

# **TEACH-RSE Teacher Professional Development and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE):**

**Realising Optimal Sexual Health and Wellbeing  
Across the Lifespan**

**Findings from the TEACH-RSE Research Project**

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# **TEACH-RSE: Research Report**

## **Teacher Professional Development and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)**

**Realising Optimal Sexual Health and Wellbeing Across the Lifespan**

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## Foreword

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the publication by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment of Interim curriculum and guidelines for RSE as an aspect of Social, Personal and Health Education. The unwieldy title of the publication reflects at least some of the contestation around its production. As the education officer working on the post-primary guidelines, I was both actor and audience in the drama that underpinned the work at the time. Reading them again, I am struck by the obvious omissions, by the careful use of language that is the inevitable consequence of consensus brokering, and by the studied vagueness of some key phrases. But I am also struck by the strength of the emphasis on the rights of the young person to relationships and sexuality education as part of their education and by the positioning of this education as part of broader social, personal and health education, now an integral and compulsory component of the school curriculum for all children and young people in Ireland.

This rationale of human rights underpins the research presented in this report – the rights to comprehensive sexuality education on the part of students, and the rights of teachers to be professionally prepared and supported at all stages of their careers in this important and complex work. The passing of the last quarter of a century has foregrounded the importance of both these sets of rights. It is disappointing then that one of the findings from the research is that for those preparing to teach, sexuality education was seen as low status with low visibility within their programmes of study. More optimistically, both future teachers and their teacher educators see preparation for sexuality education as important for all teachers irrespective of their disciplinary focus, supporting the findings from the Systematic Review of research that often the most complex and challenging issues in sexuality education arise not in the dedicated timetabled slot, but in the wider life of the school. Significant too, is the fact that they both see a close connection to parents/guardians and home as key to successful sexuality education.

That review of research also showed that provision of support for student teachers in this area is relatively poor in other systems. Despite current issues in workforce planning for teaching in Ireland, we are recognised internationally for the quality of our teachers and student teachers. We are uniquely placed to lead developments in teacher education for comprehensive sexuality education if we believe that this is important for the health and wellbeing of our children, our young people and our teachers, and for the social and emotional development of future families and communities.

My colleagues from DCU Institute of Education, led by Dr Catherine Maunsell and Dr Ashling Bourke, together with their research team, make a compelling case in the multi-perspective research published here; the voices of the student teachers, informed by their own experience of sexuality education in schools across Ireland in the last 25 years, add further insight and weight to the recommendations. They want to play a central role in sexuality education for Ireland's future generations.

Supporting them in that aspiration, and continuing to support them in their professional lives is an opportunity that we should not let pass.

**Anne Looney**

**Executive Dean, DCU Institute of Education**

**May, 2021**





# Table of Contents

Foreword	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix
List of Abbreviations	x
Glossary	xii
Acknowledgements	xiii
Executive Summary	xiv
<b>Section 1: Introduction</b>	1
1.1. Introduction	1
1.2. Sexuality Education: A Human Right and International, Regional and National Strategic Objective	2
1.3. Conceptualising Sexuality Education	4
1.4. Sexuality Education: The Role of Teacher Professional Learning and Development	8
1.5. The Irish Education Context: Relationships and Sexuality Education and Teacher Professional Learning and Development	9
1.6. TEACH-RSE Research Study	12
1.6.1. TEACH-RSE: Aims and objectives	13
1.6.2. Structure of the TEACH-RSE Research Report	13
<b>Section 2: A systematic review of the provision of sexuality education to student teachers in Initial Teacher Education</b>	15
2.1. Introduction	15
2.1.1. Aims and objectives	15
2.2. Methodology	16
2.2.1. Eligibility criteria	16
2.2.2. Screening and selection process	16
2.3. Findings	17
2.3.1. Study selection	17
2.3.2. Study characteristics	17
2.3.3. Synthesis of results	18
2.4. Overview of emergent key findings	23
<b>Section 3: A documentary analysis of SPHE/RSE Provision in Primary and post-Primary Initial Teacher Education</b>	26
3.1. Introduction	26
3.1.1. Aims and objectives	26
3.2. Methodology	26
3.2.1. Design	26
3.2.2. Materials	27
3.2.3. Procedure	27
3.3. Findings	28
3.3.1. Documentary analysis: Module-level patterns of primary and post-primary ITE CSE/RSE-related provision	29
3.4. Overview of emergent key findings	31



<b>Section 4: A mixed methods study of student teachers' experiences of, and attitudes towards, the provision of RSE in Initial Teacher Education and their perceived knowledge, comfort, confidence and preparedness to teach RSE</b>	34
<b>4.1. Introduction</b>	34
4.1.1. Aims and objectives	34
<b>4.2. Methodology</b>	34
4.2.1. Research design	34
4.2.2. Phase one: Online survey method	35
4.2.3. Phase two: Student teacher focus group interviews	37
<b>4.3. Findings</b>	38
4.3.1. Demographic profile of survey respondents	39
4.3.2. ITE programme-level factors	40
4.3.3. Student teachers' preparedness to teach RSE	42
4.3.4 Perceived knowledge of specific RSE content/topics	52
4.3.5. Perceived comfort for teaching specific RSE content/topics.	53
4.3.6. Self-efficacy beliefs pertaining to the teaching of RSE	55
4.3.7. Future orientation towards teaching RSE	58
<b>4.4 Overview of emergent key findings</b>	60
<b>Section 5: Initial Teacher Educators' experiences of and vision for the provision of RSE in Initial Teacher Education</b>	62
<b>5.1. Introduction</b>	62
5.1.1. Aims and objectives	62
<b>5.2. Methodology</b>	62
5.2.1. Participants	62
5.2.2. Interview schedule design	63
5.2.3. Ethical considerations	63
5.2.4. Procedure	63
<b>5.3. Findings</b>	63
5.3.1. Status and positioning of RSE within Initial Teacher Education	65
5.3.2. Envisioning systemic change – across wider education system, institutional/programmatic and individual student teacher levels	67
<b>5.4. Overview of emergent key findings</b>	87
<b>Section 6: Synthesis of TEACH-RSE research findings</b>	91
<b>6.1. Introduction</b>	91
<b>6.2. Parameters of the synthesis</b>	91
6.2.1. Limitations of the TEACH-RSE research findings	91
<b>6.3. Synthesis of TEACH-RSE research findings</b>	92
6.3.1. System-wide leadership: Teacher professional standards for enhancing the status and visibility of teacher professional learning and development in RSE	93
6.3.2. Systemic Approach: Coordinated, collaborative, integrated and partnership approach to RSE provision	94
6.3.3. Continuum of teacher professional learning and development for RSE	95
6.3.4. Conceptualisations of RSE in ITE	99
6.3.5. Teaching, learning and assessment of RSE at ITE	100
<b>6.4. Conclusion</b>	105



<b>Section 7: Stakeholder consultation on the development of TEACH-RSE Recommendations</b>	106
<b>7.1. Introduction</b>	106
7.1.1. Aim and objective	106
<b>7.2. Method</b>	106
7.2.1. Design	106
7.2.2. Participants	106
7.2.3. Materials	107
7.2.4. Ethical considerations	107
7.2.5. Procedure	107
<b>7.3. Emergent Key Messages</b>	109
7.3.1. Acknowledgement of RSE as being situated in a multicultural and evolving context and society	109
7.3.2. Exigence for teacher professional learning and development for RSE	110
7.3.3. Centrality of the voice of the child and parents/guardians	112
7.3.4. Endorsement of an interagency, collaborative approach to RSE provision	112
<b>7.4. Conclusion</b>	113
<b>Section 8: TEACH-RSE Recommendations</b>	114
<b>References</b>	118



