in relation to RSE in post-primary schools serving different communities	83
Table 4.29	Involvement of schools and outside facilitators in RSE in post-primary schools serving different kinds of communities	83
Table 4.30	Emphasis on biological aspects of reproduction in RSE in post-primary schools serving different kinds of communities.....	84

Table 4.31	Emphasis on 'relationships' in RSE in post-primary schools serving different kinds of communities.....	84
Table 4.32	Extent to which implementation of RSE has changed in post-primary schools serving different kinds of communities.....	85
Table 4.33	Perceived need for RSE in post-primary schools serving different kinds of communities	85
Table 4.34	Policy development in relation to RSE in post-primary schools of different sizes	86
Table 4.35	Involvement of schools and outside facilitators in RSE in post-primary schools of different sizes.....	87
Table 4.36	Extent to which implementation of RSE has changed in post-primary schools of different sizes.....	87
Table 4.37	Policy development in relation to RSE in post-primary schools with and without an SPHE co-ordinator	88
Table 4.38	Involvement of schools and outside facilitators in RSE in post-primary schools with and without an SPHE co-ordinator.....	89
Table 4.39	Extent to which implementation of RSE has changed in post-primary schools with and without an SPHE co-ordinator.....	89
Table 4.40	Policy development in relation to RSE in post-primary schools, related to person completing questionnaire.....	90
Table 4.41	Involvement of post-primary schools and outside facilitators in RSE, related to person completing questionnaire.....	91
Table 4.42	Extent to which implementation of RSE has changed, related to person completing questionnaire.....	91
Table 8.1	Summary of RSE delivery within the nine post-primary schools.....	149
Table 8.2	Continuum of implementation/delivery of RSE in post-primary schools	155

List of figures

Figure 3.1	Study design.....	44
Figure 9.1	A model of effective RSE implementation	190

Section I

*Literature Review and
Research Methodology*

Chapter 1

The contemporary context of school-based 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.

This chapter documents the contemporary context of relationships and sexuality education by briefly reviewing Irish and international research on adolescent sexual behaviour and sexual health. It also discusses the merits of the school as a site for the delivery of sex education.

1.1 The sexual behaviour of young people: international & Irish research

In Ireland, we rely on a relatively small number of studies for information and insight into the sexual behaviour of young people. Although a dearth of research on adolescent sexual behaviour at national level precludes a complete picture of Irish teenage sexuality, available regional and area-based studies help to provide valuable information on levels of teenage sexual activity and they also tell us a great deal about young people's attitudes to and beliefs about sex and sexual relationships.

In 1994, a study of the sexual behaviour of school-going teenagers in city, town and rural localities (based on a survey administered in 43 schools throughout Galway City and County) found that 21% of the 15-18 year old respondents had had sexual intercourse (MacHale & Newell 1997). The mean age of first sex was 15.5 years and boys were more than twice as likely as girls to state that they were sexually active. No gender differences emerged in the reported age of first sex. Bonner's (1996) survey of health-related behaviour – including the sexual behaviour – of 16-18 year olds attending 12 randomly selected post-primary schools in the Midland Health Board region indicated that 32% of the young people were sexually active. Again, males in this age group (38%) were significantly more likely than females (26%) to have had sexual intercourse, and 75% of all those who were sexually active had first sex between the age of 15 and 17 years. Using a combination of self-completion questionnaires and

¹ 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>

focus-group discussions, Dunne, Seery, O'Mahony & Grogan (1997) investigated young people's knowledge, values and practices in relation to sexuality, AIDS and alcohol and drug use on behalf of Cork AIDS Alliance. Questionnaires were distributed to approximately 800 young people between 15 and 24 years in Cork city. Focus-group discussions – three with early school leavers and one with young people of mixed social background – were also conducted. In the 15-17 year age group, 30% of young women and 45% of young men had had sexual intercourse; these figures rose to 45% for women and 61% for men by the age of 24. 22% of all female and 32% of all male respondents had first sexual intercourse by the age of 16. All of these area-specific studies were conducted outside of Dublin city during the mid-to late 1990s. A more recent and smaller-scale qualitative study of sexual health issues, attitudes and beliefs of early school leavers from both Dublin and provincial localities (Mayock & Byrne 2004) found that almost 60% of the forty 13-18 year olds interviewed were sexually active, with young men more likely than young women to state that they had had first sexual intercourse. For the vast majority of the young people interviewed individually for the purpose of the study, first sex was not planned and it frequently came about unexpectedly in the context of a 'one-night-stand' situation. Compared to the young men interviewed, far fewer of the young women portrayed first sexual intercourse as a positive experience and several described feelings of panic, fear, disappointment or regret.

Qualitative research in Ireland provides important information about young people's attitudes to sex, intimacy and sexual relationships. In a study that placed particular emphasis on the lifestyles of marginalised youth, Sheerin (1998) investigated tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use, as well as a range of issues related to mental and sexual health among young people living in the Midland area. While this research did not question young people about their own sexual behaviour, focus-group data uncovered a strong perception among participants that many of their peers were sexually active and the majority believed that young people have first sexual intercourse between the ages of 14 and 16 years. Concern was expressed, in light of this finding, about the risk of teenage conformity to what is perceived as 'normal' or acceptable among peers. Similarly, a recent study of post-primary school students' perspectives on sexuality, sex education and the factors that influence their sexual knowledge and behaviour (Hyde & Howlett 2004) revealed a general consensus among participants that young people having sex was 'no big deal' or 'normal'. It is also significant that for the teenagers in this study Catholic Church doctrine appeared to have very little influence in regulating and maintaining norms around sexuality.

To summarise, available Irish studies suggest 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. This figure may be higher for specific groups of young people such as early school leavers (Mayock & 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). In the UK, the average age for first sexual intercourse has been declining and currently stands at 16 years for both males and females (Wellings, Nanchahal, Macdowall et al. 2001). Furthermore, the proportion of young people reporting sexual activity before the age of 16 has increased, particularly among young women (Wellings, Field, Johnson et al. 1994, Wellings et al. 2001). Wellings (1996) has identified the following major changes in the sexual attitudes and lifestyles of young people in the past 30-40 years in the UK:

- a progressive reduction in the age at which sexual intercourse takes place
- a decrease in the time period between first sexual experience and first intercourse
- an increase in the number of young people who have sexual intercourse before the age of 16 years
- premarital sex as the norm for both men and women
- gender convergence in the average age at first sexual intercourse.

It is difficult, in the absence of routinely gathered population-level data on adolescent sexual behaviour, to assess whether the age of first sex has been declining in Ireland, although this is likely to be the case. For example, Ireland's first general-population survey of attitudes, knowledge and experience of contraception, crisis pregnancy and related services (Rundle, Leigh, McGee & Layte 2004) revealed that the age of first sex decreased for both men and women from older to younger age cohorts (that is, from year of birth 1956-60 and 1981-85, respectively). Recent research on young people's sexual attitudes certainly indicates a belief among some teenagers that sexual debut occurs for many young people during their teenage years (Hyde & Howlett 2004, Mayock & Byrne 2004).

1.2 Sexual knowledge and sexual risk behaviour

Low levels of knowledge and lack of information among teenagers about reproductive physiology, contraception, sexually transmitted infections and sexuality are a worldwide phenomenon, and available research confirms that Ireland is no exception. Irish studies have repeatedly drawn attention to inadequate knowledge and understanding of sexual health issues among young people (Dunne et al. 1997, Irish Family Planning Association 1997, Sheerin 1998). Sheerin's (1998) research, for example, demonstrated what the author described as "a major lack of awareness among young people about contraception" (Sheerin 1998: 33); many did not know the meaning of the word 'contraception' and had only limited knowledge of different forms of contraception. Mayock & Byrne's (2004) study of early school leavers found great diversity in the range and quality of young people's sexual knowledge and in the perceived value of the individual knowledge sources (peers, home, school, the media) available to them. In general, there were significant gaps in young people's sexual knowledge, and evidence of misinformation or incomplete knowledge was particularly strong among the study's young men. In relation to young people's knowledge of contraception, Hyde & Howlett (2004) reported that young men in particular indicated that they would like more information about actually using condoms. Young men also reported a lack of settings or situations where they felt comfortable and able to access knowledge about condoms.

Irish studies also reveal relatively high levels of sexual risk-taking and non-compliance with safe-sex practices among teenagers and young adults. Bonner's (1996) survey of 16-18 year old post-primary pupils who were sexually active indicated that 82% claimed to use contraception. However, a smaller number (70%) reported using contraception on the occasion of first sex. MacHale & Newell's (1997) survey found that 72% of both boys and girls used a condom at first sexual intercourse. However, only 66.6% stated that they always used condoms and 33.4% said that they used them only 'sometimes' or 'never'. Condom use was relatively high in Dunne et al.'s (1997) study, which included early school leavers, but lower than that reported by MacHale & Newell (1997). While 77% reported using a contraceptive on their last occasion of sexual intercourse, 41% of men and 45% of women in the 15-24 year age group did not use a condom at last intercourse. Finally, Mayock & Byrne's (2004) qualitative study of early school leavers found that only just over half of those young people who were sexually active used a

condom or other form of contraception at first intercourse. While a large number reported becoming more risk aware as they gained experience and later adopted a more consistent approach to condom use, a considerable number continued to engage in unprotected sex for some time subsequent to first sex.

The factors associated with inconsistent use of condoms and non-conformity to safe-sex practices are complex and multi-faceted. For example, some Irish studies have found that embarrassment about purchasing condoms – and anxieties about buying condoms locally – can act as barriers to accessing and using condoms (Dunne et al. 1997, Mayock & Byrne 2004). Alcohol use and intoxication have been demonstrated to influence sexual behaviour, leading to non-conformity to safe-sex practices in some cases (Powell, Dockeray & Swaine 1982, Fitzpatrick, McKenna & Hone 1992, MacHale & Newell 1997, Mahon, Conlon & Dillon 1998). There is also a range of complex social barriers to conformity to safe-sex practices. Constructs of masculinity and femininity have a profound impact on sexual attitudes and behaviour (Hyde & Howlett 2004) and on the social meanings young men and women attach to sex and contraception (Mayock & Byrne 2004). Both Irish and international research suggests that issues of reputation and peer appraisal are particularly important within the groups in which young people interact, the same groups through which they learn a lot (not always accurately) about sex. The fact that much interaction is within same-sex groups (especially prior to first sexual activity with others) is significant, since this promotes gender-specific understandings of issues relating to sex and relationships and gives rise to differences between boys' and girls' understandings. Once sexual activity has begun, these gendered perspectives continue to have an important influence, shaping expectations and impacting on young people's views of what is important and appropriate with regard to sex and relationships. Social and cultural norms and beliefs impact strongly on young people's sexual practices and, in particular, on their willingness to carry condoms. For example, many young women perceive carrying condoms as a risk because it implies that they are interested in or prepared for sex (Hyde & Howlett 2004, Mahon et al. 1998). In other words, having a condom on one's person carries strong connotations of promiscuity, representing a potential threat to an otherwise 'good' or reputable identity as a feminine woman (Mayock & Byrne 2004). Young people also experience difficulty in communicating with their partners prior to sexual intercourse, particularly in 'one-night-stand' situations (Coleman & Ingham 1999, Dunne et al. 1997). A number of recent UK studies suggest that embarrassment, fear of negative reactions, inexperience and lack of communication with sexual partners all militate against young people discussing condom use with both 'steady' and casual sexual partners (Coleman & Ingham 1999, Counterpoint 2001, Stone & Ingham 2002).

Women can be subject to both subtle and overt sexual pressure from men (Holland et al. 1998), and younger women in particular may defer decisions about sexual health to their male partners. It is also claimed that holding conventional beliefs regarding femininity is a barrier to positive sexual health for young women (Tolman 1999, Holland et al. 1998, Hyde & Howlett 2004). It follows that educators need to be aware of the real dilemmas facing young women in their decision-making about sex (Aggleton et al. 1998, Wollett, Marshall & Stenner 1998). Young men are also subjected to social stereotypes and they too have a range of complex issues with which to deal. For example, messages from many sources, including peers, constantly reinforce and perpetuate their need to demonstrate their masculinity, encouraging them to buy into a culture of male sexual competition (Forest 2000). Others claim that young men have no 'script' available to them other than the 'macho' predatory male (Wight 1994, Holland et al. 1998). Dominant expectations about masculinity and manliness place enormous pressures on young heterosexual men, making it difficult for them to demonstrate and express feelings (Aggleton et al. 1998). Both male and female stereotyping are embodied in social

norms and reinforced through various structures within society, including the media, the home and educational settings; they have a direct impact on the sexual behaviour of young people, affecting their ability to negotiate sexual activity that is acceptable, desired and healthy.

The influences on young people's sexual lives are clearly not restricted to explicit or formal messages about sex; instead, they are embodied in an array of subtle and complex forms of communication. The pursuit of appropriate and effective ways to promote healthy, positive sexual behaviour necessitates engagement with a range of influences, whether they are related to gender or to social positioning. For example, attempts to educate young people about HIV and AIDS prevention may be ineffective and even irrelevant to their practice unless they take account of the gender dimensions which are embedded in sexual relations and which affect both beliefs and practices (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thompson 1992). The delivery of effective and appropriate sex education requires a grasp of the complexity of adolescent sexuality and its connections to gender and identity (Measor, Tiffin & Miller 2000).

1.3 The school as a site for the delivery of sex education

'Sex education' is a term with a wide variety of uses and one which is understood differently in different contexts (e.g. home, school, clinical settings). In many countries, school-based 'sex education' is a shorthand term for a much broader subject of personal and social relationships, sexual health, and education about sexuality and relationships. In Ireland, school-based sex education at post-primary level is called Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and is part of a broader programme of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE).

Young people's sexual health is 'framed' in policy in ways that can shape the issue and serve to maximise or, alternatively, limit the possibilities for change (Bacchi 1999, Tisdall 2002). Like other areas of policy-making, relationships and sexuality education contains within it an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the issues and 'problems'. It is frequently claimed that traditional sex education has been a damage limitation exercise and sex educators have tended to focus their energy on trying to encourage young girls to "keep out of trouble" (Davidson 1996: 20). However, there is now far greater emphasis than in the past on encouraging and supporting young women to think about their own needs in sexual relationships. Despite this, sexual health is still presented as a female-dominated area and boys can be easily sidelined or ignored (Lloyd & Forrest 2001). Young men may therefore be particularly neglected when it comes to access to and potential benefit from sex education.

Many educational programmes focus on problematic aspects of sexual behaviour (e.g. the risk of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections). Indeed, the earlier review of literature highlighted many issues and behaviours that might be viewed as problematic. There is no denying the importance of addressing the range of challenging or potentially problematic realities 'out there'; yet, it is critically important to recognise the normative aspects of young people's sexual behaviour and activity. Sexual health is - and ought to be seen as - an affirmative concept and as one that goes beyond the physical consequences of sexuality to incorporate experiential, psychological, and relational dimensions as well (Aggleton & Campbell 2000, Tolman 1999). The maintenance of good sexual health - in mind and in body - requires confidence, self-awareness, openness and the ability to ask questions. Being sexually healthy is also about young people having the knowledge and confidence to read, understand and navigate the sexual world in which they live.

There is no obvious or 'magic bullet' policy solution to the successful promotion of young people's sexual health (Hosie 2004). Education for relationships and sexuality is clearly a lifelong process. Nonetheless, schools can contribute in very positive ways to the aim of providing young people with information and knowledge and with opportunities for discussion

through primary and secondary education. According to ten Dam (2002), a primary reason for schools to be involved in health education is that they can contribute to identity development and learning to participate in society, which are the main tasks of education. Schools have a number of distinct advantages and strengths as sites for the delivery of education for sexual health and relationships. They include:

- ***Large captive audience:***
Most people attend school between the ages of 5 and 16 years. Unlike service provision or education in community settings, school-based sex education can potentially reach as many young men as young women.
- ***Trained educators:***
While relationships and sexuality education is a particularly sensitive area of ..teaching, teachers are trained facilitators of learning. In general, those who have responsibility for RSE receive specialised training for this purpose.
- ***Cohesive curriculum and links with other topics:***
Since the school has a specialised curriculum, it provides a ready-made setting for the development of a responsive RSE syllabus that is appropriate .to the age and stage of students. Furthermore, the skills developed in the context of RSE are relevant and transferable to other aspects of life and living (e.g. communication and assertiveness skills).
- ***Parental and student support:***
The majority of parents and young people are supportive of the role of schools in the delivery of sex education.

It is, of course, important to recognise that schools never set out to provide the only response to educating children and young people about sex and relationships, and school-based relationships and sexuality education alone is unlikely to change behaviour, given the complex and multifaceted nature of sexuality (Young 2004). Only as part of a broader approach involving parents and other significant influencers can schools work towards providing sexuality education that is appropriate, relevant and responsive to young people's needs. It is also important to recognise that there are limitations to the input of schools in this area. For example, while schools do have the obvious advantage of having access to large numbers of young people, they may not reach a considerable number of pupils who miss out on schooling because of truancy, illness or early school-leaving. In addition, schools are more often than not viewed by pupils as instruments of authority, and, as a consequence, young people may experience difficulty with the issues of confidentiality and disclosure. Finally, many teachers feel ill-equipped to deal with the range of topics that require attention in the context of relationship and sexuality education, and it cannot be assumed that all teachers have the skills to deal with the personal and professional demands of delivering relationships and sexuality education.

High-quality sex education is essential to enable young people to understand their own development and to prepare for the choices and responsibilities in adult life. Schools – despite their limitations – play an important role in the delivery of this education. There is widespread parental support in an Irish context for the provision of sex education in schools (Morgan 2000, North Western Health Board 2004). Recent research also suggests that young people are strongly in favour of classes that deal with relationships, sexuality and sexual health (Hyde & Howlett 2004, Mayock & Byrne 2004).

Chapter 2

Relationships and sexuality education in Ireland

This chapter documents the introduction, development and progress of school-based relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in Ireland. It discusses RSE policy and outlines the structures that have been established to support the implementation of RSE. This chapter also reviews available research on RSE implementation and delivery, examines international research evidence on school innovation and change and considers what is known about how young people view school-based sex education.

2.1 The introduction of RSE in Ireland

Compared to other European countries, the introduction of school-based sexuality education in the Republic of Ireland is relatively recent.² Official recognition of the need for relationships and sexuality education can be linked to a number of key developments and events during the 1980s and 1990s. The advent and spread of AIDS and HIV was of major significance and brought about a shift not only in public awareness of sexually transmitted infections but also in the role that government felt able to play in trying to combat them. More than anything, the AIDS epidemic highlighted the necessity and legitimisation of discussing sexual behaviour in a range of settings, including schools. Revelations about child abuse were also influential in drawing attention to the need to address major gaps in the provision of health education to children of all ages. Confirmed cases of child sexual abuse rose dramatically between 1980 and 1988 (McKeown & Gilligan 1988), and this, combined with strong expressions of concern on the part of health board personnel, led to the development of an educational programme called 'Stay Safe', which was formally introduced into primary schools nationwide in 1991. The aim of the Stay Safe programme is to teach children personal safety skills, particularly in relation to feeling afraid, being bullied and dealing with strangers and inappropriate touches. By the end of 1994, the programme was operating in about half of the primary schools in the country.

² For example, some formal school-based sex education took place in UK schools during the early part of the twentieth century and sex education became firmly established in central government guidance to schools in the 1950s (Pilcher, 2005). Sex education was first introduced to Finnish schools in 1944 and became an official part of the school curriculum in 1976 (Hosie, 2002). In the Netherlands, sex education was gradually introduced from the mid-1970s in secondary schools (vanLoon & Wells, 2003) and, by 1990, 85% of secondary schools had a sex education programme (Kane & Wellings, 1999).

The 1980s and 1990s saw a number of events that drew attention to 'problems' of young sexuality. The tragedy of a 15-year-old schoolgirl, who, along with her newborn baby, died as she gave birth in an open-air grotto at Granard, Co. Longford on January 31st 1984, generated massive media coverage. In April of the same year the body of a newborn baby boy was found on a beach near Cahirciveen in Co. Kerry. This event saw the launch of a major police investigation involving what was claimed as "one of the most comprehensive police investigations into the morals and lifestyles of transgressive, especially single, women who were potentially, or known to be, sexually active" (Inglis 2002: 8). The period between 1993 and 1995 also saw the tragic discovery of four dead newborn babies at outdoor locations where, clearly, they had been abandoned by their young mothers. These devastating events provided the long awaited impetus for the proposed introduction of a school-based relationships and sexuality programme.

Sex education seems to be an inherently problematic area of social policy (Thomson 1994, Measor et al. 2000), and in most countries, including Ireland, there have been difficulties and controversies surrounding its introduction and implementation (Inglis 1998a). At the time RSE was introduced sexual morality was a highly contentious issue in Irish society and, particularly, in Irish education. While the Catholic hierarchy's position was that parents need the help and support of schools with educating their children about sex and sexuality, their writings on school-based sexuality education always noted the imperative that the policy adopted must reflect the school's core values and ethos and that children must be told the truth as defined by the church (see, for example, Education Secretariate of the Archdiocese of Dublin 1981, McNamara 1987).

In 1995 the *Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality Education* (Department of Education 1995a) made a clear case for the introduction of relationships and sexuality education (RSE). This document pointed to the radically changed context of sexuality in Ireland, drawing particular attention to the messages conveyed about sexuality in teenage magazines and in the media generally. Other arguments for the introduction of RSE included the earlier physical maturation of children and increasing evidence of early sexual activity among the young. Attention was also drawn to the need for innovation and change in an era of HIV and AIDS.³ The report recognised the importance of sexual health for individuals and for society at large in its definition of sexuality (Department of Education 1995a: 6):

Sexuality is an integral part of the human personality and has biological, psychological, cultural, social and spiritual dimensions. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to give and receive love, procreation and, in a more general way, the aptitude for forming relationships with others. It is a complex dimension of human life and relationships. A holistic understanding of sexuality will contribute to the development of personal well-being, will enhance personal relationships and will have implications for the family and ultimately for society.

³ The Health Promotion Unit of the Department of Health had, in collaboration with the Department of Education, been actively engaged in promoting safe sex since the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early to mid-1980s. In 1990, an AIDS programme for use in post-primary schools was introduced and seminars about this programme were attended by over 1,500 teachers. The Health Promotion Unit also ran a series of advertisements on television and radio advocating the use of condoms.

The report concluded that sex education was “generally uneven, uncoordinated and sometimes lacking”, and went on to recommend that RSE should be “a required part of the curriculum of each primary and post-primary school, starting at junior primary level” (Department of Education 1995a: 18). The document set out the following aims for RSE:

- To help young people develop healthy friendships and relationships
- To promote an understanding of sexuality
- To promote a healthy attitude to sexuality and to relationships
- To promote knowledge of and respect for reproduction
- To enable young people to develop healthy attitudes and values towards their sexuality in a moral, spiritual and social framework.

The Department of Education announced the introduction of Relationships and Sexuality Education in 1995, when Circular 2/95 was issued to all second-level schools (Department of Education 1995b). A National co-ordinator of RSE was appointed in 1995 and the programme commenced in schools in the autumn of 1997. The Department of Education launched a national initiative aimed at informing parents about RSE during 1996 and 1997.

It is important to note that a number of health education programmes pre-dated the introduction of RSE and the subsequent Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme in post-primary schools. These include 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).

2.2 The content and organisation of RSE

People tend to hold strong views on what should and should not be included on a sex-education curriculum at various stages and ages in a young person's development (Young 2004). Internationally, the legitimacy of teaching about sex and sexuality in schools has been hotly debated and approaches to RSE continue to attract a great deal of controversy. While some favour early and open discussion of different issues related to sexual behaviour and attitudes, others believe that early discussion of sex and sexuality leads to the loss of ‘innocence’ and early sexual experimentation amongst the young. There is also much debate about the teaching of RSE, with some supporting a very factual, information-based approach and others believing in the need to pay more attention to issues related to gender, power and communication, and negotiation skills. These positions, of course, reflect differing moral positions, values and beliefs, as well as various assumptions about what ‘works’ and what is ‘good’ or ‘effective’ sex education.

Approaches to sex education/relationship and sexuality education within schools can be divided into two broad categories: abstinence and comprehensive or abstinence-plus programmes. The fundamental message of abstinence programmes is that sex is only appropriate in the context of an intimate, loving relationship and, more specifically, within marriage. Abstinence programmes teach that sex outside of the context of intimacy or marriage has negative emotional, social and physical consequences; they usually include discussion about values and they aim to foster refusal skills. Despite widespread support for abstinence programmes, particularly in the United States, there is little evidence that abstinence programmes ‘work’ in the sense that they delay sexual activity or reduce teenage pregnancy.

Kirby (1997), for example, found no measurable impact on the initiation of sex, frequency of sex or number of partners in a 12-month follow-up study of one abstinence programme.

Comprehensive programmes, on the other hand, teach that sex is a normal, healthy aspect of life and offer pupils the opportunity to explore and define their values and to develop relationship skills. In general, they aim to delay sexual activity until both partners are ready for sex. This more pragmatic approach accepts that many teenagers may become sexually active and offers teaching about contraception and condom use (Collins et al. 2002). Despite fears and claims to the contrary, there is no evidence that comprehensive or abstinence-plus sexuality and relationships education leads to earlier or increased sexual activity or to higher rates of pregnancy among teenagers (Wellings et al. 1995, UNAIDS 1997, Wight et al. 2002). Furthermore, permission to discuss sex and sexual health issues in an open and positive environment encourages young people to develop the confidence and competencies to move into the realm of sexual relationships without feeling apprehension, fear or shame (Aggleton, Oliver & Rivers 1998). European evidence, particularly from the Netherlands and Scandinavia (where the provision of school-based sex education is well-established), indicates that good RSE contributes to a reduction in teenage pregnancies, particularly if school-based sex education is linked to access to appropriate sexual health services (Meyrick & Swann 1998, Faculty of Public Health Medicine 1995). A recent review of literature investigating the relationship between school-based sex education policies and sexual health-related statistics of young people in four developed countries (the Netherlands, France, Australia and the United States) indicates that those countries with pragmatic and positive government policies (France, Australia and especially the Netherlands) have better sexual health-related statistics than the one country with a primarily abstinence-based policy (the United States) (Weaver, Smith & Kippax 2005).

2.2.1 The content of RSE

The aim of the RSE 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.⁴ Guidelines for the teaching of RSE in both primary and post-primary schools were published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 1997 (NCCA 1997a,b). These guidelines emphasise *relationships* rather than sexuality and outline a curriculum that is clearly oriented toward helping children to develop self-esteem and self-confidence. The need to equip children with the language to enable them to “talk about themselves, their feelings, their development and their relationships with others” receives considerable attention (NCCA 1997a: 7), representing a marked departure from approaches that pronounce the ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ of relationships. 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

⁴ 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.

their personal (family and peer), romantic and sexual relationships. This emphasis on holistic development is evident in the relative absence of a preventive discourse within the *Report of the Expert Advisory Group* (Department of Education 1995a). The emphasis on holistic development is also evident in the manner in which the published resource materials of post-primary schools (Department of Education and Science 1998a,b) privilege an understanding of friendships and relationships, the development of self-awareness and self-esteem, an appreciation of the demands that peer pressure can create, the development of coping skills and an understanding of aspects of sexuality, including sex-role stereotyping and gender.⁵

In a general sense, the programme encourages discussion and reflection linked to people and institutions that influence individuals' understanding of sexuality: family, friends, the state, the church, the media and so on. In other words, as Inglis (1998: 63) points out, there is "a strong liberal dimension to the curriculum".⁶ Equally, however, Inglis (1998) notes that the RSE programme does not deal with a number of 'sensitive' or 'contentious' topics, such as masturbation. While homosexuality is covered in both junior- and senior-cycle programmes, the topic receives relatively little attention compared to other issues and themes. The resource material for junior-cycle RSE published in 1998 (Department of Education and Science 1998a) proposes that the topic of homosexuality be dealt with in the context of one third-year lesson on 'Respect and Tolerance for Difference', and the suggested approach to this lesson seeks to challenge and combat stereotyping. However, drawing attention to the *definition of sex* proposed in the resource materials (Department of Education and Science 1998a: 171),⁷ Kiely (2005: 256-257) argues convincingly that the RSE programme privileges a heterosexual identity. Kiely goes on to suggest that,

'Sex' is narrowly constituted as a single act, presumably that of heterosexual copulation ... All other sexual activities are thus, inherently constructed as non-sexual, as less intimate and accorded lower status.

It is perhaps important to note that the absence of a series of lessons on homosexuality does not preclude discussion and debate on this topic. 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." How these materials and resources are used depends on:

- the school policy on RSE, as drawn up by the staff, principal, parents, board of management
- existing provision for RSE in the school
- the RSE needs within the school, given the school's cultural context
- the on-going evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the school's RSE programme.

⁵ However, Kiley (2005) notes that specific aspects of the RSE programme (e.g. the topic of early sexual activity) construct young people's sexualities as 'problems' through an emphasis on issues such as teenage pregnancy and abortion.

⁶ Prior to the introduction of school-based RSE, the Irish YouthWork Centre and the National Youth Federation produced a document which discussed policy and practice issues in sex education, arguing that a critical approach to sex education is the most empowering for young people (Magee & Bissett, 1995). This document is described by Inglis (1998a) as a rare example of a liberal approach to sex education in an Irish context.

⁷ The following definition of 'sex' is advanced by the Department of Education and Science (1998a: 171): "Sex is a gift, a most sacred act and full sexual intimacy belongs in a totally adult relationship, where there is equal trust, respect, acceptance and understanding of both partners – as in marriage".

It is claimed that the RSE programme, as currently outlined, gives teachers and schools considerable latitude in the selection of what precisely is taught and how (Inglis 1998). In reality, the NCCA *RSE Interim Curriculum Guidelines* (1996) clearly outline the areas and topics that need to be addressed in the delivery of RSE. Schools do have discretion about the resources they use to teach the programme and also have some discretion over the age at which specific topics are taught. All of these elements of RSE delivery should, in fact, be outlined clearly within the written RSE policy statement of individual schools. It is perhaps important to state, in this context, that if schools choose to omit topics or lessons contained within the RSE curriculum, the decision cannot be said to have the official sanction of the Department of Education and Science. Equally, however, if schools are exercising discretion in the delivery of RSE, there is good reason to suggest that students may not have equal opportunities for learning, discussion and debate on at least some aspects of sexuality.

2.2.2 RSE within SPHE

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. *The Report of the Expert Advisory Group* (Department of Education 1995a: 13) states:

Social, Personal and Health Education programmes need to be a core part of the curriculum right through primary and post-primary schooling. The syllabus should be a spiral one, extending in scope each year and revisiting key topics in deeper ways appropriate to the age and stage of development of the pupils. Relationships should be a central part of this programme and Sexuality Education should take place within this context.

However, schools were not advised of the introduction of SPHE into the 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) recommended that one class period per week be allocated to the teaching of SPHE. SPHE is not an examination subject and its introduction did not require the appointment of new teachers per se; rather it operates within the in-service ambit, with teachers being either appointed to, or volunteering for, the role of SPHE teacher. At the time of its introduction in 2000, SPHE was to be phased in over a three-year period. Circular M22/00 also indicated the intention to create a national support service for SPHE from September 2000. The stated aims of SPHE (Department of Education and Science 2000a:4) are:

- To enable the students to develop skills for self-fulfilment and living in communities;
- To promote self-esteem and self-confidence;
- To enable the students to develop a framework for responsible decision-making;
- To provide opportunities for reflection and discussion;
- To promote physical, mental and emotional health and well-being.

The aims of SPHE are ambitious and holistic. The programme places strong emphasis on skills, and the emphasis in the pedagogy is on doing and being. It is, therefore, very pupil centred in orientation. The needs of students are placed centre-stage, and SPHE must be considered in the context of “the changing social and cultural milieu in which they (students) form relationships and make decisions and choices” (Department of Education and Science 2000a: 6).

At the time of writing, the NCCA was in the process of drafting a curriculum framework for SPHE at senior-cycle level. The draft curriculum framework, available for consultation on the NCCA web site (NCCA 2005), has suggested that the SPHE topics addressed at junior-cycle level be revisited at senior cycle, including RSE. RSE is considered as one of five main ‘areas of learning’ at senior cycle, of which the other four are mental health, gender studies, substance abuse and physical activity and nutrition. Again, in the RSE section of this draft curriculum it is suggested that a major emphasis be placed on students’ personal development, self-esteem and relationship skills. In terms of specific sexuality content, the draft guidelines suggest, amongst other issues, that students should understand different methods of contraception and discuss contraception in relation to STIs, specifically understand HIV, critically examine lifestyle choices about sexual activity and develop awareness of and comfort with sexual orientation. The draft curriculum also suggests exploration of the role of the parent, issues of sexual harassment and building a ‘health literacy’ around sexual activity and related issues. It is important to note that it is envisaged in the draft curriculum that a greater amount of time will be allocated to RSE in senior-cycle SPHE than the five or six timetabled periods assigned in the previous RSE guidelines. The amount of time has not as yet been specified.

2.2.3 Whole-school approach/supportive school environment

The *Report of the Expert Advisory Group* (Department of Education 1995a: 16) placed a strong emphasis on the importance of a ‘whole-school approach’ or ‘supportive school environment’ in the delivery of RSE:

The most effective way of delivering a programme is in the context of a supportive school environment which models the aspirations of the programme itself ... A whole school approach, which carries out the task in a positive and constructive manner and which promotes the participation of all members of the school community, carries the greatest likelihood of success.

In keeping with this emphasis, the SPHE guidelines issued by the Department of Education and Science (2000a) emphasise the central role of a supportive school environment. Moreover, the curriculum document lays the responsibility for SPHE on the “whole school” community (Department of Education and Science 2000a: 5). It assumes a whole-school environment in which, “People feel valued; self-esteem is fostered; respect, tolerance and fairness are promoted; there is support for those with difficulties; open communication is the norm; effort is recognised and rewarded; uniqueness and difference are valued; conflict is handled constructively; initiative and creativity are encouraged; social, moral and civic values are promoted.” The principles of “fair play, respect, tolerance and reward must permeate the whole school climate; they cannot be compartmentalised into SPHE” (Department of Education and Science 2000a: 5).⁸

⁸ The published curriculum guidelines and resource materials for RSE and SPHE (Department of Education, 1995a; Department of Education and Science, 1998a,b; Department of Education and Science, 2000a; NCCA, 1997a,b) alternate between the use of terms such as ‘whole school approach’, ‘supportive school environment’, ‘whole school environment’ in their presentation of material on this topic. We will do likewise throughout this report.

In keeping with the recommendation that relationships and sexuality education needs to be delivered within the context of a supportive school environment (World Health Organisation, no date), the SPHE guidelines (Department of Education and Science 2000a) emphasise the value of cross-curricular support for elements of the SPHE programme and for the values and dispositions promoted by SPHE, while maintaining the main focus of the programme on the designated class period for SPHE. The guidelines also stress that all teachers are, in effect, SPHE teachers (Department of Education and Science 2000a: 6), and several aspects of the subject are linked with material covered in other subjects, including the science and home economics curricula (reproduction, nutrition) and English (communication skills). Correspondingly, the support of the school principal, board of management and all teachers is important to the success of the programme. When specifically addressing the benefits of cross-curricular links in the teaching of RSE, the Department of Education and Science (1998a: 9) refers to the value of bringing the area of RSE into the “wider context of the whole school”:

RSE does not take place, at a minimum, six times a year. It should be seen by students and teachers alike as an ongoing part of the students' growth and development and as being relevant to all areas of the students' education.

As stated earlier, the recommended stand-alone time allocation for SPHE is one class period per week, and it is understood that this should be supported across the curriculum. Usually, a number of teachers from across a range of disciplines are assigned to teach SPHE, and it is advocated that one member of the SPHE team takes on the responsibility of co-ordinating the school's SPHE programme.⁹ A School Handbook, published by the SPHE Support Service (2000: 4.1), states that coordination is necessary “to ensure that key elements are taught in a coherent and planned way thus avoiding duplication with the SPHE programme and across other subject areas”. Ideally, the SPHE co-ordinator works to establish and maintain the status of SPHE within the school, to achieve balanced coverage of topics and modules, to identify and access training for teachers and to establish links with parents and guardians and relevant others, both within and outside the school. The role of SPHE co-ordinator is not a post of responsibility, although individual schools may, if they wish, allocate a post of responsibility to SPHE co-ordination.

More recent departmental papers have again referred to the necessity of a whole-school approach; for example, the report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour - entitled School Matters (2005) - recommends that, in order to adopt a consistent approach in terms of student learning and behaviour, school staff should implement policies that are “uniform and consonant with the characteristic spirit of the school” (2005, p. 114). This definition may appear to relate more to the school staff, as opposed to the entire school community. On matters relating to the whole school community, this more recent report again highlights the importance of effective school leadership, teacher effectiveness, the teachers' pastoral role, student involvement, student councils and parental involvement for student learning and behavioural outcomes. The draft SPHE Curriculum for senior cycle (NCCA 2005) has again made reference to the importance of a 'supportive whole-school environment' for the development of SPHE.

⁹ It is important to note that not all schools have an SPHE co-ordinator.

2.2.4 Partnership

SPHE is innovative not simply because of its ideological foundations but also because of the direct link established between schools and local Health Boards (now Health Service Executive (HSE) areas) in the delivery of the programme within post-primary schools. This partnership between the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children and the Health Boards constitutes a significant new relationship, and recognises the way in which SPHE is embedded not just into the school but also into its social, economic, spatial and Health Board region. In the autumn of 2000, ten SPHE regional support teams – corresponding to Health Board areas – were established. Support teams currently comprise one Regional Development Officer (RDO), one or more Health Promotion Officer (HPO), and sometimes one of the latter has a designated school brief. Since the curriculum is quite extensive, a number of Health Board specialists and others in the community are often involved in either in-service support for the training of teachers, or they are invited to speak to pupils in schools. This structure permits local variation and encourages schools to take local needs and issues into account. RSE training is co-ordinated by the SPHE and RSE Support Services.

2.2.5 Teacher as facilitator

Finally, RSE and SPHE are noteworthy in that they require teachers to make a significant shift in teaching methods from the traditional 'chalk and talk' approach to teacher as facilitator of learning, using experiential and active approaches to teaching. When emphasising the need for teaching methods to be child-centred and appropriate to the age and stage of development of the pupil, the Report of the Expert Advisory Group (Department of Education 1995a: 17) stated:

In organising the learning environment the teacher should be careful to create an atmosphere in the classroom which respects the privacy of each individual student and to treat all with due sensitivity and care.

From a pupil perspective, then, learning is experiential and enabling; from a teacher standpoint, teaching requires a high level of commitment, competencies in facilitating and promoting discussion, and the ability to address complex and sensitive issues and topics related to the lives and experiences of young people. In the introduction to the resource materials for RSE at junior cycle (Department of Education and Science 1998a: 7) the role of teacher as facilitator is outlined clearly:

A key factor in the role of the teacher in RSE is the facilitation of experiential learning. 'Teacher talk', although at times necessary, should be kept to a minimum ... Wherever possible, participatory methods are suggested so that students can creatively interact with material, thus learning is ultimately more real and relevant to the students' present and future lives.

This explicit emphasis on group discussion, role play and self-expression requires the teacher to surrender her/his traditional role in order to encourage and facilitate open and honest discussion with and between students.

2.3 RSE policy guidelines

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.

Another key recommendation of the Expert Advisory Group was that school policy statements be devised in consultation with teachers, parents, students and the Board of Management. The Interim Curriculum and Guidelines for both primary and post-primary schools (NCCA 1996a, b) again stressed the importance of collaboration in the development of a school's policy on Relationships and Sexuality Education. This and later documents (Department of Education and Science 2000:5) identify the leadership of the school principal and Board of Management as crucial to the development and implementation of SPHE and RSE policy:

The principal sets the tone for the school; her/his decisions and priorities have a direct impact on whole-school climate. In addition to the leadership given by the principal at a personal and professional level, the priority given to SPHE by a Board of Management in a school plan can be seen as a clear statement of support at policy level.

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 plan for the review and evaluation of the programme.

The procedures to which schools are expected to adhere in developing an RSE policy are quite specific. The Department of Education (1995) recommended that each school establish a committee comprising two teachers, two members of the school's management board and two nominated parents. The task of this committee is to examine the relevant documents (e.g. the NCCA curriculum guidelines) and to engage in a wider consultation with parents, teachers and the school authorities. Only then is the committee to draw up a policy, which is submitted for approval to the school's board of management and then disseminated to parents.

Shortly after the announcement of the introduction of RSE, a major national in-service training programme was launched for primary and post-primary school teachers to support the development of RSE policy and the implementation of the programme within schools. This training was organised and delivered by the RSE Training Support Service for schools in conjunction with the Education Centre Network. Between April 1996 and June 1997, three days of in-service training were provided for over 20,000 primary school teachers. The training programme for post-primary schools involved six days in total, two of which dealt with RSE in the broad context of SPHE. The remaining four days focused specifically on RSE teacher training (Morgan 2000). Since 2002, a further 1,500 teachers have attended RSE training.

As stated earlier, one of the major innovations of SPHE is the partnership relationship established between the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children and the Health Boards in relation to the delivery of SPHE/RSE within post-primary schools. Since their establishment, the in-service training of teachers and SPHE co-ordinators has been a core service provided. The teams also provide assistance with SPHE policy development and programme planning.

2.4 Landmarks in the introduction and early development of RSE

The guidelines and actions designed to assist the early development and implementation of school policy on RSE can be summarised as follows:

- 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 1998 a,b).
- 2000: The provision of guidelines outlining the role of SPHE co-ordinators within schools (SPHE Support Service 2000).
- 2000: The establishment of SPHE support teams in each Health Board area designed to provide in-service training to teachers and SPHE co-ordinators and to support schools in the development of SPHE/RSE.

2.5 The implementation of RSE: key developments and progress

The first evaluation of the implementation of RSE was undertaken in 1999 (Morgan 2000), based on a national representative sample of 1,400 primary teachers, 440 post-primary teachers and 343 parents who had attended meetings related to the introduction of the RSE programme into schools. The evaluation also included a survey of the implementation (stages and practices) of RSE in primary and post-primary schools. On an encouraging note, the study uncovered overwhelming support for school-based relationships and sexuality education among both teachers and parents. Teachers were strongly in favour of the principles on which the RSE programme is founded; they agreed that relationships and sexuality education is an important feature of a good education and that the school has an important role to play in complementing the work of parents in this area. The study also revealed a high level of satisfaction among teachers – and particularly among post-primary teachers – with the RSE training they received.

On a more discouraging note, the study pointed to only modest progress in the implementation of RSE across the schools surveyed. Specifically, it revealed that in 1999 only about two-thirds of post-primary schools had established a policy committee and less than half of these had finalised a policy document. By the year 2000 this situation had improved somewhat: almost three-quarters of the schools had established a policy committee and the vast majority of these had drafted a policy document. However, despite the substantial increase in the percentage of schools that had finalised and circulated an RSE policy document (from 29% to 49.9% between 1999 and 2000), 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. With regard to the implementation of the programme in post-primary schools, in 1999 less than 30% of schools indicated that they were implementing RSE in all classes, and this figure increased to 42.7% by the year 2000. Whilst RSE was a relatively new innovation at the time this study was conducted and progress had been made in implementing the programme between 1999 and 2000, Morgan's (2000) findings pointed to significant problems and challenges with regard to the implementation of RSE in post-primary schools. Teachers overwhelmingly identified the 'overcrowded curriculum' as the chief barrier to the implementation of the programme and they identified the support of the school principal as crucial to the successful implementation of RSE.

A more extensive range of studies has investigated various aspects of the process of developing SPHE, as well as progress in its implementation (Geary & Mannix McNamara 2002, Burtenshaw 2003, Millar 2003). *The SPHE Story – An Example of Incremental Change in the School Setting* (SPHE Support Service, not dated), launched in December 2005, describes the above studies in this regard. Research conducted to date has rightly noted that SPHE was predated in some schools by a Health Promotion and Lifeskills programme, so that SPHE was not quite as novel – and perhaps as challenging – in such schools as it may have been in those introducing SPHE for the first time. Furthermore, schools vary in terms of their organisation, social and class composition, ethos and culture, and all of these factors influence the role schools attach to SPHE and how they address its holistic aspirations.

With regard to implementation, SPHE was found to have been implemented in 67% of the schools that responded to a 2002 survey (Geary & Mannix McNamara 2002). The figures for RSE in the schools indicated a decrease in the availability of the module from first year through to third year (from 73% to 63%). Of interest in light of this decrease in coverage of RSE as students progress through the junior-cycle years is that teachers considered the relationships, sexuality and substance use modules to be the most relevant to pupils. A more recent unpublished study conducted by the SPHE Support Service in 2004 (SPHE Support Service

2004) presents results for nearly four-fifths of post-primary schools nationwide. With regard to SPHE, approximately 95% of schools had timetabled the subject in first year. This finding suggests a marked improvement in implementation levels since 2002 (Geary & Mannix McNamara 2002). 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, there is a marked tendency for delivery to decrease from first to third year. In first year, nearly four-fifths of the schools taught RSE as part of SPHE, and a further 13.5% stated that pupils experience RSE elsewhere in the junior-cycle curriculum. By third year, however, only just over two-fifths of schools reported that RSE was taught as part of SPHE (41.9%) and a further 23% reported that it was taught as part of another subject(s). Of significance also is that although approximately three-fifths of the schools reported having an RSE policy in place, a larger number of 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 than in the case of the Junior Cycle (less than half the schools).

Knowledge and understanding of the factors that impact on the implementation of RSE within schools are clearly important if progress is to be made and the programme sustained. Available research helpfully points to a number of issues and factors that act as barriers to the uniform and effective delivery of SPHE/RSE. For example, Geary & Mannix McNamara's (2003) study highlighted gender as a significant factor in the implementation and delivery of the SPHE curriculum, with boys' secondary schools emerging as the weakest, among others (comprehensive, community, vocational/community college, girls secondary and mixed secondary), in terms of SPHE implementation. Similarly, a study carried out for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (Looney & Morgan 2001) found that subjects with a social/personal emphasis were most likely to be taught in girls' schools and least likely to be implemented in boys' schools; schools catering for both boys and girls fell somewhere in between. Noteworthy also in this regard is that Millar's (2003) review of records of in-service training for teachers of SPHE found male teachers to be under-represented in SPHE in-service training. Similarly, Burtenshaw (2003) found that some schools – primarily single-sex boys' schools – in each of the Health Board areas had not engaged with the support service. International research and commentary has consistently drawn attention to the critical importance of gender in the delivery of a range of health-related messages and, in particular, on sexual health education (Measor et al. 2000, Holland et al. 1998). Research in Ireland consistently suggests that boys are less likely than girls to have received school-based sex education (Geary & Mannix McNamara 2003, Mayock & Byrne 2004, Morgan 2000).

The issue of teacher selection for SPHE is one that can potentially impact upon programme implementation, delivery and effectiveness. Geary & Mannix McNamara (2002) noted discrepancies in teachers' (of SPHE) and principals' perceptions of how selection for SPHE takes place within schools. This finding suggests an absence of clear procedures and guidelines that are available to and agreed between teachers and school principals. The management of teacher selection may also impact on the commitment of teachers to SPHE, particularly if they feel 'pushed' into SPHE teaching, rather than self-selecting. Significant in this regard is that the Department of Education and Science (2000: 6) states clearly in its guidelines that "SPHE should not be assigned to teachers without consultation."

In terms of broader structures designed to support the implementation of SPHE, Burtenshaw's (2003) review of the post-primary SPHE Support Service noted regional variation in the operation of support teams, as well as variation in the time allocated by HPOs to work on SPHE. This study also examined the process of developing partnership between the

Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children and the Health Boards and uncovered significant difficulties and obstacles to effective partnership. In particular, the level of co-operation between RDOs and HPOs varied widely throughout the service. An absence of clarity in relation to roles and responsibilities also emerged as a significant source of frustration among members of regional support teams. Although this research did not aim to assess levels of SPHE implementation within schools, it is perhaps significant that members of SPHE support teams noted variation in teacher/school perspectives on SPHE. Specifically, they claimed that SPHE was often seen by teachers in schools in disadvantaged areas as an effective mechanism for the discussion of challenges faced by their students. More academic schools, on the other hand, sometimes experienced difficulties with timetabling SPHE classes.

The factors that impact on and, in some cases, obstruct the effective implementation and delivery of school-based relationships and sexuality education in Ireland are likely to be multi-faceted and complex. While there is considerable research and commentary internationally on the outcomes of school-based sex education (Kirby 1997b, 2002, Silva & Ross 2003, Wellings et al. 1995), much less attention has focused on the processes, policies and procedures that facilitate or, alternatively, act as barriers to the implementation of sex education programmes. Most obviously, perhaps, in relation to barriers to implementation, health promotion is not 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. The pressures of an already over-crowded curriculum, coupled with the demands of preparing students for public examinations, means that sexuality education can fall easily into a low priority category. Teachers report considerable anxieties about delivering sex education programmes (Alldred, David & Smith 2003), and research also suggests that many teachers feel they are not adequately equipped to teach about sex and relationships (Wight & Scott 1994). A recent UK study of boys' perspectives on sex education (Hilton 2003) found that most believed that the age and sex of the teacher had little bearing on whether they could deliver the subject well; more important was their ability to generate trust, keep control of classes and use relaxed and informal methods of delivery. Boys wanted teachers to be empathetic, non-judgemental and able to create a 'safe environment' in order to facilitate the discussion of difficult subjects. A study of 16- to 19-year-old New Zealanders' views of sexuality education (Allen 2005) similarly found that students view this education as effective when their teachers are open, candid and comfortable when they talk about sexual issues. Finally and importantly, it cannot be assumed that all pupils will be at ease with discussing sex and sexuality with their teachers, and it may take some time for pupils to build the trust and confidence required to participate fully in sexuality and relationships education classes. Furthermore, boys and girls may differ in their views on the appropriate content for sex education classes. For example, a recent Irish study 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 (Hyde et al. 2005).

2.6 Research on school innovation and change

It is evident from the literature reviewed above that, even with the support of all the relevant parties, the RSE programme is not being implemented as comprehensively as might have been hoped for at the outset. This raises the issue of why curricular innovations are sometimes less successful than their proponents plan and anticipate. Fortunately, there is a major research literature on this matter. The summary here derives from major reviews of the findings on the implementation of curricular and other reforms, particularly in North America and in the UK. Particularly influential is the review by Richardson & Placier (2001) on factors associated with teacher change. The work of Spillane et al. (2002) on how teachers make sense of innovations is also of interest, as is the review by Van der Berg (2002) on the meaning of reforms as interpreted by those who are required to implement them.

It is convenient to divide the available research into two broad categories. One set of studies examines the change processes that occur from an *individual perspective*, paying particular attention to how cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural changes occur; these studies are guided primarily by psychological concepts. The other set of studies looks at change from an *organisational viewpoint*; these studies link structural, cultural and political aspects of the school organisation to changes in teachers and teaching.

2.6.1 Individual perspective

Much of the earlier research in the individualistic perspective was conducted in the empirical rational tradition, which assumed that individual teachers, if they were shown by others that a particular practice was good, would act in rational self-interest and make the appropriate changes. However, the programmes based on this approach only have a chance of succeeding with those teachers whose beliefs match the assumptions inherent in the innovation, and even still these teachers might not try the new innovation. Joyce (1981) concludes that such an approach yields a rate of implementation of no more than 15% (quoted by Richardson & Placier 2001).

In considering the causes for non-implementation, Spillane, Reiser and Reimar (2002) suggest that not enough attention has been given to the complexity of the way in which schools interpret innovations, with the result that less change happens than is intended. They talk about a number of ways in which teachers can interpret reform and about how, even with good intention, substantially less implementation of a programme than has been agreed can result. Firstly, there is a bias towards beliefs that are consistent with our existing views and values. This is especially the case in areas where strong feelings are involved (e.g. RSE) and can lead to the belief that a new programme is actually similar to what is already happening, with the result that they can say, 'This is already happening in our school.'

An example of this kind of cause of non-implementation comes from the work of Darling-Hammond (1990) on what was apparently a very worthwhile attempt to implement a reform in mathematics education (involving teaching for understanding). The teachers were given the new textbooks but without the explanation of the framework on which they were based. The result was that the new areas of mathematics were simply added to the older ones, with a resulting conflict on the demands of time. In other words, the teachers changed but not in the desired direction.

