

## Implementing Sexuality Education in Irish Schools: Towards research-informed policy and practice

### *What this brief adds: Key proposals*

A National Coordinating Committee for school sex education could operate as a policy lead, a driver of local and national level training, and provide support for teachers and schools.

The development of national teacher preparation standards for sex education deserves serious consideration.

Adequate policy which plans, updates, supports, and monitors Relationship and Sexuality Education in a meaningful way is required to complement teacher training and curriculum development.

Improved links between national and local settings are needed to ensure processes for school-based sex education can work in local contexts.

### *What is the issue?*

The need to provide adequate information through sex education for adolescents is well-documented.<sup>1-9</sup> Although young people learn about sexuality and sexual health from numerous sources, schools play a fundamental role<sup>8</sup>. Sex education programmes that are delivered as intended have improved outcomes in comparison to those that do not remain faithful to the original content, design, or delivery techniques.<sup>10-12</sup> There are many implementation challenges in schools and understanding what comprises effective implementation of such programmes is a neglected research area.<sup>13,14</sup>

In an Irish context, the implementation of the statutory Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme delivered in post-primary schools has been problematic.<sup>15-17</sup> Previous research on Irish RSE has highlighted gaps in our understanding of the underlying reasons for success or failure.<sup>15,16</sup> Evidence on the relationship between professional preparation and teaching outcomes is scarce,<sup>18</sup> particularly in an Irish context.<sup>15</sup>

### *Why is this issue important?*

Good sex education outcomes require good quality implementation. Although the potential benefits, and the many challenges, of sexuality education are acknowledged; there is a need to explore what works, under what conditions, and with whom. Challenges surrounding effective sex education implementation are not unique to Ireland. In 2018, UNESCO published the *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*.<sup>7</sup> This is a voluntary and evidence-based guide, intended for country and context-specific adaptation, to assist in the implementation of effective sexuality education programmes.

### *What did this research explore?*

This study adopted theory from school-based implementation research. A mixture of quantitative (questionnaires, structured observations) and qualitative methods (interviews, document analysis) were used to explore trainers' implementation of the Irish RSE in-service training; teachers' experience of in-service training; teachers' implementation of RSE lessons; students' experiences of RSE lessons; and contextual level factors at both training and school level. Teachers' conceptualisations of programme implementation were explored through a participatory research process.<sup>19</sup>

### *What were the main findings?*

- RSE in-service training was implemented as planned. Participating teachers reported positivity about the training process and felt confident and equipped to deliver RSE.
- The delivery of RSE at school-level was complex and there were many barriers. Teachers who achieved higher levels of lesson fidelity and quality reported more positive outcomes.
- Most students reported positively on RSE lesson delivery; they liked and enjoyed the lessons. Student engagement was high and only a minority reported disinterest.
- Programme content was challenging for teachers and students. Materials were out-of-date on sexual rights and citizenship and were not reflective of changing family structures.
- Teachers prioritised leadership and support for school-based implementation as crucial for effective implementation in schools.

### *What are the implications?*

- Sex education that is implemented with high quality and fidelity can translate into the classroom and create high levels of enjoyment and engagement among school students.
- Teacher preparedness for implementation is crucial. Comprehensive pre- and in-service training, specific to sex education is necessary. Follow-up supports for teachers are also required.
- The school context, specifically time constraints and overloaded lessons, need to be considered during pre-planning, implementation, and sustainability phases.
- Effective sex education requires a clear, evidence-based, time-measured programme with supporting materials and sufficient time allocation in schools.
- Sex education programme content requires regular updating, varied curricular materials and built-in evaluation processes.

## *Key policy recommendations*

1. There is a need for leadership and support during programme development, teacher training and school implementation.
2. This study has re-emphasised the importance of context and the complexity arising from programme delivery in schools. These need to be considered at the very early stages of programme design and the pre-planning implementation stages.
3. Reviewing RSE should not only lead to agreed conceptual underpinnings or a new vision of RSE but must be translated into practice in a meaningful and evidence-based way.
4. The design and development of any new RSE programme must be based on the evidence and tailored to an Irish context. Existing evidence suggests that it is easier to develop a new programme than to try and change a programme in its sustainability phase.<sup>20</sup> A clear, implementable, relevant, and measurable programme is required.
5. The introduction of national teacher preparation standards for sex education must be seriously considered.<sup>21,22</sup>
6. Teacher training should not be the only strategy for equipping teachers with the tools necessary for effective implementation. Adequate policy which plans, updates, supports, and monitors RSE in a purposeful way is required.
7. Clear national leadership for RSE is essential. The vital role that the Department of Education or organisation responsible for RSE design, implementation, and evaluation can have in the overall implementation system is clear.
8. There is a need for improved links between national structures and local educational environments, ensuring that there is not an overly top-down process for school-based sexuality education which does not work in local contexts.
9. The development of a national coordinating committee for school-based sex education is recommended. This committee should:
  - a. function as a policy lead<sup>23</sup>, a key driver of local and national level project training, a technical support centre for schools and teachers
  - b. ensure that monitoring, evaluation and sustainability are valued and operationalised
  - c. actively include input from those working in relevant government agencies and NGOs, relevant Professional Development and Health Service team(s), professional organisations and researchers, as well as family, youth and community advocacy groups.