## List of Tables

**Table 2.1.** Overview of Systematic Review search terms

**Table 2.2.** Overview of Systematic Review screening and selection process

**Table 3.1.** Typical duration, ECTS and number of 5 credit modules by ITE programme level

**Table 4.1.a.** Demographic profile of survey respondents: Identified biological sex

**Table 4.1.b.** Demographic profile of survey respondents: Current sexual orientation identity

**Table 4.1.c.** Demographic profile of survey respondents: Personal importance of religion

**Table 4.1.d.** Demographic profile of survey respondents: ITE programme level by year of study

**Table 4.2.** Model of RSE input at ITE

**Table 4.3.** Survey respondents' perceptions of how much input they have had on RSE at ITE

**Table 4.4.** Subject areas at ITE where survey respondents indicated receiving input on RSE

**Table 4.5.** Perceived quality of prior experience of RSE in primary and post-primary school

**Table 4.6.** Perceived preparation at ITE to teach RSE compared to other subject areas

**Table 4.7.** Beliefs about preparation at ITE to teach RSE to diverse groups of children and adolescents

**Table 4.8.** Provision of RSE-relevant skills-based opportunities

**Table 4.9.** Age at which RSE should start?

**Table 4.10.** Right to RSE provision in primary and post-primary school

**Table 4.11.** Right to RSE for children under 12 Years and children/adolescents over 12 years

**Table 4.13.** School–home cooperation for RSE provision

**Table 4.14.** Perceived commitment to teaching RSE in the future

**Table 4.15.** Perceived feelings of empowerment to teach RSE

**Table 4.16.** Future intentions to teach RSE

**Table 4.17.** Perceptions of additional teacher professional development requirements in RSE

**Table 5.1.** Summary of the main themes and sub-themes from interviews with Initial Teacher Educators



## List of Figures

**Figure 4.1.** Mean ratings of preparation at ITE to teach RSE to diverse groups of children and adolescents

**Figure 4.2.** Mean attitudes and beliefs toward RSE (ITE; Error bars +/- 2 SE)

**Figure 4.3.** Mean ratings for knowledge of specific RSE content/topics (ITE; Error bars +/- 2 SE)

**Figure 4.4.** Mean ratings for comfort to teach specific RSE content/topics (ITE; Error bars +/- 2 SE)

**Figure 4.5.** Mean ratings for self-efficacy beliefs pertaining to the teaching of RSE (ITE; Error bars +/- 2 SE)

**Figure 4.6.** Mean ratings for future intentions to teach RSE (ITE; Error bars +/- 2 SE)



## List of Abbreviations

<b>AIDS</b>	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
<b>BZgA</b>	German Federal Centre for Health Education
<b>CPD</b>	Continuing Professional Development
<b>CSE</b>	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
<b>CSO</b>	Central Statistics Office
<b>DCYA</b>	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>ECTS</b>	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
<b>EHEA</b>	European Higher Education Area
<b>ESRI</b>	Economic and Social Research Institute
<b>FG</b>	Focus Group
<b>FoSE</b>	Future of Sex Education (Initiative)
<b>GCED</b>	Global Citizenship Education
<b>GUI</b>	Growing Up in Ireland
<b>HBSC</b>	Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children
<b>HEA</b>	Higher Education Authority
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institution
<b>HIV</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
<b>HSE</b>	Health Service Executive
<b>HSE-SHCPP</b>	Health Service Executive – Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme
<b>ICCP</b>	Irish Contraception and Crisis Pregnancy
<b>IPPF</b>	International Planned Parenthood Federation
<b>IRC</b>	Irish Research Council
<b>ITE</b>	Initial Teacher Education
<b>ITE-P</b>	Initial Teacher Education – Primary
<b>ITE-PP</b>	Initial Teacher Education – Post-Primary
<b>ITGSE</b>	International Technical Guidance for Sexuality Education



<b>LGBTQI+</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex + The + denotes the wider range of sexual orientation and gender categories
<b>NCCA</b>	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NIPT</b>	National Induction Programme for Teachers
<b>NQT</b>	Newly Qualified Teacher
<b>NSHS</b>	National Sexual Health Strategy
<b>NSO</b>	National Strategic Outcome
<b>PDST</b>	Professional Development Service for Teachers
<b>RSE</b>	Relationships and Sexuality Education
<b>SEN</b>	Special Educational Need
<b>SIECUS</b>	Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States
<b>SIECCAN</b>	Sexuality Information and Education Council of Canada
<b>SPHE</b>	Social, Personal and Health Education
<b>STI</b>	Sexually Transmitted Infection
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund Activities
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation



## Glossary

**Competences:** Competences are statements of the attributes, skills and knowledge that teachers as professionals should possess and exemplify. The achievement of competence is a developmental process that continues throughout a teacher's career.

**Continuum of Teacher Education:** This refers to the formal and informal learning in which teachers engage as lifelong learners during their teaching career. It encompasses Initial Teacher Education (Céim), Induction (Droichead), and Continuing Professional Development (Cosán).

**Curricular Subject:** a subject with a prescribed syllabus approved by the Department of Education and Skills and examined by the State Examinations Commission.

**Foundation Studies:** As a multi-disciplinary field of study, education is informed by several other areas of learning. Applied to education, 'foundation studies' typically includes history of education; psychology of education; sociology of education; philosophy of education.

**Global Citizenship Education GCED:** GCED aims to empower learners of all ages to assume active roles, both locally and globally, in building more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure societies.

**Higher Education Institution HEI:** HEIs denotes those colleges, universities and other third level bodies providing one or more accredited programmes of Initial Teacher Education.

**Initial Teacher Education ITE:** ITE refers to the initial phase of learning to be a teacher when student teachers are engaged in a recognised teacher education programme.

**Mentoring:** Mentoring encompasses all those means by which the student teacher on placement is supported, advised and encouraged and their practice and thinking are affirmed and challenged, as appropriate. It is acknowledged that the process of mentoring student teachers is distinct from the process of mentoring newly qualified teachers.

**Partnership:** Partnership refers to the processes, structures and arrangements that enable the partners to work and learn collaboratively in teacher education. These processes, structures and arrangements also include School/HEI partnerships which focus on improving learning and teaching.

**Professional Studies:** Professional studies incorporate studies in the pedagogy of the subjects of the relevant curriculum or specification (i.e. in the case of the Primary sector, the entire range of subjects which is included in the Primary School Curriculum and, in the case of post-primary, the post-primary subjects in which the student teacher is specialising). Professional studies shall be directed towards the appropriate age group.

**School Placement:** The term school placement refers to that part of the ITE programme which takes place in school settings and which is designed to give the student teacher an opportunity to integrate educational theory and practice in a variety of teaching situations and school contexts.

**Student Teacher:** A student teacher is a student who is engaged in a programme of Initial Teacher Education.

**Source:** Teaching Council – <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie>



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TEACH-RSE Research Team: Dr Catherine Maunsell, Dr Ashling Bourke, Dr Aisling Costello, Dr Claire Cullen, Dr Malgosia Machowska-Kosciak



## Executive Summary

Education, health and wellbeing are unequivocally linked across the life course. Positive sexual health and wellbeing, together with sexuality education, are essential to the realisation of fundamental human rights and sustainable human development. The formal education system is a significant site of universal sexuality education and teachers play an integral role in enabling children and young people's right to high-quality, accurate sexuality education. It is crucial, therefore, that teachers are adequately prepared to provide comprehensive, age-appropriate, inclusive and effective sexuality education to children and young people in our 21st century classrooms.

For the first time in an Irish context, TEACH-RSE explored teacher professional learning and development and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). Adopting a systemic approach and employing multi-perspectival, mixed methods and multi-phased research design, the TEACH-RSE research study examined RSE provision in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) through the following research studies:

- i. A Systematic Review of the international, peer-reviewed literature on the provision of sexuality education in ITE to student teachers.
- ii. A Documentary Analysis of the publicly available documentation for the academic year 2019/2020 on RSE and RSE-related provision across a sample of 14 primary and post-primary ITE programmes.
- iii. A mixed methods study, employing an online survey and focus group methodology, of student teachers' perspectives on RSE provision at ITE (sample predominantly from primary ITE programmes)
- iv. A qualitative interview study of Initial Teacher Educators' perspectives on the provision of RSE on primary and post-primary ITE programmes.
- v. A consultation with stakeholders, which contributed to the development of evidence-based and stakeholder-informed TEACH-RSE Recommendations for the provision of RSE at ITE.

## Key Findings

### i) Systematic Review

The Systematic Review found variation in the provision of sexuality education during ITE for student teachers internationally. There is generally a limited number of topics covered and limited opportunities for critical reflection across ITE programme curricula.

### ii) Documentary Analysis

The Documentary Analysis found no explicit reference to RSE in the sample of publicly available ITE programme documentation. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) was identified in 5 of the 26 modules which met the inclusion criteria for this study. Reference to RSE-related content was inconsistent across programmes and generally limited. One primary ITE programme and one post-primary ITE programme were identified in the Documentary Analysis.

### iii) Mixed Methods study with student teachers

Sixty-one per cent (61%) of the student teachers surveyed felt the amount of input they had received in relation to RSE was 'Not Enough'. Sixty-two percent (62%) of respondents indicated that their perceived preparation at ITE to teach RSE was 'Worse' (34%) or 'Much Worse' (28%) when compared to their professional preparation in other subject areas at ITE. Nearly all the respondents (94%) reported an intention to teach RSE once qualified. Ninety per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was a need for continuing teacher professional learning and development in RSE. Similar to the survey findings, focus group interviewees underlined the importance to them of teaching RSE, but called for



more input on RSE at ITE and supports for their professional learning and development in this area, post-qualification.

**iv) Qualitative interview study with Initial Teacher Educators**

Initial Teacher Educators perceived RSE at ITE to be of high relevance and foundational to a student teacher's ITE, while also referencing RSE as a 'sensitive', 'grey area'. They reported minimal time allocation to RSE input on ITE programmes and typically indicated RSE provision as being one-off inputs. They highlighted the importance of scaffolding student teachers to critically engage with, and reflect on, their values and beliefs with respect to RSE. The optimal model of RSE provision in ITE suggested by the Initial Teacher Educators was a core/mandatory component with additional RSE electivity/specialism options available. Furthermore, Initial Teacher Educators articulated the need for the development of accredited SPHE/RSE qualifications post-ITE.

Drawing on this research, and informed by the consultation with stakeholders in the area, a number of TEACH-RSE Recommendations are made.

- There is a need for system-wide, research-informed, and systematically reviewed teacher professional learning and development standards for RSE provision in ITE.
- Teacher professional learning and development for RSE should be provided as a continuum with a model of core plus elective/subject specialism at ITE and further, specialist teacher professional learning and development programmes post-ITE.
- RSE provision in ITE should be conceptualised as holistic, comprehensive, inclusive, rights-based and developmental.
- At ITE programme level, adopting a multi-dimensional approach, RSE provision should address student teachers' content knowledge of, pedagogical skills in, and attitudinal dispositions toward RSE provision ensuring a clear SPHE/RSE pathway for graduate teachers.
- A system-wide, collaborative, integrated approach should be taken nationally to RSE provision including inter-departmental, inter-agency and across and within ITE programmes.