Secondly, changes or reforms that contain an implicit threat to self-esteem can be discarded. If a reform requires a teacher to rethink ways of teaching or to think about their purposes in teaching and about themselves, then it is a major step in letting go of old ideas and re-interpreting the self. For example, it has been shown that teachers are deeply upset when they encounter reforms that tell them that what they have been doing for the last several years is simply wrong (Hargreaves 2001).

Thirdly, there are sometimes different interpretations of the same message. In a study of new approaches to teaching reading and mathematics in three states in the US, Spillane (1998) found that even when teachers used the same language (e.g. reading strategies) they did not have the same ideas about revising reading instruction. He also found that teachers' interpretation was a major predictor of the extent of implementation of the reform. There are also indications that misunderstandings about implementation cannot simply be attributed to lack of effort or explicit rejection of new ideas. Hill (2001) found that American teachers working on mathematical innovations understood the reforms in ways that were dramatically different from what was intended. They simply assumed that the traditional curriculum was sufficient to implement great chunks of a policy that was designed to bring about fundamental change in mathematics policy.

An important matter is the effort by teachers (as is the case with people in general) to maintain a positive self-image. Teachers invest a great deal of their self-regard in the belief that they have performed well in the past and experience a bias towards self-affirmation. Thus, any reform or change that suggests what has been done in schools was inappropriate or insufficient can trigger a rejection of the new initiative, since it poses a threat to the self-image. There may be other possible reactions. In these circumstances teachers might tend to believe that they are already implementing what is being advocated and that there is no need to change. Alternatively, they might accept the need to change but blame the actual failure to do so on conditions in the school or lack of resources or training. The important point is that changes in teaching practices have a major emotional and personal significance for those involved in the change (Ball 1993). Reforms can also give rise to negative perceptions of their own work or, as suggested by Gitlin & Margonis (1995), there can be a feeling among teachers of identity loss and vulnerability.

An interesting finding concerns those teachers who are most likely to implement changes in the context of an innovation. A study by Evers, Borouwers & Tomic (2002) examined the factors associated with proposed innovations within post-primary schools in the Netherlands involving radical educational change. Usually referred to as the 'study home' initiative, it emerged from a national policy discussion of adapting education to the demands of society and to changes involving computer-based technology and students' lack of interest in traditional teacher-centred education. It was intended to be a fundamental change – a transformation of culture. A central feature was that teachers would act to promote each individual student's learning capacities and their independent thinking, rather than conveying knowledge. What was particularly interesting was the individual differences among teachers. Specifically, those teachers who scored high on self-efficacy (a sense that they could accomplish the tasks required in the home-study programme) were more likely to implement it. On the other hand, those teachers who were experiencing stress were much less likely to do so (Evers et al. 2002).

It is widely agreed that schools are experiencing a variety of different demands and expectations, which are not necessarily linked with each other. These diverse demands have sometimes been said to have resulted in the 'intensification of the teaching profession' (Van den Berg 2002). Part of this process is that teachers have many obligations that they feel have little to do with their teaching. Frequently they feel that they are drawn away from what they see as their central task: helping children and adolescents to learn. Related to this is the finding that teachers have questions about the legitimacy of the definitions of their work; they have questions about who has the authority to define what constitutes good education and the changes that must be realised for this.

2.6.2 Organisational perspectives

Part of the reason for the school-restructuring movement, particularly in the US, was the belief that a focus on the individual teacher was inappropriate. This resulted in a broadly defined campaign to reinvent or restructure secondary schools. There are a number of dimensions to this movement, including the need for more depth and meaning in the subject curriculum, often accompanied by efforts to develop an integrated or interdisciplinary curriculum. There is also a call for more 'authentic' forms of learning by students, including closer ties between school learning and real-life experiences.

One of the important lessons of the school-restructuring movement has been the finding that *process* is more important than *content*. A study by Darling-Hammond (1995) led to the conclusion that teachers who started with learning and questioned their practice in relation to student benefits made serious changes. Further insights into success in school restructuring are found in a study by Newmann (1996). This work showed that the change in the culture of a professional community was a major factor in success, including shared norms and values, a focus on student learning, collaboration and 'deprivatisation' of practice – changes that are counter to the traditional norms of teaching.

The factors that influence the success of school restructuring have been summarised by Lieberman (1995), who has identified themes related to teacher change that cut across a number of studies. Among these are: (i) turning problems into possibilities for change, rather than failing back on old patterns, (ii) teachers in the foreground and principals in the background, (iii) building shared meaning through joint action, reflection and the breakdown of teacher isolation, (iv) tension and conflict because of different perspectives on teaching, (v) making new structures such as teacher development teams and planning groups, and (vi) student learning and engagement as the main agenda.

The literature on staff development is especially relevant here. The work of Fullan (1990) and McLaughlin (1991) have been especially helpful in identifying the features that contribute to effective staff-development programmes. Among the most important of these are: (i) the need to have a school-wide programme, (ii) that school principals should be supportive of the process of encouraging change, (iii) programmes are more effective if they are long-term and have adequate follow-up, (iv) the process should encourage collegiality, (v) the programme should be based on up-to-date knowledge and (vi) programmes work best if they have adequate funds for materials and for substitute cover so that teachers can observe each other.

There are indications that teacher leaders may be especially influential in bringing about innovations. In the Reading Recovery programme teachers are trained in intensive techniques for teaching reading in the junior classes. Teacher leaders receive additional preparation that qualifies them to train other teachers. In a study of these 'teacher leaders,' Rineheart & Short (1991) found that teacher leadership was associated with empowerment, knowledge of student learning and re-designing of work in the school. Interestingly, it also emerged that school policies had a major impact on the extent to which the leadership was effective.

One approach to understanding the school as an organisation and how this helps to understand change or resistance to change is the micro-political perspective (Kelchtermans 1996). The basic assumption of this approach is that the actions of the members of an organisation are determined, to an important degree, by their interests. An exploration of the micro-political perspective provides an understanding of why teachers can stagnate and resist change. Teachers strive to the acquisition and maintenance of a stable work situation, and this can give rise to problems, especially when changes are imposed by external authorities (Van den Berg 2002).

2.6.3 Leadership and change

Mention was made above of the importance of teacher leaders. The evidence of the importance of leadership is shown in a number of other ways. Particular attention has been given to different styles of school leadership and their effects on school and teacher change. Attention has also been given to the distinction between instructional leadership and transformational leadership (Hallinger 2003). To some extent, instructional leadership has been characterised as a top-down, or directive model, with an emphasis on the principal's co-ordination and control of instruction.

In contrast, transformational leadership can be considered a type of shared or distributed leadership, focusing on stimulating changes through bottom-up participation.

A second distinction contrasts leadership that focuses on existing relationships and maintenance of the status quo with leadership that seeks to envision by synthesising the aspirations of members of the organisational community. A third distinction is related to the other two and is concerned with the means through which leadership achieves its effects. Instructional leadership is regarded as targeting first-order variables, i.e. the conditions that directly impact on the curriculum delivered to students in the classroom. In contrast, transformational leadership seeks to generate second-order effects, that is, to increase the capacity of others to bring about learning. In other words, transformational leaders create a climate in which teachers engage in continuous learning and in which they routinely share their learning with others. These changes are considered to be 'second-order effects,' in the sense that the principal is creating the conditions under which others are committed and self-motivated to work towards the improvement of the school without specific direction from above.

An important question, then, concerns the extent to which it is possible to 'impose' curriculum changes from centralised authority. There is some evidence that centralised policy changes 'imposed' on schools can result in teachers feeling less empowered and less in control of their instruction (Archbald & Porter 1994). However, this study showed that where a professional development programme was in place, the central policy changes tended to be implemented.

From the present perspective, the evidence is that major changes require both kinds of leadership styles. The finding that transformational leadership has a major impact on teachers' perceptions of school conditions, their commitment to change and the organisational learning that takes place is particularly noteworthy (Hallinger 2003).

2.6.4 Implications for RSE implementation

The research summarised above strongly suggests that the implementation of new curricula and innovations is more problematic than the mere introduction of the programme and the provision of a detailed syllabus. This is the case despite the fact that teachers and school personnel may be favourably disposed towards the changes that are proposed. While there is only a modest body of research in the Irish context, the information available indicates that the picture may be similar to that emerging in other countries. For example, the report of the *Review Body on the Primary Curriculum* (1990) found that while there was very strong support for the principles of the child-centred curriculum introduced in 1971, the actual implementation of the practices based on these principles lagged significantly behind the support for the ideas.

The research here is concerned not only with the study of the implementation of RSE but also with the factors that will enhance implementation. Based on this work, it is evident that:

- As well as the beliefs and attitudes of individual teachers, the school as an organisation has a major influence on the implementation of innovation and should be considered in a model of implementation.
- Implementation of innovations occurs more slowly than is frequently thought; there is a need to maintain an impetus using a variety of strategies.
- Leadership is extremely important in informal ways involving teacher leaders and also through the leadership style of the principal.
- A number of factors operate in schools to make schools change at a slower pace. These include the tendency to see the changes as more similar to existing practices than is the case ('we're doing this already'). Another major factor is the threat to teachers' professional esteem if they are being told that what they have been doing until now is 'wrong' or 'not up to date'.
- Emotional factors are extremely important in any innovation and especially where emotional issues are at the core of the change.
- Within schools, a number of factors play a major role in change. These include staff development, sharing of ideas and challenging traditional norms of teaching.
- Supports for new programmes are needed not just at the individual teacher level but also at the whole staff level.
- There is a need to know what level of implementation of a programme is actually happening.
- Implicit in the findings on the 'intensification of teaching' is that other changes, reforms and policy developments within schools have important implications for any given innovation like RSE. Broader changes are therefore an important part of the context of implementation.

2.7 Young people's experiences of school-based sex education

Young people tend to rely on four major sources of knowledge for information, understanding and insight about sex and relationships: peers, the media, schools and parents (Burtney 2000, Forrest 1997). Across all of the studies conducted in Ireland, young people consistently cite same-sex peers as a key source of information and advice on matters related to romantic and sexual relationships (Dunne et al. 1997, Bonner 1996, Sheerin 1998, Mayock & Byrne 2004, Hyde & Howlett 2004). These studies also indicate that the school is a setting where young people have opportunities to learn about sex and relationships.

Unfortunately, much of the available research suggests that schools are not necessarily perceived by young people as reliable or valued contexts for learning about sex. Furthermore, there appears to be great variation in both the level and type of formal sex education delivered within Irish schools. Among Sheerin's (1998) sample, for example, which included marginalised youth and early school leavers, few appeared to have received sex education outside the context of religion or science instruction, and the dominant feeling among young people was that the sex education they received was deficient and did not meet their needs. Similar views were expressed by the young people in the study by Dunne et al. (1997), who considered the sex education they received to be overly focused on biological aspects of sex and sexuality, leaving little or no room for the discussion of social and psychological issues and ramifications. More recently, Hyde & Howlett's (2004) study of post-primary-school students found that a considerable number of the young people who participated in focus-group discussions had not received any sex education since they left primary school. Others did not have classes until fourth year and considered this to be too late. Indeed, 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 also revealed that a considerable number of the young people received sex education in a once-off and isolated manner, and they 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 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. Additionally, the young men interviewed were far less likely to report exposure to school-based sex education.

In general, 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 there is a tendency, in any case, for young people to be critical of school subjects, recent studies nonetheless point to problems with how young people experience school-based sex education and how they perceive its benefits.

2.8 Conclusion

The introduction of school-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Ireland was announced in 1995, and the programme was introduced into schools in 1997. According to the guidelines issued by the Department of Education at this time, each school was to develop a school policy for RSE, which, from the outset, was located within a broader Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme. Curriculum guidelines were issued, in-service training was provided and SPHE support teams were established in each Health Board (Health Service Executive) area to support the development and implementation of SPHE/RSE. To date, only one study has specifically examined RSE implementation, and this research – conducted during 1999 and 2000 – indicated only modest progress in the implementation of the RSE programme. Furthermore, this study – and a larger body of research on SPHE – point to significant problems and challenges with the implementation and delivery of Relationships and Sexuality Education. There is also considerable evidence to suggest that pupils view school-based sex education as inadequate.

There are significant gaps in current knowledge and understanding of how the implementation of RSE ‘works’ and how and why schools differ in their approach to implementing and delivering RSE. Furthermore, relatively little is known about how current policy structures work to support the development of school-based Relationship and Sexuality Education. The current study hopes to address these gaps and to provide a detailed assessment of the *process* of RSE implementation and of facilitators and barriers to RSE delivery in post-primary schools.

Chapter 3

Research methodology

This chapter outlines the research aims and methodological approach to this research, which is concerned with the implementation of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) at junior cycle in Irish post-primary schools.

3.1 The study aims

This study aimed to 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:

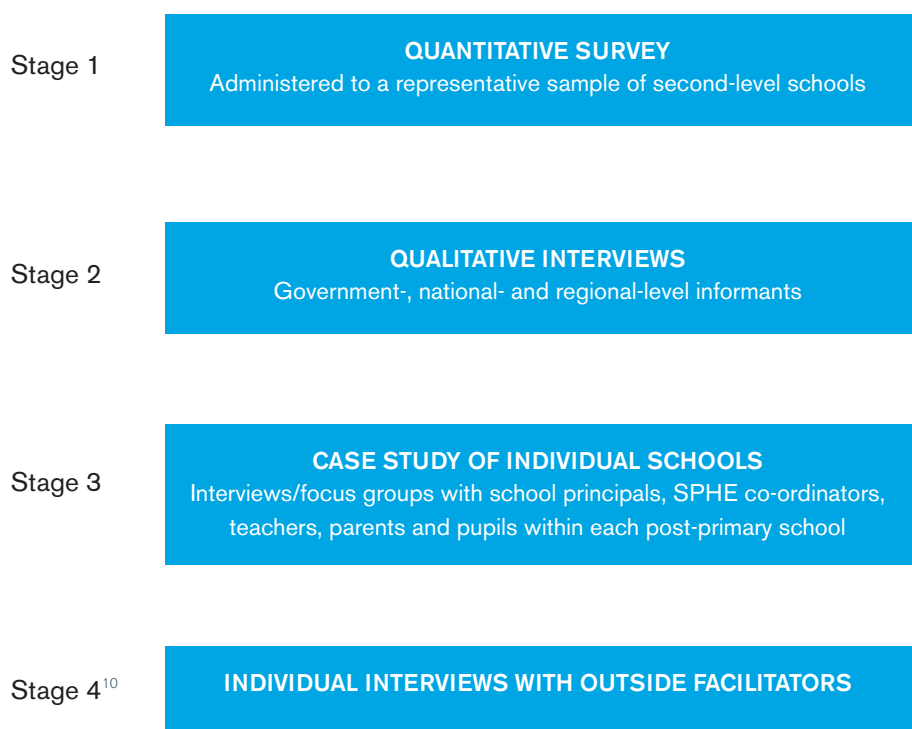
1. Investigate the extent to which RSE policy is implemented and the RSE curriculum delivered in post-primary schools nationwide.
2. Explore the factors and processes that impact on RSE delivery within schools.
3. Identify barriers and facilitators to RSE implementation and delivery.

3.2 Study design

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. Qualitative data-collection methods were then used to investigate the policies, processes, activities and initiatives that impact on RSE implementation. The qualitative component of the study – described in detail in later sections – 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.

Since this research combines quantitative and qualitative data-collection methods targeting different individuals and organisations (including schools), it is useful to present the design diagrammatically before describing each component of the study in detail. Figure 3.1 below presents the study design as a series of 'stages'.

Figure 3.1 Study design



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 3.1. A questionnaire survey was administered to a representative sample of second-level schools as a first step (autumn 2004). Stage 2 – involving the conduct of qualitative interviews with government-, national- and regional-level informants – was initiated at an early stage in the data-collection process (between February and June 2005), but a number of these interviews were conducted during Stage 3.¹¹ All of the case-study research was conducted between September 2005 and January 2006. Finally, it was decided during the course of data collection (see later section) to conduct interviews with outside facilitators, and these interviews were conducted during December 2005 and January 2006.

¹⁰ This final stage, concerned with accessing the views of outside facilitators, was not planned at the outset of the study. The rationale for interviewing a limited number of outside facilitators is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

¹¹ School holidays impacted on the data-collection process to a considerable extent.

3.3 Stage 1: Methodology of quantitative study (survey)

3.3.1 Aims

The aims of the survey were:

1. to ascertain the level of implementation of RSE in schools
2. to gauge the extent to which there were differences in implementation in different kinds of schools e.g. boys' vs. girls' schools
3. to identify individual schools with high/medium/low levels of RSE implementation with a view to further intensive investigation through case-study research.

3.3.2 Sample

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. Four schools excluded themselves on the grounds that they did not have a full post-primary cycle (e.g. were involved in PLCs only).

The selection of an individual to complete the questionnaire was to be made by the principal on the basis of who s/he judged to be best positioned to provide the requested information. The principal nominated one of the following: (i) the principal him/herself, (ii) the SPHE co-ordinator or (iii) a teacher other than (i) or (ii). The principal was asked to return a card with the name of the selected respondent. Following receipt of the name of the person nominated to complete the survey, the questionnaire was sent to this individual. The questionnaire was also sent to the principal of those schools that did not respond. Following three reminders, 187 completed questionnaires were received by March 1st 2005, giving a response rate of 76% (187 of the 246 possible schools).

3.3.3 Response rate

This response is very satisfactory by any standard and is especially high compared with similar types of surveys. Noteworthy also is that a number of schools (10 in total) indicated that they did not wish to complete a questionnaire because of research projects in which they were involved. However, while the response rate is satisfactory, the extent to which the non-responding schools are similar or different to the participating schools remains an important question. We must also consider whether the rate of response is similar across different *types* of school. The characteristics of the achieved sample are described below.

3.3.4 Achieved sample

The second-level sector in Ireland is made up of secondary schools (usually called voluntary secondary schools), vocational schools and community colleges, and comprehensive and community schools. Some voluntary secondary schools cater for boys or girls only, and some for boys and girls. Traditionally, these schools have provided an academic-type education but in recent years they have broadened their subject provision.

Vocational schools and community colleges are administered by Vocational Educational Committees (VECs). Traditionally, these establishments had a strong vocational emphasis (particularly preparing young people for trades). Nowadays the full range of courses is available in this sector.

Comprehensive schools combine academic and vocational subjects and are managed by a board of management representative of the diocesan religious authority, the VEC of the area and the Department of Education and Science. The schools are financed entirely by the DES.

Community schools are managed by boards of management representative of local interests. These schools offer a broad curriculum and are entirely funded by the DES.

There are other ways of categorising schools; these are provided in the list of post-primary schools (DES 2005). Some schools cater for both boarders and day pupils, some for boarders only and the majority for day pupils only. While the vast majority of schools make no charge for tuition, some schools (largely in the Dublin area) charge fees. Finally, another important category is 'all-Irish' schools, which provide education through the medium of Gaeilge.

A case could be made for a stratified sample that would include every kind of school and category mentioned above. In practice, this would be extremely difficult given the unequal size of the various sectors and the inter-relationships between the different ways of dividing schools. For this reason, our initial division of schools was as follows:

- voluntary secondary schools (boys)
- voluntary secondary schools (girls)
- voluntary second schools (girls and boys)
- vocational schools/community colleges
- comprehensive and community schools.

Table 3.1 shows the types of schools in the achieved sample (i.e. the schools that agreed to participate and returned questionnaires) and indicates that there was a relatively similar level of return from the different kinds of schools. The return from the vocational/community/comprehensive sector was somewhat below other categories.

Table 3.1 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

One relevant way of examining the extent to which the achieved sample is representative of all schools in Ireland is to compare the achieved sample with the sampling frame in terms of type of school. This permits us to ascertain to what extent the percentage of schools of different types is broadly reflective of the different kinds of schools in the country. This information is shown in Table 3.2, which shows the number and percentage of schools on the DES list and the corresponding number and percentage in the sample. Comparing the second and fourth columns in Table 3.2, there is a close correspondence in the case of both boys' and girls' secondary schools and community and comprehensive schools; there is a reasonable level of correspondence in the case of mixed secondary schools and community colleges/vocational schools.

**Table 3.2 Comparison of participating schools with sampling frame
(list of recognised post-primary schools of DES)**

	Sampling frame		Sample	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Voluntary secondary school (boys)	111	14.9	31	16.6
Voluntary secondary school (girls)	144	19.4	38	20.3
Voluntary secondary school (mixed)	148	20.0	46	24.6
Vocational schools and community colleges	247	33.3	53	28.3
Community and comprehensive schools	92	12.4	19	10.2

An indication of school sizes in the sample is shown in Table 3.3. This table demonstrates that schools of all sizes are well represented in the study. An examination of the information in the DES list shows that a minority of schools have less than 200 students and roughly one-quarter have more than 600. The sample is therefore quite representative in terms of school size.

Table 3.3 Size of schools participating

Size	Number	Percent
< 200 students	25	13.5
201 – 400 students	56	30.2
401 – 600 students	60	32.2
> 600 students	45	24.2

Note: One school missing

Some other information on the schools in the sample is of interest. As shown in Table 3.4, just over one-quarter of the schools was designated as having 'disadvantaged' status. This indicates that there is good representation of schools serving disadvantaged communities. The information on the designation of schools has changed over the years and it is somewhat difficult to establish the current position regarding the percentage in the system designated as 'disadvantaged'. The information available to the Educational Research Centre was that in 2002, 27% of the post-primary schools in the country were designated disadvantaged. This is almost identical to the figure that emerged in Table 3.4 below.

Table 3.4 Schools designated disadvantaged and other post-primary schools

	Number	Sample percent	All percent
Schools designated disadvantaged	49	26.2	27.0
Schools not designated disadvantaged	138	73.8	73.0

Table 3.5 indicates the percentage of schools where the respondents thought that their students (or most of their students) came from disadvantaged backgrounds. This indicates that the schools have a wide representation of different backgrounds. Just over one-third said that less than 10% of their students were experiencing socio-economic disadvantage whilst, at the other extreme, just under 5% were of the view that more than 75% of students were experiencing such disadvantage. It is particularly interesting that only a small minority of schools (3.2%) found it 'impossible to estimate' for this factor. While comparable data is obviously impossible to obtain for schools as a whole, it is evident that the schools are broadly representative of students with very different socio-economic backgrounds.

Table 3.5 Perceived percentage of children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in post-primary schools

	Number	Percent
Less than 10%	64	34.2
11 - 25%	57	30.5
26 - 50%	36	19.2
51 - 75%	15	8.0
More than 75%	9	4.8
Impossible to estimate	6	3.2

Table 3.6 shows the kinds of communities served by the schools in the sample and indicates that the sample has a representation of different kinds of communities in Ireland. No national comparison points are available against which this can be benchmarked.

Table 3.6 Community served by school

	Number	Percent
Mainly urban	58	31.5
Mix of town and rural	95	51.6
Largely rural	31	16.8

Note: 3 schools missing

An important consideration in the profile of schools was whether an SPHE co-ordinator had been appointed in the school. The results showed that 84.4% of the schools in the sample had appointed an SPHE co-ordinator. This is a positive indicator of the extent to which SPHE has achieved recognition within schools and it is in line with the recommendations of the DES.

3.3.5 Questionnaire

The full text of the questionnaire is shown in the Appendix. The questions focused on the main concerns of the research: RSE policy, the context of the teaching of the RSE programme, number of classes, the major features of the programme, and the factors perceived to be hindering the full implementation of RSE.

Section A of the questionnaire was concerned with background information, including type of school, number of students, community served by the school and whether or not there was an RSE co-ordinator in the school. Section B focused on whether the school had an RSE policy and the extent to which the education partners had made a contribution to the development of the policy. There were also questions on the context of the teaching of RSE (whether part of SPHE or otherwise), how many classes a year were devoted to RSE, and the emphasis placed on topics in the programme. Other questions in this section were concerned with the extent to which school personnel or others outside the school were involved in the delivery of RSE, the extent to which students found the programme interesting and the extent to which checks were made to gauge the implementation of RSE.

The final section focused on factors that made the RSE programme relatively more difficult than it might otherwise be, including the overcrowded curriculum and lack of school policies. The respondents were also asked whether there was a greater or lesser need for an RSE programme compared to five years ago. Finally, questions examined the ways in which - in respondents' opinions - the implementation of the programme might be improved.

3.4 Stage 2: Qualitative interviews: government, national and regional informants

This component of the study was concerned with an assessment of policy and practice issues that impact on RSE implementation and delivery from the perspective of government-, national- and regional-level informants. This 'multiple perspectives' approach sought the views of several different parties with diverse roles in the support, implementation and delivery of RSE. This enabled the research team to triangulate data and also provided the scope to acknowledge the legitimacy of different accounts, which may relate to different professionals and different roles both within and outside of schools.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select key informants at government, national and regional levels. Purposive sampling enables researchers to build up a sample that satisfies the needs of the research project and its specific aims (Robson 2002). The selection of key informants (both within and across each of the targeted policy and practice levels) aimed to ensure that the views and perspectives of a range of participants – reflecting diverse roles in the implementation process – were represented. Separate interview schedules were designed to address questions and issues relevant to the various individuals and groups targeted for participation. The schedules were developed to introduce broad topic areas for discussion and to give respondents the opportunity to develop their answers fully, without the restriction of a rigid structure (Burgess 1984). The design of the interview schedules, therefore, allowed sufficient scope for respondents to introduce issues and topics that they considered to be relevant to RSE implementation. However, across all of the individuals and groups interviewed at government, national and regional levels the following issues were targeted for questioning and elaboration:

- The value of RSE
- Organisational aspects of RSE
- The 'place'/role of RSE within SPHE
- The RSE programme: content and relevance
- Partnership between education and health sectors
- Facilitators of RSE implementation
- Barriers to RSE implementation
- Sustaining RSE.

The vast majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face and a smaller number were conducted by telephone. All interviews were tape-recorded.

At government level, individual (semi-structured) interviews were conducted with government department officials (Department of Education and Science and Department of Health and Children), individuals with responsibility for RSE and SPHE management at national level, and representatives of key organisations, including the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Crisis Pregnancy Agency. At national level, interviews were conducted with representatives from teachers' organisations, union representatives, parents' organisations, and the SPHE support service. Finally, at regional level, the research team sought access to members of SPHE support teams, health board personnel and other

agencies that provide support for RSE delivery. Two of the authors also attended a regional support-team meeting, and the proceedings of this meeting were tape-recorded.

Table 3.7 provides a breakdown of the 27 individuals interviewed at government, national and regional levels.

Table 3.7 Government, national and regional informants

Level	Organisations/agencies represented	Number of interviews
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
Total		27

3.5 Stage 3: Case study of individual schools

This is the largest single component of the *qualitative* assessment of RSE implementation and the first investigation of RSE of its kind to be undertaken in an Irish context. It involved the conduct of case studies within nine carefully selected schools and aimed to provide a detailed analysis of RSE programme implementation and delivery within these schools, based on the perspectives of key 'players', including school principals, SPHE co-ordinators, teachers, parents and students.

Case-study research "consists of a detailed investigation, often with data collected over a period of time, of phenomena, within their context" (Hartley 2004: 326). As a research strategy, case study excels at bringing us to an understanding of a complex issue and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known about it through previous research. In relation to RSE within schools, there are critical questions and issues that require attention, for example, questions about how schools implement and deliver the programme. Indeed, case studies are a preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are posed (Kohlbacher 2006). Apart from accessing detailed information on the perceived value of RSE, organizational aspects of RSE, training for RSE, and so on, the cases studies paid particular attention to the *process* of RSE implementation *within* individual schools and sought to identify key facilitators and barriers to this process. The approach to school selection (described below) was designed to enable a comparative analysis across schools that evidenced differing 'levels' of RSE implementation and to thus yield data on the processes, mechanisms and actions that facilitate or, alternatively, obstruct RSE implementation and delivery.

3.5.1 Selection of schools

Case-study research is not sampling research (Stake 1995); rather, sampling is approached so as to maximize what can be learned. We combined the strategies of 'information-oriented selection' with 'strategic selection' (Flyvbjerg 2004) to enlist the co-operation of nine schools for in-depth study. 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. These schools were informed by letter that they had been selected for further study and this initial step was followed by direct contact with individual schools by telephone. Two of the schools initially selected declined to participate. Following this, two further schools – chosen to broadly match those schools that declined – were contacted and both agreed to participate. 'Strategic selection' was then used to enlist the co-operation of one school with high implementation of RSE. In other words, we specifically targeted a school where RSE is delivered effectively. The decision to target a school with high implementation of RSE was taken on the grounds that such a step could potentially yield important data on how effective implementation works in practice. This school was, in other words, selected strategically for illustrative purposes. The survey sample was not used to identify this school; instead we relied on information gleaned from earlier interviews conducted with regional-level respondents. Having identified a suitable school, we made contact with the school Principal and, a number of weeks later, the case study was conducted.

3.5.2 Research instruments

Because case studies aim to explore the complexities of phenomena from several different angles and perspectives, a number of research instruments are often used to gather information and data, the combined analysis of which provides an understanding about the complexities under study (Yin 2003a). We combined individual semi-structured interviews with focus-group discussions to collect data on a range of issues pertaining to the implementation and delivery of RSE within each of the nine schools.

Individual interviews were conducted with the school principal and the SPHE co-ordinator, while focus groups were conducted with teachers (including, where possible, teachers not involved in the delivery of RSE), pupils and parents.¹² As with the interviews conducted with government, national and regional informants, the approach to interviewing was flexible in terms of the order of topics addressed and allowed respondents to introduce and discuss issues that they felt were pertinent to RSE.¹³

Separate interview schedules and focus-group discussion guides were prepared for each 'category' of respondent (i.e. principals, co-ordinators, teachers, parents and pupils). In the case of principals, SPHE co-ordinators and teachers the following issues were addressed during interviews and focus groups:

- School policy on RSE
- Teacher selection for RSE
- RSE programme

¹² In some schools, teachers were interviewed individually either because this arrangement better suited the school's timetabling arrangements or because teachers preferred to be interviewed individually. In almost all cases, both interviews and focus group discussions were conducted jointly by two of the authors.

¹³ This was an extremely important dimension to the interviewing process since emphasis was placed on different issues by school personnel across many of the schools studied.

- RSE delivery
- Teacher in-service training and support services
- Whole-school approach/cross-curricular linkage
- Facilitators and barriers to RSE delivery

The focus-group discussion guide for pupils was designed to address the following:

- Learning about sex/sexual health – views and experience
- Experience of school-based RSE
- Who should teach RSE?
- What do you need to know?
- RSE in your school

Finally, focus groups with parents aimed to access their perceptions of the value of RSE, their understanding of the content of the curriculum, their input into school policy on RSE and their level of satisfaction with current RSE delivery. We did not communicate with parents directly in order to gain their participation; rather, individual schools requested parents to attend on the day that this work was undertaken within the school. This approach worked well in many respects but, in most cases, only a small number of parents were interviewed due to various constraints and limitations on parents' availability to participate.

3.5.3 School sample

Table 3.8 provides a summary of the number of individual interviews and focus group discussions conducted within the ten schools.

Table 3.8 Number and range of participants within schools

CODE	Principal	SPHE co-ordinator	Teachers (N)	Parents (N)	Students (N)	Total number of respondents
School 1	✓	✓	3	1	10	16
School 2	✓ (plus V.P)	✓	4	2	10	19
School 3	✓	×	4	5	10	20
School 4	✓	✓	4	4	12	22
School 5	✓	✓	4	2	10	18
School 6	✓	✓	3	3	10	18
School 7	✓ (plus V.P)	×	4	3	10	19
School 8	✓	✓	4	4	10	20
School 9	✓	✓	2	...	8	12
Total	9 (plus 2 VPs)	7	32	24	90	164

As stated earlier, schools were chosen (in all except one case, from the questionnaire survey) to reflect different geographical areas and types of school, as well as on the grounds of their 'level' of RSE implementation and delivery.¹⁴ It is not possible to ensure that this small selection of schools is representative of schools in general. Moreover, generalisability is not the aim of case-study research; rather what matters most is gaining an in-depth understanding of the topic under study. What is important is the level of engagement required to study individual cases and the range of perspectives sought during the time spent within the sites selected. The case study does not represent a 'sample' and, in conducting case studies, the goal is to make analytical rather than statistical generalizations (Yin 2003b). Moreover, the detailed and rich data offered by case-study research allows researchers to develop a solid empirical base for specific concepts (Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg 1991).

Within practically all schools, we successfully enlisted the co-operation of a range of individuals on the subject of RSE, including the principal (and vice-principal in two cases), SPHE co-ordinator, teachers, parents and pupils.¹⁵ Principals were interviewed in all cases, but in two schools the SPHE co-ordinator was not interviewed (one school did not have a co-ordinator). We faced various challenges with interviewing teachers, due primarily to their teaching commitments, and we depended entirely on the school to nominate or 'select' teachers for participation. It was particularly difficult to gain the participation of teachers not involved in the teaching of RSE, although this was achieved in four of the participating schools. This may or may not tell its own story about how schools and teachers view RSE in terms of SPHE's embeddedness "in a supportive whole-school ethos" (SPHE Support Service 2005: 8); alternatively, it may simply reflect the constraints under which schools operate in terms of releasing teachers from classroom obligations. School staff (usually an SPHE teacher)

¹⁴ An in-depth discussion on 'levels' of RSE implementation is provided at case-study level in Chapter 8, and to a lesser extent later in this chapter.

¹⁵ Within one school it was not possible to interview parents.

selected the ninety students we interviewed. Finally, as stated earlier, schools arranged for parents to attend for participation in focus-group discussions. This approach may be viewed as self-selecting and, therefore, not necessarily representative of the views of parents in general. Certainly, it can be assumed that those parents who did participate were more, rather than less, involved in the school community than many of their peers and, therefore, likely to be relatively well-informed about RSE (as well as other subject areas). This limitation is in many ways the expected outcome of a relatively large qualitative study of this kind that is undertaken under specific constraints. Much more time would have been required, for example, within individual schools to engage diverse groups of parents, and this same situation applies to a considerable extent to participating teachers.¹⁶

3.6 Stage 4: Interviews with outside facilitators

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 separate investigation. For example, the role of outside facilitators was frequently raised by the study's informants at government, national and regional levels, and from an early stage in the conduct of case studies it was clear that the schools adopted different approaches to engaging and working with these professionals. Consequently, it was felt that there was potential merit in interviewing outside facilitators individually. Due to time constraints, this component of data collection was necessarily limited and only four facilitators were interviewed individually. All four represented non-government organisations and all were interviewed by telephone. These interviews cannot be considered to be *representative* of the views of all outside facilitators who work with schools, and this component of the research is largely exploratory. We asked these respondents to explain their approach to RSE facilitation (including the topics covered) to discuss how they communicate and negotiate with schools on the topics covered and to describe the overall content of the programme they deliver. They were also asked to comment on students' responses to the programme. We also asked interviewees for their views on the advantages and disadvantages of the provision of outside facilitation to schools in the delivery of RSE.

3.7 Procedural and ethical issues

This study set out to collect a large volume of data and, unsurprisingly perhaps, there were a number of obstacles to be overcome during the data-collection process. The qualitative components of the study proved particularly time-consuming due to the number of individuals and schools involved and the need to accommodate their work schedules and routines. Gaining people's agreement to participate was not automatic and, in some cases, required some amount of negotiation. When we approached individuals and schools to request their participation, we explained the study in detail and outlined the topics and issues that we planned to address during the interviews and focus groups. Assurances of anonymity were given in all cases (this issue was particularly important to many individuals).¹⁷ Perhaps the most challenging issue related to access to schools: schools are busy organisations, and even minor alterations to their daily routine can be a source of major disruption. It was important, therefore, to emphasize that our presence in the school would cause minimal disruption and that we understood the school's limitations with respect to the availability of teachers, pupils and parents. Nonetheless, it is important to state that, in general, there was a high level of support for the study among individuals and within schools, a possible indicator in itself of the level of interest in and support for RSE.

¹⁶ It is perhaps important to note that we did not conduct observational work within classrooms during the teaching of RSE. Such an undertaking would have required a significantly different study design (incorporating ethnographic work within schools) but may well be an approach worthy of consideration for future studies.

¹⁷ This report does not identify either individuals or schools in the presentation of the research findings. Furthermore, all identifiers (place names, the names of colleagues, geographical location, and so on) have been removed from the transcript material.

In keeping with recommended practice in the conduct of social research involving the participation of minors (Morrow & Richards 1996), the informed consent of each student was sought prior to their participation in the study. Before the focus-group discussions commenced, the researchers explained the purpose of the study. In all cases, students were given assurances of confidentiality, including the guarantee that their name (or the name of their school) would not be mentioned in any written dissemination of the research findings. All participants signed a consent form to confirm that they understood the purpose of the research and that their participation was voluntary. During the introductory period of focus-group discussions, participants were encouraged to respect the views of other group members and they were also asked not to disclose the content of the discussion to peers outside of the group. Focus-group discussions focused tightly on students' experience of school-based RSE and on other key sources of knowledge about sex and sexual health issues. Pupils were discouraged from disclosing details of their sexual activities and behaviour during group discussions. Finally, since participating minors were under the age of 18 years, parental consent to participate in the study was attained. Parental consent forms were designed for this purpose and were sent to parents in collaboration with all participating schools. In all cases, schools arranged this ahead of the dates agreed for the conduct of focus groups with students.

3.8 Data analysis

3.8.1 Analysis of survey data

Following a preliminary examination of the questionnaires to check that there were no major misunderstandings or missing data, the data were prepared for analysis by means of the SPSS statistical package. The data were initially examined for out-of-range values; this was shown not to be an issue.

The remainder of the analysis consisted of the FREQUENCIES procedure and the CROSSTABS procedures. The former provides an overview of the responses to the various questions while the latter provided a breakdown for particular variables (e.g. type of school, whether designated disadvantaged).

3.8.2 Analysis of qualitative data

All individual and focus-group discussions (including telephone interviews) were tape-recorded and verbatim transcripts prepared. The sheer bulk of qualitative data – and the added complexity of the 'layers' of views and perspectives represented – meant that a comprehensive data-management and data-reduction strategy was required. Data reduction, that is the process of reducing data into more manageable 'chunks' (Miles & Huberman 1994), helped to bring order to the data and also facilitated the retrieval of key issues and themes. This process began shortly after the conduct of the early interviews when some preliminary themes were identified for further study (and refinement). This approach helped to ensure that the analysis was 'grounded' in the views and experiences of participants (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The analysis of RSE implementation proceeded initially on the grounds of a detailed examination of the views and perspectives of participants at government, national, regional and school levels. This led to the identification of key themes for discussion and elaboration.

The analysis of case-study evidence involved a number of strategies. Insofar as the learning and insights from earlier schools informed and guided our approach to later cases to some extent, data collection and analysis were "developed together in an iterative process" (Hartley 2004: 329). However, following the completion of data collection within the nine schools, a formal approach to the categorisation and coding of data was adopted. This initially involved the preparation of a 'case summary' for each of the nine schools according to carefully selected categories. This process – which was concerned primarily with case description – allowed us

to sort, categorise and search for patterns in the data (Newmann 1996). In keeping with Yin's (2003) recommendations, we then proceeded to use a range of techniques – pattern matching, explanation building and cross-case synthesis – to bring order and coherence to the large volume of data generated. Comparative analyses of key issues and themes to emerge across the participating schools enabled us to identify points of convergence and difference between schools with differing levels of RSE implementation.

In a general sense, the analysis of the study's qualitative data aimed to capture agreement and difference among respondents and schools and, in particular, sought to capture the nuances and complexities that surround the implementation and delivery of RSE.

3.9 Reporting the research findings

This research, and the analysis which follows, incorporates multiple layers of data. This is the desired result of a mixed-method research design, which explicitly aims to include multiple perspectives. The presentation of data in the following six chapters attempts to incorporate a diverse range of views and perspectives and struggles at times to deal with the interconnectedness of many of the factors that impact on school-based RSE. The narratives resulting from the qualitative interviews and case studies, in particular, illustrate the complexities and, at times, the contradictions that surround RSE implementation and delivery. As such, these data are difficult to summarise into neat formulae or general propositions. It may be tempting to see this as a drawback, as many critics of qualitative research might claim. However, to the qualitative or case-study researcher, this is a sign that the study has uncovered a particularly rich problematic (Flyvbjerg 2004). We have endeavoured to present, document, illustrate and, where possible, tabulate the qualitative data in a way that is accessible and comprehensible. In so doing, we have deliberately allowed space for the reader to draw her/his own conclusions and interpretations, whilst also advancing our own comments and observations. Our approach to the case-study data, in particular, has been to tell the 'story' (of RSE) in its diversity, allowing it to unfold from the many-sided, complex and sometimes conflicting accounts advanced by respondents. In so doing, it is our hope that the findings presented help to advance current understanding of RSE implementation and delivery in Irish second-level schools.

3.10 Layout of the report

The findings of this study are presented in four sections as follows:

- Section II (Chapter 4) documents the findings of the survey questionnaire.
- Section III (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) presents the findings of interviews with government-, national- and regional-level respondents.
- Section IV (Chapters 8, 9 and 10) presents the findings of the case-study research.
- Section V (Chapters 11 and 12) discusses the main findings arising from the study and makes recommendations for the future development of RSE within second-level schools.

Chapter 4

Survey results

The details of the survey administration and the sample are described in Chapter 3. From the perspective of the present chapter, the most relevant features concern the response rate and the associated issue of the profile of schools in the study compared with available information on post-primary schools in the country. As noted in Chapter 3, the response rate of 76% is extremely satisfactory for a postal questionnaire. More importantly there was no evidence that any one kind of school was more or less likely to respond than were others. In particular, the different types of school (voluntary and community/comprehensive schools and vocational schools/community colleges) were represented in a way that is broadly similar to the number in the country as a whole. Therefore, we can be confident that the results are representative of what happens in RSE in post-primary schools in Ireland.

Here we set out the main results emerging from the questionnaire, focusing on policy, practice and perception of factors that influence the implementation of the programme. The presentation of results follows the main sections of the questionnaire and focuses on the following issues:

- How many schools have developed a policy with regard to RSE?
- Are there differences between schools in the development of policy statements?
- In schools where a policy was developed, who contributed to its development?
- How is RSE organised in schools? (e.g. as part of SPHE)
- How many class periods are devoted to RSE?
- Are there major differences between years in the number of classes?
- What emphasis is placed on particular areas of RSE?
- Are outside personnel involved in the teaching of RSE?
- How are the DES guidelines on RSE perceived by schools?
- How do students respond to RSE?
- Do teachers find RSE a challenging area?

- What kind of monitoring of RSE takes place?
- What factors inhibit the implementation of RSE in schools?
- How supportive are parents of RSE?
- How great is the need for RSE compared to some years ago?
- To what extent does it matter that RSE is a non-examination subject?
- What factors will help the development of RSE in the future?

Having set out these findings, the final section summarises the most relevant results from a policy perspective.

4.1 RSE policy statement

It is of major interest to know the number of schools that had RSE policy statements in place and, in the event of a policy not being in place, whether a policy was in the process of being agreed. The results for all schools combined are shown in Table 4.1. From this table, it is evident that nearly 60% of the schools have agreed an RSE policy. In most of these schools that have a policy, it is available to all interested parties, while in about a quarter of the schools that have a policy, it is available within the school (15.5% of the total number of schools).

The situation regarding the development of an RSE policy varies greatly in the other schools. Significantly, two categories make up 28% between them: schools that have no policy and schools that have plans to develop a policy in the future. These results can be contrasted with the results of a national study of the number of schools that had a policy in place in 2000 (Morgan 2000). The results of that study indicated that 44.7% had got to the stage where they have devised and circulated a policy document. While there has been an increase in the number of schools that have devised an RSE policy, it is obviously a concern that a relatively large number of schools, by their own reports, have not yet managed to devise such a policy. As will be shown below, there is not a straightforward relationship between having a policy and teaching an RSE programme.

Table 4.1 Policy development in relation to RSE

	Number of schools	Percent
An RSE policy has been agreed by all the relevant partners and is available to interested parties	82	44.2
An RSE policy has been agreed and is available within the school	29	15.5
An RSE policy has been discussed but not agreed	13	7.2
An RSE policy is in the process of being agreed	9	4.8
There are plans to develop an RSE policy in the future	28	14.9
The school does not have an RSE policy	26	13.3

Note: No missing data

Table 4.2 provides a breakdown for different kinds of schools, broken down into five categories: boys' voluntary secondary, girls' voluntary secondary, mixed voluntary secondary, vocational schools/community colleges, and community and comprehensive schools. What is most striking about the pattern emerging from this is that schools catering for boys only were somewhat less likely to have an RSE policy in place than were other schools. While the difference is not a major one, it is reminiscent of findings from earlier work suggesting that RSE provision in boys' schools was less satisfactory than in schools catering either for girls only or for boys and girls (Morgan 2000).

Table 4.2 Policy development in different kinds of post-primary schools

Note: Table entries are percentage of schools of each type (column percentages)

	Boys' voluntary secondary	Girls' voluntary secondary	Mixed voluntary secondary	Vocational schools and community colleges	Community and comprehensive schools
An RSE policy has been agreed by all the relevant partners and is available to interested parties	37.9	43.9	42.2	48.1	44.4
An RSE policy has been agreed and is available within the school	10.3	22.8	15.6	11.5	5.5
An RSE policy has been discussed but not agreed	10.0	5.4	6.5	9.6	16.6
An RSE policy is in the process of being agreed	3.9	5.6	6.7	3.8	5.5
There are plans to develop an RSE policy in the future	17.2	13.7	14.0	11.5	16.6
The school does not have an RSE policy	20.7	8.6	14.9	15.3	11.1
Total number of schools	30	37	44	52	18
Missing data (n)	1	1	2	1	1

The participants were asked about the process by which the RSE policy in their school had been devised (for those schools that had such a policy). The results shown in Table 4.3 indicate that SPHE/RSE teachers had the major input in the process of developing policy. In virtually all schools those teachers made either a 'major contribution' or 'some contribution' to the process. The next most important input was from principals, who made either a major or some contribution in all but 10% of schools. As can be seen, parents and boards of management seemed to have roughly the same degree of influence and had a major/some contribution in between 60% and 70% of schools. In just 50% of the schools 'other teachers' made some contribution; they made a major contribution in 16.3% of schools while in the remaining schools 'other teachers' were not influential. While students and outside facilitators were identified as having a lesser contribution generally, they were important in over 30% of schools.

Overall, it would seem that SPHE/RSE teachers, together with the principals, were by far the most influential groups in the development of policy on RSE within schools. The contribution of other groups varied considerably between schools. It should be stressed again that this pattern obviously applied only to those schools that had developed an RSE policy (111 schools). As will be seen below, rather more schools were involved in the teaching of RSE than had a policy.

Table 4.3 Process of developing RSE policy

	Made major contribution	Made some contribution	Made small contribution	Made no contribution
SPHE/RSE teachers	78.2	20.0	1.8	—
Principal	45.4	43.5	7.4	3.7
Board of management	26.9	40.9	25.8	6.5
Parents	26.5	46.9	19.4	7.1
Outside facilitator	20.3	17.7	8.9	53.2
Other teachers	16.3	50.0	19.6	14.1
Students	14.9	18.4	19.5	47.1

Note: The percentages here are based on 111 schools that had agreed a policy

Note: Table entries indicate the percentage that said the group concerned made a contribution (row percentages)

4.2 Context of implementation

The DES Guidelines on SPHE indicate that Relationships and Sexuality Education should be an inherent part of that subject. In the early years of the introduction of RSE, it may have been taught, at least sometimes, as a stand-alone subject or, indeed, as a part of another subject on the curriculum, like religion. It is important, therefore, to establish the context in which RSE is implemented. The way in which schools reported that RSE was organised is shown in Table 4.4.

From this it is evident that in most schools RSE is taught as part of SPHE in first and second years, but with fewer schools having this arrangement in third year.¹⁸ In the senior cycle, only a minority of schools organise RSE as part of SPHE. Two other trends are evident. Firstly, in the senior cycle there is a substantial increase in the number of schools organising RSE as part of another subject. As can be seen from Table 4.4, the percentage doing so goes from between 6-7% in first and second year to over 50% in the Leaving Certificate year. Conversely, there is a major decline in the percentage of schools teaching RSE as part of SPHE, from over 80% in first year to just over 12% in Leaving Certificate. The second trend is the increase over the years (first year to Leaving Certificate) in the percentage of schools that do not teach RSE.

Another point emerging from Table 4.4 is that a stand-alone RSE programme is found in a relatively small number of schools throughout both the senior and junior cycle. Finally, a minority of schools do not teach RSE in any year. An important question is whether the same schools are involved in first and second year. A closer examination of the data showed that this was largely the case. However, it is striking that more schools taught RSE than reported having a policy.

While it is not possible to establish with certainty the causal direction, it is noteworthy that the arrangement of having RSE taught as part of SPHE is associated with relatively higher levels of implementation. Conversely, when RSE was not part of SPHE, there was a relatively lower level of implementation. This has important implications for the future development of RSE in the context of the senior-cycle SPHE programme.

Table 4.4 Organisation of RSE in post-primary schools

	Part of SPHE	Part of another subject	As a stand-alone subject	Not taught	Missing data (n)
First year	81.2	7.0	0.6	11.3	1
Second year	81.2	6.5	0.6	11.9	—
Third year	58.1	19.9	2.2	19.9	2
Fifth year	19.4	48.9	2.2	29.5	3
Leaving Cert	12.4	51.6	2.7	33.3	3

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools who organise the teaching of RSE as indicated (row percentages)

¹⁸ A question was put to all schools regarding the teaching of RSE in Transition Year. Schools were not asked to state whether they had a Transition Year; therefore, it is likely that responses given to this question underestimate the true level of RSE implementation in Transition Year. For this reason findings are not reported here.

Information was sought on the number of classes in RSE in each year. The results shown in Table 4.5 indicate that, in line with the information in Table 4.4, RSE is more likely to happen in the junior cycle than in the senior cycle. Looked at another way, close to half of the schools do not have any programme for the senior cycle. The discrepancies between Tables 4.4 and 4.5 may indicate that some schools perceive themselves to be fulfilling their obligations in relation to RSE without designating specific class periods for it.

Table 4.5 Number of class periods in RSE in a year

	None	1-2	3-5	6-8	9-12	> 13	Missing schools (n)
First year	15.1	20.4	29.0	28.5	2.7	4.3	1
Second year	18.3	18.8	29.6	24.7	4.3	4.3	2
Third year	29.0	16.7	23.1	22.0	5.4	3.8	2
Fifth year	43.0	10.8	19.4	14.0	8.1	4.8	3
Leaving Cert	48.4	11.8	15.6	14.1	5.4	4.7	3

Table 4.6 provides a breakdown of number of class periods devoted to RSE in the different kinds of school: voluntary secondary boys' schools, voluntary secondary girls' schools, mixed voluntary secondary schools, vocational schools/community colleges and community/comprehensive schools. This table reveals a complex pattern and it should be borne in mind that the absolute number in some of these categories is quite small, when the breakdown is made. For this reason, the two final categories utilised in Table 4.5 have been collapsed, i.e. 9-12 sessions and over 13 sessions.

Two points emerge from this table. Firstly, there are similarities across different types of school in the sense that the trend is towards fewer schools having an RSE programme from first year through to Leaving Certificate year. Secondly, there is a tendency for schools that cater for boys only to have rather less implementation of an RSE programme, i.e. boys' voluntary secondary schools vs. the others.