## References

1. Berglas, N.F., Jerman, P., Rohrbach, L. A., Angulo-Olaiz, F., Chou, C.-P., & Constantine, N.A. (2016). An implementation and outcome evaluation of a multicomponent sexuality education programme for high school students. *Sex Education, 16*(5), 549–567.
2. Blake, S., & Aggleton, P. (2017). Young people, sexuality and diversity. What does a needs-led and rights-based approach look like? *Sex Education, 17*(3), 363–369.
3. Helmer, J., Senior, K., Davison, B., & Vodlic, A. (2015). Improving sexual health for young people: making sexuality education a priority. *Sex Education, 15*(2), 158–171.
4. Štulhofer, A. (2016). Is there a need for a European-wide initiative on comprehensive sexuality education? Reflections from Croatia. *Sex Education, 16*(4), 432–438.
5. UNESCO. (2009). *International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach for schools, teachers and health educators. The Rationale for Sexuality Education* (Vol. 1). Paris: UNESCO.
6. UNESCO. (2016). *Review of the Evidence on Sexuality Education. Report to Inform the Update of the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*. Paul Montgomery, P. & Knerr, W., University of Oxford Centre for Evidence-Based Intervention. Paris: UNESCO.
7. UNESCO. (2018). *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education - an Evidence-Informed Approach*. Paris: UNESCO
8. Unterhalter, E., North, A., Arnot, M., Lloyd, C., Moletsane, L., Murphy-Graham, E., Parkes, J., & Saito, M. (2014). *Interventions to enhance girls' education and gender equality*. London: DFID Research for Development.
9. European Expert Group on Sexuality Education. (2016). Sexuality education - what is it? *Sex Education, 16*(4), 427-431.
10. Michielsen, K., Chersich, M.F., Luchters, S., De Koker, P., Van Rossem, R., & Temmerman, M. (2010). Effectiveness of HIV prevention for youth in sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized and nonrandomized trials. *Aids, 24*(8), 1193–1202.
11. Shepherd, J., Kavanagh, J., Picot, J., Cooper, K., Harden, A., Barnett-Page, E., Jones, J., Clegg, A., Hartwell, D., Frampton, G.K., & Price, A. (2010). The effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of behavioural interventions for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections in young people aged 13–19: a systematic review and economic evaluation. *NIHR Health Technology Assessment, 14*(7).
12. Wight, D. (2011). The effectiveness of school based sex education: what do rigorous evaluations in Britain tell us? *Education and Health, 29*, 67–73.
13. Gugglberger, L., & Inchley, J. (2012). Phases of health promotion implementation into the Scottish school system. *Health Promotion International, 29*(2), 256–266.
14. Pearson, M., Chilton, R., Wyatt, K., Abraham, C., Ford, T., Woods, H.B., & Anderson, R. (2015). Implementing health promotion programmes in schools: a realist systematic review of research and experience in the United Kingdom. *Implementation Science, 10*(1), 149.
15. Mayock, P., Kitching, K., Morgan, M., & Press, T. S. (2007). *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*. Dublin; Ireland: Crisis pregnancy Agency; Department of Education and Science.
16. Roe, S. (2010). *Life skills matter - not just points: A survey of implementation of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in second-level schools*. Dublin: SHPE Support Service.
17. Nic Gabhainn, S., O'Higgins, S., & Barry, M. (2010). The implementation of social, personal and health education in Irish schools. *Health Education, 110*(6), 452–470.
18. Hammig, B., Ogletree, R., & Wycoff-Horn, M R. (2011). The relationship between professional preparation and class structure on health instruction in the secondary classroom. *Journal of School Health, 81*(9), 513–519.
19. Murphy, C., Barry, M.M., & Nic Gabhainn, S. (2018). Programme implementation in schools: conceptualisations from Irish teachers. *Health Education, 118*(6), 483–498.
20. Durlak, J., & DuPre, E. (2008). Implementation Matters: A Review of Research on the Influence of Implementation on Program Outcomes and the Factors Affecting Implementation. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 41*(3), 327–350.
21. Collier-Harris, C.A., & Goldman, J.D.G. (2017). Could Australia have its own teacher professional standards for teaching relationships and sexuality education? *Sex Education, 17*(5), 512–528.
22. Barr, E.M., Goldfarb, E.S., Russell, S., Seabert, D., Wallen, M., & Wilson, K.L. (2014). Improving sexuality education: the development of teacher-preparation standards. *Journal of School Health, 84*(6), 396–415.
23. Rocha, A.C., Leal, C., & Duarte, C. (2016). School-based sexuality education in Portugal: strengths and weaknesses. *Sex Education, 16*(2), 172–183.

***This brief was prepared by Dr. Christina Murphy and Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, Health Promotion Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway, 2019.***