TEACH-RSE Recommendations provide an evidence-based, stakeholder-informed foundation for policy and practice development and leadership in relation to RSE at ITE. It is envisaged that on implementation they will enable sustainable and inclusive professional learning and development for teachers of RSE. Thus, offering a significant contribution to meeting global and national strategic objectives for the realisation of lifelong optimal sexual health and wellbeing for all children and young people in Ireland, today and into the future.





# Section 1:

## Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction

Sexuality education plays a significant role in realising optimal sexual health and wellbeing of children and young people, and in supporting their sexual and holistic development across their lifespan (Allen and Rasmussen, 2017). Identified as a global challenge, recent decades have seen some progress in the field (cf. Jones et al., 2019), with sexuality education increasingly underpinned by international, regional and national-level strategic objectives, legislative and/or policy frameworks, all of which are critical prerequisites for its sustainable implementation in schools. Even so, school-based sexuality education remains a contested area and wide variance in its implementation persists, both between and within countries wherein social, cultural, historical and political contexts remain influential (Zimmerman, 2015; Chandra-Mouli et al., 2018; Ketting, 2018; Ketting et al., 2021; Kiely, 2013). As Nolan (2018), noted in the Irish context, sexuality education ‘...is not an unambiguous, value-neutral concept’ (2018, p. 7).

While inconsistencies in the implementation and quality of school-based sexuality education have been highlighted, the formal education system remains a significant site for universal, comprehensive, age-appropriate, inclusive and effective sexuality education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation UNESCO, 2009, 2018; Pound et al., 2016; Pound et al., 2017; Goldfarb and Lieberman, 2021); with teachers, and teacher professional learning and development, identified as playing an integral role in enabling children and young people’s right to comprehensive sexuality education CSE (World Health Organisation – German Federal Centre for Health Education WHO-BZgA, 2010; Maunsell and Bourke, 2018). Receiving high-quality CSE, in turn, has been identified as having the potential to support children and young people’s realisation of their rights to wellbeing, protection, participation, identity and equality, thus, shaping how they come to understand themselves, their identity, how they relate to others and fundamentally their competences with respect to sexual health and wellbeing (Xiong et al., 2020; O’Brien et al., 2021; Bourke et al., 2022).

The themes addressed in this Introductory section, include an examination of sexuality education from a human rights’ perspective and systemically, as both a national strategic objective and global goal for sustainable human development. Conceptualisations of sexuality education, particularly ‘comprehensive’ approaches are presented, followed by a synopsis of the evidence base on teacher professional learning and development in sexuality education. The Irish educational context in relation to sexuality education and teacher professional learning and development is then presented. Finally, a broad overview of the TEACH-RSE research project follows, together with an outline of the structure of the report.



## 1.2. Sexuality Education: A Human Right and International, Regional and National Strategic Objective

Education and health are inextricably intertwined across an individual's lifespan, with sexual development viewed as both an essential and complex aspect of human development (WHO, 2013; Zajacova and Lawrence, 2018; Ponzetti, 2016). Generally viewed as a protective factor for sexual health behaviours, sexuality education is associated with a range of sexual health benefits including delayed sexual initiation, reduced number of sexual partners, fewer adolescent pregnancies and lower incidences of human immunodeficiency virus HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (UNESCO, 2016). These protective effects are seen as long term and associated with reduced adverse sexual health outcomes in adulthood (Kirby, 2007; Yu, 2010; Bourke et al., 2015; Haberland and Rogow, 2015; Ingham, 2016). Research shows, however, that in contravention of their developmental rights, children and young people are not being provided with the foundation of sexual health information and skills which they need to lead healthy lives (Bay-Cheng, 2013; Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States SIECUS, 2018).

Adopting a human rights' perspective connotes an understanding of the child/young person as citizen, as 'being' and 'becoming'; as social actor actively constructing their world and as adult-in-the-making (James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 2009). Such conceptualisations of children and childhood are apposite to the current discourses on sexuality education and its purpose, challenging more traditional views of the child/young person as sexually innocent and of childhood sexualisation as a unitary phenomenon (Davies and Robinson, 2010; Robinson, 2012, 2013, 2016; Robinson and Davies, 2018, 2019; Smith, 2015; Kitching et al., 2021). Given their standing in society, children and young people are, however, often unable to assert their own rights, meaning someone else may have to implement or advocate for the fulfilment of these rights on their behalf (Cherney and Shing, 2008; Doek, 2019). Children's rights only serve their purpose in as far as they are recognised as rights by those who can exercise them (Bourke et al., 2020). Teachers are particularly well placed to play a significant enabling role in respect of children's rights.

There are growing references in both national and international literature to 'rights-based' approaches to sexuality education (cf. United Nations Population Fund Activities UNFPA, 2014; Wilentz, 2016; Daly and O'Sullivan, 2020) which are defined by Berglas et al., (2014) as the intersection of four elements, namely:

'...an underlying principle that youth have sexual rights; an expansion of programmatic goals beyond reducing unintended pregnancy and STI; the broadening of curricula to include issues of gender norms, sexual orientation, sexual expression and pleasure, violence, and individual rights and responsibilities in relationships; and a participatory teaching strategy that engages youth in critical thinking about their sexuality and sexual choices (2014, p. 63).

Children and young people's right to education, enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child UNCRC, includes their right to CSE, and enables their realisation of a number of other rights (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016; Lundy and O'Lynn, 2019). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that States adopt:

'...age-appropriate, comprehensive and inclusive sexual and reproductive health education, based on scientific evidence and human rights standards and developed with adolescents' (2016, p.16).



As a member of the United Nations, and a signatory to the UNCRC, there are obligations on the Irish State under a range of human rights instruments/treaties. In their 2006 Report on Ireland, the Committee, in their role of monitoring the implementation of the UNCRC by its State parties, expressed concerns that Irish adolescents had insufficient access to necessary information on their sexual and reproductive health. A decade later, the Committee further recommended that Ireland:

'...adopt a comprehensive sexual and reproductive health policy for adolescents and ensure that sexual and reproductive health education is part of the mandatory school curriculum' (2016a, p. 13).

While a number of international human rights treaties support the right to CSE, and governments are encouraged to adhere to international technical guidance on sexuality education published jointly by UNESCO and other UN agencies (UNESCO, 2018), significantly, there are, as yet, no universal legal obligations to mandate sexuality education for all children and young people. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Ireland in 2018, includes a number of sexuality-related rights, e.g. right to health, but it has, however, been challenged for not explicitly referencing sexual and reproductive rights of persons with disabilities (Schaaf, 2011; Ruiz, 2017). As to a rights-based approach to sexuality education, a number of challenges have also been proffered, in relation to its application to educational contexts in the Global South, and a perceived focus on the individual over that of social or collective structures (Schaaf, 2011; Ruiz, 2017; re: Irish context cf. Kelly, 2013). In response, Vanwesenbeeck et al. (2019) asserted that young people's rights, power relations and gender equality are '...crucial to "the comprehensive" in comprehensive sexuality education' going on to suggest that such concepts may need to be '...differently defined for different groups, in different settings and by different actors' (2019, p. 298). Salient also is a recent and growing scholarship on participatory approaches which engage with young people themselves in research on sexuality education (Coll et al., 2018; Ollis et al., 2019).

Identified as a global challenge, sexuality education is positioned as an imperative across international, regional and national strategic objectives for human development, health and wellbeing (Zimmerman, 2015). The significance of sexuality education is highlighted at European Union level (Beaumont and Maguire, 2013) and in a number of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which comprise the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) including:

- SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing: To ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages, including the following sub-goal: By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes.
- SDG 4: Quality Education: To ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning, and includes a sub-goal pertaining to teacher professional learning and development: By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states.
- SDG 5: Gender Equality and Empowerment: To ensure all forms of discrimination and violence against girls and women are eliminated and includes a sub-goal: By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.

At a regional, European level, Health 2020, the WHO European Health Policy Framework and Strategy for the 21st Century (2013), focused on health as a human right, acknowledged the correlation between health and



education and called for comprehensive, inclusive conceptualisations of health and wellbeing and systemic, 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-society', approaches to their realisation (WHO, 2013). It set out the improvement of health for all and reduction of health inequalities as one of two strategic objectives and identifies 'integrating work on mental and sexual health' (WHO, 2013, p. 17) as being of particular importance.

While at a national level, sexuality education is explicitly called for in the opening strategic goal of Ireland's first National Sexual Health Strategy (NSHS) 2015-2020 (Department of Health, 2015). The NSHS, outlines, for the first time at a national level, a coordinated approach to addressing sexual health and wellbeing, with one of the key objectives being that everyone in Ireland will receive comprehensive and age-appropriate sexual health education/information. This TEACH-RSE research, in addition, contributes towards the realisation of objectives as set out in Goal 3 of the NSHS on the generation of robust and high-quality data to inform policy, practice, planning and strategic monitoring. The NSHS is itself rooted within wider national policy frameworks, including *inter alia* 'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020', the first overarching national policy framework for children and young people aged 0-24 years with one of its stated aims being a positive and respectful approach to relationships and sexual health (Aim 1.3) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014) and with Project Ireland 2040: National Planning Framework's National Strategic Objectives (NSOs), specifically NSO 10 with its priority on 'Access to Quality Childcare, Education and Health Services'. The National Planning Framework of NSO's are, in turn, significantly aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2018).

When taken together, the right to CSE is grounded in fundamental human rights and is a means to empowering children and young people to attain optimal health, wellbeing, and dignity. The last decade, or so, has seen growing national and international strategic commitment to the provision of CSE as a human right, with concomitant development of the field (Ketting et al., 2018; Ketting et al., 2021).