Table 4.6 Number of class periods in RSE in a year in different types of post-primary schools

	None	1-2	3-5	6-8	> 9	Missing schools (n)
Voluntary secondary boys (n = 31)						
1st Year	16.7	19.1	42.2	15.8	6.2	–
2nd Year	19.8	12.0	42.0	19.8	6.4	1
3rd Year	31.0	10.2	34.9	16.9	7.0	2
5th Year	45.5	13.7	14.8	18.5	7.5	1
Leaving Cert	49.7	12.1	25.1	7.7	5.4	2
Voluntary secondary girls (n = 38)						
1st Year	14.0	21.1	20.8	41.3	2.8	–
2nd Year	15.0	14.2	30.3	34.4	6.1	2
3rd Year	27.0	15.7	12.2	36.1	9.0	1
5th Year	42.8	13.0	10.4	18.7	15.1	2
Leaving Cert	46.0	20.3	20.5	10.0	3.2	2
Voluntary secondary mixed (n = 46)						
1st Year	14.7	16.7	28.3	30.0	10.3	1
2nd Year	16.4	13.8	29.9	21.3	18.6	1
3rd Year	29.0	11.9	22.3	21.4	15.4	2
5th Year	42.1	15.3	22.1	10.2	10.3	1
Leaving Cert	47.2	14.3	20.5	8.9	9.1	2
Vocational schools and community colleges (n=53)						
1st Year	17.3	26.9	25.0	25.0	5.8	1
2nd Year	17.3	17.3	28.8	30.8	5.8	1
3rd Year	29.5	17.7	21.7	23.2	7.9	2
5th Year	44.2	11.5	17.3	15.4	11.6	1
Leaving Cert	42.5	9.8	19.8	17.8	10.1	2
Community and comprehensive schools (n=19)						
1st Year	11.3	33.5	22.6	27.8	4.8	1
2nd Year	15.8	21.1	31.5	26.3	5.3	–
3rd Year	27.7	16.9	22.2	27.7	5.5	1
5th Year	44.4	11.3	16.6	16.6	11.1	1
Leaving Cert	47.0	11.8	17.6	17.6	6.0	2

Note: Table entries are percentages of each type of school who reported having that number of classes in RSE in each year (row percentages)

4.3 Overall implementation of RSE

So far we have considered the percentages of schools that have an RSE policy, the years in which RSE is taught and the number of classes in which RSE is taught. One way of considering overall implementation is by combining these to get an overall index of implementation. The indicators used were as follows:

- Having an RSE policy in place
- Having a programme in place in at least three years, including at least one in the senior cycle
- Having six classes or more devoted to RSE in at least two years.

Based on these criteria, schools were divided into three categories. High implementation schools are those that have all three indicators in place. Moderate implementers are schools that have two of the three in place. Low implementation schools are schools that have one or none in place. It should be stressed that the selection of these criteria has a major bearing on the pattern of results that emerges. Nevertheless, the combining of information in this way gives useful results.

From Table 4.7, it is shown that by the criteria used in this classification just 40.6% of schools have a high level of implementation of the RSE programme, and 23.7% have a low level of implementation. With regard to differences between types of schools, it is clear that schools catering for boys only are rather different from the others. As is shown in Table 4.7, just 30% of secondary schools catering for boys only are in the high implementation category while over 33% are in the low implementation group. The pattern in the other types of schools is quite similar. As noted above, this difference between boys' and other schools emerged in some earlier studies of RSE implementation (Morgan 2000).

Table 4.7 Implementation in different kinds of post-primary schools

	Boys' voluntary secondary	Girls' voluntary secondary	Mixed voluntary secondary	Vocational schools and community colleges	Community and comprehensive schools	All
High	30.0	43.3	40.0	46.1	44.4	40.6
Moderate	36.7	35.1	35.5	34.6	33.3	35.7
Low	33.3	21.6	24.5	19.3	22.3	23.7
Missing schools (n)	1	1	1	1	1	5

Note: The criteria for 'high' moderate and low are given in the text. Table entries are percentages of schools of each type (column percentages)

4.4 Emphasis on areas of RSE

Respondents were asked about the emphasis placed on particular topics in the RSE curriculum. The list was based on the DES guidelines and is a representative sample of the topics that are included in the syllabus. The pattern of results shown in Table 4.8 shows that the strongest emphases are on relationships and on rights and responsibilities. Just over 57% of the schools indicated that they placed a major emphasis on these areas of learning in the RSE programme. In contrast, the aspects of RSE focusing on physiological, biological features did not seem to get a similar emphasis. Just 24.6% said that there was a major emphasis on 'biological aspects of reproduction' and a slightly smaller number indicated that this was the case with 'contraception/safe sex practices'.

These findings are extremely important, since they help to account for a finding that emerges in this study later in the exploration of the experiences of students of RSE. Frequently there is a discrepancy between the students' experience of RSE and that of the schools, with students typically indicating they received much less of the programme than teachers said was implemented. However, it seems that students are more likely to identify the biological aspects as being the 'real' RSE rather than the social and personal aspects. Since schools emphasise the latter aspects, students may therefore be inclined to report rather fewer classes in the area than was actually the case.

Table 4.8 Emphasis on topics in RSE

	Major emphasis %	Considerable emphasis %	Some emphasis %	Little emphasis %	Missing data (n)
Relationships	57.4	36.7	4.7	1.2	2
Rights and responsibilities	57.2	32.5	8.4	1.8	3
Biological aspects of reproduction	24.6	48.5	25.7	1.2	3
Contraception/safe-sex practices	22.7	35.0	31.9	10.4	5

4.5 Involvement of school and outside personnel

The schools were asked about the personnel delivering the RSE programme in their school, particularly the extent to which school staff or personnel from outside the school were involved. The results displayed in Table 4.9 show that in 58.7% of schools, RSE is delivered only by teachers from within the schools. In almost all of the remainder the programme is largely delivered by teachers but with assistance from outside facilitators. Other arrangements were virtually non-existent. However, the comparison of the two situations that are predominant is important and merits further exploration.

In addressing the issue of how RSE will be implemented more fully, this is a major issue. As will be shown in later chapters, some influential policy makers argued for a role for some specialists who would make a contribution to RSE in a number of schools. The kind of service and the nature of that contribution will be explored in later chapters. It may be the case that no single arrangement suits all schools. As will be clear from information presented in later parts of this chapter, whether or not schools made use of outside facilitators was influenced by factors like school size.

Table 4.9 Involvement of post-primary schools and outside facilitators in RSE

	Percent of schools
RSE is delivered exclusively by teachers from our own school	58.7
RSE is delivered mainly by teachers from our school but with assistance from outside facilitators	39.5
RSE is delivered by teachers in the school and by outside facilitators, with each having an equal part	1.2
RSE is delivered largely by outside facilitators	0.6

Table entries are percentages of schools with the arrangement specified
Missing data = 4

4.6 Perception of SPHE guidelines

As noted earlier, the Department of Education and Science has issued a set of guidelines for Social Personal and Health Education in the junior cycle, which encompass Relationships and Sexuality Education. The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which these guidelines were useful in developing RSE in the school. As can be seen from Table 4.10, 80.5% of the schools took the view that the guidelines were either very useful or useful. Only a small minority thought that the guidelines were not useful. This is a significant encouragement for those involved in the development of the guidelines for senior cycle.

Given that not all schools are making similar use of these guidelines, it would be valuable to know whether there is any association between level of implementation and their views on these same guidelines. As noted above (Table 4.7), we have divided schools into 'high', 'moderate' and 'low' implementers. When the views on the guidelines were broken down along these lines, no significant differences emerged.

Table 4.10 Usefulness of DES guidelines

	Percent of schools
Very useful	34.5
Useful	46.0
Hard to say	15.5
Not very useful	4.0
Not useful at all	—

Table entries are percentage of schools indicating that view of the guidelines
Missing data = 3

4.7 Response of students and teachers to RSE

The respondents were asked about the response of students to the RSE programme, as far as they could gauge. The results are shown in Table 4.11, which indicates that the students were perceived to be interested in the programme in the majority of schools. Only 16.6% found it 'hard to say' what the response of students was and none indicated that the students were not interested.

As is evident from Table 4.11, the vast majority of schools responded to this question, regardless of level of implementation. When an analysis similar to that for Table 4.10 was carried out (i.e. different levels of implementation), no significant differences emerged. In other words, schools saw that students responded positively, even when the exposure to the programme was modest.

Table 4.11 Response of post-primary students to RSE programme (perception of teachers)

	Percent of schools
Very interested	36.1
Interested	47.3
Hard to say	16.6
Not interested	–

Table entries are percentage of schools indicating that level of interest by pupils
Missing data = 7

The next question concerned a comparison of RSE with other aspects of SPHE. Specifically, it concerned how challenging the teachers in the school found the RSE programme. Table 4.12 shows that just under four-fifths of the teachers (78%) took the view that RSE was more challenging for teachers than the other features of SPHE. Almost all of the others indicated that they found it 'hard to say'.

The important question that arises here concerns the reason why teachers find RSE challenging. One reason for this (the discomfort of some teachers in teaching RSE) will be explored below when we consider the factors that inhibit the full implementation of the programme. In addition, these factors will be explored in the presentation of the results from the individual schools.

Table 4.12 Challenge of RSE programme to post-primary teachers compared to other features of SPHE

	Percent of schools
RSE is much more challenging	32.2
RSE is more challenging	45.4
Hard to say	19.5
RSE is less challenging	2.9
RSE is much less challenging	–

Table entries are percentage of schools indicating that RSE is more/less challenging
Missing data = 4

4.8 Support for and evaluation of RSE implementation

Respondents were asked about the extent to which various checks are carried out in schools to see whether or not the RSE programme is actually implemented. The results are shown in Table 4.13. From this it is evident that the only party that is perceived as significant in relation to monitoring the implementation of RSE is the SPHE support service. Just 48.6% of the schools said that the service 'tried to ensure that RSE was implemented.' Overall, Table 4.13 shows that schools see at best a modest interest by various stakeholders in the implementation of RSE. An important question concerns the importance of this factor (lack of monitoring of implementation) compared to other influences in preventing a fuller implementation of RSE. This issue is examined below and relevant results presented in Table 4.14.

This is an important issue: unlike examination subjects, which have a 'built-in' monitoring mechanism through examination results, SPHE generally and RSE specifically have no built-in monitoring mechanism. A case can also be made for considering how SPHE can be assessed in a way that is appropriate to the aims and objectives of the programme.

Table 4.13 Evaluation of implementation of RSE

	Tries to ensure that RSE is implemented	Takes some interest in implementation	Takes no interest in implementation	Missing data (n)
DES Inspectors	7.1	31.9	61.0	3
Board of Management	9.0	45.2	45.8	4
Parents (individual)	3.1	58.5	38.4	4
Parents' Association	2.1	43.2	54.8	4
SPHE Support Service	48.6	39.9	11.6	4

Note: Table entries are percentages (row percentages) of schools

4.9 Factors inhibiting implementation of RSE

The participants in the survey were asked about the various factors that make it difficult to implement an RSE programme fully. Specifically, they were asked to say how important in their view were several factors, including parental and societal attitudes, curricular factors and some factors that were specific to schools. The results are shown in Table 4.14. This table indicates that two factors, covering much the same issue, seem more important than any other: the overcrowded curriculum and the pressure of examination subjects. It can be seen from the table that nearly three-fifths (59%) of schools identified the overcrowded curriculum as being 'very important' in preventing the full implementation of the RSE programme, while only a minority of less than 5% thought this was 'not important'.

It is also clear that the attitudes of parents and, indeed, traditional attitudes in Ireland are not regarded as particularly important in the full implementation of RSE. Several features of attitudes are shown in Table 4.14, and the consistent response is that negative views or traditional attitudes are not important. For example, 'traditional attitudes' are regarded by only 14.6% of the schools as very important in preventing full implementation of RSE, and many more than that thought such attitudes were 'not important'.

It is also of interest that two factors are not perceived as being especially important. The first has to do with monitoring of RSE implementation by the DES. This was not perceived to be an especially important factor. Similarly, 'disagreement on what should be taught in RSE classes' was thought by just 11.6% of the schools to be a 'very important' factor in preventing the full implementation of the programme, while 42.8% thought this was 'not important'.

One important factor that is potentially quite interesting has to do with the findings regarding 'the discomfort of some teachers in teaching RSE.' Over 40% of the schools took the view that this was a 'very important' factor and less than 10% were of the view that it was unimportant. This issue of the discomfort of some teachers with RSE is important since this is one of the first studies that has specifically focused on this matter. It has implications for the identification of RSE teachers. The obvious implication is that teachers who are uncomfortable in teaching the subject should not be assigned classes in this area, certainly when not having attended RSE training. This is a consideration that has important implications for identifying teachers to teach the programme. This topic will be revisited in the final chapter in the context of the main conclusions and recommendations arising from this research.

Table 4.14 Perceived importance of various factors in preventing full implementation of RSE in post-primary schools

	Very important	Quite important	Somewhat important	Not important	Missing data (n)
Negative views of some parents towards RSE	18.1	19.9	32.2	29.8	4
The overcrowded curriculum	58.7	23.5	13.4	4.5	3
Traditional attitudes in Ireland	14.6	21.6	37.4	26.3	3
The pressure of examination subjects	40.4	27.0	16.9	15.7	4
Lack of parental support for RSE	12.8	18.6	32.6	36.0	3
Lack of monitoring of RSE programmes by Department of Education	18.5	24.3	26.6	30.6	3
The need to complete courses in so many subjects	47.2	24.2	12.9	15.7	3
Disagreement on what should be taught in RSE classes	11.6	23.7	22.0	42.8	3
Discomfort of some teachers in teaching RSE	43.2	27.3	20.5	9.1	3
Lack of a school policy on RSE	32.2	19.9	18.1	29.8	3

Note: Table entries are percentage of schools (row percentages)

4.10 Help and support for RSE

The participants were asked about the views of the parents in their school about the implementation of an RSE programme, specifically how supportive parents had been. The results are shown in Table 4.15. The majority of parents (60.4%) are perceived by schools to be supportive of RSE, while most of the others see parents as not being especially interested, or else they find it difficult to gauge the views of parents. It is particularly interesting that less than 2% of schools see parents as being either not supportive of RSE or as being against RSE being taught. This finding is remarkably consistent with the earlier findings in this study, which indicated that parental views are supportive of RSE and its importance. It is interesting that nearly 90% of the schools felt confident that they knew the views of parents.

This is an important finding and will be considered again in the context of the recommendations for the future development of the RSE programme.

Table 4.15 Perceived support of parents for RSE

	Percent of schools
Very supportive	24.6
Supportive	35.8
Not especially interested	24.0
Not supportive	0.6
Against RSE being taught in schools	1.1
Not able to gauge parents' views	14.0

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 5

The participants in the survey were asked whether having the RSE programme set in the context of SPHE has helped its implementation, in their opinion. The options ranged from 'helped a lot' to 'has been very unhelpful'. As can be seen from Table 4.16, 85% of the schools were of the view that this arrangement was helpful. About one-seventh (13.9%) of the schools thought that it had not mattered much and only a tiny minority (2 schools, in fact) thought the guidelines were unhelpful.

Later, some of the individual outcomes presented here will be analysed by key variable, like whether or not the schools were 'high' implementers of RSE. For the moment it is noteworthy that there were no significant differences between the various categories of schools in relation to their views on the extent to which the SPHE context helped the implementation of the RSE programme.

This finding regarding the importance of the SPHE context is an important outcome, since an SPHE curriculum is being developed for the senior cycle. It is also important in the context of the issues around curriculum overload.

Table 4.16 Extent to which SPHE context helps implementation of RSE

	Percent of schools
Helps a lot	46.1
Helps somewhat	38.9
Has not mattered much	13.9
Is somewhat unhelpful	0.6
Is very unhelpful	0.6

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 4

The respondents were asked about the change in the pattern and extent of implementation of the RSE programme since the major move to implement the programme in schools in the late nineties. Specifically, they were asked how implementation had changed since then in their school. The results shown in Table 4.17 are very interesting in that they show that 66.6% of the schools take the view that there has been a better implementation of RSE in their schools since the late nineties. It can also be seen that less than one-third (29.4%) thought that the situation was about the same and a minority of less than 4% took the view that there was less implementation in their schools than at the introduction of RSE.

These findings are important in that they give the views of schools about the present state of implementation compared to a 'baseline' of some years ago. A particularly important question is whether or not the perceptions of the schools are in line with other stakeholders. This will become clearer in the chapters presenting the results of the interviews.

Table 4.17 Extent to which implementation of RSE has changed in post-primary schools

	Percent of schools
There is a much better implementation of an RSE programme	25.4
There is a somewhat better implementation of an RSE programme	41.2
The situation is about the same	29.4
There is somewhat less implementation of an RSE programme	2.8
There is much less implementation of an RSE programme	1.1

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 5

4.11 The future of RSE

The final set of questions was concerned with the future of RSE. A first question in this regard concerned the *need*, compared to five years ago, for a relationships and sexuality programme in schools, in the opinion of our informants. The results shown in Table 4.18 indicate that the vast majority (86.3%) of the schools took the view that there was a greater need for an RSE programme in schools now than was the case five years ago. The remainder took the view that the need was the same as five years ago. What is especially striking is not one school took the view that there was a lesser need than was the case five years ago.

This is an extremely important finding and has major implications for curriculum planning in the future. A further analysis of the extent to which this pattern held in all kinds of schools will be presented later in this chapter.

Table 4.18 Perceived need for RSE in post-primary schools

	Percent of schools
A much greater need than five years ago	65.6
A greater need than five years ago	20.7
About the same need as five years ago	13.7
A lesser need than five years ago	—

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 3

It is convenient for some purposes to divide the subjects in the post-primary curriculum into those that are examined in public examinations (Leaving Certificate, Junior Certificate) and those that are not examined (e.g. SPHE). The respondents were asked about the non-examination subjects on the curriculum, and specifically whether it was harder to get time for these in schools over the last few years. The results are displayed in Table 4.19. It can be seen that the majority of the schools (over 70%) were of the view that it was more difficult now to get time for non-examination subjects. Only about one-fifth (21%) said that the situation was the same as a few years ago and a small minority of schools thought that it was easier to get time for non-examination subjects than was the case a few years ago. This ties in with a number of other features of the present results showing that the over-crowded curriculum and the pressure of examinations are major problems in ensuring that adequate time is available for the RSE programme.

These findings raise important issues not only for RSE and the SPHE programme but also for the curriculum as a whole. There are major educational arguments for having subjects on the curriculum that are not examined in the traditional form through examinations. Furthermore, the pressure for having such subjects is growing as there is concern about a variety of issues, including substance misuse and suicide. This finding therefore merits serious attention.

Table 4.19 Non-examination subjects on the timetable

	Percent of schools
Much harder to get time for non-examination subjects	45.3
Somewhat harder to get time for non-examination subjects	26.0
The situation is similar to a few years ago	21.0
Easier to get time for non-examination subjects	7.2
Much easier to get time for non-examination subjects	0.6

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 3

The schools were asked about factors that would be helpful in the full implementation of the RSE programme. The results are shown below in Table 4.20. Three factors were identified as being especially helpful in the implementation of RSE: expanded support service, more outside facilitators in schools and an increase in in-service provision. It emerges that 87% of schools were of the view that an expanded support service would help a lot or help somewhat. Slightly fewer schools (79% and 84% respectively) were of the view that the availability of more outside facilitators and an increase in in-service provision would help a lot/somewhat. It is interesting that the factors that were considered to be most helpful had to do with the general area of support and enhancement of skills.

It is also worth noting that two of the other factors mentioned were not considered by schools to be especially likely to be helpful in the implementation of RSE. Less than one-fifth of the schools (18.3%) took the view that a greater involvement of parents would help a lot while only one-tenth (10.8%) said that changing the RSE programme would help a lot in implementation.

This information will be valuable in providing directions for the future development of RSE. Obviously, future development of RSE will need to be considered in the context of the factors that were considered to prevent full implementation of RSE, as shown in Table 4.14 (overcrowded curriculum, discomfort of some teachers in teaching RSE). Both sets of factors are relevant to ensuring a full implementation of the programme.

Table 4.20 Factors helpful in the implementation of the RSE programme in post-primary schools

	Would help a lot	Would help somewhat	Would help a little	Would not help	Missing data (n)
Expanded support service	61.6	25.0	9.9	3.5	3
Increase in in-service provision	57.0	26.7	10.5	5.8	4
More outside facilitators in schools	46.2	33.3	14.6	5.8	4
Greater involvement of parents	18.3	39.6	26.8	15.2	3
Changes in the RSE programme	10.8	25.7	40.5	23.0	3

Note: Table entries are row percentages

4.12 Patterns of response and implementation in different kinds of schools

The information presented so far has examined the situation in the system as a whole (largely considering the total sample of schools). We have also given attention to the pattern of implementation in different kinds of schools (boys' secondary, girls' secondary, mixed secondary schools, community colleges/vocational schools, and community/comprehensive schools). It is also important to establish other dimensions along which schools differ and which may influence aspects of implementation. These include the socio-economic background of the school, school size and the type of community served by the school. These are examined below.

4.12.1 Schools designated disadvantaged and other schools

An important question is whether those schools *designated disadvantaged* are different from others with respect to aspects of implementation. A comparison was made on all of the relevant measures in the study and, with only one exception, the differences were neither statistically nor substantially significant. For illustrative purposes, some of the relevant comparisons are discussed below.

Table 4.21 shows a comparison between disadvantaged and other schools on the extent to which schools had developed policies on RSE. The differences are minimal, with similar percentages of each kind of school having developed a policy. Another important point is that there were no significant differences between disadvantaged and other schools in relation to other indices of actual implementation of the programme (number of classes and other related measures).

Table 4.21 Policy development in relation to RSE

	Schools designated disadvantaged	Other schools
An RSE policy has been agreed by all the relevant partners and is available to interested parties	36.9	45.0
An RSE policy has been agreed and is available within the school	16.7	15.5
An RSE policy has been discussed but not agreed	4.6	9.3
An RSE policy is in the process of being agreed	6.3	4.7
There are plans to develop an RSE policy in the future	16.7	14.0
The school does not have an RSE policy	18.8	11.6
Missing data (n)	1	3

Note: Table entries are column percentages

Whether or not there were differences between disadvantaged and other schools in relation to implementation, it is worth knowing about other aspects of schools' experiences. For example, do disadvantaged schools find the area more or less challenging than other aspects of SPHE?

Table 4.22 shows a breakdown for disadvantaged and other schools. In general, it seems that schools designated disadvantaged find somewhat less challenge in the RSE area compared to other domains of SPHE. This difference is statistically significant (Chi-square = 9.07, $p < .05$). The major difference centres on the percentages who thought that RSE was less challenging, with over 8% of disadvantaged schools thinking this was the case while less than 1% of other schools took this view.

We can only speculate at this stage as to why these outcomes emerged. The case studies may give some indication about this. Another possibility is examined in the next table.

Table 4.22 Perceived challenge of RSE programme to teachers compared to other features of SPHE in disadvantaged and other post-primary schools

	Schools designated disadvantaged	Other schools
RSE is much more challenging	36.2	35.9
RSE is more challenging	34.0	44.6
Hard to say	21.3	18.7
RSE is less challenging	8.5	0.8
RSE is much less challenging	–	–

Note: Table entries are percentage of schools indicating that RSE is more/less challenging
Missing data = 4.

If at least some schools serving disadvantaged communities find RSE relatively less challenging than other schools, then it might be expected that the discomfort of some teachers in teaching RSE might be relatively less in those schools. The breakdown for this variable is shown Table 4.23.

This table indicates that there is neither a substantial nor a statistical difference with regard to the discomfort of some teachers in relation to RSE in the disadvantaged and other schools. However, it should be noted that the phrasing of the question was in general terms – ‘How important in your view are each of the following...?’ - rather than specifically in relation to the respondent’s own school.

Table 4.23 Discomfort of some teachers as a factor in implementation of RSE: breakdown of disadvantaged and other post-primary schools

	Schools designated disadvantaged	Other schools
Very important	41.3	43.7
Quite important	30.4	25.4
Somewhat important	19.6	21.4
Not important	8.7	9.5

Note: Table entries are column percentages
Missing data = 3

Since the ‘overcrowded curriculum’ was identified as a major factor in preventing the full implementation of the RSE programme, it is of interest to know whether or not this factor might have operated differently in disadvantaged and other schools. Table 4.24 shows the breakdown for this factor.

No substantial or statistically significant difference emerges here, indicating that the variable operates similarly in both kinds of schools. Obviously, it is important to recall that there was no overall difference in level of implementation in disadvantaged and other schools. Hence, it might be expected that the relevant influences would operate similarly.

Table 4.24 The ‘overcrowded curriculum’ as a factor in implementation of RSE: breakdown of disadvantaged and other post-primary schools

	Schools designated disadvantaged	Other schools
Very important	58.7	59.7
Quite important	21.7	24.0
Somewhat important	15.2	11.6
Not important	4.3	4.7

Note: Table entries are column percentages
Missing data = 4

Three other variables are of considerable interest: the extent to which the programme was taught exclusively by school staff or others, the support of parents and the perceived need for the programme. As noted above, two arrangements dominated the delivery of the RSE programme: the programme was taught (i) exclusively by the school staff or (ii) largely from within school but with some outside facilitators.

Table 4.25 provides a breakdown of this factor for disadvantaged and other schools. From this table it is evident that the pattern for disadvantaged and for other schools is almost identical. We conclude, therefore, that in both types of school, the dominant arrangement is that the RSE programme is taught by teachers from within the school and in the others it is delivered largely by the school staff but with assistance from outside facilitators.

Table 4.25 Involvement of post-primary schools and outside facilitators in RSE

	Schools designated disadvantaged	Other schools
RSE is delivered exclusively by teachers from our own school	57.8	58.5
RSE is delivered mainly by teachers from our school but with assistance from outside facilitators	40.0	39.8
RSE is delivered by teachers in the school and by outside facilitators, with each having an equal part	2.2	0.8
RSE is delivered largely by outside facilitators	–	0.8

Table entries are percentages of schools with the arrangement specified
Missing data = 7.

As noted above, the overall pattern of results showed that schools thought that parents were supportive of RSE. The breakdown shown in Table 4.26 indicates that this was true for both disadvantaged and other schools.

Table 4.26 Perceived support of parents for RSE: breakdown for disadvantaged and other post-primary schools

	Schools designated disadvantaged	Other schools
Very supportive	27.1	24.4
Supportive	29.2	39.4
Not especially interested	27.1	21.3
Not supportive	2.1	–
Against RSE being taught in schools	2.1	0.8
Not able to gauge parents' views	12.5	14.2

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage). Missing data = 5

As noted above, schools were asked about the need for an RSE programme compared to five years ago. The breakdown shown in Table 4.27 indicates that while there was a tendency for schools designated disadvantaged to be somewhat more likely to say that there was a greater need than was the case five years ago, this difference did not emerge as statistically significant. We conclude, therefore, that both disadvantaged and other schools took the view that there was indeed a greater need for RSE than was the case when the programme was first introduced.

Table 4.27 Perceived need for RSE in schools in disadvantaged and other post-primary schools

	Schools designated disadvantaged	Other schools
A much greater need than five years ago	70.5	61.5
A greater need than five years ago	22.5	22.3
About the same need as five years ago	7.0	16.2
A lesser need than five years ago	—	—

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage)
Missing data = 5

4.12.2 Type of community served by school

As noted in the earlier part of this report (dealing with methodology), schools were asked about the type of community served by the school, specifically whether the community served was largely urban, mix of urban and rural or largely rural.

While an analysis was carried out for all of the measures in the study, here we give attention to some that are of particular interest. A key variable in implementation is having a policy in place. Table 4.28 provides a breakdown for schools serving different kinds of communities on this variable. While the statistical test (Chi-square) did not yield a statistically significant result on the measure, it is worth noting that there is trend evident in the data. Specifically, urban schools were most likely to have a policy, schools serving rural communities least likely and those with a mix of town and rural were somewhat in between.

When comparisons were made with other measures of implementation, these turned out to be close to identical for the different kinds of schools, indicating that whatever difference exists is around the development of a written policy.

Table 4.28 Policy development in relation to RSE in post-primary schools serving different communities

	Mainly urban	Mix of town/ rural	Mainly rural
An RSE policy has been agreed by all the relevant partners and is available to interested parties	49.1	44.7	33.3
An RSE policy has been agreed and is available within the school	17.5	13.8	16.7
An RSE policy has been discussed but not agreed	3.5	7.4	13.3
An RSE policy is in the process of being agreed	1.8	6.4	6.7
There are plans to develop an RSE policy in the future	12.3	16.0	16.7
The school does not have an RSE policy	15.8	11.7	13.3

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentages).
Missing data = 6

As noted above, the most common way in which RSE was taught was either exclusively by school personnel or else by school personnel with the assistance of outside facilitators. It is of interest to know whether there were any differences in relation to arrangements for schools serving different kinds of communities.

The information in Table 4.29 indicates some differences, which did not, however, reach statistical significance (Chi-square). There was a tendency for rural schools to have relatively more involvement of outside facilitators, while in urban schools the programme was somewhat more likely to be taught exclusively by school staff.

Table 4.29 Involvement of schools and outside facilitators in RSE in post-primary schools serving different kinds of communities

	Mainly urban	Mix of town/rural	Mainly rural
RSE is delivered exclusively by teachers from our own school	61.8	59.6	50.0
RSE is delivered mainly by teachers from our school but with assistance from outside facilitators	34.5	40.4	46.4
RSE is delivered by teachers in the school and by outside facilitators, with each having an equal part	1.8	—	3.6
RSE is delivered largely by outside facilitators	1.8	—	—

Table entries are percentages of schools with the arrangement specified
Missing data = 8

It is of interest to know whether there is any difference in emphasis in the programme of schools serving different kinds of communities. Do all kinds of schools emphasise biological aspects to the same extent? As noted above, there was a tendency for schools in general to place relatively more emphasis on the social/personal aspects than on the biological aspects.

Tables 4.30 and 4.31 respectively provide breakdowns for two features of the RSE programme: 'biological aspects of reproduction' and 'relationships'. While the statistical test did not yield a statistically significant result for the differences shown in either of these tables, something of a pattern is evident in Table 4.30. Specifically, it seems that relatively fewer rural schools reported putting a 'major' emphasis on biological aspects of reproduction. However, the pattern is not consistent, especially when a comparison is made with regard to schools placing some or little emphasis in this feature of the programme. Overall, the differences with regard to the emphasis placed by schools serving different kinds of communities in the area of 'relationships' are neither statistically nor substantially significant.

Table 4.30 Emphasis on biological aspects of reproduction in RSE in post-primary schools serving different kinds of communities

	Mainly urban	Mix of town/rural	Mainly rural
Major emphasis	28.3	25.3	14.8
Considerable emphasis	49.1	41.4	70.4
Some/little emphasis	22.6	33.3	14.8

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 6

Table 4.31 Emphasis on 'relationships' in RSE in post-primary schools serving different kinds of communities

	Mainly urban	Mix of town/rural	Mainly rural
Major emphasis	61.1	55.2	57.1
Considerable emphasis	31.5	37.9	42.9
Some/little emphasis	7.5	6.8	—

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 6

We have already presented the information on the perception of the implementation of RSE and specifically the extent to which this had improved since the introduction of the programme in the late nineties. It is of particular interest to know whether there were different views on this matter in schools serving urban and rural communities.

As can be seen, the schools serving mainly rural communities took a more optimistic view on this question, with 86.7% taking the view that there was a much better/somewhat better implementation than at the beginning of the programme. Conversely, fewer schools serving rural communities thought that the situation was 'about the same'. This difference turned out to be statistically significant: Chi-square = 15.46, $p < .05$. This is an interesting finding and is in line with information on the process of social change.

Table 4.32 Extent to which implementation of RSE has changed in post-primary schools serving different kinds of communities

	Mainly urban	Mix of town/rural	Mainly rural
There is a much better implementation of an RSE programme	27.3	23.9	26.7
There is a somewhat better implementation of an RSE programme	43.6	33.7	60.0
The situation is about the same	25.5	39.1	6.7
There is somewhat less implementation of an RSE programme	1.8	3.3	3.4
There is much less implementation of an RSE programme	1.8	–	3.3

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage)
Missing data = 9

Above it emerged that schools in general took the view that there was a greater need for an RSE programme than was the case five years ago. It is of interest to know whether there are any differences on this matter for schools serving different kinds of communities. Table 4.33 shows this information. This table indicates that the pattern for each kind of school is virtually identical, indicating the perceived need is greater than was the case five years ago in all three types of school.

Table 4.33 Perceived need for RSE in post-primary schools serving different kinds of communities

	Mainly urban	Mix of town/rural	Mainly rural
A much greater need than five years ago	66.7	65.3	64.5
A greater need than five years ago	19.3	20.0	22.6
About the same need as five years ago	14.0	14.7	12.9
A lesser need than five years ago	–	–	–

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 8

4.12.3 School size

While a full examination has been carried out on all variables with regard to the effect associated with school size, only a small number of these are reported on here since the differences were neither substantial nor statistically significant.

Table 4.34 shows the association between school size and whether or not the school had developed an RSE policy. While it is the case that larger schools were somewhat more likely to have an RSE policy in place than were smaller schools, this difference did not emerge as statistically significant. Furthermore, the relationship is not straightforward. In the category of not having a school policy small schools were most likely to say they did not have a policy, but the very largest schools were next most likely to report this.

Table 4.34 Policy development in relation to RSE in post-primary schools of different sizes

	< 200 students	200-400 students	401-600 students	> 600 students
An RSE policy has been agreed by all the relevant partners and is available to interested parties	30.4	42.6	43.1	53.3
An RSE policy has been agreed and is available within the school	17.4	16.7	13.8	15.6
An RSE policy has been discussed but not agreed	8.7	9.3	6.9	4.4
An RSE policy is in the process of being agreed	4.3	5.6	6.9	2.2
There are plans to develop an RSE policy in the future	13.0	20.4	15.5	8.9
The school does not have an RSE policy	26.1	5.6	13.8	15.6

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 8

As noted above, the majority of schools had an arrangement whereby RSE was taught exclusively by school staff, while in almost all of the remaining schools the situation was that the programme was implemented largely by the school staff but with the assistance of outside facilitators. It is of interest to know whether there is any difference with regard to such arrangements in schools of different sizes.

Table 4.35 provides the relevant information. This shows that while there was a slight tendency for smaller schools to deliver the RSE programme exclusively from within the school staff, this difference is not substantial or significant. We conclude, therefore, that the dominant approach was for schools to implement their own programme and that other schools did so but with some support from outside facilitators, and that this approach applied across schools of all sizes.

Table 4.35 Involvement of schools and outside facilitators in RSE in post-primary schools of different sizes

	< 200 students	200-400 students	401-600 students	> 600 students
RSE is delivered exclusively by teachers from our own school	63.6	62.0	53.6	58.1
RSE is delivered mainly by teachers from our school but with assistance from outside facilitators	31.8	38.0	44.6	39.5
RSE is delivered by teachers in the school and by outside facilitators, with each having an equal part	4.5	–	1.8	–
RSE is delivered largely by outside facilitators	–	–	–	2.3

Table entries are percentages of schools with the arrangement specified (column percentages)
Missing data = 9

It is of interest to know whether schools of different sizes took the same or different views on the extent to which the RSE programme was being implemented compared to the time of its inception. It will be recalled that the overall picture was of schools talking the view that the situation had improved, in the sense that there was a better implementation than was the case when the programme was first introduced. Table 4.36 shows the views of schools of different sizes with regard to implementation. The difference between schools of different sizes was neither substantial nor significant. We conclude that the extent of change in implementation is broadly the same in different sizes of schools.

Table 4.36 Extent to which implementation of RSE has changed in post-primary schools of different sizes

	< 200 students	200-400 students	401-600 students	> 600 students
There is a much better implementation of an RSE programme	18.2	27.8	28.1	23.3
There is a somewhat better implementation of an RSE programme	54.5	42.6	31.6	44.2
The situation is about the same	18.2	25.9	38.6	27.9
There is somewhat less implementation of an RSE programme	4.5	1.9	1.8	4.7
There is much less implementation of an RSE programme	4.5	1.9	–	–

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 10

4.13 Presence of an SPHE co-ordinator

The vast majority of the schools in the survey (nearly 85%) had appointed an SPHE co-ordinator. To what extent were there differences associated with having a co-ordinator in the school? It is not unreasonable to expect that there might well be greater implementation of the RSE programme in schools with an SPHE co-ordinator, and possibly some other effects. Table 4.37 shows the percentage of schools that have developed policies broken down for those schools with and without an SPHE co-ordinator. There is a major difference between the two categories of schools, with those with a co-ordinator being more likely to have a policy in place. As can be seen from Table 4.37, while over three-fifths (63.7%) of the schools with a co-ordinator have a policy in place, this is the case for just two-fifths (35.7%) of the schools without a co-ordinator. This difference is substantially and statistically significant (Chi-square = 14.82, $p < .01$), and is the strongest difference that has emerged in any of the breakdowns that have been carried out.

Table 4.37 Policy development in relation to RSE in post-primary schools with and without an SPHE co-ordinator

	Has an SPHE co-ordinator	Does not have an SPHE co-ordinator
An RSE policy has been agreed by all the relevant partners and is available to interested parties	48.0	25.0
An RSE policy has been agreed and is available within the school	15.7	10.7
An RSE policy has been discussed but not agreed	8.0	3.6
An RSE policy is in the process of being agreed	4.7	7.1
There are plans to develop an RSE policy in the future	13.3	21.4
The school does not have an RSE policy	9.3	32.1

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentage).
Missing data = 9

It is also of interest to know whether the arrangements for the delivery of RSE are different in schools that have an SPHE co-ordinator and those that do not. As can be seen from Table 4.38, there is a tendency for those schools with an SPHE co-ordinator to be somewhat more likely to involve outside facilitators. While this is an interesting finding, the difference is not statistically significant, in part because the number in the category of schools without a co-ordinator is rather small.

Table 4.38 Involvement of schools and outside facilitators in RSE in post-primary schools with and without an SPHE co-ordinator

	Has an SPHE co-ordinator	Does not have an SPHE co-ordinator
RSE is delivered exclusively by teachers from our own school	55.9	72.0
RSE is delivered mainly by teachers from our school but with assistance from outside facilitators	42.0	28.0
RSE is delivered by teachers in the school and by outside facilitators, with each having an equal part	1.4	–
RSE is delivered largely by outside facilitators	0.7	–

Table entries are percentages of schools with the arrangement specified (column percentages)
Missing data = 8

What is the perception of schools with and without an SPHE co-ordinator with regard to the implementation of the RSE programme, compared to the time when the programme was first introduced in the late nineties? This comparison is shown in Table 4.39.

From this table it is evident that schools with an SPHE co-ordinator are twice as likely than schools without a co-ordinator to feel that there is currently 'a much better implementation of RSE' than there was five years ago. However, because the differences are not as substantial in relation to other responses, the overall difference did not emerge as statistically significant. Nevertheless, the direction of this difference is interesting and ties in with the finding that schools with an SPHE co-ordinator were implementing the programme better than those that had not made such an appointment.

Table 4.39 Extent to which implementation of RSE has changed in post-primary schools with and without an SPHE co-ordinator

	Has an SPHE co-ordinator	Does not have an SPHE co-ordinator
There is a much better implementation of an RSE programme	28.1	14.8
There is a somewhat better implementation of an RSE programme	38.4	51.9
The situation is about the same	29.5	29.6
There is somewhat less implementation of an RSE programme	2.7	3.7
There is much less implementation of an RSE programme	1.4	–

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentages)
Missing data = 10

4.14 Completion of questionnaire

As noted above, the questionnaire was completed by the SPHE co-ordinator in just over three-fifths of schools, by the principal in over one-fifth, and by some other staff member in the remaining schools. It is of interest to know whether there are any differences associated with this. It might be expected that assigning the responsibility for completing the questionnaire to the SPHE co-ordinator might be associated with other priorities, especially the importance given to SPHE/RSE.

Table 4.40 shows a breakdown of policy development associated with who completed the questionnaires. There are quite strong differences, which in fact emerged as statistically significant (Chi-square = 26.59 $p < .01$). The most striking difference is in relation to the first option (policy agreed...available to all parties). This was the case in over 56% of schools where the questionnaire was completed by the SPHE co-ordinator but in less than half of this percentage in schools where the principal or another staff member has been responsible for the questionnaire.

Table 4.40 Policy development in relation to RSE in post-primary schools, related to person completing questionnaire

	Completed by principal	Completed by SPHE co-ordinator	Completed by another
An RSE policy has been agreed by all the relevant partners and is available to interested parties	28.6	56.6	25.0
An RSE policy has been agreed and is available within the school	22.9	14.1	10.7
An RSE policy has been discussed but not agreed	11.4	4.0	14.3
An RSE policy is in the process of being agreed	14.3	1.0	7.1
There are plans to develop an RSE policy in the future	14.3	11.1	21.4
The school does not have an RSE policy	8.6	13.1	21.4

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentages)
Missing data = 12

Other differences were not nearly as strong. In Table 4.41 the arrangements for the implementation of RSE are shown. What is interesting is that there was a slight tendency for those schools with the SPHE co-ordinator completing the questionnaire to have somewhat greater involvement of outside facilitators. However, it should be stressed that this difference is not statistically significant.

Table 4.41 Involvement of post-primary schools and outside facilitators in RSE, related to person completing questionnaire

	Completed by principal	Completed by SPHE co-ordinator	Completed by another
RSE is delivered exclusively by teachers from our own school	63.6	55.2	66.7
RSE is delivered mainly by teachers from our school but with assistance from outside facilitators	33.3	42.7	33.3
RSE is delivered by teachers in the school and by outside facilitators, with each having an equal part	3.0	1.0	–
RSE is delivered largely by outside facilitators	–	1.0	–

Table entries are percentages of schools with the arrangement specified
Missing data = 8

Finally, it is of interest to know whether there is any association with the perception of how well the programme is implemented since it was launched. This information is shown in Table 4.42. The main point of interest is in those schools where the questionnaire was completed by someone other than the principal or the SPHE co-ordinator. These schools were more likely to indicate that there was a ‘much better’ implementation than the other schools. However, while this difference is quite striking, the overall significance does not actually meet the required level ($p < .09$).

However, looking the pattern emerging over the tables, it is interesting that the person completing the questionnaire was apparently associated with some other factors, such as implementation of the programme.

Table 4.42 Extent to which implementation of RSE has changed, related to person completing questionnaire

	Completed by principal	Completed by SPHE co-ordinator	Completed by another
There is a much better implementation of an RSE programme	28.6	26.8	18.5
There is a somewhat better implementation of an RSE programme	45.7	42.3	33.3
The situation is about the same	20.0	29.9	33.3
There is somewhat less implementation of an RSE programme	5.7	–	11.1
There is much less implementation of an RSE programme	–	1.0	3.7

Note: Table entries are percentages of schools (column percentages)
Missing data = 12

4.15 Conclusions 1: Overall findings

A number of conclusions emerge from the survey. Firstly, we set out some of the main conclusion with regard to schools as a whole and then look at some conclusions with regard to differences between schools. This is not meant to be a comprehensive discussion, since the main features will be examined again in the context of other findings in later chapters.

Firstly, as regards implementation of the RSE programme, most schools implement the programme at least to some degree. Many more schools teach RSE in the junior cycle than in the senior cycle. In fact, close to half of the schools did not have any programme for the senior cycle. Significantly fewer schools have a policy in place than actually teach RSE. While it is difficult to give a simple indication of whether or not a school was 'implementing' RSE or not, it was possible to give a picture of implementation based on three indicators: policy in place, number of years in which the programme was taught and number of classes devoted to RSE. Based on these criteria, approximately 40% of the schools are high implementers, 36% are moderate and 24% are low implementers.

Secondly, it is of particular interest to compare the policy development and the implementation of RSE in the different kinds of school - voluntary secondary boys' schools, voluntary secondary girls' schools, mixed voluntary secondary schools, community/comprehensive schools and community colleges/vocational schools. The indications are that schools serving boys only tend to be less likely to have a policy and that these schools devote rather less time to RSE. It is interesting that this finding is reminiscent of the picture emerging from the earlier study of the implementation of RSE (Morgan 2000).

Thirdly, in the teaching and learning of RSE, the strongest emphasis is on relationships and on rights and responsibilities. In contrast, the aspects of RSE focusing on physiological, biological features seemed to be given rather less of an emphasis. This is a particularly interesting outcome since young people will identify RSE only with the biological features, thus at least partly accounting for the discrepancy between the accounts of schools and students on their experiences of RSE.

Fourthly, it is of major interest to know whether school staff members or personnel from outside the school are involved in the delivery of RSE. Our results show that in nearly 60% of schools, RSE is delivered only by teachers from within the schools. In almost all of the remainder the programme is largely delivered by teachers but with assistance from outside facilitators. Other arrangements were virtually non-existent. This is an important finding, in that it indicates that the only options for further development lie largely in deciding between these options. It also raises the question of what kinds of external facilitators are most helpful in a school.

Fifthly, in the survey there are several very positive indications of the success of the programme. Schools thought that the vast majority of pupils had engaged with the programme. They also said that there was an improvement in most schools in the provision since RSE was launched in the nineties. There were also positive views about the success of the programme, in that the schools were very positive about the support of parents and about the value of the guidelines for SPHE.

Finally, what are the factors that prevent full implementation of RSE? The schools took the view that the 'overcrowded' curriculum and the pressure of examination subjects were most important in this regard. It is especially interesting that attitudes of parents and, indeed, traditional attitudes in Ireland were not regarded as particularly important in the full implementation of RSE. However, one important factor that was identified had to do with 'the discomfort of some teachers in teaching RSE!'

4.16 Conclusions 2: Differences between schools

In the second part of this chapter, the major differences between types of schools have been examined. What is most striking about these differences is that, with some exceptions, the differences are quite modest and in most cases are not worthy of attention. This is important, since it indicates that the pattern of results that has been discussed above holds true for all kinds of schools. Below we look at the main conclusions regarding the differences that were associated with the most important variables in the study.

Firstly, when a comparison was made between schools designated disadvantaged and other schools in the survey, the differences in relation to implementation were minimal. However, a significant difference emerged with regard to the experiences of schools in relation to RSE. Specifically, it seems that schools designated disadvantaged reported that they found areas of RSE relatively less challenging than did the other schools, in comparison to other domains of SPHE. Interestingly, there were no differences between designated disadvantaged and other schools with regard to the arrangements put in place for the implementation of RSE (whether an outside agency was involved).

Secondly, there were some differences (one significant) associated with the type of community served by the school (urban vs. rural). Somewhat more schools serving urban communities had a policy in place than was the case with rural schools. Rural schools were somewhat more likely to have outside facilitators as opposed to having the programme totally organised from within the school. However, these differences were not statistically significant. The one statistical difference that did emerge reflected a belief in rural schools that there was a better implementation of the programme than was the case when it was launched.

Thirdly, school size was not a significant factor with regard to implementation, nor was it associated with differences in the perception of RSE. The same pattern was found in large and small schools with regard to all relevant variables examined, including whether RSE at the school was organised internally or involved external facilitators.

Fourthly, the presence of an SPHE co-ordinator in the school was found to be quite an important factor in the implementation of RSE. Those schools that had a co-ordinator were more likely to have a policy in place (statistically significant) and there was also a tendency for schools with a co-ordinator to have outside facilitators involved in the delivery of the programme.

Finally, there were substantial differences associated with the person completing the questionnaire, which probably reflect other factors in the school. Specifically, in those schools where the SPHE co-ordinator completed the questionnaire, there was a greater likelihood of an RSE policy being agreed and available.

Section III

*RSE Implementation:
The Perspectives of Government,
National and Regional Respondents*

Chapter 5

The introduction of RSE and early policy developments

As outlined in the methodology chapter, this study used qualitative data-collection techniques to investigate the policies, processes, activities and initiatives that impact on RSE implementation. As a first step, interviews were conducted with professionals with diverse roles in the implementation and delivery of Relationships and Sexuality Education, from representatives from the two government departments with joint responsibility for RSE (Department of Education and Science and the Department of Health and Children) through to individuals with responsibility for various aspects of RSE delivery at a regional or local level.

In this chapter – the first to report on the findings of these interviews – we discuss some important dimensions of early RSE policy and policy implementation. Developments tend to unfold incrementally in most areas of school policy and curriculum development and innovation. Correspondingly, the progress and implementation of policy can be influenced by factors that differ across time, and they may be subject to change. The introduction of RSE was announced during the mid-1990s, at a time when Ireland's social, economic and political landscape differed significantly from today. It is important, therefore, to document early RSE policy developments and, in particular, individuals' reflections on the issues that impacted on RSE policy implementation during this time. As will become apparent in later chapters, some of these issues continue to impact on RSE policy and programme implementation today.

Later in this chapter we present findings on the perceived value of RSE. This analysis also includes discussion of respondents' views on how and whether these benefits are adequately understood by schools, teachers, parents and by society at large.

5.1 Relationships and Sexuality Education: the early days

As outlined in Chapter 1, the introduction of RSE was influenced by a number of key developments and events during the 1980s and 1990s. Several respondents made explicit reference to what they perceived as a distinct climate of change during this period, particularly in relation to government and public concern about HIV/AIDS, child sexual abuse and the changing needs of young people. The HIV/AIDS epidemic, teenage pregnancy and related tragedies, as well as mounting recognition of the problem of child sexual abuse, were among the most frequently mentioned issues thought to have prompted the introduction of school-based RSE.

... all of this (RSE) emerged from the early 1980s onwards, you know, when HIV/AIDS came to the fore, but also alongside all of that there were various other issues at national level, particularly in relation to teenage pregnancy, and in the early 1990s there were several horrendous child abuse cases.

Department of Education and Science

Issues such as those cited above were recognised and responded to by the Education Minister of the day, Niamh Breathnach, according to one respondent:

There was a very strong commitment by the Minister, and there were regular instances like the Ann Lovett case.¹⁹ These cases would come to public attention at regular intervals and most certainly she [Minister] was concerned that we should begin to address the issue. And once the Expert Advisory Group reported, there was Department-wide support for bringing this work forward. And I think the primary concern was to meet the needs of young people, to take account of the changes in society and the ways in which young people's lives were changing and to ensure that the school system actually played its part in meeting their needs.

Department of Education and Science

The introduction of RSE was described by one Department of Education and Science official as an exceptional development at this time, presumably due to Ireland's historical conservatism in relation to sex and sexuality.²⁰ Significant also was the parallel investment in resources designed to support and propel the implementation of the programme, signalling a major commitment to RSE at that time on behalf of the Department of Education.

The overriding consideration here is that the introduction of RSE was quite unprecedented in the system, at a system-wide level of implementation. It was a huge programme and it absorbed enormous resources here in this Department. There was also a commitment to following through on the requirement to include RSE on the curriculum for all children.

Department of Education and Science

Respondents frequently drew attention to the philosophical underpinnings of RSE and, in particular, the programme's emphasis on the development of the *whole child*, rather than the more narrow aim of preventing negative outcomes:

RSE was firmly rooted in a vision of education that went beyond nurturing the intellectual. It sought to address the holistic needs of children and young people. So, in terms of looking at education as a process of development of the whole child, the belief was that the areas of personal growth and development and human relationships were important. So rather than focus on preventing problems and preventing issues, it was much more grounded in a vision of education that sought to develop and nurture the whole child.

RSE Training Support Service

¹⁹ The 'Ann Lovett case' is a reference to the tragedy, in 1984, of a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl, who, along with her newborn baby, died at an outdoor location during childbirth, after concealing her pregnancy.

²⁰ For a full account of historical conservatism in relation to public discussion of sex and sexuality see Inglis (1998a, b)

When discussing the context of the introduction of RSE, a number of interviewees made reference to the health education programmes that were in place prior to the introduction of RSE. Throughout the country, many schools had, for example, begun to deliver the North Western Health Board Life Skills Programme or 'On My Own Two Feet', a substance abuse prevention programme (see Chapter 2). One respondent suggested that RSE helped to bring coherence to pre-existing health education programmes and consolidated schools' earlier response to students' broader developmental needs. As a result, there was very considerable support for RSE among teachers at the time, which, in turn, facilitated the programme's introduction.

What helped the process at the outset was what I could only describe as an enormous groundswell of support for RSE. There were a number of educational initiatives underway at the time that dealt with aspects of RSE. So there was quite a lot happening on the ground and, I suppose, also a clear recognition and request from teachers themselves for something that was more structured, that was more coherent, if you like, rather than isolated packages going on.

RSE Training Support Service

The introduction of RSE was announced to schools by Circular,²¹ and the Department of Education also held a meeting with school principals prior to informing them of the introduction of the programme. However, while teachers may well have been supportive of the introduction of RSE, the response of principals and schools to the announcement of the programme was acknowledged to have been mixed.

I suppose there would have been a mixed reaction from schools. Schools would have been aware because of the media attention from the previous six months and would have known that something was coming. And the Circular, then, when it did arrive, I suppose people may have adopted a wait-and-see approach, you know, 'Where is this going to go?', 'We can't obviously start this in the morning because there are some aspects that need to be put in place before it can become a reality.'