### 1.3. Conceptualising Sexuality Education

Across the globe, diverse terminology is employed in relation to sexuality education, which is varyingly referred to as Sex Education, Sexuality and Relationships Education and, here in Ireland and elsewhere, as Relationships and Sexuality Education RSE (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education, 2016). While there appears to be no universally agreed upon definition of sexuality education, or indeed theoretical coherence, in either the research or 'grey' policy literature, CSE, with its broad-ranging scope and definition is widely considered as the preferred conceptualisation. Indeed, a range of significant guiding frameworks in the field proposed by international bodies/associations employ CSE as their main conceptualisation of sexuality education (e.g. SIECUS, 2004; WHO-BZgA, 2010, 2017; UNFPA, 2014; UNESCO, 2009, 2018).

The European Expert Group on Sexuality Education (2016) highlighted the need for sexuality education to be scientifically accurate, non-judgemental, age-appropriate, complete, and implemented as part of a carefully phased process. UNESCO in their *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* (2018) suggested that the term 'comprehensive' denotes a developmental, relational, multi-dimensional approach to the development of learners' knowledge, skills and attitudes for 'positive sexuality and good sexual and reproductive health' (p. 12). Conceptualising CSE broadly and from a human rights' perspective<sup>1</sup>, as:

'A curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills,

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<sup>1</sup> Note: these broad definitions of CSE informed the documentary analysis of publicly available ITE programme documentation reported on in Section 3 of this report.



attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, wellbeing and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own wellbeing and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives' (UNESCO, 2018, p. 18)

Sexuality education also plays a critical role in realising gender equality and challenging notions of gender norms and power dynamics in society (e.g., UNESCO, 2016). Discourses of sexual consent, gender equality, power relations and gender-based violence have been outlined as key objectives of CSE approaches (UNFPA, 2014; Haberland, 2015; Gilbert, 2018). Furthermore, research suggests that sexuality education which is inclusive of gender and sexual minority perspectives has been found to be a 'resource of resilience' leading to positive identity development when growing up in heteronormative/heterosexist social environments (Bruce et al., 2015; Goldfarb and Lieberman, 2021). LGBTQI+ inclusive approaches to sexuality education have also been widely advocated for in an Irish context (cf. Collins et al., 2018; Gavigan, 2018; Mayock et al., 2009; Bryan, 2017; Bryan and Mayock, 2017; Higgins et al., 2016).

Building on such broad and inclusive conceptualisations of CSE, Ketting et al. (2018) outlined a range of quality criteria characterising CSE, including *inter alia*, legislative and curricular provision for sexuality education, breadth of topics covered, availability of educational materials and resources, mandatory programming and implementation of sexuality education in practice. Adoption of a developmental, spiral approach, was a further criterion related to the age and developmental appropriateness of CSE. Moving beyond matters of definitional and composite criteria, the quality of the implementation of school-based CSE is salient. Several frameworks to support the delivery and implementation of CSE across educational levels have been published, as have, guidelines for CSE vocabulary use, resources, and evidence-based pedagogies (e.g. SIECUS, 1998, 2004, 2009, 2018; OECD, 2010; WHO-BZgA, 2010).

In their Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe, the WHO-BZgA identified the multi-dimensional aspects of CSE that ought to be addressed educationally, and across the lifespan, commencing early in childhood and progressing through adolescence and adulthood (2010). Critically, the standards recommended that CSE, '...is a mandatory subject both for primary and secondary schools, with clearly set minimum standards and teaching objectives' (WHO-BZgA, 2010, p. 16). Most recently, the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN) published their national-level framework for the development and evaluation of comprehensive, evidence-based, sexual health education in Canada (2019). The SIECCAN Guidelines reflect the growing need for sexuality education to address the provision of relevant, tailored and effective education to LGBTQI+ people; address consent pertaining to sexual activity; the prevention of gender-based violence; and the use of technology for learning and communicating about sexuality (cf. Fields et al., 2014).

While differences exist in the terminology, definitions, discourses and criteria employed across various national and international documentation relating to sexuality education (cf. Iyer and Aggleton, 2015; Ezer et al., 2019), nonetheless, conceptualisations of CSE centre consistently on the realisation of human rights, child, adolescent and youth empowerment; the promotion of wellbeing, and the young person's right to education about their body, relationships, and sexuality. Overall, a comprehensive approach, when compared to other models/approaches to sexuality education, has a wide-ranging focus on the sexual health and wellbeing of the learner (Keating et al., 2018) and, thus, goes beyond traditional, preventative-oriented approaches in terms of realising optimal sexual health and wellbeing outcomes across the lifespan (cf. Allen and Rasmussen, 2017; UNESCO, 2015, 2018; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2016). Significant advances have also been made in the development of international, national and/or professional frameworks for the



implementation of sexuality education, including teacher professional learning and development standards for sexuality education.

## 1.4. Sexuality Education: The Role of Teacher Professional Learning and Development

Teaching is a demanding profession and becoming a teacher has been viewed as a lifelong journey and teacher education as a continuum (Teaching Council, 2011, 2020). Conceptualised as a complex and dynamic system, teacher education, at all stages of a teacher's professional learning and development, is acknowledged as subject to constant change (Cochran-Smith, Ell et al., 2014). Teacher education is further perceived as central to the development of better-qualified teachers able to educate their students for their 21st century lives (OECD, 2005). Research studies of teacher education are, to date, more limited than those undertaken at school level. A research-informed understanding of teacher education is emphasised by lead researchers in the field, so as to support teacher educators' work with student teachers, along with curriculum and programme development (Swennen and White, 2020). Furthermore, ITE has been perceived of as '...a policy "lever" for bringing about changes in the teaching profession and subsequent overall improvement in the quality of schooling systems' (Murray, 2020, p. ii). Teacher professional learning and development has thus, '...become a common tool for addressing challenges within the educational sector' (Spear and da Costa, 2018, p. 202); and has increasingly been proposed as key in addressing the global, societal challenge of ensuring the provision of high-quality education broadly and sexuality education, more specifically.

The potential of teacher professional learning and development to respond to the opportunities and challenges presented in the area of sexuality education is significant and indeed upheld internationally as '... one of the crucial levers of success of quality sexuality education programmes and projects' (WHO-BZgA, 2017, p. 17). Teacher professional learning and development, however, have been identified as a 'weak link' (Ketting, et al, 2018, p. 94). A particular gap, highlighted repeatedly by national and international research and policy literature, is the specialised professional development of teachers of sexuality education (Mayock et al., 2007; Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017; Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019; UNESCO, 2009, 2018). Given the influence of teacher education on the quality of sexuality education, a robust body of international data highlights that access to professional development in sexuality education in ITE, and post-qualification, needs significant development (Martinez et al., 2012; Shannon and Smith 2015; Ollis et al., 2013; O'Brien et al., 2021). Goldfarb (2003) referenced the manifold effects of the lack of teacher preparation on the teaching of sexuality education, including *inter alia* the range of topics covered and teachers' emotional/affective states. She suggested that:

'In addition to the chilling effect brought on by fear of controversy, the lack of training available to sexuality educators results in teachers feeling incapable of addressing many of the more challenging but critical topics such as sexual orientation, sexual behaviour, abortion, safer sex (particularly condom use), diversity, and gender roles. It has also left them feeling inadequately prepared to respond to concerns or criticisms from the community.' (2003, p. 19)

In relation to teachers' affective states, studies have identified an array of teachers' fears, anxieties and uncertainties in relation to the teaching of sexuality education; including, among others, making mistakes (Johnson et al., 2014), angering or upsetting parents and students (Carrión and Jensen, 2014; Johnson et al. 2014; Duffy et al., 2013), media backlash, job security, and even being considered a paedophile (Leonard



et al., 2010). A lack of teacher, including student teacher, knowledge about sexuality education topics, especially in areas such as gender and sexual diversity, cultural diversity and in relation to diverse ability/ies/disability/ies, has been linked to fear, 'othering' and discomfort in teaching sexuality education content (Brown, 2016; Treacy et al., 2018). In their recent systematic review of international evidence, Brown and colleagues identified the need for more theoretically driven and person-centred approaches in programme design, content and delivery of RSE programmes for people with intellectual disabilities (Brown et al., 2020).

Advocating for an intersectional approach to sexuality education, the revised Future of Sex Education (FoSE) National Sex Education Standards stress that sex education ought to be grounded '...in social justice and equity, honouring the diversity of students (racial, ethnic, gender, orientation, ability, socio-economic, as well as academic) and promote awareness, understanding, and appreciation of diversity and inclusion (FoSE, 2020, p. 7). Research, however, has reported that teachers may feel more prepared to teach health-focused topics, such as anatomy and pregnancy and STI prevention, than topics related to sexual and gender identity and those rooted in broader social and political contexts (Shannon and Smith, 2015).

Studies have also shown that teacher discomfort and knowledge deficits pertaining to sexuality education combined are linked to reduced willingness among teachers, including student teachers, to teach so called 'sensitive' sexuality education topics (Sarma et al., 2013; Brown, 2016). Albeit at an early point in their teaching career, newly qualified teachers (NQTs) reported feeling unprepared to teach anything beyond the most basic and 'safe' topics (Shannon and Smith, 2015). In a related vein, Ketting et al., (2018) examined content matters covered on teacher education programmes in their systematic assessment of the status of sexuality education across 25 countries in the WHO European Region Area and reported that biological and reproductive aspects received highest coverage, while:

'...fewer programmes also included the issues of love, marriage and/or partnership, gender roles, mutual consent to sexual contacts and use of online media for information. Issues that were least addressed were access to abortion services, sexual abuse and domestic violence; sexual orientation; and, least dealt with, sexual pleasure.' (Ketting et al., 2018, pp. 88-89).

Increasingly, calls have been made for sexuality education which is inclusive of content on positive sexual experiences and sexual pleasure (Ingham, 2005; Kiely, 2005; Fine and McClelland, 2006; McClelland and Fine, 2016; Cameron-Lewis, 2016; Allen and Rasmussen, 2017; Lamb and Gilbert, 2019). Teachers' levels of confidence and competence can, however, result in certain content topics relating to CSE, such as positive sexuality, not being taught and more fact-based information being privileged over a critical evaluation of these facts (Lamb, 2013; Lamb et al., 2013; Shannon and Smith, 2015).

On a more optimistic note, research has shown that teachers, including student teachers, believe that sexuality education is important and should be delivered in schools (e.g., Gunaya et al., 2015). A recent Ecuadorian study reported that student teachers had a relatively high level of confidence in terms of their perceived ability to implement sexuality education and to address specific CSE topics. Furthermore, favourable attitudes towards CSE, strong self-efficacy beliefs to implement CSE, and increased confidence in the ability to implement CSE were significantly associated with positive intentions to teach CSE in the future. Insufficient mastery of CSE topics, however, may temper student teachers' intentions to teach CSE (Nuñez et al., 2019; Nuñez et al., 2019a). While research has highlighted that sexuality education topics are perceived as sensitive, controversial and often attract familial and community opposition (Ollis, 2010; Gunaya et al., 2015), studies focusing on perceived opposition to providing sexuality education in schools, found that communities and parents/guardians are supportive of the teaching of a range of sexuality



education topics (Eisenberg et al., 2008; Barr et al., 2014; Coyle et al., 2016). Research on the important role of parents/guardians as providers of relationships and sexuality education for their child/ren has also been undertaken within an Irish context (cf. Hyde et al., 2009; Conlon, 2018; and Nolan and Smyth, 2020).

A further challenge relates to teacher professional learning and development which emphasises subject specific content/pedagogies alone rather than also addressing other less tangible factors, such as student teachers' implicit attitudes (Depaepe and Konig, 2018). Such professional learning and development can only go so far in increasing the confidence and competence of teachers of sexuality. Research has shown that teacher professional learning and development to effect change in teachers' competence and confidence to teach sexuality education needed to target both explicit and implicit attitudes, while acknowledging that intentionally addressing teachers' implicit attitudes presented a significant challenge for teacher education (Bunten, 2014).

Some progress has been made in the field as evidenced by international/national-level frameworks or standards which have been developed in relation to the core content and skills required for sexuality education and by sexuality educators (FoSE Initiative, 2012, 2020). Specific to teacher professional learning and development, the National Teacher Preparation Standards for Sexuality Education developed by the FoSE Initiative in the United States, offers professionalised benchmarks for sexuality education on teacher preparation programmes there (FoSE, 2014; Barr et al., 2014). Development of such national-level standards has stimulated sexuality education researchers to explore how such a model might also provide guidance for the professional development of qualified teachers. Fisher and Cummings (2015) reported on their study with certified sexual health educators in the United States including their ability/proficiency in applying the National Teacher Preparation Standards for Sexuality Education. The educators surveyed perceived themselves to be very confident in meeting the standards. The researchers contended that evaluating a current teacher's confidence and proficiency using the standards could offer the possibility of tailoring the professional development of teachers; while also providing an evidence-informed understanding of what confident and competent teacher of sexuality education would look like in practice. Most recently, the Sex Education Collaborative, comprising a range of US organisations involved in teacher education, came together seeking to enhance school-based implementation of sex education, and focused initially on teacher professional learning and development for sex education in their Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education (SIECUS, 2019).

The application of teacher preparation standards has also been considered in countries other than the United States. Collier-Harris and Goldman (2015), have discussed the salience of developing national standards to enhance sexuality education on Australian university-based teacher preparation programmes. While in Wales, a collaborative Sex and Relationships Education Expert Panel has also proposed a range of national-level recommendations, including new teacher professional learning and development pathways for teachers of sex and relationships education (cf. Renold and McGeaney, 2017; Renold, Ashton and McGeaney, 2021).

Seeing the professional development of sexuality educators as an essential part of capacity building in the field, the WHO-BZgA published *Training Matters: A framework for core competencies of sexuality educators* (2017). Endorsing a multi-dimensional approach, the framework focuses on sexuality educators and their competencies, in the areas of attitudes, skills and knowledge, that they should have, or need to develop in order to become effective teachers of sexuality education.

From a 'complex' systems perspective (cf. Cochran-Smith et al., 2014), one caveat which warrants articulation, is that teacher professional learning and development in sexuality education, where provided,



is but one determinant of teachers' confidence and competence in respect of the provision of high-quality, inclusive CSE. An array of individual and sociocultural factors and national-level contexts, are also influential. Indeed, a systemic approach, whereby actions to enhance individual teacher empowerment, together with the creation of more inclusive, rights-supportive learning environments and the strengthening of national-level educational structures and policies and international cooperation have been found to lead to more positive, effective and sustainable systemic change in respect of CSE than strategic interventions at one level only (Vanwesenbeek et al., 2019). The next section, examines sexuality education, and more specifically teacher professional learning and development in sexuality education within the context of Irish education.

## 1.5. The Irish Education Context: Relationships and Sexuality Education and Teacher Professional Learning and Development

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) is responsible for educational policy development and implementation across all sectors of the Irish education system, including ITE. While the Teaching Council, established as a statutory body in 2006, has responsibility for the accreditation and review of ITE programmes and the registration of primary and post-primary teachers in Ireland. It has, nonetheless, been acknowledged that multiple stakeholders in the Irish context, including: 'The Teaching Council, Department of Education and Skills, teacher educators, schools, parents, colleges/universities, statutory bodies and other education agencies/support services' all play a role in influencing Teacher Education' (Conway et al., 2009, p. xiii).

ITE, positioned as it is within the higher education system in Ireland, has undergone 'fundamental change' in recent decades (Coolahan et al., 2017, p.147). The most recent ten-year period 2011-2021 has seen the publication of a suite of landmark strategic reports and reviews which have shaped national policy and practice in relation to ITE. The 'Hunt' Report outlined a long-term national strategy for higher education proposing a range of structural changes including the merging of smaller institutions and the building of regional clusters of educational institutions (DES, 2011). Subsequently an international panel, led by Prof. Pasi Sahlberg, reviewed ITE structures and provision and set out a significant reform agenda for teacher education, envisioning that by 2030, Ireland '...will have a network of teacher education institutions based on a small number of internationally comparable institutes of education ... offer[ing] research-based teacher education in internationally inspiring environments' (DES/HEA, 2012, p. 25). While the 2019 follow-up review of the implementation of structural reforms within ITE indicated that significant progress had been made in the intervening period (DES/HEA, 2019).

Pertaining to RSE within the context of the Irish Education System, following a process of collaborative and multiple stakeholder consultation, RSE was introduced to the national curriculum in 1996. As outlined in the DES Policy Guidelines, the aim of RSE is 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' (DES, 1997, p. 4).

RSE became a mandatory aspect of the primary school curriculum in 1999 and a mandatory component of the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum framework in 2000 (DES, 2000, 2014, 2015; NCCA, 2019). RSE is



taught as an integral part of SPHE at primary and post-primary, Junior and Senior Cycle levels (cf. Moynihan and Mannix-McNamara, 2014). Significantly from a human rights perspective, research conducted within an Irish context, indicated that SPHE, and by extension RSE as a constituent component, was perceived by teachers as offering an enabling environment for human rights, generally and children's rights, more specifically (Ruane et al., 2010; Waldron et al., 2011; Waldron and Oberman, 2016).

At ITE level, RSE is provided on primary ITE programmes as a component of the subject of SPHE. While, at post-primary ITE level, there are currently no explicit curricular subject requirements for teachers of SPHE/RSE (Teaching Council, 2020a Revised) a number of teacher education institutions do offer SPHE as a subject option on their post-primary ITE programmes. In-service provision for primary and post-primary teachers is supported *inter alia* by short courses offered through the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and also for post-primary teachers through short inputs offered by Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT). These short in-service courses and/or inputs offer the predominant source of teacher professional learning and development in RSE for post-primary teachers. In their consideration of the lack of status of the SPHE/RSE subject and relevant contributing factors, the Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Relationships and Sexuality Education, noted that SPHE, with RSE as a component, 'is the only subject at post-primary level where there is no accredited professional qualification' required of its teachers and expressed the belief that the provision of an accredited SPHE/RSE programme could have a positive impact on the consistency of its implementation in schools (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019, p. 19).