Department of Education and Science

This account signals the difficulties associated with the time-lag between the initial announcement of RSE and the provision of a curriculum – accompanied by the requisite teaching materials – to enable the delivery of the programme (see below for further discussion). Significant also is that a number of respondents who had direct experience of the events surrounding the introduction of RSE felt that the Department of Education delivered the RSE directive to schools in the absence of adequate communication or consultation.

When RSE was introduced it was a good idea to introduce it, but I think that they put the cart before the horse in terms of delivering a mandate that all schools must develop a policy. And while it was good that it was kind of mandated in that way, I think that one of the things was that maybe the process of doing that could have been a lot softer and a lot gentler ... I think it was introduced badly as a programme.

Regional Development Officer

²¹ Circular 2/95 announced the introduction of RSE. See Chapter 2 for more detail on the chronology of events surrounding the introduction of RSE.

The time-lapse between the announcement of RSE and the introduction of the programme was acknowledged by both representatives of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Health and Children to have been very considerable, and a number of factors were judged to have contributed to this delay. First was the issue of resistance among groups commonly referred to as a “vocal minority.”²² Some of this resistance was described with reference to the primary RSE curriculum *only*, while in other cases respondents made reference to a more general reluctance to place RSE on the curriculum of post-primary schools.

There was probably some resistance to change that would be entirely predictable with a subject like RSE because there was quite a lot of concern. A lot of the concern was voiced at primary level, for example, and this centred on aspects of the programme from Junior Infants onwards – the naming of body parts in Junior Infants and describing sexual intercourse – that would probably have summed up what the concerns were at primary level. So I found there was a lot of resistance at primary level, albeit from a small group but a vociferous group.

Department of Education and Science

I think there was a certain amount of resistance, there is no doubt about that. And I suppose, to some extent, it might have been played out of all proportion by the media. But nevertheless, there was a certain amount of it there among a small group of people. They were suggesting at the time that RSE was value-free, and so on, things that weren't true. So, yes, certainly at a broad level, resistance did exist.

RSE Training Support Service

Importantly, the latter speaker went on to explain that there was almost always a high level of support for RSE once the programme had been explained to parents and teachers.

Looking back on the experience, I think that where there was openness and transparency, these problems didn't exist. Where parents felt welcome and supported by the school in their concerns and their reservations, where information was given to them very clearly, where they had access to classroom materials and so on, parents and teachers were very supportive.

RSE Training Support Service

During the mid- to late 1990s, efforts on the part of the Department of Education to support the introduction of RSE centred on a number of actions designed to assist the development of school policy and the delivery of the RSE programme. These included the provision of guidelines for the development of school policy, the provision of in-service training for teachers and the publication of interim curriculum guidelines. Policy development within schools was a core requirement, and one that was given top priority in the *Report of the Expert Advisory Group* (Department of Education 1995a). Importantly, this policy was to reflect the broader philosophy or ethos of each individual school:

²² Respondents rarely identified the precise source of the ‘resistance’ they referred to and did not make clear distinctions between resistance of this kind from schools and/or from the general public, for example. At no stage was there any mention of resistance from members of the Catholic hierarchy. On the contrary, it was frequently stated that school management authorities were broadly supportive of the introduction of RSE. However, Inglis (1998) and Kiely (2005) claim that conservative Catholic individuals and groups actively opposed the programme on the grounds that it conflicted with Catholic teaching on sexual morality.

So the process would have involved the establishment of school policy to, as it were, drive the way in which RSE would be implemented in schools, because there are particular considerations – the ethos of individual schools and the constitutional rights of parents to have a say in any aspect of the work that would affect the moral or spiritual or religious development of their children. So the introduction of RSE took place in the context of denominational education in Ireland or, I suppose, patronage. There are particular circumstances attached to the patronage system that we have and they have to be respected. And those rights are enshrined in the Education Act, the rights of patrons of schools to ensure that what is taught is in line with the characteristic, spirit or ethos of their school.

Department of Education and Science

For various reasons, the demand that schools develop an RSE policy in accordance with the school's broader philosophy or ethos proved to be challenging. The speaker above later revisited the issue of school patronage, pointing out that confusion almost certainly accompanied the requirement that schools acknowledge the position of their patrons, since, at this time, the ideological underpinnings of RSE were frequently perceived to be at odds with Catholic schools' ethos.

There were aspects of policy development at this time that schools probably found difficult. I'd say that even today schools may not be fully aware of the position of the patron body in relation to the teaching of various aspects of the programme. So there were issues there. I think, when I look back, that one of the areas where maybe more clarity was needed at the time was in relation to the exact position of the various patron bodies on aspects of RSE. I think that maybe teachers had a feeling, that there was a general feeling that the Church is opposed to this, and that wouldn't necessarily have been true. In fact, quite the contrary: the Church was supportive of the introduction of RSE. But I think if patron bodies – Boards of Management – had been probably more up front in saying, 'This is what our Church's teaching is on whatever it was, X,Y,Z', and 'This is how the school should handle these issues,' I think that was one area that would have made a difference to teachers. Because I think many of them were just unsure about that and adopted a conservative approach then.

Department of Education and Science

This account is of considerable significance. Firstly, it acknowledges confusion on the part of schools and, indeed, teachers as to how to approach what they might have understandably regarded as a highly contentious area of teaching. Secondly, it signals a failure on the part of the Department of Education at this time to deal pragmatically with the thorny issue of school patronage and the role of boards of management in the development of RSE policy. It seems that confusion resulted and subsequently impinged on policy implementation and programme delivery within schools. As another respondent commented, "There were specific concerns at that time, for example, about the extent to which the school could amend the RSE curriculum, you know, in light of its own needs" (RSE Training Support Service). This issue will be revisited in later chapters when we examine perspectives on whether and how this perceived ambiguity continues to impact on RSE implementation. It appears, therefore, that the issue of early resistance to RSE at school level has a number of dimensions, most notably the challenge of balancing the aim of progressing a school-based sexuality education programme with the requisite stipulations of a 'school ethos,' which appears, certainly at that time, to have been equated with a 'Catholic ethos.'

A number of additional issues were judged to have impacted in a negative way on initial rates of implementation of RSE policy, as well as on programme delivery. According to a number of respondents, the introduction of the programme and the provision of in-service training in the absence of teaching resources created a seemingly incongruous relationship between policy and practice.

So, looking back, one of the greatest drawbacks was that teacher training took place in the absence of materials for teachers. So that when the materials finally arrived a lot of teachers had said, 'Well I'm not doing anything until I have some materials in my hands.' So there was a gap there that was not conducive to full implementation.

Department of Education and Science

The absence of an SPHE curriculum was also cited as an obstacle to the implementation of the RSE programme at this time. The upshot of this chronology – RSE first, then SPHE – was described by one respondent as “a legacy that we have to deal with.”

I think the nature of the situation we find ourselves in is back to front. We got RSE and schools had to have an RSE policy, and then a number of years later comes the Education Act and SPHE. I think the fact that we didn't have the SPHE curriculum to start out with, I think that's the biggest barrier. Trying to teach relationships and sexuality education without an overall social and health focus was never satisfactory. I don't think it could ever have worked.

Department of Health and Children

This speaker went further to suggest that the sequence of programme development (RSE then SPHE) continues to cause confusion at school level in relation to the policy requirements for RSE and SPHE, respectively.

I'm not sure that communication around that policy has been as clear to schools as it needs to be. And so I think maybe that's a bit of a problem: that schools think their 1996 curriculum is okay for now, or their 1996 policy – the developed policy in '96, '97, '98 – but it's actually quite different now. The Education Act and subsequent SPHE curriculum has meant that their policy now needs to say something quite different.

Department of Health and Children

Reference was made earlier to a number of health education programmes that pre-dated the announcement of the introduction of RSE. This pre-existing pool of experience at post-primary level was identified as an enabler to the introduction of RSE by one respondent, particularly in relation to the provision of in-service training:

One of our first tasks was to recruit potential trainers of teachers and we did that through national advertisements and so on. But there was a pool of teachers already involved in some of this work, like people involved in the substance abuse prevention programme. So we were fortunate in being able to draw on those people.

RSE Training Support Service

Despite the advantage of having a group of professionals with prior experience of delivering health education programmes, schools and teachers clearly varied at this time in terms of their knowledge and understanding of programmes that embodied distinctive health and development aims. This meant that schools were almost certainly not 'equal' in terms of how they perceived the importance of a programme such as RSE, nor were they setting out with equivalent experience of the challenge of delivering such programmes. The implication here is that from the outset schools are likely to have prioritised RSE differently. Furthermore, whilst some had already grappled with the challenge of providing health education (including, in some cases, sex education), others were less well-versed on the benefits of the *health-promoting school*.

Finally, a number of respondents commented on what they perceived as the peripheral role of parents in the process of policy development and implementation at the time that RSE was introduced.

Looking back as well, if you were to organise a programme in accordance with the needs of various players, the first thing that you might have done was have actually engaged with the parents and brought them on board and explained the process to them, brought them on board for policy development.

Department of Education and Science

Indeed, a number of respondents at regional level considered parental involvement in the development of RSE policy to be variable, despite the recommendations of early and more recent Department of Education and Science policy guidelines.

[What about parents and their role in decision-making around RSE policy, what's your view on their role?]

Well again, some schools have been very good, and they have gone down the policy route that has been suggested in terms of involving parents. Other schools haven't. They have literally, it's like somebody sat in a room, and drew up the policy, and sent it out, and nobody raised any objections, so therefore the policy is accepted by the parents. There are huge variations between schools.

Health Promotion Officer

There was some disagreement, however, on the matter of parental involvement, with at least two respondents drawing attention to the heavy investment in consultation with parents at the time RSE was introduced: "Seminars were delivered to parents around the country and in the main there was nothing but support from parents and recognition of RSE" (RSE Training Support Service). This difference of interpretation is interesting and may well reflect differing perceptions and understandings of how policy on parental involvement may or may not translate into practice. Later sections of this report, in fact, draw attention to current problems with parents' understanding of RSE policy and their knowledge about the content of the programme.

To summarise, the introduction of RSE – in much the same way as other areas of curriculum innovation and change – was not a straightforward or unambiguous matter. Certainly, during the mid- to late 1990s, there was a strong commitment at government level to the introduction and delivery of RSE. Despite this commitment, and the corresponding material and financial resources invested to assist the implementation process, several factors appear to have hindered progress. The requirement that RSE school policy reflect school ethos certainly presented challenges by creating a degree of ambiguity that could potentially result in the avoidance of RSE in the classroom. This ambiguity may also have facilitated a “vocal minority” in their opposition to RSE. Equally, the initial absence of RSE resource materials, the adverse consequence of the chronology of the introduction of RSE and SPHE and perceived difficulties surrounding the role and involvement of parents in the policy-making process, were judged to have impacted negatively on the early stages of programme implementation. Scepticism among a minority of parents was thought to have presented some challenges initially, but it is significant that, where it existed, resistance of this kind was thought to subside once parents were consulted and informed about the RSE programme. Noteworthy in this regard is that Morgan’s (2000) study found that 95% of parents surveyed were, in fact, supportive of RSE. Furthermore, most respondents considered this kind of resistance to have abated in more recent years.

I think we’ve come to a much different place with regards to RSE than we were 10 years ago, as a society and as teachers, you know, as educators. And also from parents’ perspectives, you know. But it was maybe necessary to go through a phase where there were, let’s say, a lot of misgivings and conservative views being expressed and concerns and fears.

Department of Education and Science

While it was the case that there were problems and significant challenges during the initial phase of implementation, it is important to note that those teachers who did get involved in RSE teaching were extremely enthusiastic, highly committed and took a view of education that was broader than a singular preoccupation with examination results, a point made strongly by a member of the SPHE National Support Service:

The kind of teachers who do teach SPHE and RSE - they’re interested in their students and they’re interested in the kind of wider world and how it impacts on their students. But there are challenges in bringing those kinds of real issues into the classroom.

SPHE National Support Service

The challenges referred to by the speaker above are, in fact, numerous and complex and will be examined in detail throughout later sections of this report.

5.2 The value of RSE

There was very considerable clarity and agreement among the 27 respondents at government, national and regional levels on the value and benefit of Relationships and Sexuality Education. Firstly and importantly, RSE was judged to be necessary because of the increasingly complex social environments that young people are faced with negotiating. Many respondents commented on the radically changed social context in Ireland and the challenges that young people face in their 'journeys' to adulthood. In this context, RSE provides a mechanism through which to anchor discussion of a wide range of issues that can potentially impact on young people's sense of security and confidence and on their development as sexual beings. In terms of young people and their needs, RSE was perceived to be important because not all young people have equal access to information about sex and relationships from other sources, including home, peers and wider society. From this perspective, school-based RSE was considered, in theory at least, to provide a more equitable means for young people to learn and become knowledgeable about relationships, sex and sexuality. Linked to the notion of providing young people with (more) equal opportunities to learn about sexuality and relationships, RSE was considered to be an important way of counteracting the misinformation often gleaned by young people from other sources, particularly from their peers.

I think it's very important because it's probably the only place that some people might get any of the information. I mean, a lot of them won't talk about it at home, and they get misinformation from friends, so I think it's really valuable, and it doesn't just cover, I mean it covers such a wide area, it covers relationships, self esteem, confidence building, which is so important.

Sexual Health Promotion Officer

In terms of young people's social skills and development, I mean, it's [RSE] crucial. Otherwise they're picking up information from friends and peers, not that there's anything wrong with that but, you know, at least if you do it through the curriculum, at least you feel confident that the information, that they're all coming from the same basis.

Regional Development Officer

Related to concerns about where and how young people accessed information about sex and sexuality, a number of respondents drew attention to the school's captive audience as a major advantage because of the potential reach of school-based relationships and sexuality education.

Certainly I think the value of having school-based RSE is that you've a captive audience. It's probably the only place you have that many young people together.

Crisis Pregnancy Agency

Others drew attention to the benefits of open discussion and learning in a context (the school) where young people have opportunities to share this experience with their peers.

The value of RSE? Well, I suppose young people can hear other young people; they have an opportunity to hear what their peers have to say and to explore issues through their peers. They might not get an opportunity to do this otherwise. And also they're given correct information, particularly on STIs and all those areas. But I think that the whole sharing as a group is very valuable.

Regional Development Officer

Reference was frequently made to the limitations of home-based sex education, and there was a strong perception that some parents did not feel adequately equipped to communicate with their children about sex.

Well, I suppose, in some respects there has to be programme provision because you can't guarantee provision in homes and you certainly can't guarantee, shall we say, the quality of provision in homes. I think there are far too many variants in that and they're well rehearsed. So we would see, if you like, an absolute legitimacy in having RSE provided through schools.

Teachers Union of Ireland

Parenting wise you can say it can start back in the home, but the parents aren't, many parents wouldn't feel equipped to do it. So instead of assuming 'well they have this much' at least with the school you know they're going out with a set curriculum.

Health Promotion Officer

Others made the point that even when home-based sex education does take place and is comprehensive, young people inevitably forego important information and opportunities for learning if they do not have exposure to school-based relationships and sexuality education. Furthermore, young people, it was claimed, do not feel able to discuss all aspects of sexuality with their parents:

I think we have a difficulty in Ireland often with relationships and sexual education between parent and child. There will always, I think, be a generation gap there and I think it's good if they can have information delivered in school which can be used as part of a discussion then at home. I wouldn't see it as exclusively being provided by the school, but I do think that it gives a young person an opportunity to perhaps ask questions that they wouldn't ask of a parent and to have that kind of information provided to them.

National Parents Council

More broadly, the philosophical underpinnings of RSE and, in particular, the heavy emphasis placed on *relationships*, were recognised by a large number of respondents as central to the programme's potential benefit for young people.

There's no point in talking about sex if you're not talking about relationships, communication, dealing with your anger, dealing with drugs, personal safety; it's just bound up in so many issues, and I think the difficulty around it is that in some schools it is still seen as sex, the sex stuff, you know, and it is not seen in the overall context of the development of the child or the young person, and I think that's a vital issue, you know.

Regional Development Officer

The account above draws attention to a more general belief among respondents on the merit of viewing relationships and sexuality education holistically. Most, for example, made reference to RSE's location within the broader Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme and to the critical importance of this arrangement in terms of delivering a programme that has meaning and relevance to young people's lives.

The whole range of emotions, being able to say no, being able to make decisions, being able to form friendships, all of that is important and that's what SPHE should be about. And it also normalizes relationships and sexuality as well.

Health Promotion Officer

I see it as being best placed within SPHE because in developing all the skills, you need to develop the same skills for RSE as for the other things, so it's a partnership or it's a web - you can't have one without the other.

Regional Development Officer

The importance of integrating sex education with other aspects of development and learning was emphasised heavily by several respondents and there was strong consensus that sex education should not be viewed or delivered in isolation.

I think RSE, I think it should be done in the context of SPHE, yeah. I think it would be counterproductive if it was taken out on its own, and the whole thing of, you know, sex and taboo comes back up again, and focusing on the sex bit and the sexual intercourse bit, as opposed to focusing on sexuality and how people interact with others and all of that.

Regional Development Officer

RSE's location within the broader SPHE programme was also considered to be beneficial in terms of increasing the prospect of high delivery rates.

I think that if RSE was completely on its own it simply wouldn't get done, but because it's part of a broader approach, I think there's a better guarantee that it will get done; there's a better chance of it having status within the curriculum within schools. And it is also easier to integrate it into the broader themes of SPHE than a stand-alone RSE.

Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland

The shift in teaching methods from that of 'teacher as instructor' to 'teacher as facilitator of learning' was mentioned by a smaller number of respondents who talked about the critical importance of creating open and constructive environments where young people can learn to talk about sex and relationships with confidence and ease.

RSE is very much a personal development process. So it's to move away from the chalk and talk to facilitating a process whereby young people can come to terms with themselves, their community and their environment, their family and how they are with whatever issue it is, be it sexuality, mental health, you know, whatever it is.

Department of Health and Children

One respondent made the point that this principle (of adopting a holistic approach) was equally relevant today as at the time it was proposed.

So I think the integration of sexuality as part of a child's whole education was a really clear principle of the programme and I think it has held up very well, the fact that it should be developmental. I think this principle is still as relevant today as it was ten years ago.

National SPHE Support Service

Our data suggest high levels of agreement, not simply on the value of RSE, but also in relation to how these benefits are framed by a wide range of respondents with very different roles and responsibilities for RSE. In view of this consensus, it is important to ask whether respondents felt that the value and benefit of RSE is reasonably well understood by teachers, schools, parents and by society at large.

One of the most conspicuous issues to emerge from an analysis of responses to the question of others' understanding of the benefits of RSE was the scepticism expressed in relation to the translation of teacher support or endorsement of the programme into practice. In other words, it was suggested that even if teachers recognize the benefits of the programme for students – and are supportive of RSE – they may, in practice, have very little influence if the school does not give priority to SPHE/RSE.

[And would you say, then, that schools and teachers generally agree that RSE has benefited young people?]

Well, it depends on the teacher, and the school, and how they perceive RSE, but I mean those who teach RSE really value it and they would see it as an excellent programme because it covers such a wide area. But, again, it's up to the individual teacher, and the school, and how important the school sees SPHE and RSE. It depends on the school.

Sexual Health Promotion Officer

This account highlights a more general concern about the inconsistency of RSE delivery across schools, and this issue will be examined in considerable detail in Section III of this report. In a somewhat similar vein, another respondent questioned the 'position' of individual teachers and their capacity to follow through on the private commitment they may have to the RSE programme.

But whether or not that teacher is in a position or is given the capacity or freedom within the school to actually take the young person through that process (of learning) I think is another question.

Department of Health and Children

Others stated that they had encountered reluctance and fear among teachers, in some cases, to teach about relationships and sexuality, and claimed that this sentiment was particularly strong among male teachers.

I mean, I really would think that RSE is very important but what I find is there's reluctance among teachers, and particularly male teachers, to take it on. That's one of the things I've noticed: there are very few males coming to training. And there's also a fear, I think, around talking about RSE, relationships and sexuality by teachers.

Health Promotion Officer

While parental resistance to RSE was judged to be relatively uncommon – certainly compared to the past – a number of respondents did nonetheless feel that there remained a degree of scepticism among parents about the benefits of the programme. The account below centres on the perception that talking about sex will lead to young people becoming sexually active.

In the educational community I think there is a good handle on the idea of RSE as part of Social Personal and Health Education overall. I think outside the educational community, there is this terrible myth, I think, false notion that if you tell children something about something they will automatically do it or if you tell them to do something they won't do it.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Not all respondents agreed, however, that the views of parents could be so easily categorised, and respondents more frequently made the point that parents are generally supportive once they are clear about the aims and content of RSE.

With some parents it's the title that scares them and they're not sure of what's actually in the programme. But once they find out what is in the programme, they're delighted that their children are taught RSE. They have the choice to opt out, but in most cases they don't.

Sexual Health Promotion Officer

Others questioned whether individual or institutional endorsement of RSE necessarily propelled them to take responsibility for the delivery of the programme.

I wouldn't think at the level of a whole society it's really understood, the importance of RSE. I mean, I'm not sure it's fully appreciated, the value of all of that. And the key question is not so much about the value, people probably all think the value is there, it's more the responsibility for completing RSE, I think that's not necessarily well understood or well appreciated by all of the parties involved.

Crisis Pregnancy Agency

Finally, a smaller number claimed that it could not be assumed that *all* schools were in tune with the broad aims of RSE and, in particular, with the notions of holistic education and the development of the *whole child*.

I think the difficulty around RSE is that in some schools it is still seen as teaching about sex. So RSE is not seen in the overall context of the development of the child or the young person, which is vital. And I think that schools just reflect what is happening in society as a whole. I think a lot of parents, too, don't maybe fully understand the importance of RSE because I think that, as a society, we do still skirt around the issue of sexuality. And it can be to do with the societal context, the cultural context, and our own difficulties with dealing with the issue. And there is a fear among teachers around teaching this element of the curriculum.

Health Promotion Officer

There are many dimensions to the account above. Indeed, much of the statement draws attention to the broader historical, social and cultural context of RSE and, in particular, the culture of silence that has traditionally surrounded sex and sexuality in Ireland. This is perhaps an important reference point in a society that has undergone rapid change within a short period of time, and it highlights differences in individual and institutional perspectives on how best to respond to the needs of young people within a changing society. The nature of school-based sex education tends to reflect societal views about sex and sexuality. It follows that the normative values of any society will be reflected in policy and practice related to the delivery of relationships and sexuality education (Hosie 2002).

5.3 Summary and conclusion

This chapter draws attention to several key characteristics of the *early* implementation of RSE. The findings reveal a great deal about incremental curricular change, particularly in relation to a subject such as RSE, which, at the time it was introduced, was arguably a landmark for the Irish educational system and which, in any case, as an area of teaching, has the potential to generate challenges that do not tend to emerge with traditional academic subjects. The findings documented also provide an important context for much of the data presented later in this report.

The introduction of RSE was, as a number of respondents pointed out, an important development within the Irish educational system, and it signalled a major commitment on the part of the Department of Education 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. Despite the heavy investment in these supports, the ensuing implementation process proved challenging. Among the difficulties highlighted the requirement that schools develop an RSE policy that reflects the school's (Catholic) ethos appears to be of major significance and almost certainly created an environment that spawned confusion. This confusion, and the ambiguity surrounding what precisely could be taught, appears to have contributed to a delay within schools in formulating a policy. Morgan's (2000) research indicated that only 49.9% of post-primary schools had formulated an RSE policy in 2000; five years later, this study reveals that 40% of the schools surveyed do not have a written policy. Ambiguity is a feature of other areas of Irish social policy and can have benefits when introducing policies that are potentially contentious (Butler & Mayock 2005). It appears, however, that the requirement that RSE policy reflect the school's ethos may have contributed to reluctance on the part of schools to embark on the policy-making process. It is also interesting to note that where opposition to RSE did exist, the position of school ethos within RSE policy-making may have unwittingly given legitimacy to resistance of this kind during the early stages of implementation. An important question, therefore, is whether school ethos continues to impact on RSE implementation and delivery. We will revisit this issue later in the report and examine whether this absence of clarity continues to impact on schools and teachers in their delivery of the RSE programme.

The chronology of the introduction of RSE and SPHE and, in particular, the initial absence of SPHE was highlighted as another significant barrier to RSE implementation. This chronology meant that RSE was first introduced in relative isolation, albeit that the guidelines issued by the *Expert Advisory Group* (Department of Education 1995a) emphasised the importance of a supportive school environment to RSE (see Chapter 2). Furthermore, when SPHE was introduced in 2000 it demanded a separate policy statement, at a time when over half of the country's post-primary schools had not yet formulated an RSE policy (Morgan 2000). This situation was not ideal, and whilst our data cannot reveal the precise effect of this chronology of programme introduction on RSE, it may well be that the importance of RSE was somehow obscured by the larger SPHE programme. The intention was, of course, that RSE was to be an *integrated* module within SPHE. However, given the earlier difficulties with the introduction of RSE, it is possible that SPHE created the 'space' for specific challenges to be neglected or ignored. Arguably, a major risk for RSE in this context was that it might be sidelined by a larger programme that contained material that was far less challenging for schools and teachers.

The initial absence of RSE resource materials for use in the classroom also emerged as a factor that impacted negatively on the early implementation process. This is unsurprising in light of the questions and concerns that teachers may have had about what they could legitimately (and safely) teach and how. It is unfortunate that much of the benefit of the heavy investment in teacher training by highly committed individuals at this time may have been diminished by the absence of a package for teachers to take back to the classroom. There was less agreement on the extent of parental involvement in the policy-making process, with some respondents highlighting the investment in informing parents about RSE and others claiming that parents were not well-versed on the content of the programme and therefore not sufficiently included or represented in the policy-formation process. Later chapters (see Chapters 7, 8 and 10, in particular) examine parental involvement in greater detail from the perspective of regional-level respondents, schools and parents.

Finally, this chapter reveals enormous support for RSE and, to a considerable extent, reinforces the importance of RSE for young people in a society that has undergone rapid pace of social change. There was consensus that teenagers need opportunities to share their emerging identities with their peers, as well as the time and space to explore aspects of their sexual development. However, many respondents remained sceptical about society's grasp (including the grasp of schools, teachers and parents) of the critical importance of providing opportunities for young people to explore aspects of their own lives and development and of the importance and legitimacy of nurturing their development as sexual beings. Later analyses, in fact, reveal that there are several complex issues that continue to militate against the prioritisation of RSE within schools and among teachers and parents.

Chapter 6

RSE implementation, policy development and support services

In this chapter we present findings on a range of issues related to the process of RSE policy implementation. Our data reveal a complex mix of factors that impact on RSE policy implementation and, in particular, on the manner in which policy converts to practice. Respondents' perceptions of current rates of implementation provide a useful starting point for this analysis. Following this, we examine policy development from the perspective of government-, national- and regional-level respondents. Participants' views on the way school ethos impacts on policy development and implementation are then examined. Later in the chapter, we consider the impact of key structures and supports – the SPHE Support Service, in-service training and other supports – that were designed to facilitate the implementation and delivery of RSE. It is important for the reader to note that Chapters 6 and 7 refer to a very broad range of RSE implementation topics, which we must signpost for further discussion in the school case studies, due to space constraints.

6.1 Perceptions of current implementation levels

There was general agreement among the study's interviewees that RSE implementation levels have increased over the past three to five years, and the majority felt that many more schools now have a written RSE policy statement. A number of factors were thought to have facilitated these developments. The formal introduction of SPHE in 2000 was identified as an important catalyst for change in that it positioned RSE within a wider programme emphasising personal development and health in a broad sense. Linked to this, the SPHE support service was thought to have played a positive role by providing a structure for in-service training and creating a forum for teachers to exchange experiences of teaching RSE.

I think two things really have really changed: one is the fact that there is a timetable slot for RSE and the second is that it is part of a wider subject. All the other modules from SPHE feed into RSE and they support it. The other thing, then, is the support teams. Regional Development Officers are on the ground now for five years and there's been consistent support for SPHE.

National SPHE Support Service

In general, respondents drew attention to a combination of measures and factors – from external supports to organisational issues within schools – that have impacted positively on RSE implementation:

[What kinds of measures have helped the implementation of RSE?]

The SPHE support service, I think, would be really valuable now, and I think the principal is absolutely vital. If you have a principal who recognises the value of it, and is interested in it, it's half the battle, another big plus. If you have an active parents council, that helps and if you have well trained teachers, that's another plus.

Health Promotion Officer

More broadly, reference was made to a growth in the perceived need for schools to respond to the social context of young people's lives, including issues related to vulnerability and risk. Indeed, one Department of Education and Science representative suggested that many of those schools that have a well-developed RSE programme are likely to have long-since recognised and initiated a response to challenges pertaining to the health-related behaviour of their students.

The bottom line of it, I think, is that over a long period of time it was becoming more and more evident that our young people were facing challenges from a health perspective, from a sexual health perspective ... So I think it's the context that's important; if you take a girls' school in a disadvantaged area where there are teenage pregnancies, for example, I feel that some of those schools may have been dealing with issues around child protection and they may actually have been ahead of a lot of the work that we've been doing because they were concerned that their kids would be going out there as well prepared as possible.

Department of Education and Science

The interest and commitment of teachers was also identified as crucial to the implementation and delivery of the RSE programme. Several respondents acknowledged the effort and dedication of teachers and their commitment to attending in-service training. Moreover, teachers were considered to be 'in tune' with young people's needs and, consequently, well-positioned to deliver RSE.

An important theme to emerge from the interviews with government, national and regional respondents relates to the number of co-dependent factors identified as important to the successful implementation of RSE: the introduction of SPHE, the work of SPHE support teams, school leadership (and the role of the principal, in particular), committed teachers, and a growing recognition of the needs of young people. While most agreed that RSE implementation levels had improved, the majority also drew attention to perceived deficits and gaps in RSE delivery. Progress in relation to RSE implementation was almost always framed as an incremental process, and a considerable number of respondents felt that progress had been slow.

I think it's [RSE implementation] always continual. There are schools that are striding forward and have made valiant attempts, even within the school culture, the way our educational system is driven. But I would say they are still in the minority but I think it's growing. I think things are improving, but I think it's very, very slow.

Health Promotion Officer

One respondent framed RSE implementation with reference to the complexity of curricular change and suggested that for schools this already challenging process was further complicated by the nature and content of RSE.

All of the issues around innovations within schools connect with teacher expectations, the school environment being change friendly, the teachers being well prepared; they all exist because they're part of any school innovation. With RSE it's even more complex because this is an area that teachers are not familiar with and addresses areas of young people's lives that teachers may not be comfortable with.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Hence, whilst there was agreement that implementation levels had improved, most participants simultaneously expressed scepticism about the consistency and coverage (across both schools and geographical areas) of RSE delivery. The following responses are representative of a wider perception that implementation levels are generally uneven.

[How would you rate the implementation of RSE at the moment nationally?]

It's hard to comment on RSE but, from the point of view of SPHE I'd say maybe 25% of schools are doing it very well. I'd nearly divide it in quarters: a quarter are doing it very well, a quarter are doing it fairly well, another quarter are not, you know, and the last quarter is poor, or nothing. But really, that's a guesstimate.

Health Promotion Officer

Every single one of the schools in my area have been out for training and, therefore, each one should know exactly what the task is. But what happens is another story ... I'd like to say that 60 to 70% are, I would say, implementing RSE reasonably well, and some of those are excellent. I'd like to say 40% excellent. And I'd say 20 to 30% are mediocre. Those figures could get a lot better.

Regional Development Officer

The survey results (Chapter 4) suggest that approximately 40% of schools are implementing RSE at a high level, 36% are doing so at a moderate level and 24% at a low level. The views of regional-level respondents, in particular, can be regarded as largely consistent with these findings, insofar as they draw attention to a range of perceived differences in how schools approach and prioritise RSE. It appears, therefore, that the early challenge of achieving consistency in the delivery of RSE across schools (see Chapter 5) remains a strong feature of current RSE implementation:

In certain schools it [RSE] works great; there's a dedicated couple of teachers, they're comfortable in doing it, they'll work with the younger ones or the newer teachers or whoever is coming in and it works. But then there are other schools where it depends, if they don't see it as a priority and there isn't a core group working on it, then it doesn't happen.

Health Promotion Officer

The account above reflects a broader preoccupation with human resource (teacher) concerns and, in particular, the challenge of having a core group of committed RSE teachers in *all* schools. Gender also emerged as a frequently cited factor affecting the implementation of RSE, with all-boys' schools invariably rated as the least likely to prioritise RSE and/or to have integrated RSE successfully into the larger SPHE programme.

All-boys' schools tend to be much lower down the line and we see this even in the uptake of training. I think that the number of male teachers that attend training is much lower and I know that for boys' schools this is a particular issue.

Health Promotion Officer

I've been in two boys' schools this week where they have absolutely nothing. But they are realising now that they can't, they can't escape this - it's too serious.

Regional Development Officer

Others who mentioned the challenge of implementing RSE in all-boys' schools drew attention to boys' preferences in relation to programme content and teaching style. The comment below highlights the challenge of dealing with diversity and difference in relation to gender in the school context.

Boys' schools tend to have greater difficulty in dealing with RSE and SPHE in general. In think boys, the impression teachers are giving me around boys' schools is that the boys want facts and information and they don't want to process and deal with experiential learning, I suppose. They just want facts and they see it as a yes/no kind of answer.

Regional Development Officer

Concern was also expressed about the small number of male teachers involved in the teaching of SPHE. A number viewed the predominance of female teachers in the delivery of the subject as reinforcing those conventional images and beliefs that typically consign the responsibility of teaching about sex and sexuality to women.²³

As stated earlier, professionals from both the health and education sectors at regional level expressed doubt about the *quality* of RSE delivery *across* schools, drawing attention to discrepancies in how RSE is prioritised and taught. These differences were attributed to a variety of factors and issues. The 'personality' of individual teachers, their level of comfort with the subject matter and the fear of litigation in the event of their having to deal with particularly sensitive topics were frequently cited as barriers to effective implementation. Others drew attention to organisational aspects of RSE delivery, including approaches to teacher selection and deployment to the teaching of SPHE.

²³ The issue of gender was also explored with case-study respondents and is explored in further detail in Chapters 8-10.

[How would you rate current levels of implementation in schools?]

I think that it's [pause], I think that it's okay. I don't think that it's great, but I think that part of the reason is this fear of litigation, you know. And also it depends very much on the personality of the teacher: some teachers are very open and kids feel that they can talk to them, and other teachers come in and teach, as opposed to facilitating SPHE, with their classes. Some schools have a system of rotation, you know, where they might have four teachers teaching second year and, "You'll do drugs and I'll do the sex, and someone else will do ..." And I think that's really not a helpful way, because you are separating each one from each other when, in actual fact, there's huge overlap.

Regional Development Officer

The factors related to discrepancies in RSE implementation across schools are explored in further detail with reference to the curriculum and content of RSE, and teacher and whole-school issues in Chapter 7. At this juncture, it is perhaps important to note that RSE delivery is considered to lack consistency across schools. Thus, whilst there was agreement that RSE implementation has increased incrementally over the past five years, the majority of respondents expressed strong misgivings about the uniformity of RSE delivery. While it certainly appears that the earlier struggle to have RSE accepted by schools, teachers and parents has diminished, concern about the *quality* of RSE delivery is clearly widespread. This finding suggests a shift away from concerns about *whether* RSE is being implemented to the question of *what* is being taught and *how*.

I think that implementation stage needs to get to the next point; now that we've won that struggle, as it were, now we need to look and see what exactly we are doing. So, I suppose we're all happy on one level to, I personally think anyway, to say, 'Well at least they've got it now on the timetable,' but now, now we need to look at quality.

Regional Development Officer

6.2 RSE policy development and policy implementation within post-primary schools

Schools are required to have a written RSE policy, and there was general agreement among respondents that the obligation to have a written policy statement was a requirement that a large number of schools had now fulfilled. This study's survey findings indicate that almost 60% of schools have a written RSE policy; a further 12% had discussed, or were in the process of agreeing, a policy.

A large number of interviewees commented on how the requirement to devise a policy statement had been successful in terms of moving RSE implementation forward and structuring RSE provision. In general, the Department of Education and Science guidelines on school-based RSE policy were thought to have assisted schools with the introduction and implementation of the programme. Put simply, the need for a clear policy on RSE was thought to have been helpful in guiding and validating the school's position in relation to RSE. However, despite this strong endorsement of the requirement for all schools to have an RSE policy, these same policy documents were judged by a considerable number of respondents to have little or no bearing on the organization or delivery of the programme within many schools. For example, several expressed the view that the school's policy document was not necessarily consulted regularly, either by the school principal or by teachers.

I mean, does the school have the RSE policy in place? They're all supposed to have one and yet you still find teachers that don't know what their RSE policy is going into a class.

Health Promotion Officer

The speaker above was also critical of the practice of drawing up a policy and not subjecting it to review at regular intervals.

With any policy, the guidelines are straightforward and, having set them up, the important thing is that you review them. You know, there are certain steps you always take in developing a policy and then after that review is the important thing. So I suppose that's one of the things: schools do have a policy but its gathering dust.

Health Promotion Officer

Many of the views expressed on the development and use of RSE policy by schools highlight questions and concerns about how policy converts to and/or impacts on practice. For example, a considerable number of respondents claimed that policy statements did not always guide practice. Furthermore, the mere existence of an RSE policy document was not necessarily equated with the provision of comprehensive teaching on relationships and sexuality. Whilst there was recognition that schools vary enormously in their approach to and use of policy, claims that policy statements were merely a 'paper exercise' were not unusual.

Again, there are schools making genuine attempts, but within the current culture and within the resource context, I think we have a huge way to go. There are other schools who are paying lip service to policy. They are literally saying, "Ah yeah, it's there," but, and again, I think the principal, the attitude of the principal and the post holders in the school will determine what happens in that school. And I think, you know, because you don't get parents beating down the door for SPHE to be on the curriculum the pressure isn't there.

Health Promotion Officer

Some schools have their policy and they have everything working, but whether they are they actually covering the subject is another thing, and that's hard to gauge.

Health Promotion Officer

Others who expressed concern about RSE policy focused on the *approach* to policy-making adopted by individual schools. It was regularly asserted, for example, that in many instances parents were not consulted but rather informed at a later stage (if at all) of when and how Relationships and Sexuality Education was to take place.

It's almost tokenism really. My experience has been that a few parents are involved in policy committees, but it's mostly tokenism, I think.

Regional Development Officer

As is evident from much of the commentary, the school principal was considered to have a major influence, and to play a central role, in the development and implementation of Relationships and Sexuality Education. The principal was perceived to be best positioned to lead the design and implementation of RSE policy, as well as to transform and produce the required structures and supports for RSE programme development within the school. In effect, without the support and commitment of the principal, RSE simply fades into the background.

I mean the principal is very much the steering person in terms of how they support SPHE, in terms of supports they provide and making sure that there's a certain level of quality and that people are getting out to in-service.

Regional Development Officer

Clearly, however, a principal's enthusiasm alone will not bring about effective policy implementation. Teachers were also identified as playing a fundamental role in the development and delivery of the RSE curriculum; it is the teacher who tackles the substantive matters of content and teaching methodology, and teachers are also best equipped to subject the content of RSE to periodic questioning, criticism and review.

However, as much of the commentary on RSE implementation suggests, the question of how policy is devised and subsequently put into operation by the school is neither obvious nor clear-cut. In keeping with their awareness of inconsistencies in the development and use of RSE policy across schools, regional-level interviewees considered the continued guidance and advice of Regional Support Teams to be essential if school policy on RSE is to be developed in all schools and to retain its meaning and relevance to teachers, parents and pupils alike.

I think we need to continually push the importance of policy development in schools.

Regional Development Officer

[The Department of Education and Science issued Guidelines for RSE Policies in post-primary schools. Do you think that they have been effective?]

Yeah, I think they are, but I think schools still need help. I mean, we usually go in and help teachers around the policy because they're, some of them are inclined to [pause], well, it's the principal and maybe a teacher who develops it, download it from the internet and that's their policy drawn up. So I think that it needs to be emphasised more that it's a process that needs to involve many team members.

Health Promotion Officer

Many of the data above are suggestive of problems and challenges linked to the formulation and subsequent use of RSE policy statements by schools. One wonders if schools have received adequate guidance on what the policy is and what it should contain or if schools are making use of the professional supports available to them in developing their policy. We will revisit these questions later in this report when we examine RSE policy and policy-making within the nine schools selected for case study. At this juncture, it is important to examine the impact of school ethos on the implementation of RSE policy and on the delivery of the programme.

6.3 School ethos

The role and influence of school ethos on the implementation of RSE policy and on the delivery of the programme was the subject of considerable discussion. Among participants, there was disagreement about the impact of school ethos: whereas some considered the ethos of the school to impact significantly and, in some cases, negatively on RSE, others insisted that the role and influence of school ethos was consistently overstated. It is important to explore these views and to identify the key concerns and perspectives articulated by the study's respondents.

Among those who identified school ethos as a significant and negative influence, ambiguity emerged as a major theme. It was regularly asserted, for example, that the absence of clarity on what precisely could be taught and discussed created a great deal of uncertainty for teachers. In the following account, the speaker draws attention to the challenge for teachers and schools of accommodating a variety of 'moral codes' in the absence of explicit guidance on what is to be taught and addressed, and when.

The tension [for teachers] comes from the fact that there are several moral codes working in schools. There's the pupils' moral code and there is the parents' moral code. There is the teachers' moral code, which is their own business, and then there is the moral code of mostly Catholic schools, which says contraception is not allowed, sex before marriage is not allowed, homosexuality can be tolerated as long as it's not practised. And that's where teachers see fierce difficulty. They feel that they are very much caught in terms of what kind of help they can give children, what kind of questions they can answer. And they're scared of that because if they're asked for information, information that anybody, any child, might possibly need in this day and age, they are limited by the ethos of the school. Now, in reality they probably aren't but, at any one moment, they could be depending on the parent not to object, do you know.

Regional Development Officer

While topics such as puberty and the facts of reproduction were not generally thought to pose a potential threat to teacher confidence in delivering the programme, concerns were frequently expressed about the more sensitive issues and questions that inevitably arise in the context of teaching RSE. Among these, sexual orientation and the provision of contraceptive advice were cited as issues that pose particular concern for teachers.²⁴

One of the things that I have experienced, one of the tensions that I have found since coming to this post, is that I have to acknowledge that SPHE and RSE is delivered within the context and ethos of the particular schools. And I have some difficulties with that. And, to just give you a bald example: the use of the word family planning instead of contraception. Now, we have had this with teachers, you know, but that would be something I would have an issue with as well because for everyone it's not a question of family planning. The whole issue around homosexuality, I think, needs to be dealt with as well. It is dealt with at a very shallow sort of level, and I think that needs revision. These are two kinds of specific things that jump out ... and I think they're just examples where our culture and society have changed.

Health Promotion Officer

²⁴ Because of the level of concern expressed over potentially contentious topics such as contraception and sexual orientation, we provide an in-depth analysis of schools' views on these matters in Chapters 8-10.

Not all respondents agreed that school ethos was a factor that impinged on the ability of schools and teachers to deliver RSE. Indeed, a number felt that ethos was something of a smoke screen, which, in today's world, had little bearing on the reality of what was now accepted and demanded (by parents, by society at large and perhaps by the church) from school-based relationships and sexuality education.

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

I think the issue that's often wheeled out in terms of Relationships and Sexuality Education relates to Catholic schools. Sometimes this issue about ethos is used as a way kind of, as a way of kind of saying that schools don't do Relationships and Sexuality Education properly because they're religious-run schools, I just want to suggest that from my experience that's a complete load of rubbish. In fact, religious-run schools are often the better, the best at it.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

The implication of this and other such comments is that school ethos need not hinder or obstruct the delivery of RSE in a society that now accepts open discussion of sexuality; the central claim, therefore, is that the problem of ethos is more imagined than real.

A smaller number of interviewees adopted a middle ground on the question of the influence of school ethos, suggesting that while, on the one hand, (Catholic) school ethos can pose problems when it comes to the treatment of issues such as contraception and homosexuality, equally, 'school ethos' provides a ready-made excuse to avoid teaching RSE where policy development is weak. In the following account, the speaker identifies the process of school policy development as the solution to the difficulties or perceived tensions that can exist when teaching about sex within a Catholic school ethos.

I mean the ethos of the school can be a difficult one from the point of view of some of the sensitive issues like, I suppose, contraception as opposed to family planning and homosexuality. But I think some schools hide behind or use that thing of the Catholic ethos sometimes so as not to address things ... but then they [many schools] would be happy to address sensitive issues but they do need a little bit more support probably around policy development.

Health Promotion Officer

A second regional respondent also identified the processes of policy formation and review as the most effective means of ensuring that all parties, including teachers, parents and the school management, have explicit knowledge and understanding of the content of RSE. The implication here is that a clear-cut and transparent RSE policy can potentially address much of the ambiguity that surrounds school ethos and thereby pave the way for effective RSE implementation.

Ethos does create a lot of concern for schools. And I suppose that any school that has a live SPHE or RSE policy, you know, some of them will do an SPHE policy and they'll put in a big section on RSE ... If they have a policy that's live, not a thing done ten years ago, then I think they're on safer ground. If they have no policy at all or a policy that was just downloaded or something or came from some religious order and they're not clear about it, then they're concerned. I find the policy is a very useful document, particularly for principals. But I think for teachers on the ground they are worried about, you know, mentioning something like contraception at Junior Cycle and some parent coming in and saying, 'Are you suggesting contraception?', or something like that. I think the policy is a key thing, their own policy, involving parents as well, you know. They feel very much on safe ground when they do that, but a lot of schools don't have effective policies.

Regional Development Officer

It is difficult to assess the precise impact of school ethos on individual teachers and schools on the basis of these data. Indeed, it is interesting to note that school ethos is an issue that appears to provoke a variety of individual responses and interpretations, suggesting perhaps that it is quite strongly linked to personal beliefs and world views. Nonetheless, the disparity of views and perspectives on this matter is itself suggestive of a level confusion and ambiguity, which, at the very least, leaves schools dealing with the matter of 'ethos' in very different ways. This is not surprising in view of the findings documented in the previous chapter. The requirement that schools devise a policy that is in keeping with their ethos was explicit in the RSE guidelines from the outset (Department of Education and Science 1995a). As demonstrated in Chapter 5, government-level participants acknowledged the difficulties created by the stipulation that RSE policy (and, by implication, the programme content) be delivered in accordance with what most teachers understand to be a Catholic ethos. This issue will be explored from the perspective of schools and teachers in Section IV, when the case studies of the nine selected schools are examined in detail.

6.4 The partnership

A number of this study's findings related to the partnership between the Departments of Education and Science and Health and Children (and operated through the SPHE Support Service) echo those discussed in *The SPHE Story* (SPHE Support Service, no date) and Burtenshaw's (2003) research on SPHE at Junior Cycle.

There was almost unanimous agreement among interviewees at government, national and local levels that this partnership was a positive development and that it was significant in terms of advancing and sustaining the implementation of RSE. Respondents drew attention to a variety of ways in which partnership had facilitated the implementation of RSE. For a considerable number, information-sharing and joint learning constituted key positive outcomes of partnership, while others emphasised the benefits of collaboration and co-ordination.

I think that if partnership works well it can be very empowering from both a health board and education perspective because we've all got different resources and different styles of educational training.

Health Promotion Officer

The partnership with the health boards has helped. It gives a sense of co-ordination and co-operation and the opportunity to share ideas and approaches.

Regional Development Officer

It is perhaps significant that a number of health professionals stated that working in partnership had enabled them to develop a better understanding of the school as a site for the delivery of relationships and sexuality education.

It [partnership] has been very useful to me coming from the other side [health] to see the education side, like the ethos of school and all of that. Like, I would have gone in there thinking, 'This is a load of rubbish, you need to tackle X, Y and Z, you need to be showing how to put on condoms.' So I think that the two agencies or organisations coming together, coming from different places, has been good. There is more sensitivity there and I think more can be achieved if the two are actually working together. I mean, there is a lot of learning to be had from both sides.

Health Promotion Officer

I think the value of it really is that we both have learned a lot from each other. I'm not from a school background and I hadn't a clue how schools function, literally. And a lot of health people don't, unless they've worked in schools. Like the realisation that you do not really have a minute as a teacher from the time you go in the morning to the time you go home in the evening. And we as health professionals are going in saying, 'The schools won't engage' and 'Why won't they engage?' So we've learned so much about the system, the way it works, and they've learned too, I think.

Health Promotion Officer

Equally, health professionals drew attention to the benefits to the education sector of the resources, skills and experience that health promotion personnel had to offer.

I think the partnership is core; I think it's our way of getting work done; I think we've a lot to offer education as well. I think we've a wide array of supports and services within the health services; I think we have a different set of skills and a different way of doing things that complements the work of education. That's the value of partnership.

Department of Health and Children

In short, the advantages of partnership were framed with reference to collaboration, co-facilitation and the mutual benefits arising from the exchange of experience, resources and skills. There was general consensus that partnership provided a valuable mechanism for the implementation and delivery of SPHE and, by implication, RSE. Most respondents were positive and supportive of the notion of partnership and felt that a lot had been and could be learned from this multi-disciplinary approach. Despite this level of support for this collaboration, almost all respondents simultaneously drew attention to challenges and problems associated with partnership. There are a number of dimensions to the perceived problems, and the first – and possibly the most significant – relates to differences in what were referred to explicitly as differences in the work cultures within health and education, respectively.

[You mentioned challenges with partnership. What are those kinds of challenges about?]

Those challenges would be about two different sets of cultures. On the one hand, as a department, Education would govern from a very centralised perspective, you know; we deal with all schools right across the country; it's about equity of provision right across the country. So if a circular goes out, it goes to all schools.

Department of Education and Science

Well, I mean, the way we operate in the health service is different from the Department of Education. So we're talking about two different systems coming together, so there's a clash.

Health Promotion Officer

Linked to differences in the culture and work structures was a perception that Education and Health worked to achieve very different aims and outcomes and that this discrepancy invariably created tensions and problems.

I mean Health are looking for behavioural outcomes, so their outcomes are related to a health benefit, whereas from an educational perspective, certainly we would be coming from the perspective of trying to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural and emotional. So, for the SPHE curriculum, its outcome is around facilitating, giving young people the opportunity to develop skills for self-fulfilment, to promote self-esteem and self-confidence. So we're coming at it from an educational perspective as distinct from coming at it from, I suppose, a level where you're looking at health outcomes.

Department of Education and Science

A smaller number of respondents expressed the view that the health and education sectors view schools – and their *role* in the delivery of sexuality education – differently.

I think fundamentally Health and Education view schools differently. The education sector views schools as learning sites, you know, as places where education happens. Health sees it as another convenient place to deliver health messages. And they come at education from a training model approach. I think they sometimes believe that education is about the Nike approach: just do it and it will happen. And there is quite a difference between the training approach and an approach that is based on educational goals, and they don't always marry well.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Several respondents, including Regional Development Officers (RDOs) and Health Promotion Officers (HPOs), drew on their personal experience of working *in partnership* to illustrate the day-to-day challenges they encountered or observed. A number, for example, who found partnership to be constructive and workable, attributed this positive working relationship to personality factors and to the good fortune of 'getting on well' with their counterpart in health or education. They added that whilst this situation had worked for them it left too much to chance and did not provide any assurance that this arrangement would prove satisfactory in the future, either for themselves or for others.

We [reference to working with Regional Development Officer] have never had any difficulties but that is largely to do with ourselves, you know, and I accept that one hundred percent. We just happen to get on, we don't rub off each other, we work together well. So it can be down to personalities. However, I think one of the biggest difficulties was that the partnership was not set up as a formalised structure and there was no groundwork done, which flies in the face of everything we say about encouraging or developing partnership.

Health Promotion Officer

Overall, many of the views expressed underline a mismatch between the perceived ideological benefits of partnership and the manner in which this joint venture is managed and played out in practice. Partnership arrangements vary by Health Service Executive region and the unsatisfactory nature of this situation was identified as further hampering cooperation between the health and education sectors.

[Have there been challenges to building and maintaining partnership?]

There are challenges because I don't think there's any clear kind of structure or guidelines or contract initially, you know. And you're meant to constantly communicate around what we're at and, yet, we kind of almost work it out as we go along ... I think there has to be a national picture. I don't like the notion that we're all left locally to kind of deal with this because it's caused too much hassle.