Recent and significant reform of the Junior Cycle (first 3 years of post-primary education – approximately relating to young people aged 12-15 years), now sees RSE, integrated as it is within SPHE (SPHE/RSE), as being taught under the new subject area of Wellbeing (DES, Health Service Executive (HSE) and Department of Health, 2013; DES, 2015; NCCA, 2017, DES, 2018). The positioning of SPHE/RSE within the subject area of Wellbeing at post-primary level is highly salient for SPHE/RSE provision in post-primary schools, as it offers a context or 'space' for the teaching of SPHE/RSE within the Junior Cycle, consistent with a comprehensive approach to sexuality education (cf. Leahy and Simovska, 2017; O'Brien and the Human Development Team, 2008; O'Brien and O'Shea, 2017, 2018). Such positioning, poses both opportunities and significant resource challenges for the personal and professional development of those teaching SPHE/RSE in the context of wellbeing (NCCA, 2017). Indeed, the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023 places at its centre the need for teacher professional learning and development to prepare teachers of the future (DES, 2018). Most recently, the NCCA Report on the review of RSE in primary and post-primary schools (2019) advanced a number of recommendations for the future of RSE in Ireland. Critically, it recommended re-developing the curriculum and developing specialist training and pathways for professional development in the area of SPHE/RSE. Additionally, it highlighted the knowledge, attitudes and skills that are needed by teachers who may be teaching RSE and suggested that:

'access to professional development needs to be enhanced across a continuum from initial teacher education to in-service education, through a collaborative, multi-faceted and multi-agency approach' (NCCA, 2019, pp. 83-84).

Of further relevance, is the ongoing NCCA review of the primary curriculum, which is envisaged to have concomitant implications for the conceptualisation and positioning of SPHE/RSE as a component of Wellbeing on primary ITE programmes, as it is at Junior Cycle level. Significant changes have also recently ensued with the publication of Céim: Initial Teacher Education Standards (Teaching Council, 2020), which outlines the requirements that primary and post-primary ITE programmes must meet in order to gain Teaching Council accreditation, and within which Wellbeing (and SPHE/RSE as a constituent component)



is now explicitly articulated within the core element of Global Citizenship Education (GCED). Emergent implications for such positioning of SPHE/RSE in Wellbeing within GCED at ITE warrant further critical consideration by relevant stakeholders.

In terms of the scholarship in the field, there is a robust body of national, general population surveys of adults' sexual behaviours, experiences and relationships which have included items on learning about sex, experience of sex education and/or referenced sexuality education/RSE in their study implications *inter alia* the Irish Contraception and Crisis Pregnancy 1CCP-2003 study (Rundle et al., 2004) and the ICCP-2010 study (McBride et al., 2012); the Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships ISSHR (Layte et al., 2006); and the Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland SAVI study (McGee et al., 2002). Most recently, a scoping study intended to inform the commissioning of a future general population survey of knowledge, attitudes and behaviours on sexual health and wellbeing and crisis pregnancy in Ireland has been published. Any future survey should, in turn, prove valuable in updating the existing datasets, and potentially reveal emerging issues pertinent to sexual education (Tierney and Kelleher, 2021). Findings from the surveys undertaken to date highlight the salience of school-based sexuality education as a protective factor in realising optimal sexual health and call for health and education stakeholders to continue to '... systematically focus on addressing the factors contributing to poorer levels of RSE implementation and increase the impact of levers designed to improve implementation levels' (McBride et al., 2012, p. 155).

Teacher professional learning and development is one such lever. To date, the literature on SPHE/RSE in the Irish education system has examined sexuality education from the perspectives of the individual (student, teacher) and/or school level (Morgan, 2000; Mac an Ghaill et al., 2004; Mayock et al., 2007). Recommendations arising from these studies have consistently highlighted the need for further and specialised training for teachers in SPHE/RSE. Of relevance, Mayock et al. (2007) offered a model of a continuum of implementation of delivery of RSE in post-primary schools from low-level implementation to high-level implementation across a range of characteristics namely: coordination of SPHE/RSE (at school level); parental involvement; status of RSE; teacher training; teacher comfort; clarity among teachers about what can be taught; student perspectives and understanding; whole school support (2007, p. 20). While at a whole school level, a suite of reports published in the last decade by the Department of Education and Science/Skills (DES, 2013; 2014, 2017) also emphasise the importance of schools having suitably qualified teachers of SPHE/RSE. Notably, in *Looking at Social Personal and Health Education: Teaching and learning in post-primary schools*, a composite report, based on the findings of SPHE/RSE subject inspections of post-primary schools, the positive impact of teachers' systematic engagement in SPHE/RSE-related professional development on the quality of its implementation in schools was identified (2013, p. 35).

Furthermore, in relation to the recently introduced Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections whereby the perspectives of children and young people are formally accessed, school principals identified that if such mechanisms were mirrored in terms of RSE, this could have the potential to improve RSE provision within schools; wherein '... students themselves will be asked about their experience of RSE as part of the inspection process' (NCCA, 2019, p. 40). The salience of including children and young people as key stakeholders in the development and implementation of sexuality education is well argued and sexuality education is likely to be most effective when children and young people's beliefs and practices are actively sought and included (e.g., Giordano and Ross, 2012; Temple-Smith et al., 2016).

As evidenced in findings from nationally representative studies, young people are sexual beings, engaging in a range of sexual behaviours. Young et al. (2018) in their analysis of the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children HBSC data of almost 4,500 Irish young people, aged 15–18 years, reported that 25% of young



men and 21% of young women self-reported that they had experienced sexual intercourse. While drawing on the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) Child Cohort dataset, Nolan and Smyth (2020) reported that overall, 33% of the 17-18 year olds, at the time of the Third Wave of data collation had had sexual intercourse, 34% of young men and 32% of young women. The GUI study had also gathered data on school-based RSE, in the earlier Second Wave at age 13 and Nolan and Smith outlined that 55% of 13 year olds and 92% of 17 year olds indicated that they had received RSE at school, albeit with significant variation in RSE received at post-primary level (2020, p. 23). As these authors have highlighted, consistent with the NCCA Report on the review of RSE in primary and post-primary schools (2019), is not only that RSE is provided in primary and post-primary schools, but also of salience is the quality of such provision.

In their review of sexuality education across 25 countries, Ketting et al. reported that sexuality education provision in Ireland was reflective of many countries across the WHO European Region Area (2018). Ireland was one of the 10 countries<sup>2</sup> reviewed which were reported as having few teachers trained in sexuality education. A key recommendation made by the review authors is that the quality of sexuality education programmes needed to be improved through enhancement of teacher professional learning and development and associated supports:

‘There is a clear need to train teachers in sexuality education and to develop educational materials for this purpose. Training of future teachers in sexuality education has been included in the training curricula of teacher training colleges and universities in only a handful of countries in the region. The same should be done in all other countries in which sexuality education is mandatory or optional.’ (Ketting et al., 2018, p. 117).

In conclusion, there is a significant gap in the research evidence in Ireland and, indeed, internationally, on the quality of provision of RSE at ITE to those student teachers who will, in the future, go on to teach RSE to children and young people in primary and post-primary schools (cf. Murphy and Nic Gabhainn, 2019). Given the significant national reforms of ITE and ITE programmes in the last decade, together with the current and ongoing review of the national RSE curriculum, it is timely, therefore, to undertake a systemic investigation of RSE provision to student teachers in ITE.

## 1.6. TEACH-RSE Research Study

TEACH-RSE is the first of its kind, in an Irish context, to examine the preparation of primary and post-primary teachers to teach Relationships and Sexuality Education RSE and was specifically designed to go some way in addressing the research lacuna on teacher professional learning and development and RSE.

TEACH-RSE builds on the wider research literature on RSE in the Irish education system, which has examined sexuality education in the context of SPHE/RSE from the perspectives of the individual (student, teacher) and/or school level, and which has consistently recommended the need for further professional learning and development in the field and specialised qualifications for teachers in SPHE/RSE.

TEACH-RSE research fits within the broader teacher education scholarship, and not separate to the scholarly learnings from areas, other than RSE. Furthermore, TEACH-RSE research is not about the justification of RSE within ITE, the subject of RSE is mandatory, and ITE, as an ‘arm of public education’, bears a responsibility for the preparation of teachers to teach RSE.

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<sup>2</sup> Ireland, along with Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Bulgaria, Germany, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, The Netherlands, Serbia and Tajikistan.

TEACH-RSE positions ITE as part of the continuum of teacher professional learning and development. While the focus of TEACH-RSE is on preparing teachers in ITE, learning to teach is unequivocally viewed as a developmental process across the teacher's life course (Conway et al., 2009). With ITE, as part of this continuum, focusing on providing teachers with a set of high-level beginning competences (Conway et al., 2009, p. xiv).

TEACH-RSE adopts a systemic approach to the study of RSE provision in ITE and in so doing, ITE is perceived of as but one aspect of the system influencing student teacher confidence and competence to teach RSE. And beyond ITE, a teacher's provision of school-based sexuality education is complementary to that provided by the parent/guardian as the primary educator of the child/young person.

Finally, TEACH-RSE is situated in the wider sociocultural and historical contexts of education and sexuality in Irish society and more globally, as well as through the development of recommendations for RSE in ITE, and seeks through an evidence-based approach to inform the future of RSE provision in ITE (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2018), notwithstanding, the power to imagine as possible, that which is not yet so (Gilligan, 1999, 2021).

### 1.6.1. TEACH-RSE: Aims and objectives

The primary aim of TEACH-RSE was to explore the role of teacher professional learning and development in achieving the first of the National Sexual Health Strategy's goals of ensuring that all people living in Ireland receive comprehensive and age-appropriate sexual health education (Goal 1, National Sexual Health Strategy 2015-2020). More specifically, TEACH-RSE aims to strengthen the provision of RSE on ITE programmes, with the objective of contributing to the enhancement of school-based sexuality education and the optimal sexual health and wellbeing of children and young people across their lifespan.

Adopting a multi-perspectival approach, TEACH-RSE explored a range of systemic factors pertaining to the preparation of primary and post-primary teachers to teach RSE, which contribute to enhancing and empowering student teachers in their future teaching of RSE.

The overall objective is to propose evidence-informed TEACH-RSE Recommendations for RSE provision in ITE to ensure future teachers are competent and confident to provide high-quality comprehensive, inclusive RSE thus enabling lifelong optimal sexual health and wellbeing for all children and young people in Ireland.

### 1.6.2. Structure of the TEACH-RSE Research Report

This research report presents the main findings of the TEACH-RSE research in the following sections:

- **Section two:** presents an overview of a Systematic Review of the international peer-reviewed literature on sexuality education provision during ITE for student teachers.
- **Section three:** outlines a Documentary Analysis of publicly available documentation on SPHE/RSE provision across a sample of 14 primary and post-primary ITE programmes levels.
- **Section four:** reports on an explanatory, sequential mixed methods study of student teachers' knowledge, comfort, confidence, preparedness and intention to teach RSE.
- **Section five:** reports on a qualitative interview study with Initial Teacher Educators on primary and post-primary ITE programmes on their perspectives of RSE provision in ITE.



- **Section six:** synthesises the emergent research findings across the constituent TEACH-RSE desk-based and primary research studies.
- **Section seven:** provides an overview of the participative research approach employed, through stakeholder consultation with 36 key informants on teacher professional learning and development and RSE, towards the development of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations.
- **Section eight:** outlines the evidence-based, stakeholder-informed TEACH-RSE Recommendations on RSE provision at ITE.



# Section 2:

## A systematic review of the provision of sexuality education to student teachers in Initial Teacher Education

### 2.1. Introduction

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) is central to the development of a better-qualified teaching profession able to educate their students for their 21st century lives (OECD, 2005). Understanding sexuality education preparation for student teachers in ITE is crucial to the quality of its implementation in schools (WHO-BZgA, 2017). Given that our understanding of sexuality education is ever evolving, the WHO-BZgA (2017) *Training Matters: Framework of Core Competencies for Sexuality Educators* was selected as the operational, analytical framework for this Systematic Review. Derived as it is from the work of global experts in the field and thus, an international standard for sexuality education, the *Training Matters* framework offered the ability to analyse findings through the multi-dimensional lens of attitudes, skills and knowledge pertaining to sexuality education provided to student teachers in ITE.

#### 2.1.1. Aims and objectives

This study aimed to systematically review empirical evidence on the provision of sexuality education to student teachers in the context of ITE.

The objectives were:

- To review the existing peer-reviewed, published literature on sexuality education provision to student teachers during ITE.
- To synthesise the research on sexuality education provision to student teachers at ITE institutional/programmatic level.
- To synthesise the research on individual level student teachers' knowledge, attitudes and skills in relation to sexuality education during ITE.

The methodological process of, and findings from the Systematic Review, as well as an overview of key emergent findings are outlined in the following sections.



## 2.2. Methodology

This review was completed in accordance with PRISMA guidelines for a Systematic Review (Liberati et al., 2009).

### 2.2.1. Eligibility criteria.

Articles were included if:

- The focus of the study was on the ITE context either at the institutional/programmatic level and/or individual student teacher level.
- Data was collected with, or about, student teachers.
- Data, employing mixed methods, qualitative, quantitative and/or Documentary Analysis, was collected.
- Published post-1990, in English language peer-reviewed journals.

### 2.2.2. Screening and selection process

A three-reviewer process was employed. Searches were conducted in August 2019 on five databases selected for their ability to provide a focused search within the disciplines of education (ERIC and Education Research Complete), psychology (PsycINFO), and multi-disciplinary research in inter alia the disciplines of health/public health (Web of Science and MEDLINE). Table 2.1. outlines the keywords from two domains, namely ITE and SE, included in the searches. Search terms for each domain were combined using the Boolean search function "AND". Where possible, limits were applied to include articles from peer-reviewed journals.

Table 2.1. Overview of Systematic Review search terms

Search	Domain
Search 1	'Initial teacher education' OR 'Initial teacher training' OR 'Teacher professional development' OR 'Teacher education' OR 'Teacher training' OR 'Pre-service teacher education' OR 'Pre-service teacher training' OR 'In-service teacher education' OR 'In-service teacher training' OR 'In-service training of teachers' OR 'Continuing teacher education' OR 'Continuing teacher training' OR 'Teacher professional education' OR 'Teaching profession' OR 'Professional education' OR 'student teacher' OR 'Sex educator' OR 'Experienced teacher' OR 'Trainee teacher' OR 'Teacher preparation' OR 'Teacher educator' OR 'Teacher' OR 'Educator'
Search 2	'Sexuality education' OR 'Sex education' OR 'Sexual health education' OR 'Comprehensive sexuality education' OR 'Sexual education' OR 'Sex-related education' OR 'Holistic sex education' OR 'Inclusive sex education'

Following a first phase of screening of the title, and abstract, and the removal of duplicates and references which did not meet the eligibility criteria, full text papers of the remaining articles were obtained, where possible. All three reviewers blindly screened the texts of the remaining articles, with consensus reached that 15 articles met the criteria for this review. The reference list of the articles was screened and two researchers, identified as experts in the field, were contacted to address whether there were any outstanding papers for consideration within the review timeline. No additional papers were identified.



## 2.3. Findings

### 2.3.1. Study selection

Fifteen articles reporting on 13 empirical studies were included in the review. Harrison and Ollis (2015) and Ollis (2016) articles are derived from the same dataset, as are Sinkinson and Hughes (2008) and Sinkinson (2009) articles. Given, however, that these articles refer to unique aspects of the particular studies, they have been described and discussed as separate studies in this review. An overview of the process of screening and study selection is outlined in Table 2.2.

**Table 2.2. Overview of Systematic Review screening and selection process**

Phase of screening	Articles retained	Articles removed
Literature search of selected databases	1,605 citations identified	452 removed as duplicates
Phase 1: Title and abstract screening	1,153 titles and abstracts screened	1,119 articles excluded
Phase 2: Full text screening	34 articles reviewed	19 articles excluded (position papers, n=6), (module descriptors/lesson plans, n=2), (data collected on in-service teachers, n=5), (focus of the paper was not on the ITE context, n=5), (did not relate to teaching SE, n=1)
Final articles to be included in Systematic Review	15 articles retained	Screening of the reference list of the final 15 articles and responses from experts in the field did not yield additional articles to include for review.

### 2.3.2 Study characteristics

Six qualitative, five quantitative, and four mixed methods studies were reviewed. Where information was available, the research studies were identified as having been conducted between 1993 and 2014, predominantly in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The studies were published between 1996 and 2016. Data were most frequently collected from one source; student teachers (n=10), teacher educators/course providers (n=3), institutional documentation (n=1). One study collected data from both student teachers and teacher educators/course providers (Johnson, 2014).

The samples size of studies varied from 3 to 478 participants, but was generally small (8 of the studies had fewer than 90 participants: Brown, 2016; Carman et al., 2011; Goldman and Coleman, 2013; Harrison and Ollis, 2015; Johnson, 2014; MacEntee, 2016; Ollis, 2016; Vavrus, 2009).

Seven studies assessed educational inputs on sexuality education at ITE, and three conducted content analyses of content covered on educational inputs on sexuality education at ITE. As the studies were predominantly descriptive and explorative in design, specific outcome variables were often neither defined, nor addressed. Educational input studies were classified as examples of research which assessed a particular course, or module, or a selected lecture, on sexuality education at ITE. With regards to theoretical approaches that may have informed the educational input studies reviewed, three did not report a specific theoretical approach (Gursimsek, 2010; MacEntee, 2016; Sinkinson, 2009), and the remaining four reported that a critical approach was adopted (Brown, 2016; Harrison and Ollis, 2015; Ollis, 2016; Vavrus, 2009).



### 2.3.3. Synthesis of results

For the purpose of the report, a qualitative synthesis of findings was undertaken. Findings were reported in relation to a) Institutional/Programme level and b) Individual Student Teacher level aligned with the World Health Organisation's Training Matters: Framework of Core Competencies for Sexuality Educators (WHO-BZgA, 2017) and an awareness of the interaction of these aspects of student teachers' development was informative in terms of structuring the findings.

The research studies reviewed predominantly focused on examining a particular educational input on sexuality education during ITE, or on investigating the sexuality education content covered during ITE. Fewer of the reviewed studies explored student teachers' skills to teach sexuality education or student teachers' attitudes to sexuality education. The findings of the studies were synthesised and categorised in relation to institutional/programmatic level or individual student teacher level. Findings which reflected responses and perceptions of student teachers were categorised as Individual Student Teacher level. Institutional/Programme level related to studies assessing particular modules, or comparing course content across programmes and institutional-level studies were categorised as studies where data were collected from multiple institutions.

Individual Student Teacher level findings were reported in relation to the attitudes, skills, and knowledge competency areas required of sexuality educators. These competency domains, however, are not discrete entities or mutually exclusive. In taking a systemic approach, it is, therefore, acknowledged that they are dynamically inter-connected, and influence and interact other domains. Thus, although findings are reported under discrete headings, aspects of student teachers' development cannot and should not be fully understood in isolation.