Regional Development Officer

Finally, there was some disagreement over the nature of supervision and evaluation that underpins the partnership arrangement. For example, one Health Promotion Officer pointed out that HPOs do not have an equivalent reporting back/support structure to that of Regional Development Officers (in terms of the National co-ordinator of SPHE). However, one RDO felt that the reverse was the case: that HPOs enjoyed better supports since they can report back both to the National SPHE co-ordinator *and* to their local Health Promotion Manager. Certainly, the views expressed are suggestive of a need for a more formal structure aimed at furthering the work of partnership between the education and health sectors. The joint work of education and health professionals could be enhanced greatly with the assistance of such a national collaborative structure. There is also a need to consider the uniformity of the provision of supports to schools across geographical areas.

6.5 In-service training and other supports

It is clear from earlier discussions that teachers are viewed as being well positioned to facilitate learning and to generate discussion about a range of issues relevant to relationships and sexuality. Equally, respondents agreed that it is important that any individual who has responsibility for the teaching of relationships and sexuality education needs to be equipped to discuss relevant topics with ease and to be adequately trained to draw on a range of teaching techniques. As outlined in the previous chapter, the investment in teacher training by the Department of Education and Science at the time RSE was introduced constituted a major initiative. Among respondents at government, national and regional levels, in-service training was portrayed as central to the success of the RSE programme. While it was acknowledged that some teachers were more likely than others to have natural skills that enable them to deal more effectively with the sensitive aspects of relationships and sexuality, training was identified as a key support that could potentially enable a more uniform approach to RSE delivery within classrooms nationwide.

In general, respondents felt that a large number of teachers had attended both SPHE and RSE in-service training and that the extent and coverage of this training was reasonably comprehensive. Nonetheless, reference was made on many occasions to teachers who had not been trained, and a number of respondents felt that the amount of time allocated to training was inadequate in terms of providing teachers with the skills to meet the demands of delivering the RSE programme.

At the moment some teachers are probably teaching RSE with no training. The minimum they get in our (Health) Board around RSE, specific RSE, is three days: two days and then a follow-up day. So that's 15 hours. But I think the minimum people should get, for SPHE-type life skills or RSE training would be 40 hours, 40 to 50 hours, I think, minimum.²⁵

Health Promotion Officer

²⁵ In fact, 15 hours of specific RSE training is offered to teachers. Teachers are asked to attend generic SPHE training prior to RSE training so they may, therefore, have accessed a total of 25 or 30 hours training.

More broadly, there was some criticism of the way in which in-service training was approached and, in particular, of the over-reliance on one-off sessions without adequate follow-up and/or opportunities for teachers to revise and develop their approach to RSE: "Our in-service model is not on a continuum of professional development, it's more like a one-hit-wonder approach" (NCCA).²⁶ Respondents also identified problems related to the release of teachers for in-service training. The following respondent suggested that the release of teachers for RSE training is even more problematic than for other subject areas.

We do have a major problem in our schools about the release of teachers for skills training. Boards of management don't want to see their teachers absent for training days, and the RSE training day is viewed as 'soft' skills training, as distinct from learning a new biology syllabus for instance.

Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland

Others suggested that school principals were sometimes satisfied to release one or a small number of teachers for SPHE/RSE training on the assumption that they would then be equipped to convey the relevant information and learning to other staff members.

Principals are still working on that assumption that if one teacher goes 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

The benefits of training were considered to be compromised in some cases by the practice of rotating the responsibility for SPHE delivery between teachers. It was suggested that this approach to teacher deployment to SPHE/RSE resulted in a substantial loss of skill, particularly when an experienced teacher handed the programme over to a less experienced colleague.

There are situations where staff might say, 'Well, look, I'll do my bit for a couple of years and then I'm handing it over to somebody else.' This, in turn, has resource implications because there are new people coming on board and every time this happens there is a loss of that kind of skill and sophistication.

Department of Education and Science

²⁶ It is, perhaps, important to note that this particular criticism of in-service training related in many cases to current policies and approaches to in-service training in general and not simply to SPHE/RSE. In an analysis of in-service provision in Ireland, Sugrue & Ui Thuama (1997: 65) suggest that lifelong learning for teachers is characterised by "a cult of the present".

Attention was drawn on several occasions to the negative impact of only training those teachers selected and designated for SPHE teaching. Much of the commentary here highlights perceived problems with a 'whole-school approach' to SPHE/RSE.²⁷

Training has to be done at the whole-school level. It's not just enough to do it with SPHE teachers. If you have a teacher teaching history, science or English, anything of a sexual nature could come up there, so it's not just enough to focus on the SPHE teacher, because what happens then is people say, 'Oh there's the one that does the sex, that's the teacher,' and everything about sex is left to her.

Health Promotion Officer

Training should not just be for a small select number of teachers. Every teacher should have familiarity with it, even if they don't teach it.

Association of Community & Comprehensive Schools

One respondent noted that in-service training had opened up opportunities to discuss a range of issues related to the delivery of RSE. This individual also suggested that schools have become more attuned to the importance of RSE since the introduction of child protection guidelines, which require schools to provide children with the 'highest standard of care'.

I think that in-service has created discussion. I think the child protection guidelines that we were involved in last year certainly highlighted the importance of RSE to principals: it focused their attention on the whole area of RSE and that something needs to be done about it.

Regional Development Officer

Overall, the perception that many schools had not fully embraced the responsibility of comprehensive RSE delivery permeated many accounts. Unsurprisingly, in this context, the vast majority of respondents emphasized the need for continued investment in in-service training and most went further to suggest that *all* teachers, not simply those who have to teach SPHE/RSE, need to be familiar with the aims of RSE and the content of the programme. The following statement on RSE training by a representative of the National SPHE Support Service further illustrates this consensus on the continued need for specialised RSE training for teachers.

Ten years ago we had doubts about what we were doing ... Now we know that what we are doing is good, but we don't do enough.

National SPHE Support Service

²⁷ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of Department of Education (1995a) and Department of Education and Science (2000a) recommendations on 'whole school approach' and 'supportive school environment'.

As documented in Chapter 4, this study's survey results indicate that over 60% of schools felt that the Department of Education and Science inspectorate took no interest in RSE implementation, while 38% and 55% of schools felt parents and parents' associations respectively took no interest in the implementation of the programme. These findings raise concerns across a variety of areas and, in the context of in-service training, one may legitimately question whether the potential benefits of RSE training for teachers can be fully realized if a large proportion of school personnel believe that the Department of Education and Science has little interest in what happens with RSE 'on the ground.' Support and evaluation are key functions of the inspectorate, which our data suggest are currently unsatisfactory in relation to RSE. 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

With regard to teaching resources, a large number of participants felt that while teaching resources were adequate in terms of the current curriculum guidelines and the suggested lesson plans, other resources aimed at supporting the programme were long overdue. The study's respondents made the following suggestions in terms of improving current resources:

- Greater use of IT supports, e.g. a web-site and help-line.²⁸
- The introduction of a Communication Support Unit for schools. Such a unit would communicate the latest information/resource materials to schools by e-mail and make schools aware of new developments across a range of relevant areas.
- An RSE DVD appropriate to the Irish context needs to be developed and introduced to schools.²⁹
- A nationally coordinated system of information-sharing between Health Service Executive regions, in order to avoid the duplication of work.

Finally, a number of regional interviewees suggested that consideration should be given to the allocation of a specific space within the school for SPHE/RSE in order to accommodate the appropriate and recommended seating arrangements (i.e. sitting in a circle to facilitate discussion), and to help to provide greater privacy for potentially sensitive class discussion. Indeed, smaller class sizes and more adequate timetabling were issues raised by teachers and school principals. We consider these issues in more detail within the case-study research (Chapters 8-10).

²⁸ An SPHE Support Service web-site and helpful phone numbers are already available (www.sphe.ie); perhaps this indicates their role needs to be expanded, perhaps in the manner of the second suggestion (i.e. through a Communication Support Unit).

²⁹ A major concern here was that schools' current reliance on out-dated Irish and/or British video material falls far short of meeting the needs of Irish adolescents. 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.

6.6 Summary and conclusion

This chapter has documented government, national and regional perspectives on current RSE implementation levels, school policy development and the supports available to schools. It appears that while respondents considered RSE implementation to have improved in recent years, they conveyed an equally strong belief that schools vary in *how* they implement and approach RSE. Later chapters in this report provide critical information on how and why schools differ in terms of their implementation and delivery of RSE.

This chapter's examination of RSE policy development strongly suggests a perception of major differences in the manner in which schools approach RSE policy-making. The importance of RSE policy to actual implementation will be raised repeatedly throughout this report. It appears that, to date, the process of policy development has not always brought together a range of views – including those of the principal, teachers, parents and pupils – to collectively identify the needs of young people and plan the RSE programme accordingly. A good school policy helps to ensure that sex education meets the needs of young people attending the school (Green 1994). Furthermore, the process of policy development presents a valuable opportunity to define current needs and review practice in the light of these (Green 1995). On the basis of the accounts we received, it seems likely that the RSE policy documents devised by the majority of schools are not subjected to periodic review. This represents a lost opportunity for progress, particularly given that RSE is a programme in a relatively early stage of development. More than this, schools may not necessarily use their policy statements to inform their approach to RSE, and where a policy statement exists teachers may not be aware of the content of this document. Green (1994) similarly noted that the sex education policies of schools in the UK rarely served as working documents to direct practice, suggesting that this problem is not unique to Ireland. These issues will be the subject of further exploration and analysis when we examine RSE in detail within the nine schools selected for case study.

As documented in Chapter 4, the SPHE Support Service received by far the most positive response from schools in terms of “trying to ensure that RSE was implemented.” This chapter's findings indicate that government, national and regional respondents endorse the partnership arrangement and consider it to provide a better co-ordinated approach to supporting schools. However, in keeping with the findings of previous research (Burtenshaw 2003), there are perceived difficulties with partnership, and most of these centre on differences in the work cultures of the education and health sectors, respectively. The absence of clear guidelines on work practices (and reporting procedures) appears to have generated a sense among both health promotion and regional development officers that successful collaboration is simply a chance occurrence, which is overly dependent on personality factors. This situation may well exacerbate the ‘cultural clash’ referred to on many occasions by both education and health sector respondents. This issue requires careful consideration and attention in the future. Despite these difficulties, it is important to note that there was widespread support for continued investment in (and further development of) the partnership arrangement.

One of the major functions of the SPHE Support Service is to provide in-service training. Currently, a total of between 25 and 30 hours' RSE training is offered to teachers. The vast majority of respondents - and in particular those involved directly in the provision of RSE teacher training - believed that training is the key support required for the advancement of RSE. There were a number of concerns, however, about how training filters through to schools and about the impact of this training on RSE. For example, a large number insisted that there was over-reliance on 'one-off' training sessions, without adequate update and re-training. Respondents also expressed concern about the uniformity/consistency of the training audience, suggesting that schools often release teachers for a limited number of training sessions and that teachers sometimes do not have the time to complete the full training course. Irish educational policy has advocated lifelong learning and continuous professional development for a number of years (Sugrue & Uí Thuma 1997). Perhaps, in the context of problems with the release of teachers for full RSE training, the modernisation of RSE resources in an age of electronic/digital communication becomes an even more pressing issue. The impact of current support services and training will be investigated further with reference to class size and teacher time within the case-study analysis.

Chapter 7

The school and RSE

This chapter examines how schools are seen to manage, organise and deliver Relationships and Sexuality Education. RSE is discussed with reference to SPHE throughout much of the chapter, as many issues pertinent to RSE arise in tandem with SPHE as a subject. As the viewpoints presented suggest, current inconsistencies in RSE implementation may be rooted to some extent in the overall complexity of the education system and the ability of school personnel to manage and overcome this complexity. As one Department of Health and Children respondent suggested, SPHE may be regarded as 'burdensome' in current structural terms. While there was broad agreement on the problems facing SPHE/RSE at school level, respondents advanced a variety of ideas on what can and should be done to improve levels and standards of RSE delivery.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first examines the position of SPHE as a post-primary curricular subject. The second examines the role of the SPHE/RSE teacher and also discusses the role of outside facilitators. In the final section we examine the whole-school approach to SPHE/RSE, or the notion that RSE needs to be located within a supportive school environment.

7.1 Curricular status, interpretation and implementation

SPHE is distinct from most other second-level subjects for a number of reasons. First, the subject is not part of any state examination, and while the NCCA are at an advanced stage in formulating a senior-cycle SPHE curriculum, SPHE currently runs officially as a subject only to junior-certificate level. Secondly, SPHE is a subject that, while having a stated position on the second-level timetable, additionally reflects an approach to education that sets it apart from the purely academic focus of other subjects. This section explores the impact that such qualities may have on the status and position of RSE within the Irish second-level system. It also examines the interpretation of RSE within SPHE.

As stated earlier, SPHE is distinct from many other subjects because it is not part of the state examination system. Several interviewees drew attention to this difference and simultaneously raised questions about the status of SPHE/RSE within an educational system that prioritises and rewards academic achievement:

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.

Regional Development Officer

Whilst drawing attention to SPHE's struggle for prominence within a highly academic educational system, respondents felt quite strongly that an SPHE exam would be inappropriate. Whilst it may give the subject a kind of 'status', it was generally felt that the requirement of taking an exam would run contrary to the very essence of SPHE. Many participants also questioned how an exam could possibly measure unique, personal development and experience and felt that the pressure and demands of preparing for an exam would relegate SPHE/RSE to an exercise in factual learning and ultimately lead to the neglect of the personal and developmental dimensions of SPHE.

It's the only subject that is only about the students. There's no other agenda, there's no past paper. And could you imagine if there was, if you'd come in, you'd look at the paper and wouldn't care about the personal development of the student. You'd be saying, "This is what's coming up" and "This is how you answer it."

Regional Development Officer

However, a number of respondents felt that some kind of assessment would help to maintain standards in teaching and learning. Portfolio assessment and assessment *for* learning as opposed to assessment *of* learning was suggested on a number of occasions. Others made the point that SPHE is frequently – and wrongly – perceived as at variance with a highly academic educational system when, in reality, students can benefit greatly from an effective SPHE programme, particularly at times when exam-related stress is greatest.

The evidence in terms of health promotion in schools indicates that schools that have a health agenda in place have better academic records, the children behave better in school, they don't have the same discipline problems, children feel more engaged and absenteeism is lower. So, therefore – and I'm not saying for one moment that the reason we do it is to have these outcomes – it nurtures the whole development of the child, and it will assist them to develop academically as well as personally.

Health Promotion Officer

The implication, therefore, is that the low status of SPHE may be in some part attributable to inaccurate perceptions of its benefits (academic and otherwise) at school level. However, irrespective of what is known about the benefits of SPHE – which, in any case, are not well researched in Ireland – there are other curricular factors that militate against SPHE's status. SPHE has been running officially for six years at junior-cycle level *only*, a situation that might be expected to detract from its importance and status as a second-level subject. It is not so surprising in this context that a number of respondents felt strongly that the full benefits of RSE cannot be fully realized in the absence of a senior-cycle curriculum.

I think that if it's junior students their needs or demands or questions are likely to be less searching, they're likely to be less, if you like, have less of a cutting-edge nature to them ... I don't think you can derive full benefit or even judge how much benefit could be derived in the absence of explicit provision at senior cycle.

Teachers' Union of Ireland

The brevity of the SPHE curriculum at second level may also directly affect RSE's relevance and impact in terms of providing 'education for life': senior-cycle students are, after all, more likely to be involved in a relationship and/or be sexually active than junior-cycle pupils.

One thing that I always, kind of amuses me, is that we're preparing the children along the way from primary to post-primary, but when we reach the senior cycle, you know, it's not relevant almost, when actually it's more relevant (for students) because of the age ... Sexual intercourse is more common among that age group, and yet we actually don't pay any attention to it.

Health Promotion Manager

Perhaps the concern overall is that the official continuation of SPHE to senior-cycle level is long overdue. At present, the position of RSE at senior cycle appears to be ambiguous, at best. As our survey results suggest, roughly half of the schools reported that they did not teach RSE in fifth or sixth years.

Furthermore, when RSE is taught at senior cycle, it appears most often as part of another subject such as religious education or biology. One may legitimately question the appropriateness of teaching RSE outside of the broader SPHE framework. While few respondents dealt with the area during interview, two commentators were clearly opposed to teaching RSE in the context of religious education:

I think there is a real danger in excessively associating RSE with religious education because the fact of the matter is that the behaviour and the whole attitude of students at senior cycle ... they are less likely to be positively influenced by an RSE programme if it is associated with a set of attitudes or a set of precepts or a given morality.

Teachers' Union of Ireland

As documented in Chapter 5, RSE's location within the larger SPHE programme received the unanimous endorsement of the study's respondents. This arrangement was also thought to help to raise the status of RSE and to make delivery more likely.

I think if RSE was completely on its own it simply wouldn't get done, but because it's part of a broader approach I think there's a better guarantee it will get done, there's a better guarantee that it will have status within the curriculum in the schools. And it also will be easier, I think, to integrate it into the broader themes of SPHE than a stand alone RSE.

Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland

However, a number of respondents were concerned that the SPHE curriculum is sometimes implemented at junior cycle without any or with inadequate coverage of the RSE module.

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.

Health Promotion Officer

The account above highlights a more general concern about whether the *claim* that SPHE is timetabled necessarily equates with the delivery of RSE. Other similar accounts highlight a degree of confusion about the place of RSE within the larger SPHE programme, as illustrated in the commentary of one Regional Development Officer:

The danger with having RSE within SPHE is that sometimes RSE has become, maybe, the obstacle of the entire programme. So that RSE has become the main module in the programme ... I mean, I know some teachers understand SPHE to be the same as RSE. And other aspects such as personal safety, you know, the substance abuse module or other ones are kind of pushed aside a little bit. And the opposite can happen as well, that RSE is pushed out of SPHE.

Regional Development Officer

Finally, it appears that there may be diverse interpretations of SPHE's position within schools. From a DES perspective, SPHE may be regarded as a discrete timetabled subject, delivered in the context of a supportive whole-school environment. However, the following remarks suggest that this message may not be communicated effectively enough to schools, or at least, SPHE's position is not as clear-cut for schools as it is for the DES:

Some schools have a wonderful ethos in that they see SPHE as a curricular subject and they also see it as related to other areas in a holistic way - as a way of providing supports for students in difficulties, for having students involved in policy-making. But a lot of teachers often just see it as a curricular subject. Then a lot of them have another view of it, which is quite strange. They see it as a cure-all subject. Again, I was in a school recently and they felt under pressure from that point of view, you know. If there's violence after school or something like that, 'Oh, sure, SPHE will sort that.' If there's a bullying, if there's some litter, if there's some vandalism or whatever, you know?

Regional Development Officer

Overall, there appears to be some difficulty with the interpretation of SPHE and RSE's position therein. These difficulties may well derive from the early years of RSE implementation (see Chapter 5) and live on through issues such as curricular overload, limitations and ambiguities. Whatever the origin, confusion of this kind clearly impacts on both the prioritisation of SPHE and the quality of teaching and learning within RSE. A small number of national and governmental participants referred to accountability measures (i.e. school development planning and whole-school evaluations) as a potential way of improving the school's focus on SPHE/RSE as a curricular subject. SPHE may not have any tangible leverage in terms of the points system at senior cycle, but perhaps if schools were made more aware of the overall benefits of SPHE for students, both personally and academically, it would have far greater status. The next section turns to RSE teachers and examines their role in RSE teaching.

7.2 RSE teaching: professional concerns and the role of outside facilitators

A number of structural, professional and personal issues may affect those who shoulder the responsibility of RSE in the classroom, namely teachers. This section explores respondents' perceptions of issues that affect – and, in some cases, impinge on – teachers' ability or confidence in delivering RSE. It also examines the role of outside agencies in the teaching of RSE.

Since SPHE is not a traditional Bachelor of Arts subject, teachers do not generally enter the post-primary sector in order to specifically teach SPHE/RSE. Furthermore, the subject orientation within second-level teaching means that teachers may not conceive of SPHE/RSE as a career option.

Traditionally, post-primary teachers would have seen themselves as subject teachers, so the introduction of RSE where there was no dedicated teacher was certainly a factor that would have been a barrier ... Even for those who were well disposed towards coming on board and teaching RSE, it is not an easy area to deal with so there would have certainly been concerns among teachers that they would be adequately prepared to deal with the subject.

Department of Education and Science

Claims that newly qualified teachers sometimes take on RSE well before they receive any in-service training were not uncommon. This unsatisfactory situation was attributed, in many cases, to the virtual absence of pre-service SPHE training.³⁰

It seems to always be the young teachers; she's straight out of teaching college, she goes into the school and she's given this as her extra piece of work to demonstrate her commitment, kind of thing. She's young, she's inexperienced and yet she's going in to teach, you know, adolescents that are three or four years younger than her. Something that adds value to the delivery of SPHE and RSE should be looked at because these subjects are covered at the undergrad level in the same way as teachers specialize in other areas.

Crisis Pregnancy Agency

One may suggest, therefore, that in order to raise the perception of RSE teaching as a career option, we need to look more closely at pre-service teacher education. Indeed, newly qualified teachers do not generally encounter formal SPHE teaching (or training for SPHE/RSE) until they enter the teaching profession. Furthermore, the very position of SPHE/RSE as an 'add-on' to a teacher's core subject responsibilities means that it may go unnoticed as part of their professional profile.

You don't have an RSE teacher like you have a maths teacher and a French teacher. It's an add-on for somebody in the school. So it's very hard then for a parent, say, to go, 'Well, oh is that your RSE teacher?' They'll know the maths, they'll know the physics. The problem is trying to identify what this person is - it's a bit of religion, it's a bit of this, it's a bit of everything else.

Health Promotion Officer

A further problem is that restrictions on subject and timetable allocations mean that there is no guarantee that those teachers who participate in RSE training go on to teach the subject. This may lead to further professional complexity around a subject that already faces many difficulties.

There are a lot of funny things going on in some schools where, you know, you have maybe twelve SPHE teachers needed for curricular purposes and you'd have maybe six teachers with absolutely no training teaching it, and you'd have four or five teachers with a lot of training not teaching it at all but wanting to teach it.

Regional Development Officer

³⁰ 'Pre-service training' (or pre-service teacher education) in the second-level context refers to any course those studying to 'serve' as second-level teachers participate in as part of the required Higher Diploma in Education programme.

This lack of continuity can be exacerbated by teacher turnover. Indeed, turnover of staff appears to be proving a problem in some schools in terms of enlisting a core group of SPHE/RSE teachers within schools. Two interviewees went as far as to question the motives of some teachers in taking on SPHE/RSE. The concern was that some teachers may use SPHE experience as a form of 'capital', as a way of accumulating a repertoire of experience that enhances their future career options. The following comment illustrates this point:

Teachers might do SPHE in the Diploma year, but, again, you know, sometimes people do things in their Diploma year because they think it'll make them more employable. But when you actually ask them to sign on the dotted line, they'll do it for the first year and then say, 'Ah no, I don't want to do that.'

Joint Managerial Body

A more obvious barrier to teachers taking on the responsibility of SPHE/RSE is that of pressure on teacher time, encapsulated in the following remarks:

I think the biggest barriers to actual change and innovation in our schools is the fact that within the working day teachers don't have the time to do non-teaching activities ... I think the biggest barrier for teachers being more committed to working with parents and more committed to actually taking different approaches to things is not some kind of professional reaction in the literal sense but rather, at a practical level, they simply don't have the time within their working day to do what they're expected to do.

Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland

Efforts to organise trained, committed personnel to teach RSE clearly encounter a number of barriers, even when the school itself values and is committed to the subject. It is worrying that timetable allocation may be acting as a barrier to trained personnel teaching RSE, since this can result in teachers who are reluctant to teach RSE becoming involved in the delivery of a programme that demands quite specific and specialised skills. This may in turn lead to the avoidance of RSE teaching as well as a poorer perception of its value amongst students:

If a teacher gets allocated SPHE and they're not willing to engage with it and they're not willing to engage with the RSE component, well, then it's, like, it's a recipe for disaster.

Department of Education and Science

Alongside the systemic influences noted above, a range of other professional and personal issues were judged to affect the teaching and delivery of RSE; among these, teacher comfort featured most prominently in the accounts of respondents. Within RSE, 'teacher comfort' is a broad term, which, depending on the context, refers to the level of comfort a teacher feels in delivering the RSE programme. Where teacher comfort is an issue, it may refer to feelings of personal embarrassment with teaching about sexuality, fear over parents' views of the RSE programme, worry over teaching the correct health-related facts and information to students and/or concern about what can be 'safely' taught in light of the school's (Catholic) ethos or policy.

Embarrassment about talking about sex and relationships was frequently mentioned and widely referred to as a major barrier to the effective teaching of RSE. Some respondents suggested that, with exception, male teachers had greater difficulty with the area and that fewer male teachers attend training. Student gender was also thought to impact on teacher comfort, with boys thought to be more challenging than girls when it came to teaching RSE. Respondents varied in their views on teacher age and experience as factors affecting the quality of RSE delivery: while some claimed that more experienced teachers were less likely to experience problems with RSE (and have greater discipline), others felt that younger teachers were more likely to be in tune with the issues, pressures and challenges facing young people.

As our data suggest, it may be all too easy to ‘fudge’ or avoid RSE, and if embarrassment is factored into the equation the likelihood of teacher avoidance of the subject is likely to be far greater. However, fear about the potential negative consequences of teaching RSE is equally, if not more, prohibitive for some teachers. Teacher fear was most often attributed to their not knowing or feeling confident about what is ‘safe’ and appropriate to address within the RSE module. It was felt that some teachers may be particularly worried, for example, about what parents think, or whether certain material or topics are permissible within the school ethos. One Health Promotion Officer suggested that some teachers merely skim the RSE module because of their level of discomfort and/or fear of negative repercussions in the event of parents objecting to the content of the programme. Once again, it appears that this uncertainty about what is ‘safe’ to teach may well stem from the manner in which RSE was initially introduced to teachers:

I think there was a general sense of support from the school, but then in the absence of clarity on that area, maybe teachers might naturally have adopted a conservative approach and said, ‘Well I’m not sticking my neck out here in case, you know, I say something wrong.’

Department of Education and Science

It is significant that a number of respondents ascribed specific qualities to a ‘good’ SPHE/RSE teacher and that many of these reflect a belief that RSE may draw on human resources far more than other subject areas. Such qualities include empathy with students, good listening skills, a level of personal comfort with the topic of relationships and sexuality, and a level of confidence and belief in the subject. It was repeatedly asserted by regional respondents that those who attend training develop a much more positive attitude towards RSE, and are far more comfortable with teaching the subject. The emphasis on personal development within RSE training was viewed as crucial to teacher comfort with the range of topics that typically arise during the teaching of RSE.

A large number of respondents nominated trained teachers as the best suited to teach the RSE programme. However, as we have seen, staffing and timetabling problems can militate against effective and consistent delivery by teachers. During interview, we also explored the role of outside facilitators in the delivery of RSE. Most participants were supportive of schools’ availing of the expertise of outside facilitators, with the proviso that they have specialist skill in RSE instruction. Several pointed out, for example, that a facilitator from outside the school is an extremely useful resource, particularly in cases where teacher embarrassment is high. Indeed, a considerable number of government-level respondents felt that outside agencies should play a greater role in RSE instruction. The concern was that teachers and schools can only do so much, and that specialists need to be more involved. For example, a Department of Health and Children representative suggested that while “teachers are the backbone, there’s no reason

why the backbone can't pull off other places." Similar views were expressed by respondents from the Department of Education and Science and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment:

I think that one of the key things for the future is going to be to recognise that schools can only do a certain amount, that there are many other dimensions to the way in which schools can play their part ... I think we have to be quite creative about meeting the needs of young people, to ensure that they have access to current information and knowledge and skills development in a way that they will come on board and they will accept and support the services on offer to them. I think we just have to be a bit more creative about how we look at it.

Department of Education and Science

You can give teachers in-service training but you're not going to get the critical mass of teachers who are well disposed towards RSE. Schools are going to need the support of specialists, and I think we need to put some of those specialists into schools or give schools access to them, not in the sense of the travelling road show, "It's Monday, we're having the talk," but that there might be groups of specialists available and that a specialist teacher might be shared between a number of schools: someone who understands how schools work and who understands the key health messages that kids need. I know that internationally there's a move towards this.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Equally, however, several respondents expressed concern about the use of facilitators on a one-off basis or as an expedient means of 'covering' RSE and suggested that the role of outside agencies needed to be planned carefully and integrated into the broader RSE programme. Isolated 'talks' or input were viewed as counterproductive, and concern was also expressed about the message that this approach sent to students:

The silent messages in RSE are so important in terms of what we do and what we don't do, and if we bring somebody else in that's giving a message ... I certainly think it is best that the teacher teachers it.

Regional Development Officer

Others who commented on the role and use of facilitators referenced the need for schools to know precisely what is being taught by the individual(s) involved. Some participants also felt that, from a child-protection perspective, the teacher needed to be present when a facilitator worked with students. Above all else, the teacher must know what topics and issues are covered, and the materials used by facilitators need to fit with the school's RSE policy and programme.

Concern was also expressed about equity of access to outside services and facilitators, since not all schools are located in regions where these services are available and/or well developed. One Health Promotion Officer felt that, in light of this, delivery by teachers was the only sustainable approach to RSE delivery.

I think the people we should focus on to deliver it are teachers, because that's the only sustainable way to approach RSE. I think you can get speakers from outside, but they're not always going to be available, or they're not funded.

Health Promotion Officer

Hence, while outside facilitators were viewed by many as a valuable resource, challenges associated with the organisation and management of RSE delivery by facilitators, coupled with the need to integrate the material delivered by teachers and facilitators, means that the use of facilitators by schools may not be as straightforward as it initially appears. Some concern was also expressed about the approach of (some) facilitators from organisations that place a heavy emphasis on prevention and risk.

Invariably, the people who are coming in are talking about sexually transmitted infections, teenage pregnancy, rape crisis. And to me, it's very much about a negative aspect of relationships and sexuality. And the wider picture unfortunately is being missed. It should be about celebrating your humanity, your sexuality, and valuing yourself as a gift. And if that's not done first, I would be absolutely irate that my child would be exposed to this in a school without having got the proper background. On the other hand, people will say that it's easier for people who come in from outside to talk about these things. But the very nature of the kind of in-service training we're offering is about bringing teachers on board. Central to the teaching of SPHE is the relationship between the student and the teacher. And if it takes days or weeks to get that relationship to work, then that teacher is in a place where they feel confident and safe themselves to deal with many of the issues that will arise within the RSE/SPHE programme.

SPHE Support Service Meeting Participant

For a considerable number of regional respondents, the solution lies in adequate teacher training: if there was sufficient training, schools would not have to look to outside facilitators to deliver RSE.

Based on the evidence presented, it may not be unreasonable to suggest that teachers' fears would not be as great a barrier to RSE implementation if fewer reluctant teachers had RSE imposed on them at school level, if SPHE was regarded early on as an actual career option and, indeed, if a greater number of teachers were released for in-service training. Some respondents also suggested that concerns about the matter of school ethos could be dealt with by outlining clearly to all parties (teachers, parents and so on) what will be discussed during classes. Again, in many of the solutions advanced, school policy became the focus of attention: if RSE policy is revised regularly, teachers will feel 'safer' and more confident about what is expected from them. Regional respondents, in particular, identified communication with parents as an effective means of allaying teacher fears.

Certainly, structural barriers have a major part to play in RSE implementation, and debate clearly exists about whether schools can take on RSE alone. While outside facilitators may eradicate the problems of teacher fears and embarrassment, there are a number of other curricular and structural issues that require attention. What is clear is that there is a significant human resource gap that needs to be addressed if RSE is to be developed and sustained into the future.

7.3 Whole-school approach/supportive school environment

This final section deals with a number of dimensions of *whole-school support* for RSE. *Whole-school support* is dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 8 when we undertake a detailed examination of RSE delivery within the nine schools selected for case study. Here, we examine respondents' views on the participation of parents, students and the wider teaching body, in RSE. This issue is important since the participation of members of the wider school community can be seen as a vital enabler to a supportive school environment for RSE.

In general, participants emphasised the importance of the involvement of the entire staff in RSE: a positive school climate was viewed as essential, since the aim of fostering the personal development of students is one that requires openness about RSE as a subject across the *whole school*. One regional respondent made the point that, irrespective of the academic subject in question, teachers constantly find themselves dealing with issues pertaining to relationships and sexuality:

We're only beginning to address the real issue in 2005: that any teacher should be able to teach RSE. If you're going to teach, you should be able to teach RSE because you're dealing with it all day every day, whether you're in the science classroom, the geography class, the maths class, relationships and sexuality is a constant consideration in terms of development of the students.

Regional Development Officer

A second commentator felt strongly that a large number of teachers need to be well disposed and willing to share the responsibility for RSE if timetabling difficulties are to be overcome, particularly in large schools.

Teachers have to want to do it, they have to be good at it and, at the same time, you've got to fit it in to the timetable, and that's very difficult. In a big school you need a lot of people who are positive towards and trained in RSE.

Joint Managerial Body

Others made the point that schools were more likely to achieve consistency in the messages they give to students through the co-ordination of planning *across the curriculum*:

If we're talking about ethos in terms of how it interacts with RSE, I think that cross-curricular planning needs to be happening so that you know what information you're giving to students; you've talked it through and everyone has been involved in that process.

Department of Health and Children

While there was a great deal of talk about the benefits (and necessity) of a supportive school environment, there was also general agreement that a whole-school approach to RSE was not something that was easy to achieve. Moreover, the following comment suggests that collaboration of this kind is challenging for second-level schools in general, irrespective of the subject in question.

I think our curriculum is quite, it's laid out, examined etc., but we don't have a tradition of collaboration ... the notion that you would have all the French teachers or the science teachers working together as a team to see how are we going to promote science in our schools, who is not doing science, why they are not doing it, how do we teach it, how can we make our teaching more interdisciplinary or more congruent with each other's, etc. And it's the same with RSE: unless there's a kind of a team approach to doing it it's not going to work.

Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland

Communication between teachers is clearly critical to achieving whole-school support for RSE. However, respondents also considered the participation of parents to be essential if linkages across the curriculum, and between SPHE/RSE and other subjects, were to be achieved. Indeed, it is worth reiterating that the necessity of school-based RSE was often framed as a way of ensuring that children have (equal) access to knowledge and information about sex and relationships, since it cannot be assumed that this teaching is available to them in their homes (see Chapter 5). Additionally, and as mentioned previously, communication between home and school could go some way towards alleviating teachers' fears about parents' misgivings about RSE. A small number of respondents claimed, however, that vocal parent and other community minorities have acted as a barrier to RSE teaching.

The vast majority of parents are sympathetic to the schools, to the teachers, but there is always five percent that have other agendas, and they can make life very difficult for a subject that teachers may have no training in and that they're taking on voluntarily.

Regional Development Officer

I suppose being realistic there are also those out there who don't support RSE. There are a lot of groups and organisations that are well organised and very vociferous and they are against this kind of education within the school and would, for their own reasons, have lots of things that they don't like about it. So that has been kind of a barrier.

Department of Health and Children

While minority opinion may, in some cases, pose problems for schools, the majority of respondents felt that parental objection to RSE was the exception rather than the norm. Furthermore, several expressed the view that a large number of schools did not involve parents proactively in decision-making about RSE.

I have talked to over 200 parents in sub-groups and there were no parents who didn't see the importance of such education and who weren't absolutely aware of how sexualised our society has become. They wanted RSE in schools; they didn't know whether their schools were doing it or not doing it; they would like to be involved but weren't sure how they could be. And they felt that the school doors in relation to this issue were firmly locked.

Health Promotion Officer

It appears that communication between schools and parents in relation to RSE is not a straightforward process, either for parents or for schools, and that there is great diversity and inconsistency in schools' approach to involving parents in RSE. Moreover, school policy-making is not an area that is traditionally viewed as the remit of parents in Ireland, and, as earlier analyses demonstrate, there are curricular, management and teacher issues that affect RSE in a general sense and that also encroach on parental involvement. Constraints on parent time, which is out of the school's control, further compound these difficulties. One Regional Development Officer described her experience of parental involvement on policy decisions.

Parents are involved in the RSE policy-making, but they are generally quiet. I've worked on policy with maybe twenty schools now, and parents don't generally contribute very much because it normally happens in the school, which is the teachers' territory and parents are very much visitors. Sometimes they can't attend because most parents now are working, and the ones who don't work usually don't get involved with policy-making. I think it would be great if they were involved.

Regional Development Officer

Regional respondents, in particular, considered the involvement of students in drawing up an RSE policy to be crucial: if account was taken of student views and perspectives, they would be more likely to take SPHE/RSE seriously. Their participation in policy-making would also help to ensure that the content of RSE was relevant to their lives and their experiences.

Students should be afforded a number of levels of participation - sitting on the management team mightn't work ... you might have to do capacity building with them to enable them to sit around with the parish priest or the principal or whatever and to feel that they have a voice. So just having a place at the table doesn't happen by accident.

Health Promotion Officer

Once the students came in and joined the conversation, they really challenged a lot of the thinking that was going on and particularly, as well, between the parents and teachers. So I think it's crucial.

Regional Development Officer

Although the latter respondent related a positive story about student involvement in RSE policy-making, the majority of respondents felt that young people were not usually consulted by schools. Furthermore, a number added that, in instances where consultation with students does take place, the exercise is more often tokenistic than real. One respondent also made the point that those students most likely to be in a position to work on student councils (i.e. senior students) are currently not offered SPHE at senior cycle.

The failure to include parents and students in the policy-making process impacts negatively not simply on how teachers view the subject but also on the status of RSE and the sense of ownership that both parents and pupils have over the programme.

If schools haven't gone through the right, the recommended, way of developing policy, like consulting with the parents, consulting with the young people, consulting with the key people, then people don't have a sense of ownership of it - they'll reject it.

Health Promotion Officer

The involvement of the whole school community in RSE, from policy-making through to delivery, is important for a number of reasons. The involvement of parents is important as a means of alleviating teacher stress and promoting the delivery of consistent messages to students. The involvement of parents is important as a way of avoiding miscommunication, promoting consistent messages to students and, at times, to alleviating teacher stress. Finally, making parents and students stakeholders in the RSE programme is critical in terms of creating a sense of ownership, promoting engagement and meeting the needs of the contemporary student body. Nonetheless, there are clearly difficulties with co-ordinating a whole-school approach when many practical aspects of school-based RSE are in difficulty, and while questions remain about who should teach RSE.

7.4 Summary and conclusion

A number of tentative conclusions about the implementation of RSE can be drawn from this chapter's discussion of curricular and teacher influences and the matter of whole-school support. What is perhaps most striking from the data presented is that, despite the resources that have been invested in RSE (e.g. in-service training), the success of the programme remains largely dependent on the motivation and commitment of individual schools and teachers. It appears, therefore, that the implementation of SPHE/RSE is qualitatively different to other areas of curricular change at second level and that additional innovations are required if these programmes are to be developed and sustained into the future. While it is unrealistic to suggest that SPHE/RSE should be prioritised over other subjects, they do, nonetheless, require specific attention from the Department of Education and Science if full implementation is to be achieved.

Schools need to be given greater time and space to consider SPHE/RSE, both as an approach to schooling and as a timetabled subject. It is important to reiterate, at this point, that 'the pressure of exam subjects', the 'overcrowded curriculum' and the 'need to complete so many courses in so many subjects' were the most commonly listed barriers to RSE implementation by the schools surveyed for the purpose of this study (see Chapter 4). It appears, however, that the academic and broader benefits of effective SPHE/RSE programmes are not fully appreciated by schools, a situation which needs to be urgently addressed. The fact that SPHE assessment-for-learning measures are not yet finalised is highly unsatisfactory and compounds this problem further, particularly when one considers the facilitative approach recommended in the SPHE guidelines. It is perhaps important to note that the long-overdue senior-cycle guidelines need also to take account of these curricular complexities.

Since SPHE draws on teachers' professional *and* personal skills it is a subject that requires special attention in the context of the second-level system. Most obviously, perhaps, second-level teachers need to be aware of SPHE/RSE before they enter the teaching profession. It would be extremely helpful if teachers had the option of adding an *official* RSE dimension to their professional profile before they began teaching, as well as in the context of their on-going professional development. This knowledge and skill would undoubtedly help to address many of the current barriers to RSE delivery, including teacher fear and embarrassment, and their ability to interact with and plan with outside facilitators if they so wish. While greater professional structures cannot be viewed as a panacea for SPHE/RSE, they may go some way to raising its profile within the teaching community, thereby positively influencing the perceptions of the target community, that is, students themselves.

Since individuals may have varying levels of comfort with RSE, and hold a variety of views on relationships and sexuality, it is understandable that SPHE/RSE faces particular difficulty in the area of whole-school support. Again, a greater awareness of SPHE/RSE as a career

option might have benefits for whole-school RSE awareness. The familiar problems within Irish schools of finding time for co-ordinated planning across the curriculum and facilitating parent and student consultation emerge once again as barriers to achieving whole-school support for RSE. It is perhaps important, however, to consider that additional challenges emerge for SPHE/RSE in relation to whole-school support compared to other subject areas. Most obviously, RSE and SPHE examine how the student feels about and understands the social world, how he/she relates to others and how he/she behaves in wider society, characteristics not associated with the content of other curricular areas. While parents cannot expect schools to take on sole responsibility for RSE, it is vital that schools inform and involve parents in the RSE programme. Equally, the student-centred approach to SPHE/RSE implies that the content, where appropriate, needs to be discussed with students under the guidance of skilled professionals. A tokenistic or peripheral role for students ultimately diminishes RSE's relevance and meaning as a school subject and, more broadly, within their social and personal lives.

It is important to reiterate that the findings of this and the previous two chapters are based on the views of governmental, national and regional players *only*. Throughout the next section, the views of principals, teachers, parents, and (for the first time) students are presented.

Chapter 8

RSE within the schools: policy, practice and the teaching of RSE

This is the first of three chapters to present findings of the case studies of RSE within the nine schools selected for in-depth study. As outlined in the methodology chapter, the case-study research was designed to complement the survey, which provides critical macro-level information about the implementation of RSE *across* a large number of schools, but which cannot easily unravel the complex factors that impact on RSE *within* individual schools.

In this chapter, we shift the focus of analysis to a detailed examination of the *organisation, management and delivery of RSE at school level*. The evidence presented points to an array of factors and issues that impact on RSE. Much of the data highlights problems with the status of RSE, the teaching of the subject and, more broadly, with aspects of policy development and the implementation of a whole-school approach. Whilst these and other problems exist, it is critical to bear in mind that RSE is being taught, albeit at different levels, in all but one of the schools studied. What emerges strongly from our analysis is an identifiable *continuum* of programme implementation and delivery across the schools, which we present early in the chapter. This continuum draws attention to a range and potential mix of factors that influence the delivery of the RSE programme. In later sections we undertake a detailed exploration of RSE policy, the status of RSE and the delivery of the programme, with reference to the work of the nine schools studied. We aim throughout the chapter to identify the processes and mechanisms that work to facilitate RSE and we also highlight the issues that act as barriers to the effective delivery of the programme.

8.1 Profile of participating schools³¹

Nine post-primary schools participated in the case studies. The selection process aimed to achieve variability in terms of school type, size, geographical location and catchment area. A balance of urban and rural schools was attained. One school was located in an inner-city area, two in large suburban localities and two were in large regional towns; a further three schools were located in smaller provincial towns, and one in a rural locality. Of the nine schools, one was designated disadvantaged at the time of the study.³²

Three of the schools were single-sex voluntary secondary schools (one serving all girls and two, all boys) held in trust by a religious order. The six co-educational schools selected included three community colleges under the VEC and three voluntary secondary schools, including one fee-paying school. In the voluntary secondary schools and community colleges studied the

³¹ To preserve the anonymity of the schools selected for case study, this profile is deliberately general and we do not attribute specific characteristics to the individual schools studied.

³² Designated disadvantage status is granted to schools on a number of indicators of deprivation and these schools are eligible for additional resources.

principal and almost all the staff are lay people. The schools varied in terms of size/number of pupils. Only one had less than 200 students, two had between 200 and 300 students and five schools had between 500 and 600 students. One school had over 900 students enrolled.

8.2 RSE within the schools: an overview

This section summarises some key features of RSE delivery within the nine schools and provides an overview of similarities and differences between the schools in terms of SPHE/RSE policy, the timetabling and location of RSE at junior and senior cycle and the schools' use of outside facilitators.

Table 8.1 Summary of RSE delivery within the nine post-primary schools³³

SCHOOL CODE	RSE policy	Intro RSE	SPHE policy	Intro SPHE	Junior cycle (where is RSE taught)	Senior cycle (where is RSE taught)	Timetable arrangements (Junior cycle)	Use of outside facilitators (OF)
Sch 1	No	2004	No	2001	Not formally taught (some issues addressed in other classes)	RE	One SPHE class period per week, 1st-3rd year	No
Sch 2	Yes (4/5 years)	2000	Yes	1980s	Outside facilitators	RE (by some teachers of RE only)	One SPHE class period per week, 1st-3rd year (RSE not taught by teachers)	Yes (all of RSE taught by OF)
Sch 3	Yes (6 years)	2000	Yes	1998	SPHE	RE	One SPHE class period per week, 1st-3rd year	No
Sch 4	Yes (10 years)	1995	Yes	2000	SPHE	RE	One SPHE class per week, 1st – 3rd year	Yes (Transition Year)
Sch 5	Yes	1998	Yes	1998	SPHE	RE	Double class period once weekly for half of the year; then switch to PE (1st-3rd year)	No
Sch 6	No	2001	No	2002	SPHE	Home Economics	One SPHE class per week, 1st – 3rd year	Yes (Transition Year only)
Sch 7	No	2003	No	2001	SPHE	RE (by some teachers of RE only)	One SPHE class per week (1st – 3rd year)	Yes
Sch 8	Yes	1998	Yes	1998	SPHE	Unsure	One SPHE class per week 1st – 3rd year	Yes (but less so now that RSE is well established)
Sch 9	Yes (just drafted)	Not formally introduced	No (currently being drawn up)	2003	SPHE	RE (by some teachers of RE only)	One SPHE class per week 1st – 3rd year	Yes (for Leaving Certificate classes only)

³³ The codes attributed to schools do not reflect the order in which the case studies were conducted.

Six of the nine schools have a written RSE policy statement and all six also have a policy statement for SPHE. One school had only recently devised a policy and had not formally introduced the programme. Teachers in this school did comment, however, on teaching aspects of the programme in other classes (e.g. biology). RSE was taught in the context of SPHE at junior cycle in seven of the nine schools. School 2 offered RSE to students but this education was delivered entirely by outside facilitators and teachers did not cover the RSE module within the broader SPHE programme. While other schools availed of outside facilitators, these professionals were usually asked to address specific aspects of RSE (e.g. sexually transmitted infections) and several schools used outside facilitators for the delivery of RSE at senior cycle *only*. Finally, in keeping with the recommended guidelines for timetabling, practically all schools offered one class period of SPHE weekly between first and third year. School 5 managed the timetabling of SPHE differently and provided a double period of SPHE for half of the school year from first year through to third year.

8.3 A comparative analysis of RSE within two schools

The data presented on Table 8.1 suggest that the nine schools selected for case study were broadly similar in terms of certain aspects of RSE delivery: all schools, for example, had SPHE timetabled and the majority endeavoured to teach RSE within the context of the SPHE programme. One might, in fact, conclude from this table that RSE is being delivered and working well in practically all of the schools studied. However, the interview and focus-group data uncovered marked differences in how the schools approached RSE, as well as differences in both the *quantity and quality* of RSE. In other words, we found that the broad 'facts' of RSE implementation and delivery (e.g. having an RSE policy, timetabling SPHE, and so on) across even this relatively small group of schools do not adequately reflect the work of schools in the *teaching* of RSE. A comparative analysis of a number of key characteristics of RSE management and delivery within two schools will be used to illustrate differences in how schools may approach RSE.

Two schools – referred to here as St. Ita's and St. Mark's - were selected for comparative analysis on the grounds that they look very similar 'on paper' in their implementation and delivery of RSE.³⁴ For example, both schools have a well-established RSE policy, they both teach RSE in the context of SPHE and neither avails of outside facilitators to assist with the teaching of RSE. However, when RSE is examined in greater detail within the two schools, a number of quite significant differences are apparent in their respective approaches to SPHE/RSE. Additionally, interviews with school personnel highlight some important differences in the status of SPHE and teacher comfort with the content of the RSE module.

The key qualitative differences in how these schools approach RSE centre on *the co-ordination of SPHE, the status of the SPHE and teacher comfort*. All three are examined in greater detail below.

³⁴ In other words, the two schools were selected because they are broadly similar, not because they represent opposing ends of the RSE implementation spectrum (from low to high implementation). Both schools could, in fact, be said to be implementing RSE at a 'moderate' or 'moderate to high' level in terms of some of the characteristics listed on the continuum of implementation presented on Table 8.2 later in this chapter.

8.3.1 The co-ordination of SPHE

St. Ita's has had only temporary co-ordinators of SPHE in recent years. This arrangement understandably led to various inconsistencies in SPHE delivery and resulted in a neglect of the subject. By contrast, St. Mark's had an SPHE co-ordinator who had worked to build the programme over several years. This individual was a very experienced teacher of SPHE and had also been involved in devising the school's RSE policy. The co-ordinator's strong commitment to the subject over several years has helped to foster continuity and development across all areas of SPHE, and within RSE in particular.

The contrasting situations in the two schools underline the critical role of the SPHE co-ordinator. These cases also highlight SPHE's reliance on dedicated teachers who have a very specific commitment to the subject area. In the words of one of the school principals: "SPHE teaching is very different and it takes a certain type of personality. I think it needs to be driven by the right people."

8.3.2 The status of SPHE/RSE

The case-study data suggest that raising the status of SPHE presented challenges in both schools, and SPHE co-ordinators and teachers alike stated openly that SPHE and RSE struggled for recognition:

I think RSE is an undervalued part of the SPHE programme. My general feeling is that a lot of people feel uncomfortable teaching it, you know, and that they're not comfortable with the topics that come out of it.

Teacher

The position of SPHE appeared to be a particular problem in St. Ita's, as the following account suggests:

I suppose we have a split in the staff room. I'd say we have quite a high majority, quite a high percentage, of people who think it's very worthwhile. But it was highlighted by an SPHE day for teachers here recently that there are people who think it's a load of rubbish, and who were very uncomfortable. They actually left; they couldn't deal with talking about feelings and didn't see it's relevance to us or to students.

Co-ordinator, St. Ita's

The interviews we conducted in this school suggest that at least a proportion of the teaching staff have limited interest in SPHE/RSE. The SPHE co-ordinator later identified the low status of the subject – and the ambivalence of many teachers – as the greatest barriers to RSE delivery within the school.

I think really until there's a better approach to SPHE fostered here, that's the biggest resource really: more awareness and support of the programme within the school itself.

Co-ordinator, St. Ita's

Staff within St. Mark's also identified problems with the status of SPHE, and recognition of the value of the subject by the wider teacher body within the school was clearly an incremental process. According to one teacher, RSE faced specific problems in this regard because of teachers' discomfort with much of the subject matter.

Nonetheless, within this school there was far greater agreement among teachers about the importance of RSE. It is perhaps significant that the principal had a particular commitment to the provision of health education to boys.

We've always had the care of students as central, and I think that, particularly with all boys, these programmes are vital because boys need a voice and it's very difficult to get them to vocalise what they're thinking. And yet if we do create the space, they will come out and say it. They need a lot more ... it's needed more in boys' schools than anywhere else.

Principal, St. Mark's

8.3.3 Teacher comfort

Staff in both schools spoke about the negative impact of teachers' lack of comfort with the subject matter of RSE and identified teachers' anxiety about teaching RSE as a major barrier to the delivery of the programme, as the following quotes illustrate:

This isn't a criticism of them [teachers] as people, but they don't understand the subject, they don't really feel comfortable with it, and they are forced to teach it. So it becomes a sort of extra class in the week for some people ... there are some classes who are really enjoying SPHE and RSE; I know there are some classes who aren't getting a class, it's being used for another subject, you know. Which means it can be down to the teacher.

Co-ordinator, St. Ita's

With RSE, a lot depends on the comfort level of the person handling it in the school.

Principal, St. Mark's

However, within St. Mark's, the presence of a small core group of trained and highly committed SPHE teachers – supported by the co-ordinator and school principal – helped to circumvent many of the challenges associated with teacher discomfort (see later sections for a more detailed discussion of the problem of teacher discomfort).

This comparative analysis provides a useful introduction to the nuances of RSE implementation. It also demonstrates that the in-school complexities of RSE delivery do not easily come to light when questions are asked about whether, for example, there is a written policy (and when it was introduced), how timetabling is arranged, and so on. This analysis, in fact, reveals marked differences in how two schools implement and deliver RSE and in their overall management of the RSE programme, despite clear similarities between them in terms of their RSE policies and the timetabling of SPHE. This finding strongly suggests that in order to understand RSE implementation it is necessary to move beyond a 'factual' checklist of basic criteria, as this may well conceal the diverse and complex in-school influences on the programme.

8.4 Towards an understanding of RSE implementation within post-primary schools

The previous section can be usefully viewed as an introduction to the diversity of in-school influences on RSE implementation and delivery. There is clearly a complex mix of factors that affect RSE. As a first step to understanding this complexity, it is important to draw attention to two key influences on the organisation and delivery of RSE: RSE policy development and the commitment of the school principal.

8.4.1 RSE policy

Chapter 7 highlighted the importance attached to RSE policy by a range of key 'players' in SPHE/RSE at government, national and regional levels. This study's school-based research confirms that RSE policy – and the process of consultation related to policy formation – is critical to establishing the subject on a sound footing within the whole school environment. The policy-making exercise itself facilitates discussion among teachers, raises the profile of RSE and helps to clarify thinking about relationships and sexuality education. The process of consultation with teachers, management and parents is a key mechanism for ensuring that both teachers and parents are informed about the programme content. This leaves less room for ambiguity and confusion among teachers about what they can 'safely' teach and helps to ensure that parents are well-versed on the school's approach to the programme. Staff within schools where a policy statement for RSE had been developed through a consultative process – and where teachers were familiar with the policy – frequently commented on how the policy assisted them in their work. The quotes below come from teachers working in different schools.

Well, it gives you guidelines for how far you can go without crossing a line, sort of thing.

Teacher

I think the policy means that everything is above board, parents are aware, then. It's very important to have them on your side, really ... there's accountability also.

Teacher

Finally, and importantly, a good school policy helps to ensure that the content of RSE meets the needs of young people attending the school. Ideally, young people need to be consulted in the policy-making process and also, at a later stage, as partners in reviewing RSE within the school.

8.4.2 The commitment of the school principal

The school principal plays a critical leadership role and has the capacity to prioritise SPHE/RSE and the time and effort invested in the programme. Without the commitment of the school principal, teachers may not be made aware of the school's RSE policy and/or of the critical importance of in-service training. More broadly, it is the principal who creates an agenda of expectations and has the capacity to motivate and encourage teachers to opt to teach the subject. During interview, teachers from different schools consistently identified the principal as playing a lead role in the implementation of RSE:

The first thing I would say is principals need to absolutely realise its importance. It is imperative that principals know what SPHE and RSE are about.

Teacher

The principal who was here then was absolutely important at the time SPHE was introduced and, in particular, he would have been fully behind the RSE component. So yeah, he was very supportive and that's very important.

Teacher

The leadership of the principal is also crucial if RSE is to be delivered with whole-school support. The following comment by an SPHE co-ordinator in one school where RSE policy had only recently been formulated, and where the module had not yet been formally introduced, is illustrative of the effect of a traditional lack of commitment to SPHE/RSE within the school: "I feel there's only very limited interest in it in the school, and that is a huge problem."

Whilst the policy-making process and the commitment of the principal emerged as key influences on the quality of RSE, there are several additional factors that impact on the delivery of the programme. 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 8.2 these characteristics are presented 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 'mid-way' along a *continuum* of development in its management of one, several, or all of the areas listed.

Table 8.2 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 ³⁵	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.

³⁵ 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.

School culture is regarded in both the Irish and international literature as one of the most complex and important concepts in education today (Furlong 2000, Fullan 2001). Table 8.2 is a useful device for understanding the complexity of curricular change and the impact of some important dimensions of school culture on non-examination subjects such as SPHE/RSE.

The 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*. Whole-school issues are therefore important to RSE, as are the leadership of the principal, the involvement of parents and the attitudes and beliefs of teachers. Furthermore, the table does not suggest that one characteristic is more important than another; rather, implementation will be facilitated by the presence of all or several of the factors as defined at the higher end of the continuum. Importantly, the case studies indicate that no two schools can be described as being at the same stage or point along the continuum for *all* of the characteristics listed. Furthermore, no school can be described as operating at the high end of the continuum with regard to all of the characteristics listed. Ultimately, however, if a school is referred to later in this chapter as implementing at a 'low' level, they can be understood as positioned at the lower end of the continuum for many of the characteristics identified. The opposite is the case for 'high' implementation schools.

One finding that emerges strongly from both the quantitative survey and the case studies is the critical role of co-ordination of SPHE within schools. Where a co-ordinator was in place, and where this person worked with colleagues with a strong level of commitment to SPHE/RSE, the likelihood of high implementation of RSE was far greater. Related to this is the importance of whole-school support; where several staff members are trained in SPHE, and where SPHE is a post of responsibility, there is a greater likelihood that the school will operate at the higher end of the implementation continuum. The attitude of individual teachers is also of major significance. In schools with low implementation, there was a virtual avoidance of RSE due to teachers' personal discomfort with discussing sexuality with students, as well as fear of parental misgivings about the programme. This situation, where it existed, was associated with low levels of communication within the school and with a lack of clarity about the role and influence of school ethos. The negative views of parents did not, in fact, emerge as a significant barrier to RSE delivery. Indeed, the parents interviewed across all of the schools were positively disposed to schools providing education on relationships and sexuality, and most schools did not find that they had to deal with widespread parental misgivings about the programme's content. The case studies also indicate that consultation with parents with regard to RSE policy and the provision of information on the precise content of the programme was not only important as a process, but also resulted in schools being more likely to have an effective RSE programme in place.

It is worth noting that many of the factors identified in Table 8.2 have emerged in the school change and effectiveness literature when other curricular areas have been the focus of change. For example, a study of school effectiveness in Irish second-level schools found significant differences among second-level schools in relation to both academic and non-academic student outcomes (Smyth 2000). A major conclusion arising from this study centres on the importance of focusing on the school as a whole organization and the need to direct policy development accordingly.

8.5 RSE policy development and implementation

Six of the nine participating schools had a written policy statement and one school was mid-way through the process of developing a policy statement. Our data suggest that schools were not equal in terms of their prior experience of school-based health education provision at the time RSE directives were issued by the Department of Education and Science, and this appeared to influence the pace with which they moved to initiate policy development. Certainly, schools with a history of pastoral care provision appeared to make a smoother transition to RSE policy-making and programme planning, as the following quotes from two such schools illustrate:

The written policy would only have been developed in the mid-nineties but the unwritten policy was always there, and the teaching of R.E., in particular, in the school was always very strong.

Principal

Our programme had been kind of well embedded in the school for a long time, long before SPHE. We had our relationships and sexuality programme, you know, and the teachers are very good at what they do with it.

Co-ordinator

A number of teachers referred to the Department of Education and Science guidelines on policy development, and two schools adhered closely to these guidelines when devising their policy.³⁶ Even if schools did not follow policy-making guidelines precisely, there was considerable agreement across schools that the guidelines initially issued by the Department were useful. Of the six schools that had a written policy statement, all consulted parents and the wider school community, including teachers and the Board of Management. Consultation was generally portrayed as empowering by school personnel who participated in the process. In relation to parents, consultation was sometimes undertaken by letter but, more often than not, schools invited parents to attend a meeting at which the RSE programme was outlined and explained. This undertaking helped to allay any fears or misgivings that parents may have had about the programme. Indeed, few schools reported problems in gaining parental support for RSE, and across the schools there was general agreement that parental misgivings about RSE had waned very significantly in the past 5-10 years. The vast majority of teachers felt that parents were supportive of schools providing teaching on sexuality and sexual health to their children.³⁷

There has been a complete cultural shift. Parents are aware - they know that their child needs information – and when I say aware, I am talking about the increase in sexually transmitted diseases and so on.

Teacher

³⁶ However, no school involved students in the RSE policy formation process, as suggested by the Department of Education (1995) in the guidelines issued. At this time, it is likely that relatively few schools had the mechanisms such as a student council that might have helped them to do so. Nonetheless, it is significant that no school adhered to the recommendations of the Department of Education in this regard.

³⁷ This finding corroborates the survey findings (Chapter 4) which indicate that 'traditional (or conservative) attitudes' in Ireland do not appear to act as a barrier to the full implementation of RSE. It is worth noting, however, that the language used by school personnel when discussing the issue of parental support was quite passive; schools tended to assume that parents were satisfied with all aspects of the RSE programme. While parents were certainly supportive of the school's role in RSE, a considerable number felt that communication between the school and home on the matter of RSE was less than satisfactory (see Chapter 10).

The SPHE co-ordinator of another school commented:

You see, I think once it's explained to parents, I don't think they can actually have any argument against it. I mean, RSE, the only bit that parents heard originally when it started off was the sex part, you know. They heard sex and not sexuality. They were totally misinformed when the debate started years ago. But once it's explained, it's fine.

Co-ordinator

Three schools did not have a policy and appeared to experience problems with the process of policy formation. All cited a number of reasons for not drawing up a policy, among which time constraints and the need to prioritise other school business featured most strongly.

We should have a policy, I'm sure it's on our list of things to do, but at the minute I think there's about sixty or seventy policies that most schools are supposed to have. So to be really honest with you, all the staff are currently in sub-groups working on this, that, or the other - everybody has been working on a policy. Again, it's down to time and, again, having the expertise; it's such a sensitive area you're talking about.

Deputy Principal

The need to consult with parents – who, it was feared, would object to the programme – also acted as a barrier to policy development in the case of two schools. In one school, for example, both the principal and the SPHE co-ordinator expressed a strong reluctance to discuss RSE with parents, believing that a large number would object to the programme.

We haven't got an RSE policy in the school where parents have come in on it. So I am always aware of this, you know. And I am afraid that maybe some parents would not like, you know, this course being taught to their kids. They may think it's a personal thing where the parents should tell them about relationships and sexuality.

Co-ordinator

School personnel may have specific reasons for believing that parents are unlikely to support teaching on relationships and sexuality. There is an equal danger, however, that such assumptions may be unfounded. Neither of the schools where reservations about consulting with parents were expressed had, in fact, 'tested' these assumptions by engaging with parents on the matter of sexuality education. Furthermore, the reports from schools where such consultation did take place strongly suggest that parents are supportive when their views are considered and when they are informed about the school's approach to this sensitive area of teaching.

By and large we would have found that parents were very much in agreement with what we were doing and they are very happy. I don't believe I ever heard, maybe once, of a student being taken out of a specific aspect of the programme. Other than that, no.

Co-ordinator

Policy formation is a key task that assists RSE implementation but it is merely a first step in a process of fostering an approach to Relationships and Sexuality Education that meets the needs of students. The question of how RSE policy facilitates and supports the delivery of the programme is therefore pertinent. Across the schools we studied, only a relatively small number appeared to draw on their policy document in their annual planning of RSE. Typically, the policy statement currently in use had been devised several years previously and, over time, appeared to have lost its significance as a reference point for practice. Furthermore, in a small number of schools, some teachers appeared not to be aware that a policy statement existed.

It's only recently I became aware that there was one [RSE policy] in the school. I know that's bad, like.

Teacher

It appears, therefore, that policy may not directly influence the day-to-day teaching of RSE, particularly when policies are not current. Indeed, a difficulty with RSE policy within practically all of the schools is that it had not been reviewed since the time it was initially introduced. A teacher from the same school as the teacher quoted above stated:

That policy has been developed a long time now and it hasn't been updated of late, even though it would be in my mind to have it updated.

Teacher

The principal from another school made a similar point:

The original policy is still there and, I would say, in the last two years we've been looking seriously again at updating it because, obviously, over time and with the coming in of SPHE etcetera, it needs to be looked at again. But there are so many issues.

Principal

As the reports above suggest, teachers and school principals did not regard the absence of policy revision as ideal, and, once again, time emerged as the major obstacle to undertaking such a review. Only one of the nine schools had revisited its policy and introduced changes since the time it was initially formulated.

We revised our policy there about two or three years ago, and at that stage then we had a Student Council, so we involved the students. We had two senior students who then sat in on the policy revision as well.

Co-ordinator

Although time constraints understandably present challenges and difficulties, the absence of review nonetheless suggests that principals may see their task as complete once an RSE policy is produced. Our data also suggest that, in some instances, principals were also poorly informed about practice (i.e. the content of the RSE programme), even if they had been involved in the process of approving the school's policy statement.

I'd have to plead ignorance on that - I wouldn't be sure exactly what the programme is ... I mean, you'll probably get more clear-cut answers from the teachers on the ground who are directly involved, who are teaching it every day. I'd just have the broad view.

Principal

Most school principals deferred to the expertise of teaching staff and, in particular, to the SPHE co-ordinator, about curricular issues. This might, on the one hand, be viewed as securing a position of power for teachers as the experts in Relationships and Sexuality Education. Alternatively, it may be suggestive of a separate view of policy and practice (within at least some schools) and lends some support to the view expressed by a number of regional support staff (from both health and education sectors) that RSE policy formation is merely a 'paper exercise' that principals undertake, without adequate follow-up or review once the task is complete (see Chapter 7).

Schools may have a policy statement, but for this policy to be effective there must be a strong commitment to RSE within the school as well as the requisite resources and supports to enable the delivery of the programme. This point was made strongly by a principal in one school:

I think for the policy to be effective and to be taken up, you need a strong element of commitment to the values that underpin the policy. Then you need support as well. We've been lucky in the sense that we've had access to various resources that we can tap into through the Health Board and through private people who have set up offering services.

Principal

Schools – including those schools that rate as 'medium' or 'high' implementers of RSE – were critical of the manner in which directives related to the implementation of the programme were communicated to schools by the Department of Education and Science. In particular, there were strong claims that the Department's handling of this matter – in terms of providing practical guidelines, resources and supports – did not adequately meet the needs of schools and teachers.

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

Similarly, the principal from another school commented on the difficulty of implementing such programmes:

... 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

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!'

Principal

Others were critical of the timetabling directive (i.e. 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.

Deputy Principal

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.

Principal

The finding that 40% of the schools surveyed for the purpose of this study (see Chapter 4) had not yet reached an agreed RSE policy is discouraging and suggests that a considerable proportion of schools may not appreciate and/or endorse the importance of policy. Across the schools studied, the most frequently cited obstacle to policy development centred on time constraints. Whilst schools are under immense pressure to produce an increasing number of policies related to curricular and management issues, it is difficult to accept time *alone* as the single greatest factor hindering policy-making over a ten-year period since the Department of Education first issued guidelines related to RSE policy (Department of Education 1995). It seems likely that the school's use of time is influenced by a wide array of considerations and that SPHE/RSE may not feature high on the list of priorities within a large number of schools. The belief that RSE is simply a 'tag-on' to an already extremely demanding curriculum is important, as is the suggestion by school personnel that government policy has contributed to this situation. It is important, therefore, to explore the status of SPHE/RSE within the schools selected for case study.

8.6 The status of SPHE/RSE

The status of SPHE emerged as a major influence on schools' implementation and delivery of RSE. By 'status' we mean a recognition and understanding by key personnel (the principal, the SPHE co-ordinator and SPHE teachers) and, ideally, by the entire teaching staff, of the importance of SPHE and RSE. Across all of the schools, SPHE struggled – to a lesser or greater extent – to achieve status and recognition. This finding affirms many of the concerns expressed by regional support staff regarding SPHE's struggle for prominence within a highly academic educational system. However, within schools where RSE implementation and delivery was high, SPHE (and, by implication, RSE) did have status. In this section, we explore some of the problems that SPHE faces in terms of gaining the status that academic subjects appear to automatically command.

Teachers, SPHE co-ordinators and school principals consistently identified or alluded to the low status of SPHE as a barrier to RSE delivery. While SPHE was timetabled in all of the schools, it nonetheless competed for time, space and recognition with a large number of academic subjects. The following comments from different schools illustrate a perceived problem with accommodating non-examination subjects within a curriculum and school culture that prioritise academic success.

At the end of the day, SPHE is not on the Junior Cert.; it's not on the Leaving Cert.

Teacher

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 such a programme [SPHE/RSE] was even going on.

Principal

In addition, it was commonly assumed that since SPHE does not carry the demands of taking an exam, students simply do not take the subject seriously.

Anything that doesn't have an exam at the end of it is going to be a doss as far as students are concerned; it's the class where they can go in and chat.

Teacher

However, a significant problem with the low status of SPHE is that ambivalence on the part of some teachers can impact negatively on students' views of the subject. This issue was recognised by only a very small minority of teachers.

A lot of teachers have tunnel thinking about academic subjects. We're a very academic school, and I would think broader minded teachers would see the value of SPHE/RSE. As regards the students themselves, they're at the mercy of the attitude of the teacher. We're a very academic school.

Co-ordinator

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'. As a non-examination subject, SPHE appeared to be viewed as superfluous by teachers not engaged with the subject; certainly, this was the impression of many of the SPHE teachers interviewed.³⁸ In some cases, this same perception led some teachers to avoid SPHE or refuse to participate in the teaching of the subject. Second-level teachers' professional identities are, of course, constructed largely around subject specialities, and it is perhaps not so surprising that some teachers prefer to adhere to their area(s) of expertise. What is noteworthy, however, is that teaching SPHE – or being asked to teach the subject – can be perceived by some teachers as a subtle or not-so-subtle demotion or downgrading of their status and worth as educators.

I know some teachers don't want to teach it because they see it as a joke.

Teacher

An SPHE co-ordinator from another school makes a similar point:

Well, amongst teachers, it's a doss class.

Co-ordinator

Older teachers were sometimes portrayed – rightly or wrongly – by younger staff members as more likely to be ambivalent about and to lack interest in RSE.

We have great variation in staff age in the school. And I would say that there are still a fair few teachers, maybe with three, four or five years left and they're the teachers who probably don't really have any interest in that area.

Teacher

³⁸ Likewise, Lynch & Lodge (2002) found that teachers of less valued subjects (including home economics and art) expressed a sense of alienation or perceived lack of regard by their colleagues and some felt that they were viewed as inferior by some of their peers.

Teachers also commented that SPHE/RSE was frequently delegated to relatively junior members of staff (usually women), reflecting a poor understanding of the level of responsibility involved. Irrespective of how the position of SPHE within the school's broader culture and routine was portrayed, its low status impacted very considerably on the work of both co-ordinators and teachers of the subject. Indeed, SPHE co-ordinators frequently portrayed their efforts to have the subject recognised and valued within the school as a struggle.³⁹

I have had to speak out very strongly because I've often heard objections like, 'Sure, religion covers that.'

Co-ordinator

If SPHE suffers because of its low status within schools, then the position of RSE can be even more tenuous, a point readily acknowledged by both principals and SPHE co-ordinators:

RSE tends, because it's a sub-section of pretty much a small curriculum, and particularly when that curriculum isn't exam-based, the vast majority of teachers see it as someone else's role. You know: 'I'm not a religion teacher; it doesn't concern me; it's not my role.' And particularly because it's not an exam subject.

Principal

I think it's a module that's looked on as, 'God, let's get this over fast and move away from it.'

Co-ordinator

It appears that RSE may be an unappealing subject area for teachers, and several, in fact, openly acknowledged that RSE runs the risk of being neglected or overlooked because it is a particularly challenging and personally demanding module within SPHE. The comments below reflect the considerable overlap that can exist between teacher comfort and the recognition that RSE is afforded by individual teachers and/or by the school.

Then there's the discomfort that some people have with RSE. And I'd say there are some people who would consider it to be important, but I would think, generally, no. I would say a lot of people would prefer to be teaching their subject. And I think as well, like, and possibly with me, I'm not comfortable with teaching sexuality really.

Teacher

It is significant that students within many of the schools studied were aware of the low status of RSE and of the discomfort some teachers demonstrate with many of the issues and topics that arise in the teaching of the subject. The following student came from the same school as the teacher quoted above:

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.

JC Student

³⁹ In a UK study, Alldred et al. (2003) similarly found that Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) co-ordinators, although eager to develop initiatives, faced immense difficulties because of the low status of the subject.

However, in at least two of the schools studied SPHE did have status as a subject, and the case-study data suggest that within these schools there was more widespread recognition among teachers, including those not involved directly in teaching the subject, of the value of SPHE and RSE.

I think if you don't have that, I mean if the subject hasn't got a status, forget it. You know the curriculum is absolutely jam-packed, and everybody is pushing for their own subject area to be looked after. And if a thing isn't treated with respect, and I think, again, as I said, I was at a co-ordinators' meeting just there last week, and I was listening to people, and 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?

Co-ordinator

Much of the commentary of teachers, co-ordinators and principals demonstrates that the implementation of new curricula is far more problematic than the mere introduction of a policy and programme and the provision of a detailed syllabus. A programme such as SPHE, which does not conform to the highly academic orientation of the Irish secondary-school curriculum, is likely to meet with considerable resistance, and our data confirm this. What emerges strongly from our work within schools is that SPHE and RSE are far more likely to enjoy both status and success within schools that have fostered and adopted a whole-school approach to SPHE. However, across the schools studied, the achievement of this level of in-school support for SPHE presented major challenges, and most schools had only begun the work of establishing SPHE/RSE on a whole-school footing. The following accounts from different schools demonstrate this:

It is very difficult to achieve. It might connect up with biology - they're learning about reproduction and doing RSE. We would then do those around the same time of the year. But, in reality, it's quite difficult, I have to say.

Co-ordinator

The whole-school approach is the ideal, but in reality it doesn't quite happen like that, you know. You have your SPHE class, you do your bit, do the pastoral care system; you've your Year Head and class tutors. But I think all of that needs co-ordination; it needs somebody, a strong leader who really believes in the value of all of that so that it becomes part of the fabric of the school. So I think it's possible but it's very much ideal and a very difficult thing to do. And I think we're only at beginning stages in some ways.

Deputy Principal

In a small number of cases, the notion of 'whole-school' was regarded as impracticable and, in others, the comments of teachers frequently demonstrated an absence of this orientation to SPHE/RSE delivery.

Lovely idea! It's a great idea but you have so many teachers who aren't open to SPHE teaching ... It's impossible because you're not going to change everyone. You'll still get people who trained in SPHE and think it's all hogwash, and that's never going to change.

Co-ordinator

It is difficult for SPHE/RSE to have status and recognition if all teachers are not informed about the programme and its content. Some schools had organised whole-school planning days for SPHE and this initiative appeared to yield positive results in terms of raising teacher awareness of the programme and also impacted positively on the morale of the schools' SPHE teachers. In general, however, our discussions with school personnel indicate that schools had a relatively poor grasp of the importance and potential of whole-school thinking for SPHE and RSE. This is despite the emphasis placed on this issue in all of the published Department of Education and Science and SPHE Support Service documents on RSE and SPHE (e.g. Department of Education 1995a, Department of Education and Science 2000a, SPHE Support Service 2000). It appears that schools need far more guidance if the aim of establishing whole-school support for SPHE is to be realised.

8.7 Classroom delivery of the SPHE/RSE curriculum

This section examines several complex and interrelated issues that influence the teaching and effectiveness of RSE in the classrooms of the nine schools studied. The first of these is teacher selection for SPHE/RSE. In Chapter 4, teacher comfort was identified as having a significant impact on RSE implementation. This issue is explored in greater detail here, with reference to personal comfort with sexuality as a topic, the school's RSE policy, teachers' perspectives on the impact of school ethos on the teaching of RSE, and the challenge of adopting active or experiential learning approaches to SPHE/RSE. The role of outside facilitators in the teaching of RSE is also explored here. Finally, this section examines teacher training, resourcing and, crucially, schools' views on current RSE guidelines and their relevance to students today.

8.7.1 Teacher selection

Schools differed in terms of the number of teachers involved in SPHE/RSE. While some schools had up to one-third of their staff involved, others had as few as one-tenth. Furthermore, across the schools, there was no apparent relationship between staff size and number of teachers involved in SPHE/RSE delivery. While this may simply reflect differences in how schools manage timetabling, the human resources required to effectively implement RSE emerged as a challenging issue for the majority of schools. School management, teachers, parents, students and outside facilitators all emphasized the need to have a person who was 'suited' to working in the SPHE/RSE area and this requirement invariably presented difficulties in terms of teacher selection. Firstly, within several schools, the school management found that only a limited number of teachers was suited to and/or sufficiently interested in SPHE and RSE. The need to have trained teachers involved in the programme was a consideration that posed further challenges. The following comments from different schools illustrate these difficulties:

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.

Deputy Principal

The number of teachers willing to teach SPHE is fifty/fifty, and then the ones within SPHE, the numbers who'd want to take on RSE would be a very small percentage.

Co-ordinator

There is an embarrassment factor, you see ... but it's something - you need people who are very skilled and comfortable talking about it, and I think that's where it lacks, because SPHE very often is an add-on to a teacher's timetable.

Principal

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 secondary teaching profession was felt to pose major problems for teacher selection, as this comment from the SPHE co-ordinator of another school illustrates:

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.

Co-ordinator

In the following quote a teacher discusses how the allocation of teachers to RSE may impact on its delivery in the classroom:

It is dependent on who students have for SPHE: if they have somebody who has an interest and an enthusiasm, they'll love it. If it's somebody who has got it to fill up the timetable, God help them. It's not going to be done, no; it's not going to be done.

Teacher

Several schools appeared to rely on religion teachers to participate in SPHE/RSE teaching and this approach seemed to work quite well in some cases. Furthermore, within schools with a history of pastoral care provision, teachers appeared to be more likely to volunteer to teach SPHE/RSE. However, while self-nomination for SPHE teaching may well be the recommended approach, it is not the only strategy used to staff SPHE. In two schools, teachers reported that they suddenly learned that SPHE was on their timetable and that they were expected to teach the subject (in the absence of training) without notice or consultation.⁴⁰ This imposition of SPHE/RSE on a teacher tended to cause agitation and resentment, as the following account of one teacher in a large urban school suggests:

I think for those who are teachers that don't mind teaching it, it's fine. The problem is when you have teachers that do mind teaching it. And you really don't get an option. Like, you're just, you're told that's that, you know: that you have to teach it this year.

Teacher

⁴⁰ Expecting SPHE and/or RSE to be taught without training reflects and reinforces its low status amongst both staff and pupils (Aldred et al. 2003).

The negative consequences of selecting SPHE teachers without first consulting with them and gaining their agreement were very apparent in one school in particular. On the face of it the school appears to have all of the timetabling requirements in place for SPHE and, in principle, SPHE teaching is voluntary. However, several teachers felt strongly that responsibility for the subject was imposed on them by the school management. It is significant that students in this school reported that SPHE was used as a study class by some teachers, whilst others avoided the timetabled SPHE lesson completely. The SPHE co-ordinator here was also aware of the use of designated class periods for work or subjects other than the teaching of SPHE.

I'm never guaranteed certain teachers, so I would be quite conscious that there are teachers who fluff over a lot of it, give study periods and everything; but I professionally can't intrude.

Co-ordinator

It is dependent on who students have for SPHE: if they have somebody who has an interest and an enthusiasm, they'll love it. If it's somebody who has got it to fill up the timetable, God help them. It's not going to be done, no; it's not going to be done.

Teacher

This school is used merely for illustrative purposes, and similar problems were evident to varying degrees in other schools. It is also important to note that not all teachers reacted negatively to finding SPHE/RSE on their timetables. Indeed, one teacher in another school felt that teachers must be willing to take on a range of responsibilities in order to achieve coverage of the extensive range of subjects, particularly within smaller schools.

I'm afraid, it's not that I would have a natural innate interest surely, but it [SPHE] appeared on my timetable ... I think that's one of the repercussions of teaching in a small school: you need to be very, very flexible.

Teacher

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.

Teacher

It was suggested by a number of governmental and regional participants that a history of pastoral care within the school works to create greater teacher flexibility and openness to RSE. A teacher in one school also suggested that the strong pastoral care emphasis within the school meant that teachers were generally disposed to making a contribution to SPHE and RSE.

There is openness there among the staff that it [SPHE] could arrive on your plate, you know, if not as part of a formal programme, indirectly within the context of pastoral care at any stage, you know. And most teachers would like to be in a position to help out.

Teacher

However, our data suggest that teacher training has a greater bearing on teacher flexibility than does a pastoral care history: such a history was present, for example, in a number of schools where teachers expressed resentment about the school's approach to teacher selection.

8.7.2 Teacher comfort

As documented in Chapter 7, regional health- and education-sector professionals believed that teacher discomfort with the topics of relationships and sex was a significant barrier to RSE delivery. Our examination of RSE within schools largely confirms this assertion. Interviews with teachers revealed various levels of discomfort with the subject matter of RSE, and a number of teachers stated openly that they felt ill-equipped or unable to teach the subject. Whilst the teacher quoted below felt that RSE was critically important for students, and was supportive of school-based sex education, she did not feel adequately qualified or prepared to deal with many aspects of the programme.

The RSE, to be honest, I mean, okay, I might take little bits of material out of the RSE but, I mean, the sexuality bit and all of that area from conception to birth and all that and the use of condoms. I mean, I don't touch it, you know what I mean. Well, because really it's not, it's there on the timetable but in reality all that whole area is not being covered.

Co-ordinator

Many of the teachers interviewed across the nine schools appeared to have a reasonable level of personal comfort with the topics of relationships and sexuality. However, it is important to note that the majority of teachers interviewed had volunteered to participate in the research and, in any case, represented only a proportion of those who had responsibility for RSE within the nine schools. In general, teacher comfort impacted very significantly on the extent of RSE teaching within the broader SPHE programme. For example, no school claimed that *all* of the school's SPHE teachers taught RSE as part of the SPHE programme. Furthermore, the commentary of students and many parents suggests that there was marked variation in teacher comfort across the nine schools. Students (from the same year and in the same school) frequently had very different experiences of RSE, and these differences were largely attributable to teacher comfort with the content of the programme. Discrepancies of this kind were also acknowledged by a number of SPHE co-ordinators. The following quotes come from three different schools:

There are some classes who are really enjoying it. I know there are some classes who aren't even getting a class, it's being used for another subject, you know, which can be down to the teacher.

Co-ordinator

What is taught in RSE, as far as I'm aware, it's down to the teacher and not actually the programme for what they cover, which is again an Irish solution to an Irish problem.

Parent

Our science teacher, he showed us a video. He could hardly read the chapter on reproduction, he actually couldn't do it so he just showed us two or three videos and that was that chapter covered. And that was embarrassment - to save all the jokes from the boys and all the rest of it. And that's not sending out a good message either when they [teachers] can't talk about it.

Student

Personal comfort with the topic of sexuality was not the only factor that led to inconsistent RSE teaching or avoidance of the subject. The absence of an RSE policy in three schools impacted very significantly on teacher comfort and confidence, with teachers reporting that they felt vulnerable because they had no formal in-school support structure in the event of parents objecting to RSE or to particular aspects of the programme. The following quotes from staff from two different schools highlight this issue:

I'm not, I'm definitely not going to teach any [RSE] until there's a policy in place ... I wouldn't feel comfortable with it because it's not right for me to get into those issues with parents' daughters and sons until they know what I'm going to tell them.

Principal

The little bit that I am afraid of [pause], we haven't got an RSE policy in the school where the parents have come in on it, so I am always aware of this, you know. And I am afraid that maybe some parents would not like, you know, this course being taught to their kids; they may think it's a personal thing, where the parents should tell them about relationships and sexuality.

Co-ordinator

8.7.3 School ethos

Teachers' views on school ethos and their approach to this issue might also be expected to have a bearing on personal levels of comfort with the content of RSE. As documented earlier in this report, questions about the perceived role and impact of school ethos produced varied responses from government, national and regional respondents, with some asserting that it did have a negative impact on the delivery of the programme and others claiming that the school ethos was an overstated obstacle to the teaching of RSE. Likewise, teachers articulated a variety of views on this matter, and individual approaches to school ethos in the context of RSE also varied. It is perhaps significant that a considerable number stated that they relied on the school's RSE policy for guidance on the matter of ethos. In terms of their approach to the sensitive questions and topics that frequently arise in the teaching of RSE (e.g. student questions about condom and other contraceptive use), a number of teachers reported that they always prefaced their responses to such questions by acknowledging and reminding students of the school's religious (usually Catholic) ethos and related teachings on such matters. Other teachers preferred not to discuss certain issues – or to give specific information to students in a group setting – but they were willing to discuss some of the more sensitive (or contentious)

issues with individual students if and when such questions arose.⁴¹ Perhaps because of the personal and moral values associated with much of the content of RSE, most teachers exercised personal discretion over the role that school ethos played within the confines of the classroom. What is probably most significant about the question of ethos is that teachers in all of the schools agreed that students need accurate and detailed information around relationships and sexuality. The following accounts illustrate some of the views and approaches articulated by teachers within a number of schools:

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

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

You can explain something to a child and an individual on a one-to-one basis, you know. So, for instance, if issues come up in that first-year programme, or even in a second-year class, if someone comes up and asks you on a one-to-one basis, there's a certain freedom there, I think, to be more open about explaining something more clearly, when you know the level of information that that student already has, rather than being blasé about saying something out to a whole group.

Teacher

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 first 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. While the quotes above are suggestive of personal confidence among these teachers in their handling of the dilemmas posed by the requirement that the values underlying RSE are consistent with the ethos of the school (Department of Education and Science 1995), this issue nonetheless remains shrouded in ambiguity. For example, practically all of the teachers interviewed conveyed a degree of uncertainty about the matter of ethos, and individuals' management of this issue was predicated largely on the teacher's personal attitude towards RSE and on his/her individual approach to the school ethos/sexual morality interface. Our data suggest that relatively few teachers felt confident in their approach to selecting 'safe' and appropriate topics within the teaching of RSE.

⁴¹ One teacher in particular was very vocal about preferring to deal with highly personal and sensitive issues on an individual basis with students. She felt strongly that such personal questions could cause upset to some students if dealt with in the public arena of the classroom.

Worthy of note, also, is that one outside facilitator (who specialised in providing education on sexually transmitted infections) stated that individual schools had, on occasions, requested that certain aspects of their programme (e.g. contraception) be omitted. When this situation arose, the agency declined to deliver work with the school in question. The facilitators interviewed stated that they understood and respected the school's ethos, but what is perhaps most significant here is that some facilitators reported that they avoided some of the more "contentious" topics and issues in their work with schools and only addressed them cautiously if students themselves raised particular questions in the classroom. If professional outside agencies feel the need to covertly or, at the very least, 'indirectly' teach aspects of RSE in some second-level schools, the dilemma for many teachers is likely to be very considerable in some instances.

8.7.4 Teaching using experiential or active learning methodologies

The discomfort teachers experienced in many cases was not always related solely to the content of the RSE programme. The recommended teaching methodology and, in particular, the requirement that teachers adopt a facilitating role (which is how participants generally referred to the role) appeared to be a further source of anxiety for teachers. The approach recommended by the DES/NCCA was, in fact, adopted by only one of the nine schools on a *school-wide* level (i.e. by all SPHE teachers). This situation may be viewed as symptomatic of the challenges that an academically-oriented educational system poses for subjects like SPHE. It is important to note that facilitating learning with active learning methodologies is recommended across the second-level curriculum. However, while the study did not look at other subjects, our data at times implied that the traditional 'chalk and talk' approach was quite dominant in other subjects. It may be understandable that conflict may arise for teachers who are more familiar with traditional approaches, as such approaches may not sit well with a subject that may not be regarded historically as 'traditional'. As one SPHE co-ordinator remarked:

There's some of them [teachers] want to do it straight out of a book and want to follow it page by page and get three pages done in one class. It doesn't work like that. They're kind of, we'll say the teachers who think, 'Okay syllabus. I have to get X amount done and X amount of pages done before the bell goes.' That doesn't work in SPHE.

Co-ordinator

Commenting on how teachers responded to RSE training, one co-ordinator made specific reference to teachers' scepticism about the recommended active learning or experiential approach: "The staff were saying, 'That's fine, but how would you teach it? It isn't practical to do things like that!'" She added that some viewed the materials as "babyish and childish". This co-ordinator also noted that during a whole-school SPHE training day, a number of teachers found it very difficult to sit in a circle and talk about their experiences. She partially attributed these responses to (some) teachers' fear of not having 'control' in a classroom setting. Another SPHE co-ordinator highlighted similar resistance on the part of teachers to this approach.

A lot of teachers have problems with the subject area 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

Not all teachers were uncomfortable with or resistant to the experiential approach to teaching but a number highlighted a range of practical problems associated with the approach, including class size (with large numbers of pupils not being conducive to this approach) and the impracticalities of rearranging furniture for a 40-minute class period. It is perhaps significant that all four professionals from the outside agencies interviewed felt that second-level teachers were generally not equipped for this approach to teaching. Their comments illustrate this point:

It's just stepping too much out of roles for teachers.

Facilitator

This is not teaching, this should be the job of a facilitator and a facilitator and a teacher are entirely different.⁴²

Facilitator

Teachers were generally very positive about the RSE training they attended (see below), but facilitators from outside agencies were concerned that teachers did not have adequate skill or experience to handle RSE in addition to their other teaching duties. One might again consider that degree-level mastery is required in most other subject areas:

People know [RSE] in themselves, but to be able to articulate it in a way and communicate that with a group of 22 teenagers in a way that is safe and positive ... I trained for 7 years; you know it's kind of, I'm using all of those skills in group-work sessions. And I know that I couldn't have done this before I trained.

Facilitator

To re-iterate a point made in Chapter 7, pre-service training needs to be considered as a more realistic option for SPHE/RSE teachers. What is clear from the data presented is that the experiential approach to teaching will not fit easily within the Irish second-level education system without recognition that SPHE/RSE places demands on teachers that spill into the personal domain. A key issue here is that the teaching of SPHE and RSE requires teachers to step out of the rather more authoritative disposition associated with a traditional teacher role.

The challenge for teachers of moving from traditional teaching approaches to more progressive experiential approaches was an issue raised more frequently by students than by teachers themselves. Significantly in this regard, students from low implementation schools were more likely to state they would prefer an 'outsider' to teach RSE, since it would reduce the discomfort for them personally (and for teachers) of seeing their RSE teacher for academic subjects. Worthy of note also is that one facilitator from an outside agency remarked that professionals who assist schools with RSE sometimes create a 'students versus teachers' dynamic in their work with schools, a situation which is clearly undesirable in terms of the position of both student and teachers.

A lot of people will come and create that 'student versus teacher' atmosphere by saying, 'You can tell me anything and I'm not going to tell those teachers.' And I think that then makes teachers very suspicious, and I wouldn't have thought I would have come across it but I have come across it quite a lot.

Facilitator

⁴² Whilst this point may be strongly contested by (some) teachers, it nonetheless reflects the experience of one outside facilitator who has considerable experience of working with schools.

It is understandable that teachers may be anxious about gaining the trust and respect of students if the practice described above is occurring in some schools. Lack of teacher comfort and subsequent inability to create trust clearly impacts on student behaviour and response to SPHE/RSE. 'Giddy' or negative reactions led some teachers to abandon RSE, while others addressed such behaviour as best they could and largely accepted it as part of the challenge. One teacher from a large urban school stated that her anxieties about teaching RSE were associated in part to the unpredictability of student responses: "It depends sometimes on whether they are mature enough to deal with it themselves, you know that sort of way." Teacher concerns about student behaviour sometimes specifically referenced gender. For example, there was a perception amongst some teachers that younger males' immaturity led to discipline problems and general giddiness in the classroom. One outside facilitator commented on boys' lack of openness compared to their female counterparts: "I find the boys a little bit more inhibited; they wouldn't be as open to talk about values or attitudes or stuff like that." A number suggested that boys tended to be more immature and, consequently, difficult to engage in a meaningful way. Two co-educational schools dealt with some of these perceived gender differences by separating boys and girls for 'one-off' RSE teaching in first year.

One may question how schools can avoid teaching RSE in a context of whole-school evaluation and inspection. It is important in this context to point out that the topic of whole-school evaluation was raised only once during the very considerable number of focus groups and interviews conducted. Teachers spoke at length about being evaluated by parents and by the community, but almost never referenced the inspectorate. At the same time, there are probably very few areas of the curriculum in Irish secondary schools that are 'outsourced' to outside agencies to the same extent as RSE. In addition, the sheer scope of content in the SPHE programme may make it easy for teachers to gloss over RSE, in the manner that several regional-level respondents claimed:

To some extent SPHE is like a dumping ground, I think anyway ... Smoking, junk food, diet, exercises, has all been kind of landed on us, you know. And also sometimes we would get slightly diverted from maybe the set programme that we had organised for ourselves because something, maybe, like bullying comes up, and therefore we have to take time out and look at that. And it's terribly important that you do. But RSE can be left, then, and that happens. Sometimes it doesn't get covered.

Teacher

The overcrowded curriculum is a frequently cited barrier to full SPHE implementation. However, it appears that RSE may be the first module to fall victim to curricular overload, due in large part to teacher discomfort with the area.

8.7.5 The use of outside facilitators

The outside facilitators interviewed expressed strong views on the need to approach relationships and sexuality in a holistic, context-embedded manner, and all four made deliberate efforts to consider the areas and topics that schools had already covered within RSE. Requests from schools to assist with RSE varied, and not all schools asked for assistance with the same topics. One facilitator stated that some schools have a 'pick-and-mix' approach to the areas they want covered, and that the specific topics requested depended largely on the school's ability to cope with the demands of RSE:

Sometimes schools can pick stuff that they're comfortable with, or if they feel like we have an area of expertise specifically in relation to talking about sex they find it can be easier for both the students, everybody involved, for us to do that.

Facilitator

This facilitator commented that this approach was not ideal in terms of student learning and that it would be preferable if the same messages and opportunities to develop skills were available to all students. This point is important and highlights challenges in terms of providing an equal opportunity to *all* students to learn from RSE.

SPHE co-ordinators in at least half of the schools felt strongly that outside facilitators need to approach the subject in a sensitive manner, complementing rather than substituting in-school RSE teaching.

I would hate the idea of handing RSE out because we don't know, you don't know who you're giving it out to or what kind of approach they're going to have. I think when you're teaching in the school for a number of years, obviously you build a relationship with the kids and I think that's key, particularly for a subject like this.

Teacher

I've gone more to the view that it's more important to have the kids themselves doing the thinking rather than an outsider telling them what their experience was as a drug addict, or something like that. There's a certain kind of interest in that, but I'm not convinced of its relevance. I think unless the person is really good, it can be a waste of time, or they might even have a negative effect on the student. There are some excellent people who come in and talk to them, but you need to pick those people carefully.

Co-ordinator

Schools differed in their perspectives on the use of outside facilitators and in the degree to which they involved these professionals in the delivery of RSE. At one end of the spectrum, three schools did not avail of the services of outside agencies. One of these schools (which was not actually teaching RSE) did not favour the use of outside facilitators because of concerns that they may have a particular 'agenda' and, therefore, impart messages that the school did not endorse.

When we talked to them about the kind of programmes they would run, and we looked at the client base and we looked at the parents, we, it worried us that there were very strong messages ... the messages were that you need to use contraception, for example. And some of our parents - we're a very traditional school - would have found that difficult to accept.

Principal

At the other end of the spectrum, outside facilitators covered the majority of schools' RSE teaching, with the aim of giving accurate information to students and simultaneously, perhaps, resolving the problem of teacher discomfort. Five schools adopted this approach to varying extents, particularly as part of the transition-year programme.

Perhaps the best people to judge the effectiveness of outside facilitators are students, since teachers are often not present when facilitators work in the classroom. In schools where outsiders dealt with the majority of RSE, students tended to hold a more negative view of the school's approach to the subject. While some viewed outside facilitators as advantageous because "teachers get embarrassed" or "you can talk your mind", several simultaneously observed that 'outsiders' were used because their teachers were not equipped to deliver the programme.

The reason they got a speaker in was our teacher didn't know enough about it. He didn't know enough, so in order to educate us further he got someone to do it for him.

SC Student

The majority of students, in fact, indicated that they would be happy for their teachers to teach RSE if they were "open" and "comfortable" with the topics involved and prepared to spend adequate time on the RSE module. Furthermore, students who did have an RSE teacher who used experiential learning approaches were very positive about the subject. What appears to be most effective – from the viewpoint of both students and teachers – is a strong RSE programme *within* the school (delivered by teachers), which makes prudent and informed choices about the use of outside facilitators.

8.7.6 Training, programme content and teaching resources

Teacher training has been discussed in some detail in earlier sections of this report. In this section, we look more closely at the school experience of training, as well as the broader issue of access to training. We also examine respondents' perspectives on the RSE programme and on the resources designed to assist them with the teaching of RSE.

Teachers who had participated in the SPHE and/or RSE training provided by the SPHE Support Service were generally very positive about the experience, and a large number commented on the high commitment of Support Service staff. All principals favoured RSE training and were usually open to releasing teachers to attend courses. Nonetheless, within two of the schools studied a high level of investment in teacher training – led by the principal and SPHE co-ordinator – was a factor that set them apart from others in terms of their implementation of RSE. One school sourced and allocated funding for teachers to participate in two ten-week RSE training courses, while a number of teachers from a second school had completed a health education diploma. The SPHE co-ordinator in the former school described the advantages of this high investment in training.

Working together in the training was very good staff development in itself, and you'd establish a different link, I mean, you'd be more comfortable, maybe, with other members of the staff. And again, I mean, the fact that the Principal was there, you know. And we certainly would have a close bond in this school.

Co-ordinator

As documented earlier, finding the time for training and accommodating the disruption that release for training causes are significant problems for schools. In any case, it cannot be assumed that a school will have a significant number of teachers who are pre-disposed or sympathetic to the messages and methodologies discussed at training. For example, one teacher (who had undertaken RSE training), felt totally overwhelmed by the subject and stated, "It's a whole big area now, you know. We're not qualified enough. I mean, you'd want to be a

psychologist." Attendance at training does not, therefore, guarantee that teachers will be comfortable with or prepared to teach RSE. One principal described how this problem had impacted on the school's efforts to staff the RSE programme:

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 note that schools are not on an equal footing with regard to opportunities to attend training. For example, not all schools have easy access to training courses due, in some cases, to their geographical location. Additionally, the commitment to fund additional or follow-up training is not in place in most schools, although this commitment was evident in the high-implementation schools studied. For these and other reasons, the implementation and effectiveness of RSE depends to a far greater extent than is desirable on the personal initiative and interest of the school principal and the SPHE co-ordinator.

We have invested a fair bit in terms of training teachers, we'll say, for health education programmes and we have encouraged people to go to the various SPHE in-services, and we are very lucky here locally that the local area Health Board provided a significant amount of in-service.

Principal

When teachers discussed the content of training, the question of teachers' use of experiential learning methodologies frequently became the focus of attention. While many teachers were open to making the shift from 'chalk and talk' towards more experiential styles of teaching, there are clearly some who do not subscribe to this methodology.⁴³ The following teacher, for example, felt that this approach was overemphasised during training:

I just found RSE training went maybe a little bit more into the lesson side of it. I know everyone's into active learning now, but sometimes in training we spend too much time on like, 'Oh, this is hard, how do I broach this subject,' instead of actually going through it as a lesson.

Teacher

On the other hand, one principal who had invested heavily in SPHE/RSE suggested that experiential learning methodologies – which require the teacher to step into the role of facilitator – needed more, not less, attention during training.

RSE is a subject that, you know, we bring our own baggage to. You know, there is no doubt whatsoever, each one of us, we have our own baggage and we have our own difficulties. And we desperately need support, not as teachers, but as facilitators of this subject.

Principal

⁴³ See Chapter 2 for a description of the emphasis placed on the role of teacher as facilitator within Department of Education and Science official guidelines.

The task of convincing teachers that experiential learning methodologies are preferable for RSE is clearly a challenging one, and it appears that some may remain sceptical about its benefits, irrespective of the in-service training they receive. The absence of pre-service training was an issue raised by teachers in at least four of the 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 go some way towards alleviating such resistance to moving from the traditional role of 'transmitter of information' to becoming a facilitator of learning.⁴⁴

As outlined earlier, the views of students, SPHE co-ordinators and some teachers strongly suggest that what is taught in the RSE class may depend entirely on the individual teacher and the topics they are willing to broach. It was difficult at times to probe teachers' views on programme content during the focus-group discussions because of their obvious level of discomfort with this topic in some instances. It also proved difficult to ascertain from teachers what precisely they currently teach (in terms of exact topics, discussion points, and so on). In some cases, this may be simply indicative of their level of reliance on outside agencies/facilitators for the delivery of RSE. That notwithstanding, the following excerpt is an example of the many non-specific responses to questions about RSE content:

[To what extent would you see it as your role to deal with issues like pregnancy and sexual relationships? Or would you rely on, say, outside agencies for those areas?]

No, well I certainly wouldn't see it as my primary role. I think it's the responsibility of all teachers in the school, any members of the staff. So if it had to come up in the class, the topic would be covered, and covered sufficiently, but I certainly wouldn't be, I wouldn't take sole responsibility for that subject or indeed any other subject.

Junior-cycle SPHE teacher

Conversely, one senior-cycle RE teacher who was interviewed individually⁴⁵ was very specific about what she taught and spoke openly about teaching the topics of contraception, condom use and STIs. However, interviews with other teachers in this school suggest very different approaches to RSE and to the programme content. For example, a second teacher from this school told how most of her SPHE classes were taken up with individual tutoring, homework correction and conflict resolution, leaving little time for SPHE teaching, and another teacher from the school explained that she spends a significant amount of time simply dealing with "the basics" with senior-cycle students. The following quote from an RSE teacher illustrates how class time may be taken up with 'the basics', revising areas and topics covered at a much earlier stage:

You would be really surprised at the gaps in students' knowledge, even though they've probably done it. I'm sure they've done it in first to third year along the line, but they're sitting in front of you in sixth year and you would be actually very surprised at the lack of knowledge they have in sixth year.

Teacher

⁴⁴ It is perhaps important to state that this shift is not unique to the areas of SPHE/RSE. With the rapid pace of change in Irish society the educational system has come under increasing pressure to adapt so that students are adequately prepared to face new contexts and challenges. Teachers in general have therefore become more aware of the need to acquire new skills and attitudes and of the need to 'recast' their roles as educators (Sugrue 1997). This is the context in which the terms 'facilitator of learning' and 'experiential learning methodologies' have been coined. Importantly, they embrace pedagogical approaches, which, at least in theory, extend across all curricular areas.

⁴⁵ Teachers were individually interviewed in schools 7 and 2 in order to facilitate the schools' timetabling arrangements.

These accounts highlight the absence of communication that can exist between teachers about what is taught and when, and they also demonstrate the kind of inconsistencies that frequently characterise RSE teaching within individual schools. This school relied to a large extent on outside facilitators, who took responsibility for practically all of the more challenging or 'contentious' areas within RSE (e.g. STIs, contraception etc.). The apparent inconsistencies in how teachers approach RSE suggest that their students are unlikely to have equal access to the same information and teaching on relationships and sexuality.

It is worth reiterating at this point that 65.6% of the study's survey respondents stated that there was a greater need for RSE now than five years ago. It is significant, therefore, that a large number of case-study respondents who articulated their views on the appropriateness of the current junior-cycle RSE programme felt that it needed to be reviewed and updated. In particular, many felt that the programme needed to deal explicitly with the topics of safe-sex practices, contraception and condom use, STIs and sexual orientation, certainly by third year. The draft curriculum framework for senior-cycle SPHE (NCCA 2005) makes more explicit reference to these issues at senior-cycle level. Much of the justification for this suggestion rested on the perception that a significant proportion of young people are 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

One vice-principal felt strongly 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

Similarly, a principal from another school stated that greater discussion of issues such as safe sex and STIs was required at junior cycle:

RSE education in first to third year would not be perhaps as detailed as I would like with regards to the sexual side of the curriculum. I think that we need to take a very realistic approach, and that has to encompass all of the various aspects of sex education: the dangers, the sexual diseases, the physical and mental consequences of people's actions, and prevention.

Principal

This principal framed his concerns about the inadequacy of the current RSE programme in terms of the need to be realistic and pragmatic about young people's needs. He and others also expressed the view that the curriculum and guidelines need also to address issues such as sexual harassment via text-messaging. Overall, throughout much of the discussion with teachers, there was a strong perception of a shift in attitudes towards sexuality and a corresponding need to deal with many aspects of sexuality and sexual behaviour at an earlier age than previously:

Things are changing, you know: young people are becoming involved in, you know, spelling it out, sexual activity at a younger age. What's being recommended at first year is very, very basic, and I know you have to be sensitive to the needs of those who are not sexually active, but, you know, the curriculum possibly might need to be modernised a little bit.

Teacher

In third-year class the other day, we went right into STIs. Now five years ago I wouldn't have done STDs until I reached fifth year... but with the way that things are going now, it is necessary.

SPHE co-ordinator

The SPHE co-ordinator quoted above stated that she adhered rigidly to the DES guidelines in first and second year but considered that by third year a more flexible approach to the curriculum was required, to permit the inclusion of areas not currently specified in the official curriculum. This teacher taught in an all-boys' school and explained that she deals with sexual orientation in second year because of an obvious need to discuss this topic with the 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 do; 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

On the matter of teaching about homosexuality, the principal of another school stated:

Ten years ago, homosexuality was hardly mentioned, whereas now, people are very open and upfront about it. And there wouldn't have been the same openness, we'll say, within the school ten years ago. But I think you have to recognise the possibility that there are people who are homosexual ... and possibly some of them active as well, you know, within the school community.

Principal

This principal felt it was unwise to encourage students to self-identify as homosexual within the school as this may expose them to risk, particularly since schools currently have few guidelines on how to deal with the matter of sexual orientation. He felt that schools need much clearer guidance from the Department of Education and Science on how to deal appropriately with questions and concerns that homosexual students may have, as well as on how to approach the issue of sexual orientation with the wider student body.

It is, of course, important not to generalise about the needs of an entire student population on the basis of the accounts of a relatively small number of teachers and principals. Nonetheless, it appears that consideration needs to be given to the content of junior-cycle RSE and whether the current programme adequately meets the needs of contemporary teenagers. It is perhaps important to note, however, that one SPHE co-ordinator suggested that the strength of the previous guidelines and curriculum was their age-appropriateness.

I think that in the guidelines age-appropriateness is very well handled. Obviously it's ten years later now, and I think the children are probably more sexually active even than they were ten years ago. But I think it's important that the programme stays age-appropriate, because not everybody in the class is going to be as aware.

SPHE Co-ordinator

As stated earlier, teachers frequently did not give explicit accounts of what they taught in RSE, perhaps reflecting a level of uncertainty about what precisely *can* be 'safely' taught. To some extent, our data suggest that teachers are left to make individual decisions about the content of RSE. Some teachers may be reluctant or refuse to deal with certain topics, whilst others are confident to address a wider range of issues with students. At the same time, a large number of teachers and principals articulated an awareness of the need for RSE to be appropriate to the needs of today's students and, in many cases, suggested that the junior-cycle programme needed to be extended to cover a number of more sensitive issues – including contraceptive practices, safe sex and sexual orientation – certainly, by third year. It is perhaps significant that these views were also commonly articulated by teachers who themselves felt ill-equipped to deal with many aspects of RSE. In general, however, school personnel simultaneously perceived several problems and risks associated with decisions to address topics not presented as 'lessons' within current RSE guidelines for schools. For example, one principal felt that the current guidelines did not adequately 'protect' teachers and schools.

If a principal is going to worry each time they decide to try something new and worry that the Department will not back them on it, 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.

Principal

This account draws attention to considerable ambiguity and confusion surrounding programme content (and, by implication, RSE policy). As outlined in Chapter 5, this ambiguity featured as an early barrier to RSE implementation and delivery, and our data suggest that it remains a strong feature of RSE delivery today. Students' views on the teaching and content of RSE (Chapter 10) further confirm an undesirable level of uncertainty and inconsistency in the content of RSE and the broader 'messages' they glean from it.

The question, then, of how prescriptive RSE ought to be is important, particularly in light of the 'pick-and-mix' approach that appears to characterise RSE. Much of the commentary suggests that greater clarity and guidance is required on RSE content in general and that many teachers favoured a more prescriptive curriculum. However, there was a strong belief that flexibility is required within the teaching of RSE in order to respond to the individual needs of students.

I certainly think it needs to be reviewed at this stage because, I mean, it is vague; we're left with, you know, there are these modules and all of that but you could literally interpret it kind of in any way you want. But then again, I like the fluidity there because I think it's a subject where you can't really rigidly stick to maybe what you plan. It can sort of take off in different directions.

SPHE co-ordinator

I think I would be in favour of it, a more prescriptive curriculum. I mean, I think it would give you a scope that maybe you don't have now. I'm just thinking, you know, sometimes when parents see specific things written down, it could lead to their being slightly more cautious, you know?

Teacher

I would rather a more prescriptive RSE curriculum in the case of a school like this where we have clergy.

SPHE Co-ordinator

At the very least, future guidelines need to give greater assistance to teachers on how to assess the needs of students and adapt their teaching accordingly. The findings documented here also suggest that the uncertainty and confusion surrounding teachers' views on 'safe' and appropriate RSE content need urgently to be addressed.

In general, teachers were less likely to spontaneously mention the issue of resource materials during interview, possibly reflecting their preoccupation with human resource concerns and the broader structural issues that impact on RSE teaching. When questioned about this issue, however, teachers were generally positive about the teaching guidelines and materials provided by the Department of Education and Science. Within three schools, teachers made specific reference to their use of former North-Western Health Board teaching materials and explained that they tailored these resources to meet students' needs. However, respondents within six of the nine schools felt that many of the available RSE materials were outdated and in need of revision. Additionally, teachers felt strongly that resource materials need to acknowledge the reality of adolescents' social worlds and the challenges and decisions they face.

In many ways, the topic of resources served as a useful barometer of a school's RSE implementation level and spoke volumes about individual teachers' development or position with regard to RSE teaching. Schools and/or teachers that were implementing RSE and using experiential learning methodologies were far more likely to draw attention to issues like teaching materials, class size, furniture arrangement and the drawbacks of having only one class per week. In short, these schools/individuals had reached a stage where they reflected on practice and considered the efficacy of the teaching tools and materials available to them. In contrast, teachers who were not teaching RSE at this level were often preoccupied with what they clearly perceived as the challenging nature of the subject matter of RSE:

I don't think it's a problem of resources. It's just myself. I'm just not comfortable with it.

Co-ordinator

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

School perspectives on how adequately the Department of Education and Science has supported the directives related to the timetabling and teaching of SPHE and RSE have been addressed in an earlier section. It is worth re-iterating, however, that 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.

It is important to note that *awareness* of resources (through internet web sites, training and so on) can be poor among teachers and that they have very little time to devote to researching and selecting appropriate resources within the school day. The presence of a helpful set of resources, where it existed within schools, was attributable largely to the work of the SPHE co-ordinator, who usually devoted personal time to compiling a useful set of materials for teachers. Teachers from two schools where an SPHE co-ordinator was no longer in place (but had been previously) highlighted the importance of having easy access to a wide range of materials and made specific reference to the negative impact of the absence of a co-ordinator.

The previous co-ordinator was excellent ... she was very organised in terms of giving us our materials at the beginning of the year. And we miss that now.

Teacher

Concerns were strongly voiced on a number of occasions by teachers about the lack of appropriate audio-visual material for students. Three schools had continued to use a sex education video that was released during the early 1980s and felt that the orientation and content of the video material was outdated:⁴⁶

That's the only actual 'sex education for boys' video that's out there and it's ludicrous.

Co-ordinator

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.

Teacher

⁴⁶ 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.

The students in these schools were also critical of the content of this video, which they considered to be highly 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.

JC Student

Access to and awareness of effective resources appeared to be an underlying issue for teachers within many of the schools.

I know, just from speaking to the teachers, that accessing resources that are good and that are Irish is difficult. There's lots of good American stuff that they're constantly re-reading, but I think there is a huge lack there.

Principal

It appears that at least some of the available resource materials for RSE were viewed as inadequate or outdated, and there was also a perceived problem with the generic nature of the available material. For example, 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.

8.8 Summary and conclusion

Internationally, the provision school-based sex education is acknowledged to be challenging, and the variability of provision of sexuality and relationship education between schools has been recognised for some time (Rogers 1974, Allen 1987). The findings presented in this chapter highlight very considerable diversity in how schools approach RSE and in schools' handling of the time and human resource demands related to the delivery of the programme. Curricular innovation and change does not always work as planned (Richardson & Placier 2001) and even when organizations and/or individuals within them decide to adopt an innovation full implementation does not always or automatically follow (Parcel et al. 1990). Schools are, of course, complex settings, with distinct yet varied cultures. Indeed, our findings indicate that no two of the schools studied approached and/or delivered RSE in precisely the same way, nor did the schools fall easily into discrete categories such as 'low', 'moderate' or 'high' level implementation. Early in the chapter, it was suggested that RSE implementation is best understood along a continuum that takes account of several inter-related characteristics. These include: the co-ordination of SPHE/RSE, parental involvement, the subject's status, teacher training, teacher comfort, clarity among teachers about what can be taught, students' perspectives and understanding, and whole-school support. The latter characteristic – whole-school support – embraces many of the other core characteristics identified and, where it exists, provides a key mechanism for effective RSE implementation. Whole-school issues are therefore important to RSE, as are the policy-making and policy-review processes and the leadership of the school principal. The advantage of the *continuum of implementation* (Table 8.2) presented in this chapter is that it does not single out one characteristic as more important than others; rather, effective implementation of RSE will be facilitated by the presence of all (or the majority) of the characteristics listed, as defined at the higher end of the continuum. However, leadership is critical if change within schools is to take place effectively (Hallinger

2003), and this study's findings confirm this: RSE implementation relied heavily on the interest and commitment of the school principal; the leadership of the SPHE co-ordinator was also a critical factor in the success of the programme.

Research has demonstrated that particular subjects or subject areas have higher status in schools than others (Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte 1999). Indeed, a recent Irish study found that the more applied subjects, such as home economics and art, are regarded as having low status within second-level schools (Lynch & Lodge 2002). Similarly, the case-study findings documented here strongly suggest that the low status of SPHE/RSE is a very significant problem, and one which acts as a significant barrier to effective implementation. Similar findings have been noted by Alldred et al. (2003) in a UK study, which found that PSHE (Personal, Social and/or Health Education) faced enormous difficulties because of its low status within schools and among teachers. Our findings further suggest that the low status of SPHE has a negative impact on teacher confidence with RSE in particular. Clearly, if RSE does not have sufficient recognition, teachers may not receive sufficient training, adequate time and resources will not be invested in the subject, and teacher morale will be low.

Knowledge and understanding of obstacles to RSE delivery within schools are important, since the factors that impede full implementation are also likely to undermine its sustainability (Buston et al. 2002). This analysis has identified the following as the major barriers to effective RSE implementation and delivery: the absence of a written RSE policy, the low status of SPHE/RSE, timetabling constraints, problems with staffing SPHE and RSE teaching, teacher discomfort with the topic of sexuality, confusion among teachers about what can be 'safely' taught, difficulty among some teachers with making the shift to experiential teaching methodologies and inadequate or outdated resource materials for use in the classroom. This chapter contains a large number of other findings that are extremely important in understanding the nuances and complexities of RSE within schools. We present some of the most noteworthy findings of the case-study research in summary form below:

Policy development and early implementation

- Six of the nine schools had a written policy statement on RSE and SPHE. One school had recently devised an RSE policy, but had not begun formal RSE implementation. Two of the schools had no RSE policy. This meant that, in practice, one school avoided the RSE module of SPHE, while another depended largely on outside facilitators to deliver the programme.
- Schools with a history of pastoral care provision often appeared to make a smoother initial transition to RSE policy-making and programme planning.
- The presence of an RSE policy statement was critical to establishing RSE on a sound footing within the school. Meaningful policy development, involving the participation of teachers, parents and students, facilitated discussion among teachers, thus raising the profile of RSE and clarifying schools' thinking on RSE content. However, only a small number of schools drew regularly on their policy statement for direction in the delivery of RSE.
- Schools that did not have a policy in place cited time constraints and the need to prioritise other school business as barriers to policy development. However, largely unfounded fears over parental views were perhaps the greatest barrier to policy development in the case of schools that did not have a written policy statement. Schools where policy had been developed found that the vast majority of parents were supportive of their work.
- Staff within schools where RSE was developed as a consultative process - and where teachers were familiar with their RSE policy - frequently commented on how the policy statement assisted them in their work.
- Schools were quite critical of the manner in which RSE directives were communicated to them by the Department of Education and Science. It was felt in a number of schools that adequate resources and supports were not in place to develop RSE policy and appropriate teaching methodologies. Timetabling and the release of teachers for in-service training were two important areas of criticism.

Leadership and personal initiative

- The commitment and initiative of the principal and SPHE co-ordinator were crucial to the initial phase of implementation, to the subsequent development of the programme and to establishing a supportive school environment for RSE.
- Without the commitment of these two individuals, teachers may not be aware of the school's RSE policy and/or the importance of in-service training. The principal is also in a position to influence SPHE's place on the timetable and to reduce class sizes to accommodate experiential teaching methodologies.
- Teachers consistently identified the principal as playing a lead role in the implementation of RSE.

The status of SPHE/RSE

- The status of SPHE emerged as a major influence on the school's implementation and delivery of RSE. Across all of the schools, SPHE struggled to varying extents to gain recognition.
- While SPHE was timetabled in all schools, it nonetheless competed for time, space and recognition with a large number of academic subjects. It was commonly assumed that since SPHE is not formally examined, students do not take the subject seriously.
- A significant problem with the status of SPHE was the ambivalence of some teachers towards the subject, due in part to SPHE's low professional status as an area of expertise among teachers.
- The low status of SPHE, combined with lack of teacher comfort around RSE, meant that RSE ran the risk of being neglected or overlooked in some schools.
- Students were acutely aware of the low status of SPHE within their schools.
- In at least two of the 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. Additional effort and commitment on the part of staff, students and parents appeared to be a necessary for SPHE and RSE to gain status and success within schools.

RSE delivery

- It was frequently claimed that some teachers were more suited to the teaching of SPHE/RSE than others. In a number of schools, the management found it difficult to interest teachers in SPHE and to create a pool of trained teachers to deliver the programme.
- Only three schools could be said to adhere to a voluntary policy on who assumes responsibility for SPHE/RSE. Waiting for the teachers to volunteer was not always practical and was unlikely, in any case, within some schools, due to pressures to prioritise academic subjects, the low status of SPHE/RSE, and the lack of trained personnel.
- The presence of a history of pastoral care was not found to facilitate the process of teacher selection in all schools. Without question, having a pool of trained SPHE/RSE teachers in the school was the most influential factor on ease of teacher selection.
- Teacher comfort with RSE teaching had a major influence on implementation. No school claimed that all SPHE teachers taught RSE as part of their SPHE teaching, and comments from many students and parents suggested that there was marked variation in teacher comfort across the nine schools. Students from the same school frequently had different experiences of RSE, and these differences appeared to be linked to teachers' level of comfort with the subject matter of RSE.
- The absence of an RSE policy in three schools impacted negatively on teacher comfort and confidence in RSE teaching.
- Teachers articulated a variety of views on the impact school ethos had on their teaching of RSE. A considerable number stated they relied on the school policy for guidance. A number who addressed more 'sensitive' issues, such as contraceptive use, always prefaced this teaching by acknowledging the school's religious ethos. Others preferred to discuss such matters on a one-to-one basis with students.
- 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 and, in particular, topics such as contraception, condom use and homosexuality.
- All teachers agreed that students need accurate and detailed information about relationships and sexuality.

- The requirement that teachers adopt experiential learning methodologies for SPHE/RSE appeared to be a further source of anxiety for some teachers. This approach was adopted on a school-wide level by just one school. Difficulties and, in some cases, resistance among teachers in making the shift from more traditional teaching methodologies impacted to a considerable extent on the under-use of active/experiential learning approaches. Fear among some teachers of losing control or respect also appeared to act as an obstacle to their willingness to subscribe to experiential teaching approaches.
- A number of outside facilitators felt that many second-level teachers were not sufficiently equipped to deliver RSE effectively.
- Lack of teacher comfort clearly affected the way some students behaved during RSE lessons. The pressure of teaching a low-status subject, personal discomfort with discussing sexuality, lack of experience with experiential learning techniques and the 'giddy' reactions of students were major factors leading to the abandonment or avoidance of RSE in some cases.
- Schools varied in the way they used outside facilitators. Given the level of discomfort with the subject matter of RSE among many teachers, it is unsurprising that at least five schools found outside agencies to be an important resource. Three schools did not use outside facilitators. In one school, outside facilitators were used to complement a well-developed in-school approach to teaching RSE.
- SPHE co-ordinators in at least half of the schools felt it was very important that outside facilitators approach the subject in a sensitive manner, supplementing rather than substituting RSE. The outside facilitators we spoke to also expressed strong views on the need to approach RSE in a holistic, context-embedded manner.
- Teachers who had participated in SPHE and/or RSE training provided by the SPHE Support Service were generally positive about the experience. What set two schools apart in terms of the effectiveness of their whole-school approach was that the schools had invested their own resources and time in extra teacher training.
- As already stated, accommodating the disruption caused by releasing teachers to training was a major barrier to developing a pool of trained teachers in each school. Additionally, some teachers who had participated in RSE training remained uncomfortable with the subject and its methodologies.
- Not all schools could be said to be on an equal footing with regard to access to training. Some schools may be at a disadvantage geographically. Additionally, the commitment to fund additional or follow-up training was not in place in most schools. The resulting situation is that the implementation and effectiveness of RSE depends to a far greater extent than is desirable on the personal initiative and interest of the school principal and the SPHE co-ordinator.
- A large number of teachers, SPHE co-ordinators and principals felt that the content of the junior-cycle curriculum needed to be reviewed and extended to include formal teaching on contraceptive behaviour, safe sex, condom use and homosexuality.
- Teachers were less likely to mention 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. Teachers were generally positive about the teaching guidelines and materials provided by the DES. However, a considerable number of participants across six of the nine schools felt many of the available RSE materials were outdated and needed to more adequately acknowledge the reality of adolescents' social experiences and challenges.
- Awareness of resources (e.g. web sites and training) can be poor amongst teachers who, in general, have very little time to devote to researching and selecting appropriate resources within the school day. This problem was particularly apparent in schools that did not have an SPHE co-ordinator to facilitate access to appropriate teaching materials.

Chapter 9

High-level implementation of RSE: a case study

Previous chapters have identified numerous complex and interrelated issues that impact on the implementation of RSE. In this chapter we document the key features of policy and practice within one school with high-level implementation of RSE. This exercise is undertaken for illustrative purposes and as a means of demonstrating the approaches, mechanisms and actions that work to facilitate RSE implementation. We recognise that approaches to curricular matters differ between schools and that all aspects of the material documented may not be directly applicable to individual school environments and contexts. Nonetheless, there are undoubtedly facets of the approaches and procedures presented that have relevance to many schools and which, at the very least, demonstrate how one school has managed the task of implementing RSE to a high level of effectiveness. We also document the challenges and difficulties that this school experienced during the implementation process.

9.1 School background

The school as a community college was established in 1980. It is situated in a regional town/area with a population of approximately 4,000 people and has always been a co-educational school. The town is also served by a Convent girls' secondary school. At the time we made contact with the school, there were 568 pupils enrolled and the vast majority (almost 470) of the student population was male. The principal stated that the background of the students was roughly half urban, half rural.

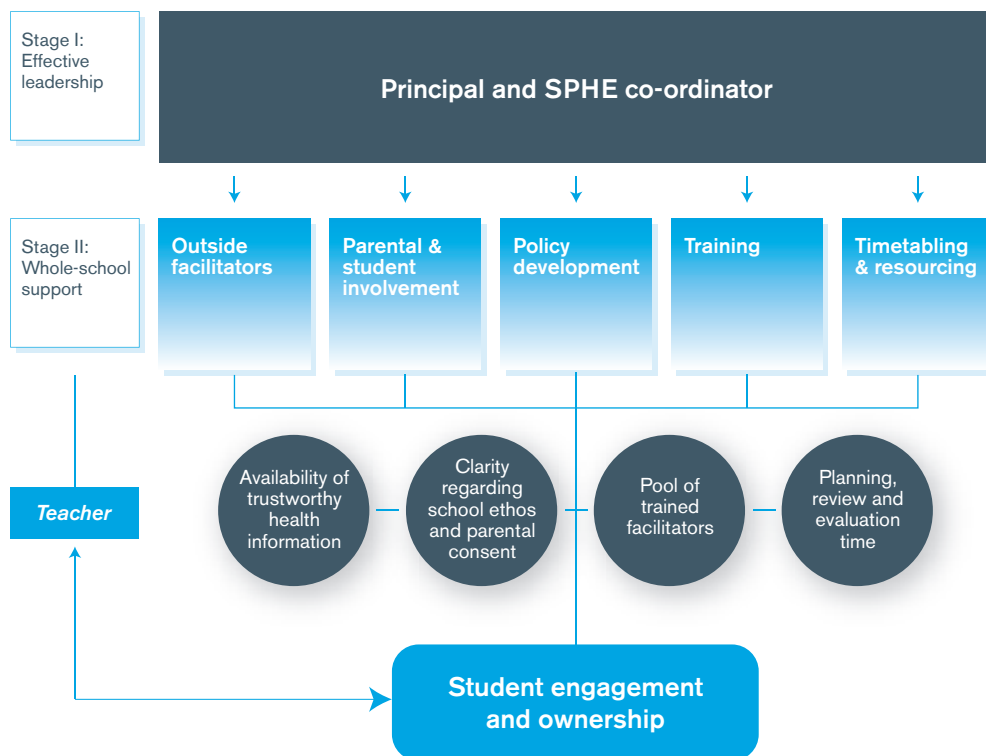
The school offers Junior Certificate, Transition Year, Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied programmes. In junior cycle, SPHE is timetabled for one class per week from first year through to third year. An outside facilitator teaches RSE in Transition Year, and SPHE (including RSE) is again timetabled in fifth and sixth year. There are 50 teachers (including full- and part-time staff) currently working in the school and, of these, nine are comprehensively trained in the teaching of SPHE/RSE.

The school had no SPHE/RSE programme in place prior to 1998, and it is important to note that, today, it may *not* look dissimilar to the other schools studied if basic criteria (e.g. the presence of an RSE policy statement, timetabling arrangements) - such as those presented on Table 8.1 in the previous chapter - are applied (see 151). What sets this school apart from others is that there is a high level of commitment to SPHE/RSE *across the whole school community*. These subjects have high status within the school and have developed and expanded incrementally since they were initially introduced, despite some obstacles and setbacks from time to time. The commitment and leadership of the principal and SPHE co-ordinator have been critical to the development of six core characteristics that have contributed to effective RSE within the school: the presence and prominence of a written RSE policy

statement, parental and student involvement, extensive teacher training, timetabling flexibility, a high level of investment in RSE resources, and the involvement of outside facilitators. Combined, these characteristics have played a formative role in the development of a positive and proactive approach to SPHE/RSE throughout the entire school community.

We have devised a model of effective implementation – represented diagrammatically in Figure 9.1 below – based on this school’s approach to RSE implementation.

Figure 9.1 A model of effective RSE implementation



The implementation process is presented in two stages. **Stage I, effective leadership**, relates to the role of the principal and the SPHE co-ordinator, particularly during the early stages of implementation, while **Stage II** is concerned with the process of fostering **whole-school support** for SPHE/RSE. Teacher effectiveness and student engagement and ownership are part and parcel of the whole-school approach, and they emerge alongside the development of a supportive school environment. Both are referred to throughout the descriptive account of RSE implementation below.

9.2 Stage I: Effective leadership

9.2.1 *The principal and the SPHE co-ordinator*

As emphasised in Chapter 8, the school principal is perceived to play a crucial role in prioritising SPHE/RSE and raising their status within the school: it is the principal who provides leadership in the development of a written RSE policy statement and s/he is also instrumental in creating awareness and access to training. The principal of this school had been teaching for twenty-two years prior to taking up the post of principal twelve years previously. He was strongly committed to the implementation of RSE and SPHE within the school and outlined several reasons for making SPHE a priority. Most significantly, perhaps, he believed that a 'healthy' approach to SPHE/RSE has advantages that extend well beyond the potential benefit to student health, *per se*: good SPHE has clear potential to contribute to improvements in student behaviour and discipline, as well as to their academic achievement. His views on these and other matters can be summarised as follows:

- The principal expressed concern about the kinds of problems he had encountered among students and felt strongly that the school needed to address the development of the *whole child*: "You've got to do something to let parents know and let students know that there are other things important in life apart from points."
- He felt that SPHE could potentially greatly enhance the spirit and quality of relationships within the school by building a positive outlook amongst both teachers and students.
- He believed that 'good' SPHE greatly reduced discipline problems, particularly when combined with the Mentoring System, Pastoral Care programme and the work of the Students' Council.
- According to the principal, SPHE training had contributed positively to the development and attitude of the teachers themselves (including the principal): "We don't sit pupils in front of us and teach it like another class; first, we have it in a facilitatory mode and, also, we make the class numbers smaller."

The commentary of teachers, parents and students confirm the principal's commitment to SPHE/RSE and to student welfare generally, and they strongly suggest that this commitment has had a significant positive impact on the quality of RSE delivery:

He sees straight away all the difficulties that are there, you know, and if you didn't have that kind of vision from the top down, it wouldn't happen, there's no doubt about that.

SPHE co-ordinator

He's very encouraging and that he believes in RSE. And I think then it's seen as an important subject, whereas in other schools it's possibly not taken as seriously and there isn't that same support.

Teacher

It's [RSE] interesting, like, and it's oral. It's open discussion.

JC Student

While the principal has in many respects acted as a 'gatekeeper' to SPHE, the SPHE co-ordinator has driven and fostered the programme. As highlighted in the previous chapter (in the comparative analysis of 'St. Mark's' and 'St. Ita's'), the presence of a dedicated SPHE co-ordinator impacts very significantly on the quality and effectiveness of the programme. This school's co-ordinator developed a personal interest in SPHE after completing a personal development course a number of years previously and she began work on the programme during the late 1990s with the support of the principal. Comments from staff verify that her approach to implementing SPHE has been highly influential:

T1: *I feel that we have great support in our school.*

T2: *Yeah, definitely.*

T3: *And part of that is, I suppose, that [name of co-ordinator] is very strong. We have a good leader, and we are very well resourced.*

Teachers

The co-ordinator takes a very proactive approach to SPHE/RSE training; she has a strong personal interest in the subjects and has shared the school's policy and approach with a number of co-ordinators from other schools. The position of SPHE co-ordinator is clearly one of high status within the school. This role was initially designated a Special Duties 'B' Post by the school management, and the co-ordinator now holds the post of assistant principal. She argued that the allocation of a post of responsibility to the SPHE co-ordinator is essential if the subject is to gain recognition and hold status within schools.

In 1998, the SPHE co-ordinator and the principal together made a number of strategic decisions that had a major impact on SPHE/RSE implementation. Much of the early impetus focused on training, but most significantly, perhaps, the academic orientation of the school was not viewed as incompatible or at variance with this heavy investment in a 'non-academic' subject that has no examination requirement. The Department of Education and Science (1995) guidelines were largely adhered to initially. Indeed, it is encouraging to find evidence that these guidelines proved effective, even if a great deal clearly depended on the personal commitment of the principal and co-ordinator. The early decisions taken by the school management focused primarily on policy development, teacher training, parental involvement, timetabling flexibility and resource building. The actions related to each of these areas permitted and, indeed, demanded the involvement of the whole school community, so that staff members had significant input into decision-making at various junctures. This approach continues to characterise the school's management of the RSE and SPHE programmes. The process of implementation is described in greater detail below using the 'stages' presented in Figure 9.1.

9.3 Stage II: Whole-school support

9.3.1 Policy development, initial implementation and programme content

RSE policy was developed during the 1998/99 school year in conjunction with a separate SPHE policy. The school adhered quite strictly to the guidelines issued by the Department of Education (1995) in their approach to RSE policy-making, or as the co-ordinator put it, "We did it by the book."

The school held a well-attended public meeting for parents, and two parent representatives were invited to participate in the RSE and SPHE policy committee. This committee consisted of the principal, SPHE co-ordinator, one teacher, two parents and two members of the Board of Management. The policy was drawn up over the course of one year, and a number of committee meetings were convened during this time. A draft policy was then presented to parents at a second public meeting and, at this juncture, one parent objected to the policy. However, this parent later left the area; no other member of the parent body raised an objection and an RSE policy was agreed. This was not the only objection raised in relation to the school's proposals for RSE. The principal explained that a clergy member in a nearby parish wrote to both the principal and parents voicing concerns about and objection to the programme. The principal went on to explain that this problem "faded away" after a time. It is noteworthy that among all of the schools studied this school experienced perhaps the greatest level of objection of to the RSE programme. It is also significant that the school felt sufficiently supported by parents and adequately legitimised by the consultative policy process to proceed.

The school's RSE and SPHE policies are in constant use and both are contained in a teaching materials' manual for all SPHE/RSE teachers. The policies are therefore very visible and play a central role in the planning and provision of both SPHE and RSE. However, RSE policy has not been revised or updated since its development in 1998 and both the principal and SPHE co-ordinator referred to the need to review both the RSE and SPHE policies.

The school introduced the SPHE and RSE programmes incrementally and initially introduced a first-year cohort of students to the subjects in 2000. Since that time, SPHE has been offered to all first-year classes and has been continued for the cohort of students who were the first recipients of the programme. During the early stages of implementation, SPHE/RSE was allocated a specific 'slot' on the agenda of staff meetings. This helped to ensure that all staff were informed about the challenges and progress and it had the additional benefit of raising the profile of RSE and SPHE within the school.

The SPHE and RSE programmes provided in the school do not deviate significantly from Departmental guidelines for junior cycle (Department of Education and Science 2000). However, the SPHE co-ordinator continues to invest time in the development and sourcing of suitable resources and materials for use in the classroom. The school has a resource area in the staff room for SPHE/RSE materials, but the co-ordinator emphasised that these materials are "suggested but not prescribed." The provision of appropriate materials to aid the teaching of RSE and SPHE appears to be an on-going challenge. The principal commented that teaching resources (e.g. lesson ideas, teaching aids) needed constant updating, with specific attention to the increase in student behaviour problems and alcohol and drug use, all of which require specific and specialised material. The SPHE co-ordinator considered the resources provided by the SPHE Support Service to be very relevant but also felt strongly that they require expansion and updating.

In first year, the RSE programme deals primarily with physiological and biological aspects of development; these topics are expanded and developed in second year, and by third year the programme moves towards a more detailed discussion of relationships, incorporating the themes of responsibility and respect. Sensitive topics such as contraception/family planning are *referred* to in junior cycle but they are not dealt with in detail. These issues are, however, covered in considerable detail during senior cycle. Due to the emphasis on active and experiential learning – which allows senior-cycle students considerable input into the content of the programme – it is not possible to comment on the specifics of what is taught at senior level. It is perhaps useful, however, to note the following comment by the SPHE co-ordinator:

I certainly think that the Leaving Certs would think it's their programme, you know, because I say to them, 'What do you want to talk about; what do you want to deal with?'

SPHE co-ordinator

RSE is taught by SPHE teachers to transition-year students. However, at this stage transition-year students also participate in a ten-week course delivered by an outside agency. This agency is one which promotes, educates and raises awareness of a range of sexual health issues and the material covered by outside facilitators was described as “very graphic.” This level of detail was thought by staff to be appropriate, since it is delivered with due regard to students’ development and maturity.

When the outside agency comes in, students are no longer in junior cycle. They're getting older, and they're being treated [pause] ... it's having a trust, you know, that they can be mature enough to listen to these people and take it on board as well. And they like that. It's more knowledge-based than what we do inside in the class, more experiential.

Teacher

The senior-cycle students we interviewed agreed that Transition Year was “a good time” to learn and have opportunities to discuss issues such as sexually transmitted infections. Finally, SPHE (including RSE) is also timetabled as a subject during fifth and sixth year.

The SPHE co-ordinator described a shift in teaching approaches as the students progress from junior to senior cycle. While the programme is more “controlled” at junior-cycle level, senior-cycle students are encouraged and trusted to raise topics that are relevant to their own lives. The SPHE co-ordinator felt strongly that this approach to the senior-cycle programme helps to engage the students and gives them a sense of ownership of SPHE/RSE. This sense of ownership was portrayed as crucial to the incorporation of topics and discussion points within RSE that are relevant to the lives and experiences of young people:

The very fact that they discuss it and they think about it in the classroom ... it's not the first time they'll have faced it when they're out there, at least they've had time to think about it.

SPHE co-ordinator

Senior-cycle students acknowledged that the programme placed a major emphasis on relationships and they clearly felt at liberty to introduce new topics during SPHE/RSE classes. This appeared to be a particularly important facet of enjoyable RSE:

RSE is for us, so, like ... if we don't understand something we just bring it up, like - that's what it's all about.

SC Student

An active learning/experiential approach to the teaching of SPHE/RSE appears to play a major role in ensuring that the programme is pupil-centred. This approach is examined further in the following section.

9.3.2 Teacher training

From the outset, a heavy emphasis was placed on RSE training for teachers, which commenced in 1998. The co-ordinator explained the rationale for the school's approach to training, which emphasised the involvement of *all* staff, not simply those teachers who had an interest in teaching the subject.

When you're implementing something new, people say, "Oh they're the SPHE crowd, they'll do it, and we don't have to worry about it," whereas we made SPHE and RSE everybody's and, for me, that was huge. I think it made a huge difference to it.

SPHE co-ordinator

A ten-week training programme – held outside of school hours – was organised during the early stages of implementation and the school also secured funding to employ an outside facilitator to train the staff on programme content and methodology. A large number of teachers (including the principal) also participated in SPHE Support Service RSE training. The school followed this up with another ten-week training course in 2003, drawing on the assistance of a Regional Development Officer and funding from the SPHE Support Service.

The positive impact of this very heavy investment in training – which has resulted in a pool of trained RSE teachers within the school – can be seen in a number of ways. Firstly, the issues of teacher comfort and selection were addressed throughout the training process, with a strong emphasis on self-nomination and choice for teachers. Several, for example, derived great benefit at a personal and professional level from RSE training, while others did not. What is critical here is that teachers did not feel under pressure to teach SPHE or RSE.

Like we said to people, 'It's open to everybody, you don't have to be an SPHE teacher.' And also reassured them that they wouldn't have to teach SPHE if they did the training. Because sometimes people have a fear, 'Oh, if I do the training, I'll get roped in.'

SPHE co-ordinator

We're very fortunate here; it's taken very seriously, I think, rather than sort of being imposed, we'll say, like in other schools where it's become an obligatory thing. That's not the way to approach it and that didn't happen here.

Teacher

This approach – which did not assume that all teachers were interested in or suited to RSE – meant that RSE was not viewed as a ‘burden’ or imposition. There was also communication amongst the staff on the matter of teacher comfort, and this issue was discussed openly. All of the teachers we interviewed were fully trained, comfortable with the content of the RSE, and appeared to have grown accustomed to the demands of the programme. Crucially, whole-school awareness and support were fostered within the school from the outset. Consequently, teachers who had no direct involvement in SPHE/RSE teaching were aware that it was an important area of development and that it was held in high regard by the school management.

From the outset, the management encouraged male teachers to attend RSE training, reflecting a wider view that SPHE/RSE affects *all* staff and students and is not simply the remit of one particular ‘type’ of teacher. Efforts to achieve this gender mix have met with some success: three of the nine SPHE/RSE teachers are male. One teacher made specific reference to the importance of having both male and female teachers of RSE:

The mix of gender we have is quite good. It would be very worrying if there wasn't a balance, if there weren't males because then it would be seen as a sort of a female thing.

Teacher

The principal was not satisfied, however, that an adequate number of male teachers were currently involved in the teaching of SPHE/RSE: he stated that if he were to change anything about the way RSE has been implemented up to this point, he would seek to involve even more teachers, and particularly more males, in SPHE/RSE training. Four-fifths of the student population in this school is male, and this appears to be a factor that has motivated the principal and SPHE co-ordinator to seek to involve male teachers.

Apart from fostering commitment to SPHE/RSE across the school and generating a pool of trained teachers, intensive training impacted on teachers' willingness to adopt an active learning/experiential approach. It was largely taken for granted, for example, that a traditional, teacher-centred approach is inappropriate for SPHE/RSE. Nonetheless, two teachers opted out of teaching SPHE because they were not comfortable with this approach. The principal explained:

I think they forgot that SPHE/RSE is different, that you have got to facilitate. Teachers desperately need to acknowledge that these subjects are different, that active learning is required, and that we need training in it.

Principal

Significantly, students commented on the difference between SPHE and other subjects in terms of teachers' pedagogical strategies. Junior-cycle students, for example, remarked that teachers are able to relate to students: “They get through to the student and get to know them more like a friend.” These students also felt confident that they could express their opinions and ask questions without feeling that trust would be betrayed at a later stage.

You can trust them [the teachers]. They're constantly saying, 'What we talk about in this room won't be discussed outside.' They say that to make you feel like you can talk to them.

JC Student

Likewise, the principal and SPHE co-ordinator both commented that students view the teacher less as an authority figure during SPHE classes. Intensive and on-going training has undoubtedly helped teachers to develop the competencies and skills to enable them to successfully negotiate this boundary without feeling that their authority and worth as teachers is diluted. Finally, RSE training appears to have fostered a supportive environment where teachers can share their experiences and problems without feeling undermined as educators.

We certainly would have a close bond in this school, I feel, because I worked in other schools and you don't have that. I would feel that RSE has huge support and we understand each other's problems with the subject.

Teacher

9.3.3 Timetabling, resourcing and outside facilitators

As in many of the other schools studied, SPHE is timetabled once weekly between first and third year. Unlike most other schools, however, RSE is always conducted in groups of approximately 14 students. This arrangement naturally draws heavily on the school's human resources, a point made strongly by one of the teachers.

It created huge problems on the timetable, because it meant splitting up; I mean we have to be timetabled together, and all of the classes split up. But it started at the beginning and it's still there.

Teacher

Small class size understandably makes the difficult task of timetabling even more challenging. However, the principal believes strongly that small classes are necessary for RSE and have major benefits for both students and teachers. Commenting on the consequences of class size, he also stated that schools need additional teacher allocation from the Department of Education and Science, which, he suggested, could be appropriately linked with whole-school evaluation and inspection. The principal also felt strongly that his insistence on small classes from the outset of the implementation process created vital opportunities for teachers to come to terms with experiential learning methodologies. Perhaps with larger student groups, teachers may have been more likely to proceed with a traditional pedagogical strategy.

SPHE teachers meet formally at the beginning of each school year to plan and discuss the coming year's work. A significant feature of this planning is that all RSE teachers begin the RSE module in January/February of each school year. According to the co-ordinator, this approach to programme delivery works well and helps to foster a sense of solidarity and confidence among teachers. The school is keen to support newcomers to SPHE/RSE and does so by providing reassurance, advice and opportunities to attend training. The school utilises both in-school and out-of-school time to great advantage and places a major emphasis on teacher reflection, preparation and support. All of this denotes a school that is sophisticated in its approach to RSE and has made very significant progress with implementation. Put differently, RSE policy and rhetoric have become a reality in this school.

9.3.4 Student and parental involvement

The school takes a proactive approach to parental involvement. All first-year parents are invited to the school before the RSE programme begins in January or February and at this meeting they are invited to participate in some of the activities that students will undertake later that year. It is significant that some teachers stated that this approach helps to ensure that parents are knowledgeable about the programme. This level of explicit communication with parents contrasts sharply with most other schools selected for case study. Of note also is that within a considerable number of these schools teacher discomfort with the content of RSE was frequently related to unresolved anxieties over parental views and responses. Students' and parents' perspectives on consultation and involvement in RSE are dealt with in greater detail in the following chapter.

Nonetheless, communication with parents, while high relative to other schools, was not without its problems. The principal and SPHE co-ordinator were both aware, for example, that these meetings tended to attract the same individuals time after time and they felt that more work was required to involve a greater number of parents. It is interesting that parents expressed similar frustrations, noting that it was regrettable that so few parents were informed about the school's SPHE/RSE programme. As one parent put it, "You'll have the same fifteen or twenty people who have an interest." The parents we interviewed felt there was generally a high level of apathy towards the RSE programme among parents:

It's a case of, 'As long as somebody else is doing it, it's fine'. People have actually removed themselves, you know. There will be a percentage who will have the interest, to be fair, but I do feel it's down to two or three - that's it.

Parent

The parents who participated in the focus group were very well informed on the content, methodology and philosophy of SPHE/RSE and their comments on the lack of parental involvement are instructive: this school had invested heavily in all aspects of the RSE programme, including parental participation. Nonetheless, the task of involving parents continues to pose challenges.

Effective SPHE/RSE within the school has led to the implementation of a number of other programmes, which involve both students and parents. The school has a mentoring programme, a pastoral care programme and runs a mental health module during Transition Year. Two additional features make this school stand out from the other schools we studied, and are again indicative of the school's commitment to a holistic approach to student development. One is a *fathering programme*, which involves fathers of students in a course that addresses aspects of father-child relationships. The principal described the programme:

We got two facilitators, two highly qualified people. They are therapists, and they took parents through a twelve-week course and covered issues like conflict resolution, communication problems, the whole nurturing thing, the whole area of RSE, with their sons and daughters, and it was very, very successful.

Principal

The school also invites outside professionals (e.g. psychologists) to talk to the students about specific issues that may affect them at some stage in their lives. As well as supporting and reinforcing the messages inherent within SPHE/RSE, these programmes also help to position student health and well-being at the core of the school's culture as an organisation.

Students themselves can be said to be formally involved in the school through the Students' Council, although they were not involved in the process of RSE policy development in 1998. Student councils were not commonplace at this time and the mechanisms for student involvement in such decision-making were, in any case, less well developed.⁴⁷ As in other schools (see Chapter 10), the students valued RSE. Senior-cycle students, in particular, highlighted the importance of confidentiality in the classroom and felt that the matter of trust needed careful negotiation between teachers and students.

Students also made spontaneous reference to differences between SPHE and other classes, including seating arrangements, class size and the general mood within the classroom. As mentioned earlier, senior-cycle students were encouraged to introduce topics for discussion. During focus-group discussions, it was clear that their sense of ownership of the programme had a significant positive impact on their level of engagement with the subject. Students explained that the extent to which group participants share information during class varies and tends to relate to individual personalities and levels of personal comfort with the topic under consideration. A number also commented that it would be useful if they had opportunities to talk to a teacher or 'outsider' individually. This point is of particular interest, given that these students were more fortunate than many of their counterparts in other schools who were taught RSE in classes of twenty-five students or more. In particular, it suggests a need for follow-up services and information, an issue worthy of consideration in the forthcoming SPHE guidelines for senior cycle.

Finally, it is important to note that when we questioned students in this school about how they experienced stress, they rated "doing well in the Leaving Cert" as the single biggest source of pressure. Drinking was regarded as the next greatest pressure, alongside the suggestion that drinking and intoxication made sexual activity "more likely". These responses underscore the importance and necessity for subjects like SPHE/RSE. It is significant, in light of this, that the school management and teachers recognise and are committed to responding to issues and concerns - both beyond and related to academic success - that affect the lives and experiences of young people.

9.4 Conclusion

The model of effective RSE implementation presented early in this chapter (Figure 9.1) draws attention to the central role of whole-school support, and this case study highlights the positive impact of this approach on teacher effectiveness and student engagement with the programme. Whole-school support has enabled the dissemination of positive messages to teachers about RSE and has clearly propelled the implementation process. Parental involvement in policy-making (and the fact that policy is part of each teacher's handbook) has increased teachers' level of clarity about the programme and their confidence therein. The school can legitimately claim to have given very considerable attention to involving and informing parents in the implementation process. Teacher training has impacted positively on all aspects of teacher effectiveness, but particularly on the pedagogical strategies of teachers and their adoption of experiential learning techniques. Timetabling flexibility within the school has been crucial to reducing class size and to providing teachers with adequate planning and

⁴⁷ A recent study of enablers, barriers and supports to second level Student Councils in Ireland found that, in many schools, Boards of Management and staff did not seem to be aware of the student council at all (Keogh & Whyte 2004).

consultation time. The level of student engagement and ownership of the programme (particularly at senior-cycle) can be seen as a positive indicator of the effectiveness of RSE delivery within the school.

RSE implementation in this school has not proceeded without difficulty, and it has taken strong leadership and effective staff communication to combat these challenges. Early objections to RSE by a small number of parents and one member of the clergy were dealt with in a positive manner, and the consultative policy process helped to clarify the school community's stance on the teaching of RSE. The principal and SPHE co-ordinator feel strongly that RSE teaching is not the remit of female teachers *only* and they have given very considerable attention to involving male teachers from the start of the implementation process. Nonetheless, encouraging male teachers to participate in RSE continues to present problems and appears to be viewed as an issue in need of attention due to the high number of male students enrolled in the school. Likewise, parental involvement has not been without its difficulties and challenges. Despite the school's efforts to involve, inform and communicate with parents, the parents interviewed did not consider the parent body to be well informed about RSE and they also felt that parental apathy towards RSE was a significant problem. This issue will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 10.

Finally, it appears that a high level of personal interest and commitment is required on the part of the school management and teachers for SPHE/RSE to achieve status. The high regard for SPHE/RSE within this school can be attributed, at least in part, to the investment of time and effort in teacher training and the amount of whole-staff time devoted to these subject areas. Many may suggest that this level of personal and professional investment will not transpire easily within a large number of schools. It may, indeed, take some time, restructuring and major investment in resourcing if the kind of subject prioritisation described throughout this chapter is to become the norm in Irish second-level schools.

Chapter 10

The views of parents and students

In this, the final chapter looking at the findings of our study, we examine parent and pupil perspectives on RSE, based on the focus groups conducted within the schools selected for case study. We acknowledge the limitations of this data in terms of its representativeness of parents and students in the general population. Nonetheless, it is critically important to present the views of those parents and students who participated in the research, not least because there are relatively few studies in Ireland that have given parents and pupils a 'voice' on the matter of relationships and sexuality education (however, see North Western Health Board 2004).

10.1 The views of parents

This section outlines the views of parents in eight of the nine schools studied.⁴⁸ First we explore parents' knowledge and awareness of the RSE programme and their views on the importance of school-based sex education. Later we examine their opinions on the place or status of RSE, how they rate the subject's importance and how they feel it is prioritised by the school. This section also explores how parents perceive the responsibility of the school in the domain of relationships and sexuality education and how this relates to their responsibilities as parents for the education of their children. Finally, we examine parents' views on the content of the RSE programme. This issue is particularly important in view of teachers' anxieties about possible objections by parents to what is being taught in the classroom.

10.1.1 Awareness of the RSE programme

Before discussing parental awareness of the RSE programme, it is important to point out that parents may not have detailed knowledge of many second-level subject areas. It is therefore unfair to expect that they would have detailed knowledge of one module within a curricular area such as SPHE. However, because of the value-laden and personal nature of relationships and sexuality issues, it might be argued that information about the programme needs to be even more readily accessible to parents than information about other areas of the curriculum.

The question of how much parents know about the school's RSE programme was the starting point of most of the focus-group discussions we convened.⁴⁹ Predictably, perhaps, we found varying degrees of awareness among parents, ranging from completely uninformed to very knowledgeable. 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'

⁴⁸ It was not possible to interview parents in one of the nine schools (see Chapter 3).

⁴⁹ For example, we asked parents about their knowledge of the content of RSE and the number of classes allocated to SPHE.

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 because the SPHE co-ordinator had left a few years previously and had not been replaced. These parents felt strongly that they needed 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.

Given the pressures in their own lives, coupled with their possible discomfort about approaching the school for information about RSE, many parents are unlikely to request clarification on what precisely is being taught. In the absence of direct communication from the school, perhaps the most direct form of access parents have to knowledge about the RSE programme is to ask their children. However, parents stated in most cases that this was not a real option, particularly with boys.

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.

Parent, School 4

Parents, in fact, generally appeared not to ask their children about the RSE programme. The reports of students in one school confirm this and also indicate that students may be quite reluctant to discuss RSE with their parents:

[Do you ever talk to your parents about what you do in these (RSE) classes?]

S1: *No.*

[Do they ever ask?]

S2: *Feel uncomfortable talking to them about that kind of stuff.*

[So you don’t mention it at all, do you?]

S2: *No.*

JC Students, School 8

Parents from two schools felt they were well informed about the content of the RSE programme. However, they simultaneously drew attention to the lack of knowledge about RSE among parents in general. Significantly, they did not attribute this problem to a lack of investment in parental involvement on the part of the schools in question.

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.

Parent, School 7

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

Parent, School 8

One parent in a boys' school suggested that written communication about RSE, sent by post, would be helpful because of the tendency of teenagers, and boys in particular, not to pass on letters that are sent home by hand. Interestingly, this parent had been involved in the school's RSE policy development in 1998, but now felt relatively uninformed about the content of the programme.

It appears that, once again, the picture is blurred when we compare the schools' perspective on parental involvement in RSE implementation with the views of parents themselves. A point worthy of note here is that the parents we interviewed were probably more involved in the school community than many of their peers, a point emphasised by parents themselves and by many teachers. Schools that held information nights appeared to provide general information on the RSE programme, among a range of other subjects, but it is easy to see how RSE may be overlooked all too easily by both parents and teachers in this context. Written communication, particularly when this communication merely seeks parental permission to teach RSE, is also problematic, and one may question whether this form of communication constitutes parental *involvement*. It clearly takes quite an amount of effort on the part of school personnel *and* the parent body for genuine parental involvement in the RSE programme to take place.

While schools are not required to seek permission to teach RSE as part of the SPHE curriculum, it was common practice in the schools we studied to request consent to teach the programme. Consent was invariably sought from parents for their child(ren) to participate in classes delivered by an outside facilitator. It is interesting to note, however, that without adequate knowledge and understanding of what is taught, parents may not be in a position to give *informed* consent to the school. One group of parents suggested that there was a risk that some parents may withdraw their children from RSE because they do not have an adequate understanding of the RSE programme.⁵⁰ A considerable number of parents felt that the school needed to do more to inform parents about the RSE programme. One parent also suggested that it would be helpful if a course were available to parents to help them to address relationships and sexuality with their children:

It's really a learning curve. And 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.

Parent, School 2

Overall, our discussions with parents suggested that while they were aware of school-based RSE, they did not necessarily feel informed about the content of the programme. A number of parents felt that the school needed to take a more proactive stance on this matter. Nonetheless, there are clearly factors beyond that of the school's approach to communicating with parents that impact on their level of involvement in RSE and their understanding of the programme's content.

⁵⁰ As documented in Chapter 7, one member of the SPHE Support Service reported that parents who were initially against the programme subsequently became actively involved in, and supportive of, RSE policy development, having learned about the content of the programme.

10.1.2 The importance of school-based RSE

At this point, it is useful to consider whether or not parents felt SPHE/RSE was a priority for their children's education. Attention has been drawn to the position of RSE within a highly academically-oriented education system on numerous occasions throughout previous chapters. When we broached this issue with parents, the vast majority simultaneously agreed that RSE is important. The value ascribed by parents to RSE can be summarised in the points below:

- 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, when the value of RSE was explored in greater detail with parents, a somewhat different picture emerged. Parents, for example, did not believe that RSE was a priority within schools and they felt strongly that academic subjects took precedence over 'softer' subject areas. Parents themselves also acknowledged their own attitudes to RSE, stating that they paid far more attention to the 'academic side' of their children's schooling. For a number, RSE was simply an advantage, if taught, given the pressures surrounding academic performance and examinations, in particular. The following comment was made by a parent who had been involved in the process of RSE policy-making within the school:

There are other things to worry about, you know. I feel RSE would be the icing on the cake, you know, to know that it is also being covered. I think for a lot of parents it wouldn't be something on which to decide whether or not to send your child to a particular school. It would be more the academic subjects.

Parent, School 5

Others suggested that parents' preoccupation with academic success, however undesirable, was a reality:

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.

Parent, School 3

These comments may explain why RSE is viewed as important (by parents, teachers and schools) and simultaneously ranks at the bottom of people's priorities. Perhaps Morgan's (2000) finding that over 90% of the 343 parents surveyed viewed the school's role as complementing the home in regard to RSE is merely aspirational. It seems that even schools that give high priority to SPHE/RSE may experience difficulty in their efforts to engage and involve parents, and this situation may simply reflect the relatively low priority attached to this curricular area among parents.

The majority view emerging from parent focus groups was that, ideally at least, the home ought to provide the basis for relationships and sexuality education. Equally, however, a large number felt that RSE may not be adequately addressed within many homes and that schools' input in this area was therefore critical. It was suggested on several occasions that there were many advantages to teenagers' learning about relationships and sexuality in the company of peers under the guidance of trained teachers or facilitators. A large number of parents also felt strongly that effective school-based RSE programmes have a critical role to play in the healthy development of teenagers.

It appears that, to some extent, parental involvement in school-based RSE depends on the motivation of individual parents. In general, the parents we spoke to were reasonably comfortable with RSE as a topic and a large number were open to discussing relationships and sexuality with their children. Equally, however, they were very happy that the RSE programme was in place to deal with this aspect of student development. One parent suggested that the majority of parents are likely to feel relief, rather than anxiety, about the school's role in RSE delivery:

I think perhaps it's a possibility that a lot of parents were relieved that the subject was being covered in school ... I think a lot of parents were probably very pleased that it was just, that the box was ticked. So parents were supportive of it ... and, to be honest, I would have been one of those that said, 'Thank God they've been told!'

Parent, School 5

It is worth noting that within one school with high-level implementation of RSE, the parents interviewed were quite critical of the level of parental apathy in relation to SPHE/RSE and also suggested that while societal attitudes to sex and sexuality had changed radically, many parents were not at all comfortable with discussing sex with their children. A concern arising from the findings of this study is that a (considerable) number of young people may fall victim to a combination of inadequate home-based sex education and relatively ineffective school-based RSE. This observation is not a criticism of either schools or parents; there are, indeed, many factors that might be held responsible for this situation where it exists. What is clear is that there is a need to raise parental awareness about the importance of RSE. Schools, on the other hand, may need to reconsider their approach to involving parents, on the grounds that involving parents is not simply a requirement but also a positive step towards an effective, whole-school approach to RSE.

10.1.3 Views on RSE programme delivery and programme content

Age-appropriate content emerged as the most common concern among parents in relation to the RSE programme. Most felt strongly, for example, that the programme needed to be introduced to students gradually and sensitively. Indeed, one parent raised concerns about the school's 'one-off' and sporadic approach to RSE, which he described as "all in first year and then nothing." He felt that the programme needed to be more consistent and measured. In this school, the majority of RSE teaching was delivered through a one-day course in first year, and outside facilitators conducted workshops during Transition Year. This parent depicted the school's approach to RSE as follows:

They [the school] sit you down and frighten the life out of you in first year, and the information is a little bit scrappy after that.

Parent, School 4

In general, parents felt that the emotional side of sexuality needed very considerable attention, particularly at junior cycle:

I think we should get them more to respect each other and to be able to deal with sex. Like, they should know the facts of life and should know what's going on and what's happening to themselves.

Parent, School 3

Irrespective of the 'facts' communicated to young people, a large majority of parents insisted that respect for oneself and others was the most important message. The official RSE programme, in fact, concentrates very heavily on relationships, emotions, communication and self-respect.

In keeping with the survey findings (Chapter 4), the perception that Irish society has undergone radical social change was widespread among parents. When RSE was first introduced, homosexuality had only recently been decriminalised and the legal sale of condoms was also a relatively recent development. Our interviews with parents included questions about their perspectives on if and when the topics of contraception⁵¹ and homosexuality should be covered. The majority view was that contraception and condom use should be taught to junior-cycle students. However, some also felt that not all parents would agree that this topic needed to be dealt with at this stage. One parent in an inner-city school put it thus: "People think 'give them information and they're going to go out and do it,' but it doesn't work like that." 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 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

⁵¹ During interview, we used the term 'contraception' (not 'family planning', which is briefly referred to in the third-year RSE programme).

Many of the views expressed by parents on the content of RSE highlight greater concern about *how* RSE is approached than *what* is actually taught. Of relevance here is the absence or limited use of experiential learning approaches within most of the schools studied, coupled with teacher discomfort with much of the subject matter of RSE (see Chapter 8). The focus of one parent's comments on teaching about homosexuality, for example, was clearly on openness and acceptance, rather than a preoccupation with the topic itself:

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

Many parents considered that homosexuality was a topic that merited attention at junior cycle and felt that silence around this issue was both unacceptable and potentially damaging to students. However, others were more reluctant to fully endorse open discussion of homosexuality with teenagers. The comments of these parents suggest that whilst homosexuality might be presented as 'normal', this should not be equated with it being perceived by students as an 'option':

I would not like them to be taught that this is natural, normal and how it should be. The facts are great but I wouldn't like someone putting their angle on it.

Parent, School 6

In Chapter 8 we referred to some teachers' concerns about RSE's ability to accommodate difference and diversity among students. To reiterate, teachers suggested that the available RSE teaching and resource materials did not adequately serve the diverse needs of students. One parent also referred to the need for clear guidelines on this matter:

Some children are at a different stage and at a different time than others. I think that the policy guidelines need to be done in a structured way.

Parent, School 4

Finally, several parents felt that boys need special help in relation to expressing their emotions and with communication generally. Many expressed deep concern about the high rates of male suicide in Ireland and suggested that far more attention to the specific needs of young males was required within both RSE and SPHE.

Very few parents raised the issue of school ethos and its potential impact on the RSE programme. The limited discussion among parents on this issue appears to point to a concern on their part with secular aspects of schooling. However, as with the teachers we described in Chapter 8, individual parents can interpret the issue of ethos uniquely, based upon their personal belief system. One parent stated, for example, that she would not choose a school for her child simply because it was Catholic, but would focus instead on the school's educational programme, facilities, standard of teaching and academic record. On the other hand, this individual stated that she would expect a Catholic school to teach RSE with due regard to a Catholic ethos. There was some disagreement amongst parents in one school (School 7) on

the issue of ethos: one felt that a Catholic school should adhere to its ethos in the teaching of RSE, while two other parents felt that schools need to “move with the times” and recognise that “life has changed” and went further to suggest that if schools are to be responsive to a multicultural school population, they cannot simply adhere to a Catholic ethos. The issue of multi-denominational schooling was also raised with reference to ethos/religion by the following parent:

I think because we are in a multi-denominational society it is important that it's kept separately and respected on each side, like. Religion class is religion, but that's what that is. RSE should be taught separately.

Parent, School 8

While parents' views on specific issues related to the school and RSE differed, there was general agreement that schools needed to address, not avoid, the real issues facing young people in a way that enables them to deal with the decisions they are likely to confront in an informed and confident manner. Our data also suggest that while parents felt that school ethos needed to be respected, it should not eclipse RSE teaching.

Finally, parents' responses to the question of how well they felt the school deals with SPHE/RSE strongly suggest a belief in the importance of school experiences in the social and personal development of students:

[Are you satisfied with the school's work in the area of RSE?]

I think the school handles it, even though they don't know they're doing it, but the way they interact between themselves the boys and the girls, they're doing an awful lot and the teachers play a part in this, they're mixed in fairly well together and I think that does an awful lot, even though they don't realise it.

Parent, School 4

We know the teacher here and she has a particularly wonderful rapport with the children, she really is like their aunty almost. They would go to her with problems; that's what she's known for.

Parent, School 6

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.

10.2 The views of students

As the recipients of RSE, students have views that are critically important. Our discussions with students across the nine schools provide valuable insights into the importance they attach to learning about relationships and sexuality within school settings and tell us a great deal about what young people want from the adults charged with the responsibility of providing this education.

10.2.1 The value of RSE

Irrespective of the school they attended, there was unanimous agreement among students on the importance of RSE. Student expressions of the value of being taught about relationships and sexuality referenced a range of issues: the need for teenagers to have accurate information about sex and relationships, the reality that not all parents talked to young people about sex and the need for teenagers to understand the potential negative consequences of uninformed sexual activity.

Well, it's important because, like, say something happens, and I think it's real important that we know the consequences and we just need to know so that, like, in the future, we're basically aware

JC Student, School 2

S1: Sex, like, some kids do it young, and they need to know the dangers and the facts.

S2: Some people don't know about it, they don't have a clue. I think it should be done both at school and at home.

JC Students, School 1

Girls, in particular, frequently mentioned pregnancy risk and the need for teenagers to know and understand how to prevent pregnancy.

I think it is actually the most important subject of all because if a girl does get pregnant they're gonna drop out of school. I think it is a really, really important subject to know about.

JC Student, School 2

Young people also talked about the broader benefits of teenagers having opportunities to discuss friendships and relationships, and a number commented on the advantage of knowing that their peers may have the same or similar concerns and anxieties about relationships. Chapter 1 of this report drew attention to the large captive audience that schools can access through Relationships and Sexuality Education. Similarly, one student made the point that school is a good place to provide education on relationships and sexuality because young people are unlikely to attend other venues, even if such opportunities exist.

'Cos it's in school and it's a class that you have to go to ... if it was organised, say, in your local community in a little hall or something, no one is going to go. They're going to say, 'It's only about relationships and sexuality, I don't want to go to that, I'm going off with my friend rather than that,' whereas in school it's an actual class and you have to go.

JC Student, School 7

As might be expected, pupils mentioned a variety of knowledge sources apart from school, with friends, the street, television (and other media) and home being the most frequently mentioned knowledge sources. However, apart from information they received from parents or siblings, most did not regard these sources as reliable, much less ideal. Many, for example, considered the information they gleaned from sources such as television and magazines to be unreliable and often described media depictions of love, romance and sex as “unrealistic”, “silly” or “far-fetched.” Students in one school also mentioned the conflicting messages that frequently characterise media messages and information related to sex and relationships:

[What about what you hear from TV?]

S1: It's all lies.

S2: You know, on Hollyoaks or whatever, they twist things. So people actually think that's right.

S3: Yeah, they're twisting it, like. You're going one place and reading something and you're going to another place and get a whole different story. We don't know what to think.

JC Students, School 7

[What do you think about that information that you get outside of school?]

S1: Not exactly accurate.

S2: No, it's not accurate.

S3: Very one-sided. Just, you know, you have to be the most beautiful person and sort of a very skewed view about it.

SC Students, School 6

While young people found it interesting and informative to discuss sexuality with friends, they appeared not to have confidence in the information they received in the school yard or on the street.

It'd be more kind of slang. I would prefer to learn in school.

JC Student, School 8

I think boys, as well, sometimes they don't give you the right information.

JC Student, School 5

If they [friends] were talking about, 'This is what I did', I wouldn't believe them ... they kind of exaggerate.

JC Student, School 4

A large number also felt strongly that young people do not necessarily have opportunities to learn about sex from their parents. Even if parents do try to 'teach' their children, teenagers find these discussions embarrassing, and many students expressed reluctance to discuss sexuality with their parents. The school, in contrast, provides a more neutral 'zone' where they can learn and discuss relationships and sexuality, provided that the 'right' mood prevails. Student commentary on the advantages of school-based RSE also frequently referenced the benefit of sharing experiences with peers.

S1: Like, you'd be embarrassed to talk about it in front of your parents. It's better talking about it with a stranger.

S2: And you don't feel so stupid when the whole class is asking the same questions, like.

JC Students, School 8

The vast majority of the students claimed to take RSE seriously, although they were aware that teachers often assumed that this was not the case. Students sometimes described SPHE and RSE classes as a "doss", but 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 it.

JC Students, School 8

Students frequently mentioned that SPHE did not require the completion of assignments or exams. Since they perceived SPHE classes to be more relaxed and academically less demanding, it is perhaps not so surprising that some students did refer to the classes as a "doss". Nonetheless, 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 educational 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.

SC Student, School 5

10.2.2 Experience of RSE

Our focus-group data indicate that students had very different experiences of RSE, and this variability was evident both between and within the schools studied. Even students who attended schools where RSE was implemented to a high or relatively high level frequently disagreed about the issues and areas covered by their teachers, and these interactions were highly suggestive of quite significant differences in what students were taught. Inconsistency of RSE delivery, therefore, emerged as a significant theme. In the following interaction between students in School 4, for example, the group agreed (following some discussion) 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.*

SC Students, School 4

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.

SC Student, School 5

Many students expressed dissatisfaction with the relationships and sexuality education they received, and this discontent was related to a number of issues. For example, some students felt that the school did not devote sufficient time to SPHE. Others stated that while they did have SPHE classes, RSE was not given adequate (or any) attention. Yet others claimed that while they discussed relationships (and friendships), much less attention was given by their teachers to sexuality. In other words, there was a strong perception that RSE was *selectively addressed*.⁵² Indeed, our discussions with students suggest they did not always 'connect' the topics of *relationships* and *sexuality*.

[And when you talk about this whole area of relationships and sexuality, what stands out in your mind?]

S1: *For me, I would see the sex education a bit more than the relationship.*

[Is the relationship part necessary?]

S1 & S2: *Yeah.*

[Why is that?]

⁵² We discuss this selective or 'pick-and-mix' approach to teaching RSE later in this chapter when we examine students' accounts of what precisely they learned during RSE classes.

S2: Well, I think it's more relationships with your friends as well, you need that too. I think, well, I suppose I can remember we did more about relationships than the sex education.

[Why do you think that was the case?]

S2: I suppose it was the class as well. We wouldn't have been the easiest class. Like, the boys are very immature and probably would have made a lot of jokes about it and it would have been more uncomfortable for the girls to talk about then when the boys were making jokes about it. So I suppose that was why.

SC Students, School 6

It is interesting that a number of teachers commented on what they perceived as a 'disconnect' in students' minds between relationships *and* sexuality and a number struggled, at times, to find ways to deal with this issue.

When boys hear relationships and sexuality, they automatically focus totally on the idea of girls, you know. And then I'm kind of saying, 'But sure, you've relationships with everyone - you've relationships with your classmates.' And they think, 'Oh, yeah,' because they automatically think it's a sexual thing.

Co-ordinator, School 9

Much of the dissatisfaction expressed by students concerning RSE focused on what they perceived as a general lack of openness within the school about sex. Students claimed that, to a large extent – and certainly outside of SPHE/RSE classes – sex was a taboo subject; it was an uncomfortable and embarrassing topic for everyone and this, in turn, meant that if and when they did get to the RSE module, a great deal of teacher time was taken up with disciplinary matters. Students recognised that much of the “messaging” during class arose because of students' discomfort and embarrassment. They also felt that a greater degree of openness throughout the school about sex, sexuality, and the relationships and sexuality programme generally, would help to eradicate the source of this very disruptive behaviour.⁵³

When students, on the other hand, were satisfied with RSE they talked enthusiastically about the benefits of RSE and the enjoyment they derive from RSE classes.

[How is it (RSE) different?]

S1: It's good. It's a discussion. No exam. It's a class discussion, you get different views on it.

S2: We sit in a circle.

[And what about your teachers?]

S2: They get through to the student and get to know them more like a friend.

JC Students, School 8

⁵³ It is worth noting that students within some schools were not always explicitly informed by their teacher in advance of meeting with us as researchers about the precise focus of the research and a number had been told that we wanted them to talk about SPHE. This, in itself, suggests an avoidance of the topic on the part of at least some teachers.

10.2.3 Teachers and RSE

Teachers' teaching strategies received much attention when young people talked about their experiences of RSE. Much of the commentary focused on the teacher's demeanour, and young people frequently stated that their teachers were "too closed", "embarrassed" or "not able to handle the class." The most important qualities that a teacher needs to possess, according to the students, were comfort with sexuality issues, openness, and the ability to encourage trust in pupils. Students also felt 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.

SC Student, School 8

As documented in Chapter 8, however, there are difficulties with teacher selection for SPHE/ RSE and it appears that teachers do not always volunteer for, but are rather assigned to, SPHE and RSE teaching. Students needed to feel that the teacher would keep confidentiality and be sufficiently open to allow pupils to discuss personal or difficult subjects. Indeed, students feared at times that what they said during RSE classes would be reported back to the staff room. Others felt, however, that their peers – not their teachers – were more likely to break trust.

[Do you feel confident enough to talk openly in your SPHE classes?]

S1: *No.*

[Why not?]

S1: *I would trust the teacher but not like ...*

S2: *The lads.*

SC Students, School 9

The main point made by young people was that 'good' sexuality education takes place when educators are open, candid and comfortable talking about sexual issues. Confidentiality, in terms of trusting teachers and classmates, was a topic that students almost always mentioned and is an issue which appears to act as a barrier to their participation in SPHE and RSE classes. However, the following excerpt from a high implementation school provided considerable insight into what young people think is important in a teacher of RSE:

[Is RSE important?]

S1: *People will learn things they didn't know, in that way it's important, yeah.*

S2: *I think that it's more important to have a teacher that you are comfortable with.*

S3: *Yeah.*

S2: *Especially in first year.*

S3: *You have to know that you can trust them and know that they're not going and telling the principal and stuff what you've said in class.*

[Is it an issue for you that your SPHE teacher might be your geography teacher as well?]

S4: *She's my history teacher.*

S3: *She's one of my favourite teachers that I get on with her, like. I didn't have her during my Junior [Certificate] but now I do so I get to know her better. We made it clear at the start that anything we have to say is confidential, even between students, like.*

[And that is quite respected, is it?]

S3: *Yeah.*

S4: *She never judged anyone.*

SC Students, School 8

The topic of teacher age was the subject of some disagreement during many group discussions. Some, for example, felt that the teacher needs to be young or closer to their age to be taken seriously, while others thought that an older and more experienced individual would be better equipped to maintain discipline and 'handle' the subject content.

[When you're being taught the area, do you think teachers are good people to teach this?]

S1: *Depends on the teacher.*

S2: *I think when [teacher's name] is doing about it, she's a home economics teacher, we were doing about it in home economics. I think, she's older and I suppose you felt, I did feel more comfortable. She's more maybe a mother figure in the school. So I suppose, I think she was the right person to do that.*

SC Students, School 6

Irrespective of the different views on age, there was overwhelming agreement that the teacher needed to be confident and comfortable with discussing sexuality issues, and a large number of students acknowledged that these particular qualities were not necessarily related to age.

Students often stated that teachers had difficulty controlling RSE classes because of giddiness and other 'bad' behaviour on the part of students. They felt strongly that teachers needed to be able to "take control of the class," since classes tend to be taken up with the management of behaviour if discipline is poor. The overall feeling was that teachers need to be "firm" but not too strict and, above all else, confident and comfortable with the topics and issues that arise during RSE classes. These issues were raised by the junior cycle students in School 9:

[What are the classes like?]

S1: *The teacher this year is awful - you're not allowed laugh. She's awful - too strict, really. Last year we could like, there was more, she was more a friend than a teacher really.*

S2: *You could have a discussion [last year] but if you talk in this class it's, like, not allowed.*

S3: *Too strict.*

[So you would like an SPHE teacher to be open to talking and discussing things with you. Are other things important?]

S2: *That they answer questions.*

S3: *Serious, but with a bit of humour.*

S1: *Not take it too seriously.*

S3: *A bit of humour, yeah.*

JC Students, School 9

When students perceived their RSE teachers to be inadequate, they were far more likely to express a preference for facilitators from outside the school. The senior-cycle student discussion in Schools 1 and 6 are instructive in this regard:

S1: *The teacher felt embarrassed.*

S2: *But the woman that was teaching us was good. They brought in a doctor to speak to us about it and nurses; all different things about drugs, drink, pregnancies, STIs and we got a load of leaflets about it as well. It was interesting and we got to learn about sexuality, like sexual health.*

SC Students, School 1

[Do you think teachers are comfortable talking about condoms?]

S1: *They're not, it's not part of their job. We have other people coming in to teach us.*

[That was in Transition Year?]

S1: *Yeah.*

[Do you think that was better?]

S2: *Yeah. Because it wasn't the same teachers that teach your normal everyday subjects, it was somebody else coming in teaching you something different.*

S1: *Who has a wealth of knowledge about the subject anyway.*

S3: *Yeah.*

[So it's better to have outside people?]

S3: *I think so, yeah.*

SC Students, School 6

To a large extent, our data demonstrate 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.

SC Student, School 6

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

JC 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.

According to Allen (2005: 401):

Sexuality education demands a relatively informal teaching style, where the normal hierarchy between student and teacher is relaxed so that young people can talk more openly about this private subject.

Put differently, relationships and sexuality education requires teachers to step out of their role as instructors. The importance of this more informal teaching style is recognised by the SPHE Support Service, and the training provided by the service aims to promote experiential learning methodologies. However, the evidence presented in Chapter 8 highlights several areas of difficulty for teachers in adopting these approaches, and some appear to be highly resistant to this role. On the whole, our discussions with students echo this finding.

10.2.4 The timing and content of RSE

Junior-cycle students sometimes found it difficult to articulate or identify the kind of information and knowledge they wanted and needed from RSE. As might be expected, younger students were often embarrassed when it came to 'naming' areas that are important and were often brief and non-specific about relevant topics. Others, however, were more outspoken on this matter. A major message or theme arising from student responses to questions about RSE content centres on the perception that much of the information they received was not sufficiently detailed.⁵⁴ Senior-cycle students tended to express stronger views on this issue and, in some cases, the strength of their assertions appeared to be related to the absence or lack of education on relationships and sexuality that they themselves had received at junior cycle. A number also challenged the view that giving information to young people encourages sexual activity, and believed that issues need to be confronted at an earlier age:

It's just information, it doesn't have to mean everyone is going away doing it (that is, having sex).

SC Student, School 8

⁵⁴ It is important to note, however, that many of the junior-cycle students who participated in focus groups were in 1st or 2nd year and they may not have covered much of the programme.

[What about the younger kids in school, say, would you think 'God they could do with knowing that?']

S1: *Definitely, yeah.*

S2: *Cause they're a lot worse than what we were.*

S1: *Yeah they are, like.*

[So they're more active in that area?]

All: *Yeah, yeah.*

[Is that just an impression you have or is that reality?]

S1: *No, it's reality.*

SC Students, School 3

Given the variation in students' age, background and the variable amounts and quality of the RSE teaching they received, it is unsurprising that they held different views on a 'good age' to begin learning about relationships and sexuality in the school setting. The following student highlighted an individual's stage of readiness as an important factor, as did a number of other students:

I think it depends on the person - whether they're mature or not - because some people are so immature. At different ages people can be more mature, so it really depends on the person themselves. Maybe sixth class, first year.

JC Student, School 1

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 that 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.

You don't really need to know about things like that when you're really young ...you're not active.

SC Student, School 2

I learned it when I was in sixth class and when we'd been told about it, everyone was just so immature that we'd start laughing and it was just a bit of a joke ... I think about thirteen, first year, is a good time to start learning about RSE - you would be a bit more mature.

JC Student, School 2

'Giddy' reactions such as those described by the pupil above 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.⁵⁵ However, not all students had negative experiences of RSE in primary school.

⁵⁵ 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.

[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.*

SC Student, School 5

Students' experiences of primary school RSE and the programme's impact on their openness to RSE at second level are therefore issues worthy of consideration. There was a strong perception amongst some female students from co-educational settings that boys were immature and sometimes not 'ready' for RSE:

We wouldn't have been the easiest class. Like the boys are very immature and probably would have made a lot of jokes about it and ... it would have been more uncomfortable for the girls to talk about then, when the boys were making jokes about it.

SC Student, School 6

In light of the number of comparable statements to the one above by a female senior-cycle student, it is worth revisiting some similar comments by other respondents earlier in this report:

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.

Parent

I think boys, as well, sometimes they don't give you the right information.

JC Student

When boys hear relationships and sexuality, they automatically focus totally on the idea of girls, you know. And then I'm kind of saying, 'But sure, you've relationships with everyone - you've relationships with your classmates.' And they think, 'Oh, yeah,' because they automatically think it's a sexual thing.

Co-ordinator

These comments could be interpreted as reinforcing a prevailing discourse that generalises about males' (emotional and sexual) development, their maturity, socialization, sexual intent and their response to RSE, raising the question of the extent to which males are subject to a self-fulfilling prophecy effect in regard to their responses to RSE as well as the extent to which they subscribe to or reject these ideas. The co-ordinator's comments (above) could also be read as a heteronormative version of maleness. We have already highlighted how gendered perspectives play a role in the socialization of males and females' sexual identities. Galvin et. al (2006) and Mac an Ghail, Hanafin and Conway (2002) have also explored these issues in the Irish context.

The majority of students felt that boys and girls should not be separated for RSE teaching (a practice we noted earlier in a small number of schools). In fact, students almost always emphasised the benefits of having opportunities to hear the perspectives of their opposite-sex peers.

It just shows the questions that boys will ask and the questions that girls will ask, kind of communicating together, like.

SC Student, School 2

There was general agreement among students that boys and girls need to learn about the same issues and topics, and the majority view was that sex education should start at the age of 12 or 13 years. A number of students also stated that RSE needed to be dealt with cumulatively and that some of the content needed to be revisited with students at regular intervals. In many cases, students 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.” As with all forms of learning, students come to a subject with different levels and kinds of prior knowledge, which, in turn, influence the extent to which students can engage with and master skills and information. However, a core message here is that RSE must be responsive to the needs of young people.

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. It appears, therefore, that student views are very similar to those expressed by many parents and teachers on the question of appropriate content. 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:

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.*

JC Students, School 4

[What do you think is important to learn about in RSE?]

Sex, like. Some kids do it young, and they need to know the dangers and the facts.

SC Student, School 1

When questioned about the topic of homosexuality, students invariably stated that the subject of sexual orientation needed to be openly explored and discussed at junior cycle. Furthermore, a considerable number expressed concern about young people who may have questions about their sexual orientation due to the lack of supports available to them. Again, these concerns echo the comments of many teachers, principals and parents.

[Do you think that homosexuality should be discussed in your RSE classes?]

S1: *Yeah, it should.*

S2: *Yeah, if it is made normal in the school, they might say, 'Oh, maybe I could talk about it with someone', you know, and they probably wouldn't be afraid to say it.*

SC Students, School 2

I think it should be done in school as well so that, you know, even people who aren't homosexual know how to respect and treat people that are.

SC Student, School 5

Within a large number of focus groups, students talked openly about the problem of homophobic bullying within their schools:⁵⁶

S1: *If anybody is sort of like poncy or acts anyway gay at all it's like slagging constantly.*

[Do you think that's healthy?]

S2: *I don't think it's healthy.*

[Have you been aware at any stage of a gay kid in the school who got a lot of slagging?]

S1: *I don't think any children in the school would say openly that they're gay in case they get put down.*

SC Students, School 6

Students may have had difficulty at times 'naming' the topics they needed addressed but when questioned directly about specific aspects of sexuality, including contraception and homosexuality, their responses were largely unambiguous, and practically all students endorsed the need for realistic and open dialogue on these topics. Senior-cycle students, in particular, also frequently pointed out that the RSE they received did not deal effectively, or at all, with emotional dimensions of sex and relationships. Many bemoaned the absence of open discussion of topics that were relevant to their lives and which, they believed, were omitted because of adult fears that such discussion would encourage sexual activity. Significantly, when students were dissatisfied with RSE (or aspects of what was and was not dealt with during RSE classes) they frequently advanced explanations that referenced the school's Catholic or religious ethos:

I think a lot of it has to do with that this is a Catholic school, a convent, like. I think that has a lot to do with it.

SC Student, School 3

⁵⁶ Norman, Galvin and MacNamara's (2006) recent research strongly suggests that there is a major silence around issues of homosexuality and homophobia in Irish second-level schools. This silence, they claim, has "allowed homophobic behaviour to prevail as the dominant force in the ethos of the schools in which we conducted the research" (2006 p. 115).

S1: We didn't learn about safe sex. It's a Catholic school so you don't learn about it, or do you in sixth year?

S2: I don't see why it's such an issue. We're in a Catholic school and we still haven't had a contraception talk. I can't believe that ...

SC Students, School 4

[Have you ever discussed homosexuality in RSE?]

S1: It's 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.

SC Students, School 5

The excerpts above highlight a strong perception among young people that certain topics and issues are not permissible during RSE because of the school's Catholic or religious ethos. Students are clearly aware of a variety of factors that impinge on their learning about sexuality and relationships. Critically, the school, as a key knowledge source, appears to be one of these factors.

Reference has already been made to the problem of teachers selectively choosing, or avoiding, aspects of RSE due to their discomfort with certain topics and/or, in some cases, a lack of clarity about the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate subject matter (often with reference to the school's ethos). The focus groups with students in a number of schools demonstrated a perception and awareness of differences in how teachers approach and manage the content of RSE. The following excerpts are from focus groups with students in two schools and indicate a belief among students that RSE was hardly addressed or "skipped over" within SPHE classes: the first comes from junior-cycle students in a school where RSE consisted of a one-day talk in first year (School 2); the second is from a group of junior-cycle students in School 3 who had SPHE classes once weekly and, the third, from senior-cycle students in this same school:

In SPHE we don't do anything about RSE. We've kind of done hygiene, and that's about it – your hair and washing yourself, just like touching the surface, it wasn't at all – not much, I think.

JC Student, School 2

[There are five of you here, have you ever had an RSE class in school?]

All: No.

[You did in primary school, so none of you here have ever had a sex education class?]

All: No.

[Okay. Who would you expect to teach you RSE here?]

S1: *The teachers. The SPHE teacher.*

[What other kind of things do you do in SPHE?]

S2: *Drugs and alcohol, decision-making, hygiene.*

JC Students, School 3

[What else did you do in SPHE besides the drugs and alcohol?]

S1: *Personal hygiene and exercise, that kind of thing.*

[So what part was left out of SPHE, because RSE is a module in SPHE?]

S2: *It was looked at but it was very quick, like, it was only one or two classes.*

[So the RSE part...]

S2: *Yeah, we just skipped over it.*

SC Students, School 3

These kinds of experiences were more commonly articulated by students who attended schools where there was no RSE policy in place and/or where outside facilitators covered most of the RSE programme. Indeed, much of our data suggests that students within schools that relied very heavily or entirely on outside facilitators to deliver RSE were more likely to feel that RSE was not dealt with openly and effectively by their schools. Certainly, there is strong evidence to suggest that students in some of the study's schools do not receive adequate or consistent teaching on RSE. Furthermore, even within schools where students were more positive about their RSE classes, inconsistencies in RSE delivery also emerged as a significant theme within students' accounts.

It was good. Last year for the first time we did STDs, I think. We did a lot on HIV - we watched a video on it and we all learnt a lot more, you know. Like that there's more ways of getting it than from just sex and there's, like, you know, needles and stuff like that. We learned a lot more on that stuff.

SC Student, School 5

One of the religion teachers in the school would actually go to the trouble to work with you ... HIV and all last year. But the other three teachers basically, they don't do anything on RSE.

SC Student, School 5

To reiterate a point made in Chapter 8, the RSE programme needs to be sufficiently broad to address the needs of students. Furthermore, if a positive attitude to RSE is to be fostered among students, they need to feel that open discussion about sexuality is permissible, constructive and healthy. Students may appear, at times, not to take SPHE/RSE seriously, but our data confirm that young people want and appreciate opportunities to discuss, appraise and explore a whole range of social and emotional issues that impact on their personal and sexual development. In relation to the provision of effective school-based RSE, much of the data

presented suggests a need to balance the input of teachers with that of outside facilitators in the delivery of the programme. It appears that an over-reliance on outside facilitators may generate a belief among students that their teachers are unable to teach RSE and/or place little value on the subject. This is not altogether surprising since approaches to RSE understandably influence how students respond to the subject, and also shape their perceptions of what they learn and why. Put differently, how schools approach RSE has great significance for how students perceive and understand their development and identity as sexual beings.

10.3 Summary and conclusion

This chapter's exploration of the perspectives of parents and students provides an important counterbalance to the earlier focus on the views of a range of professionals who play diverse roles in the organisation, delivery and support of RSE. Many of the findings have implications for the RSE programme (particularly in terms of the content of the junior-cycle curriculum); they also provide considerable insight into how RSE is viewed and experienced by the programme's target audience of students, and also by their parents, who are the primary educators of their children within the sphere of relationships and sexuality.

Parents varied in their level of knowledge and awareness of school-based RSE but were unanimous in their beliefs about the importance of the programme and they valued its presence on the curriculum of second-level schools. However, parents from only two schools felt that they were well informed about the RSE programme and many appeared to have only rudimentary knowledge about its content. This finding signals less than satisfactory communication between schools and parents on RSE and on the topics and areas covered in the teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education. Earlier chapters have, in fact, highlighted numerous problems associated with poor communication with parents: in particular, it appears that an absence or lack of communication with parents contributes to teachers' fears about possible parental objection to RSE. This can, in turn, lead to a dilution or avoidance of some of the content of RSE and ultimately contributes to problems with the overall status of SPHE/RSE as a subject. It is perhaps significant that all of the parents interviewed for the purpose of this study were supportive of RSE and, if anything, considered that more detailed information needed to be imparted to students at junior-cycle level. Whilst the parents interviewed cannot be considered to be representative of parents in general, it nonetheless appears that teachers' fears about possible negative responses from parents to RSE may well be unfounded.

Schools clearly have a responsibility to inform parents about this important area of education. However, while parents felt that schools needed to be more engaged and pro-active in their efforts to communicate with them, it is significant that a large number also suggested that many of their peers did not take the time to inform themselves about RSE. For a variety of reasons – and most notably, perhaps, because of the heavy emphasis parents place on academic achievement – it appears that many parents may not seek information on RSE and/or rate the subject highly compared to exam subjects. Once again, it seems that the highly academic orientation of the second-level educational system militates against RSE getting the attention it ideally requires, even from parents. Many of the comments of students also indicate a perception that their parents take relatively little interest in RSE. This finding is important and indicates that work needs to be done to raise parental awareness of the potential personal and academic benefits of SPHE/RSE for students.

Parents' views on the content of RSE were also explored; parents' most prominent concern related to the appropriateness of the programme to students' age, development and needs. However, parents also felt that RSE needed to be responsive to young people's lives and

experiences and sufficiently comprehensive to address the situations and decisions they are likely to confront. Most also referred to the changes that have taken place in Irish society, and there was general consensus that these changes had brought about a shift in young people's attitudes and behaviour. Parents invariably emphasised the need to talk to young people about self-respect and respect for others and the majority took a pragmatic stance on issues such as contraception and condom use, stating that teenagers needed access to all information that could potentially enable them to make safe and healthy decisions. Most were also in favour of the inclusion of material and discussion on the topic of homosexuality at junior cycle. A final but noteworthy point made by parents in relation to RSE content concerns the role and influence of school ethos: whilst most felt that school ethos ought to be respected, equally (Catholic) ethos should not preclude the inclusion of all topics relevant to the reality of young people's lives.

The largest single group of individuals interviewed for the purpose of this study was, in fact, students: a total of ninety young people participated in focus-group discussions across the nine schools studied. Irrespective of the school in question, students were unanimous in the value they placed on RSE and advanced several points in support of this assertion: their need for accurate information about sex and relationships, the reality that not all parents talked to young people about sex, the need for teenagers to understand the consequences of their actions, and the benefit of discussing sexuality and relationships in the company of same- and opposite-sex peers. Many cited the media and friends as other sources of information about sex but they invariably questioned the reliability of the information imparted and frequently pointed to ways in which media and peer discourse distorted 'the facts'. Indeed, many appeared to discount much of what they gleaned from these knowledge sources. In contrast, students viewed the school as an appropriate context for accessing accurate knowledge and as a place where they could share their experiences in a relatively safe environment with their peers. It is perhaps important to point out that while students sometimes referred to SPHE/RSE as a 'doss', this terminology was not always used derogatorily but rather to signal a class period where they enjoyed a less pressurised learning environment.

Recent research in Ireland has documented dissatisfaction among young people about the school-based sex education they receive (Hyde & Howlett 2004, Mayock & Byrne 2004) and this chapter's findings further illustrate the range and nature of the difficulties that students perceive with how RSE is approached and delivered in their schools. Indeed, the findings documented highlight a strong perception among students that RSE is not a priority within their schools (or, indeed, for their parents). While this view was invariably related to the emphasis placed on exam subjects, students also perceived reluctance on the part of some teachers to deal effectively with RSE and, at times, this perception was reinforced by schools' (over)reliance on outside agencies to deliver RSE. Students also reported highly variable experiences of RSE, and this was true also of many who attended the same school. Indeed, inconsistency of RSE delivery emerged as a major theme in their accounts. Most group discussions revealed an acute awareness among students of a lack of uniformity in teachers' approaches to RSE, as well as discrepancies in the amount of time devoted to RSE within the SPHE programme and in the 'type' of information imparted during RSE classes. Many attributed 'bad' RSE to what they perceived as a lack of openness about sexuality within their schools, although they also acknowledged that it was a difficult topic for teachers and for students. Nonetheless, they were acutely aware of the discomfort that many of their teachers felt with the subject matter of RSE, and where this situation existed, it invariably impacted in a negative way on student perspectives on and responses to RSE. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the teacher him/herself has such an impact on student perceptions of RSE. This finding underscores the importance of selecting and supporting appropriate individuals to teach RSE, a process that appeared fraught with difficulty in many of the schools studied.

Student responses to RSE might be expected to differ but this chapter has drawn attention to some gender-specific responses and related perceptions that have implications for RSE delivery. We have shown, for example, that adult respondents drew frequently on gendered ideas about young men's responses to RSE and their (emotional and sexual) development. This discourse may reinforce a more general belief or expectation that male students are likely to react in specific (negative) ways to RSE and appears to have led to the separation of boys and girls for RSE teaching in some schools. This has important implications for how teachers and schools respond to the individual needs of male (and female) students within relationships and sexuality education.

Responses to questions about *who* should teach RSE suggest that students felt that not all of their teachers were suited to teaching this subject. Several points were raised by students in their efforts to depict the kinds of qualities that teachers needed in order to deliver RSE. Above all else, teachers need be comfortable with the topic and able to discuss sexuality; teachers also need to be assertive and confident but not overly strict or authoritarian in their response to giddiness, which more often than not simply signalled students' own discomfort with some of the subject matter of RSE. Consistent with other research on student views on sex education (Allen 2005), students in this study expressed a preference for a less formal teaching style that permits open discussion and simultaneously 'connects' with students. These characteristics were almost always rated as impacting on the quality of RSE to a greater extent than other teacher attributes such as teacher age or gender. It is perhaps not surprising in light of this that students responded better to RSE when active learning/experiential approaches were utilised by their teachers. The ability of teachers to create a trusting, safe and confidential environment for SPHE/RSE was also portrayed as key characteristic of effective RSE but one which students did not always feel characterised the management of RSE classes by their teachers.

Finally, on the matter of programme content, many students appeared to believe that schools and teachers were not prepared to respond to the reality of their lives and were critical of the lack of open discussion and teaching on several topics. For example, students claimed that the topics of contraception, safe sex, condom use and sexual orientation were not dealt with effectively, if at all, by their teachers. The vast majority felt that the inclusion of these topics on the junior cycle was both appropriate and necessary, although many were simultaneously anxious to state that RSE needs to be appropriate and responsive to the needs and/or maturity level of the individual students. It is significant in this regard that none of the schools we studied had formally involved their students in the formulation of the RSE policy and/or consulted them about the content of the programme. Opportunities for students to express their views on RSE needs were, therefore, infrequent at best and non-existent in most cases. This study's findings strongly suggest that much can be gained from consulting with students (and their parents) in devising and implementing RSE policy. Furthermore, RSE policy-making and the actions designed to effectively implement the programme need to extend *across* the school as an organisation if a supportive and responsive environment is to be created both for students and for teachers.

Chapter 11

Summary and conclusions

This study aimed to comprehensively build on existing research on RSE in Ireland, with a specific focus on the extent of RSE implementation in post-primary schools 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:

- investigate the extent to which RSE policy is now implemented and the RSE curriculum delivered in post-primary schools nationwide
- explore the factors and processes that impact on RSE delivery within schools
- identify barriers and facilitators to RSE implementation and delivery.

There were four main phases to this study. A quantitative survey of Irish second-level schools was conducted to establish the broad picture with regard to RSE implementation. Interviews with relevant personnel at government, national and regional level examined the views of other stakeholders in RSE. These included representatives from the Health and Education Departments, the NCCA, National Parents' Council, teacher unions, the RSE Support Service and the SPHE Support Service. Nine second-level-school case studies were conducted to capture the views and experiences of teachers, principals, parents and students with regard to RSE. Finally, individuals from four outside organisations that engage with schools directly to facilitate the delivery of RSE were interviewed.

All the indications were that these features of the research were methodologically sound. The response rate of 76% in the survey is highly satisfactory. The schools in the survey were generally representative of the schools in the country, including voluntary secondary, community and comprehensive schools and community colleges and vocational schools. All of the interviews at government and national level were completed successfully. Finally, there was excellent cooperation from the schools in the case studies, despite the demands of the study on them.

The main conclusions of the study are summarised here with respect to the following:

- 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
- Views on the content of the RSE programme

11.1 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 prevailing discourse that generalises about males' developmental levels, maturity, socialization, sexual intent and reactions to RSE was quite apparent from the responses of a number of different participants in this study. Unfortunately, due to time and space constraints, it was not possible to explore this matter further. It is possible, nonetheless, that the tendency for boys' schools to be poorer implementers of RSE may be linked to the low expectations that these beliefs create in the minds of teachers, parents and both male and female students about boys' responses to relationships and sexuality education.

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. 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% and 48% in fifth and sixth years respectively. These findings draw attention to three key issues. First, they suggest that junior certificate year *may* impact adversely on the delivery of RSE. Indeed, 71% of the schools surveyed felt that it was now more difficult to allocate time to non-examination subjects than previously. Previous research on implementation rates for SPHE and RSE in post-primary

schools points similarly to a decrease in the availability and teaching of RSE from first through to third year (Geary and Mannix Mcnamara 2002, SPHE Support Service 2004).⁵⁷ Secondly, given that early school leavers are more vulnerable in terms of lack of awareness around sexual knowledge and health (Mayock and Byrne 2004), the decrease 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 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 selected 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*.

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.

11.2 Facilitators of RSE implementation

11.2.1 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 suggested 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

⁵⁷ 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.

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.

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.

11.2.2 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, to releasing teachers for training, creating an awareness of RSE/SPHE 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.

11.2.3 Outside facilitators

There was some debate as to the merits of outside facilitators among government, national and regional 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.

11.2.4 Support services 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 support services 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. The SPHE Support Service and in-service training were important to our survey schools in terms of the support they provide. However, the schools surveyed also saw a need for greater assistance from outside experts or facilitators in the delivery of RSE.

11.2.5 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.

11.3 Barriers to RSE implementation

11.3.1 Curricular and time constraints

Our survey findings suggest second-level schools place 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 the overloaded curriculum is combined with teacher discomfort with the subject matter of Relationships and Sexuality Education, RSE may be easily sidelined.

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 the equivalent of one class period per week for each year group, given the combination of timetabling and exam pressures that exist. 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.

11.3.2 SPHE status and perceptions of RSE

The low status of SPHE emerged a 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.

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.

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.

Finally, 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.

11.3.3 Teacher comfort with RSE

Our survey 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 (Allred, David & Smith 2003, Wight & Scott 1994). Much of this study's qualitative data suggest 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 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.

The 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.

It is perhaps significant that students frequently attributed their school's (inadequate) approach to RSE to the school's Catholic ethos, which they felt defined and constrained the parameters or boundaries of what teachers and pupils were permitted to discuss. 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. Finally, a number of outside facilitators felt that many second-level teachers were not equipped to deliver RSE in this manner.

11.3.4 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 was identified as crucial to how in-service training was managed and approached within individual schools. 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.

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.

11.3.5 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/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.

The task of allocating teachers to SPHE/RSE was such that a number of principals admitted that the temptation to select a teacher or teachers who have available class periods on their timetable was very considerable. The academic orientation of the second-levels school system was also perceived by teachers to pose major problems for teacher selection. It seems that the principle of voluntary SPHE/RSE teaching is compromised in many cases by the very real constraints of timetabling and by broader staffing difficulties. 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 also 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.

11.4 Other factors and processes that impact on RSE delivery in post-primary schools

11.4.1 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.

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. 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 ethos. We found a lack of clarity can exist among teachers about the role of school ethos and that this has a potentially great impact on how teachers deliver RSE and/or respond to specific questions or queries on the part of students. Ambiguity of this kind is clearly undesirable and ultimately compromises some of the core objectives of RSE.

11.4.2 Resources

The introduction of the RSE programme in the absence of comprehensive teaching resources was identified as an early weakness and barrier to the implementation of RSE by government, national and regional respondents. 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.⁵⁸ As a result, teachers have no option but to use materials that they often feel are outdated.

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. 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 next 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.

11.4.3 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

⁵⁸ 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.

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.

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. It was felt by one principal that 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. 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.

Finally, two principals stated that if the Department was to demonstrate a strong commitment to RSE, it would have to 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.

11.4.4 Support and evaluation

The survey results indicate that the SPHE Support Service is the only available support perceived to take an interest in the monitoring and implementation of RSE. 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 at present in relation to SPHE/RSE. Two government-level respondents drew explicit attention to the importance of school inspection of RSE.

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.

11.5 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. Various parents referred to the information they had received as vague, or voiced the concern that there were few opportunities to get information on RSE aside from information nights, which were not run by all schools.

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.

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 SPHE/RSE on the part of other parents. 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.

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.

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 were 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 case-study 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.

11.6 The views and experiences of students

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.
- 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 RSE/SPHE 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. Students were anxious to learn from SPHE and RSE and were very receptive to topics and material that were 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.

The students interviewed reported very varied experiences of RSE, and inconsistency of RSE delivery emerged as a major theme during group discussions. Some 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. For example, students in one school agreed that their only common experience of RSE related to a day-long lesson in first year, which was attended by all students. 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 that 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. However, not all students had negative experiences of RSE in primary school. 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 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.

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 that in turn inhibits learning. 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.

11.7 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.

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.

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. Indeed, 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. 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.

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*. 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.

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, School 6

Chapter 12

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 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).
- 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 SPHE/RSE 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 SPHE/RSE 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 given 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 SPHE/RSE 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 SPHE/RSE 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 in 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 RSE/SPHE 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 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.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on Implementation of the Relationships and Sexuality Programme in Post-primary Schools

This questionnaire is designed to estimate the implementation of the Relationships and Sexuality Education programme in post-primary schools. The study has been commissioned by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency and the DES. It is being carried out jointly by St. Patrick's College and the Children's Research Centre at Trinity College. It is crucial that we get accurate information on this important topic. For this we want to hear from all schools that we contact. The code on the questionnaire is designed to enable us to track questionnaires. Please complete the questionnaire and return in the prepaid envelope before December 13th

Section A School information

1. Type of school (tick one)

- Voluntary secondary school (boys)
- Voluntary secondary school (girls)
- Voluntary secondary school (mixed)
- Vocational school/community college
- Comprehensive school
- Community school

2. School size

- < 200 students
- 201 – 400 students
- 401 – 600 students
- > 600 students

3. Is your school designated as having Disadvantaged Status by the Department of Education and Science?

- Yes
- No

4. What proportion of the children in your school experience socio-economic disadvantage, in your opinion?

- less than 10%
- 11-25%
- 26-50%
- 51-75%
- More than 75%
- Impossible to give an estimate

5. What kind of community is served by your school?

- Mainly urban
- Mix of town and rural
- Largely rural

6. Is there an SPHE co-ordinator in the school?

- Yes
- No

Section B

1. What is the situation with regard to RSE policy in your school?

- An RSE policy has been agreed by all the relevant partners and is available to all interested parties
- An RSE policy has been agreed and is available within the school community
- An RSE policy has been discussed but not agreed
- An RSE policy is in the process of being agreed
- There are plans to develop an RSE policy in the future
- The school does not have an RSE policy

2. If an RSE policy is in place, please indicate the contribution that each of the following made to the process of devising this (leave blank if no policy is in place)

	Made major contribution	Made some contribution	Made small contribution	Made no contribution
Principal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
SPHE/RSE teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Board of management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Outside facilitator	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others (specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. We would like to find out about Relationships and Sexuality Education in your school. Please indicate whether RSE is taught as part of SPHE, is taught as part of another area or as a stand alone programme. Please tick the option that is right for each year in your school.

	Part of SPHE	Part of another	As a stand-alone subject	Not taught subject
First year	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Second year	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Third year	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transition Year	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fifth year	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leaving Cert	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If RSE is taught as part of another subject, what is that subject

4. We would like to know how many class periods are devoted to RSE, in any year where this happens. (Leave blank where there is no RSE programme)

First year	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> 9-12	<input type="checkbox"/> > 13
Second year	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> 9-12	<input type="checkbox"/> > 13
Third year	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> 9-12	<input type="checkbox"/> > 13
Transition Year	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> 9-12	<input type="checkbox"/> > 13
Fifth year	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> 9-12	<input type="checkbox"/> > 13
Leaving Cert	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> 9-12	<input type="checkbox"/> > 13

5. Please indicate the emphasis on each of the following in your RSE programme.

	Major emphasis	Considerable emphasis	Some emphasis	Little or no emphasis
Biological aspects of Reproduction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contraception/safe sex practices	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rights and responsibilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. We would like to know about the personnel delivering the RSE programme in your school, particularly the extent to which school staff or personnel from outside the school are involved.

Please indicate which of these is closest to describing the situation in your school.

- RSE is delivered exclusively by teachers from our own school
- RSE is delivered mainly by teachers from our school but with assistance from outside facilitators
- RSE is delivered by teachers in the school and by outside facilitators, with each having an equal part
- RSE is delivered largely by outside facilitators

In those instances where outside facilitators are involved, please describe briefly their background/expertise

7. How useful do you find the SPHE (Junior Cycle) Guidelines (issued by the DES), when developing the RSE element of SPHE?

- Very useful
- Useful
- Hard to say
- Not very useful
- Not useful at all

8. What has been the response of students in your school to the RSE programme, as far as you can judge?

- Very interested
- Interested
- Hard to day
- Not interested
- Totally uninterested

9. Compared to other aspects of SPHE, how do the teachers in your school find the RSE programme?

- RSE is much more challenging
- RSE is more challenging
- Hard to day
- RSE is less challenging
- RSE is much less challenging

10. We would like to know the extent to which any one checks with you as to whether or not RSE is actually implemented. Please indicate what the situation is with regard to each of the following:

	Tries to ensure that RSE is implemented	Takes some interest in implementation	Takes no interest in its implementation
DES	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Board of Management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parents (individual)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parents Association	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
SPHE Support Service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section C

1. Of the various factors that make it difficult to implement an RSE programme, how important in your view are each of the following:

	Very Important	Quite Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Negative views of some parents towards RSE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The overcrowded curriculum	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Traditional attitudes in Ireland	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The pressure of examination subjects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of parental support for RSE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of monitoring of RSE programmes by Department of Education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The need to complete courses in so many subjects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disagreement on what should be taught in RSE classes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discomfort of some teachers in teaching RSE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of school policies on RSE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Others (please specify)

2. What are the views of the parents in your school about the implementation of an RSE programme, in your opinion?
- Very supportive
 - Supportive
 - Not especially interested
 - Not supportive
 - Against the RSE being taught in schools
 - Not able to gauge parents' views
3. As you know the Junior Cycle RSE Programme is set out in the context of SPHE. To what extent has this helped the implementation of RSE?
- Helped a lot
 - Helped somewhat
 - Has not mattered much
 - Has been somewhat unhelpful
 - Has been very unhelpful
4. There was a major move to implement an RSE programme in schools in the late nineties. In your view, how has implementation changed since then, in your school?
- There is a much better implementation of an RSE programme
 - There is a somewhat better implementation of an RSE programme
 - The situation is about the same
 - There is somewhat less implementation of an RSE programme
 - There is much less implementation of an RSE programme
5. In your view, how great is the need for a Relationships and Sexuality Programme in schools, compared to five years ago?
- A much greater need than five years ago
 - A greater need than five years ago
 - About the same need as five years ago
 - A lesser need than five years ago
 - A much lesser need than five years ago
6. With regard to the non-examination subjects on the curriculum (like SPHE), what in your view has happened to them in schools over the last few years?
- We find it much harder to get time for non-examination subjects
 - We find it somewhat harder to get time for non-examination subjects
 - The situation is similar to a few years ago
 - We find it easier to get time for non-examination subjects
 - We find it much easier to get time for non-examination subjects

7. In your view, how much would each of the following help in the implementation of the RSE programme in post-primary schools:

	Would help a lot	Would help somewhat	Would help a little	Would not help
Greater involvement of parents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
More outside facilitators in schools	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increase in in-service provision	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Expanded support service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Changes in the RSE programme	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other changes...please comment below

Thank you for your help! For statistical accuracy we need to know who completed this questionnaire: (tick one)

- Principal
- SPHE co-ordinator
- Other staff member

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

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