#### 2.3.3.1. Institutional/programme level findings.

At a programme level, studies revealed variance in the type of sexuality education provision (core/mandatory and elective) that student teachers receive during ITE. May and Kundert (1996) found that coursework on sexuality education was reported as part of a mandatory course by 66% of respondents and as part of an elective course by 14% of respondents. While McKay and Barrett (1999) reported that only 15% of the health education programmes in their study offered mandatory sexuality education training with 26% of programmes offering an elective component. With regards to the provision of skill development and training for sexuality education that student teachers received during ITE, Rodriguez et al. (1997) found that of a potential 169 undergraduate programmes, the majority (i.e., 72%) offered some training to student teachers in health education: A minority offered teaching methods courses in sexuality education (i.e., 12%) and HIV/AIDS prevention education (i.e., 4%). Two of the reviewed studies also investigated programme time allocated to sexuality education, and found that time spent on sexuality education on a programme and/or across programmes varied from 3.6 hours (May and Kundert, 1996) to between 9.6 and 36.2 hours (McKay and Barrett, 1999). While at an institutional level, Carman et al. (2011) found that 8 of 45 teacher training institutions did not offer any training in sexuality education and of those that did so, 62% offered mandatory, and 38% elective, educational inputs on sexuality education.

Findings indicate the paucity of sexuality education topics covered across ITE programme curricula. Rodriguez et al. (1997) reported that 90% of the courses which they reviewed listed a maximum of three sexuality education topic areas. The top three sexuality education topics that were reported in terms of coverage were: human development, relationships, and society and culture. Somewhat consistently, McKay and Barrett (1999) found that the topics least emphasised on courses were: masturbation, sexual



orientation, human sexual response, and methods of sexually transmitted disease (STD) prevention. Johnson (2014) examined coverage of LGBTQI+ issues on ITE courses and reported that out of the three ITE institutions examined, none specifically referenced LGBTQI+ issues.

Finally, one study reported that the provision of sexuality education was found to be contingent on the interest and expertise of the university teacher educators (Carman et al., 2011). Carman et al. (2011) conducted phone interviews with university staff, and found that, whether and to what extent, sexuality education was provided at ITE was largely dependent on the university staff themselves.

Collectively, these findings reveal the variance in mandatory and/or elective sexuality education provision during ITE, as well as the diverse content covered and the role of teacher educators on its provision.

### **2.3.3.2. Individual student teacher level findings**

#### **2.3.3.2.1. Factors associated with student teachers' attitudes regarding sexuality education topics**

Gender, geographical location, religious beliefs and family background were identified as factors associated with student teachers' attitudes regarding sexuality education (Gursimsek, 2010; Johnson, 2014; Sinkinson and Hughes, 2008). Attending a sexuality education course may have positive implications for student teachers' attitudes as Gursimsek (2010) found that when compared to those who attended the sexuality education course, those who had not, reported more conservative and prejudiced views towards sexuality. Given that this was an elective course, however, it is important to consider self-selection bias regarding those who may have opted to take the course.

Student teachers in Johnson's (2014) study reported that, through engagement in educational inputs which discussed LGBTQI+ issues in an open and inclusive way, greater awareness of student teachers' own and others' biases was developed. So, too, was knowledge to better understand these issues. Student teachers did, however, acknowledge difficulty integrating these new learnings with their family backgrounds, and belief systems. MacEntee's study (2016) also revealed tensions between student teachers' intentions to teach, and their own attitudes to sexuality education topics and norms within schools. Since the educational input, however, none had used the participatory visual methods when teaching about HIV and AIDS during their teaching practice. Student teachers' responses indicated that external factors made it difficult to independently continue to integrate participatory visual methods and HIV and AIDS topics into their teaching practice experiences in schools.

The findings from both Johnson (2014), and MacEntee (2016), indicate that student teachers' intentions and the realities of teaching subjects and using pedagogical approaches in schools do not always align. These studies indicate that student teachers have an awareness 'that [their] own experiences, attitudes and behaviour influence the way of educating learners' (WHO-BZgA, 2017, p. 25). They further reveal the challenges between awareness of attitudes, and a commitment in their teaching of sexuality education to 'treating all persons regardless of their different backgrounds, abilities, gender identities and sexual orientation, with respect and dignity' (p. 26).

#### **Critical consciousness**

The Training Matters framework outlines the objectives of sexuality education, including 'open-mindedness and respect for others' (WHO-BZgA 2017, p. 26). Although sexuality education courses during ITE may be student teachers' first exposure to issues of sexual and gender equality, for example, critiques of hetero-normativity (Vavrus, 2009) and introductions to critical feminist discourses (Harrison and Ollis, 2015), findings indicate that the sexuality education programmes offered during ITE may be insufficient in



developing student teachers' critical consciousness – the ability to recognise and analyse wider social and cultural systems of inequality and the commitment to take action to address such inequalities.

Vavrus (2009) found student teachers expressed varying degrees of critical consciousness as a result of completing a multicultural curriculum and assignment. While Harrison and Ollis's (2015) examination of micro-teaching lessons indicated that completion of an educational input on sexuality education from a feminist, post-structuralist perspective did not suffice in increasing student teachers' understanding of gender/power relations, it did reveal the challenges of employing such a perspective. Similarly, Sinkinson (2009) reported a noticeable lack of development of criticality regarding sociocultural perspectives of sexuality education from the completion of an introductory health education course (2004, first year) to the completion of a specialist health education course (2006, third year). Any socially critical dialogue that developed was found to be already present on completion of the introductory course. Finally, albeit difficult to generalise given the study's small sample size, Brown (2016) reported that experiential pedagogical approaches, through inclusion of *inter alia* a guest speaker living with HIV, and employment of a critical, creative, arts-based pedagogical strategy offered a critical lens through which student teachers moved from a position of stigmatisation towards one of understanding and compassion.

### **2.3.3.2.2. Factors associated with student teachers' skills regarding sexuality education topics**

With regards to student teachers' skills, or potential skill development during ITE, several aspects of ITE were identified as significant in relation to the acquisition of the required skills to teach sexuality education. These included the pedagogical approaches adopted during ITE; the learning environment; opportunities for practical teaching experience, and critical self-reflection.

#### **Pedagogical approaches**

Seven of the studies reviewed examined aspects of pedagogical approaches to teaching sexuality education (Carman et al., 2011; Goldman and Coleman, 2013; Goldman and Grimbeek, 2016; Johnson, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 1997; Sinkinson, 2009; Sinkinson and Hughes, 2008). Goldman and Coleman (2013) reported that their small sample of six student teachers indicated that they learned very little regarding knowledge and pedagogical approaches specific to sexuality education during ITE. Two of the six student teachers reported that they had been exposed to contemporary and interactive teaching approaches – such as discussion, and role-play, during ITE. The remaining four student teachers reported having been, in the main, exposed to traditional pedagogies – lectures, modelling, and demonstration – and indicated the likelihood that they would replicate these pedagogical approaches in their own teaching. Sinkinson (2009) however, found that student teachers identified co-constructivist pedagogical approaches as being important when teaching sexuality education, and that they intended to make sexuality education age-appropriate and relevant to their pupils' learning. One student teacher further suggested that they would like to introduce games into their teaching. Student teacher participants in MacEntee's (2016) study indicated that the use of participatory visual methods was a novel and thought-provoking way to learn about HIV and AIDS.

Across studies, student teachers remarked that respect and acceptance of other people's views and opinions were critical to ensure that the environment in which sexuality education provision takes place is safe. These views are aligned with two of the overarching skills outlined in *Training Matters* namely the 'ability to use interactive teaching and learning approaches' and the 'ability to create and maintain a safe, inclusive and enabling environment' (WHO-BZgA 2017, p. 28).



### **Learning environment**

Student teachers (Goldman and Grimbeek, 2016) and teacher educators/course providers (Johnson, 2014), indicated preferences for the use of tutorial groups, small group face-to-face discussion, and case studies when teaching about sexuality education generally and LGBTQI+ course content, more specifically. In both studies, these approaches were associated with creating a less threatening, and more comfortable environment for student teachers to engage with topics on a personal level. MacEntee's (2016) study provides provisional support for the use of workshops in learning about HIV and AIDS.

In relation to assessment of sexuality education at ITE, Goldman and Grimbeek (2016) found that student teachers had a preference for group-based assessments, independent research, and self-assessment. Consistent with Training Matters, sexuality educators should "be able to use a wide range of interactive and participatory student-centred approaches" (WHO-BZgA 2017, p.28). These findings indicate that the creation of interactive and participatory learning environments is conducive to sexuality education at ITE level. The opportunity to engage in these types of learning environments and student teachers' positive perceptions of these learning environments may, in turn, have consequences for the types of learning environments which student teachers subsequently create.

### **Practical teaching skills**

Several of the studies indicated the need for opportunities for student teachers to teach and develop the skills to teach sexuality education. Harrison and Ollis's (2015) article was the sole study to report on the evaluation of the potential pedagogical skills student teachers had acquired following the completion of educational input on sexuality education. Their examination of micro-teaching lessons indicated the value of examining student teachers' teaching of sexuality education. Through this experience, they identified that the educational input had been insufficient in providing student teachers with the opportunity to reflect on a critical approach to gender and sexuality, and to develop the pedagogical skills to teach sexuality education from a critical perspective.

Vavrus (2009) suggested that, given the level of fear acknowledged by student teachers around teaching sexuality education, interventions and programmes should provide structured opportunities for student teachers to construct lesson plans that critically address gender identity and sexuality in developmentally appropriate ways. Vavrus (2009) further suggests that instruction on conducting discussions related to gender identity and sexuality, and strategies to respond to homophobic and sexist discourse should also be provided. Participants in Brown's (2016) study similarly reported that they would have liked to have had more opportunities to familiarise themselves with facilitating visual participatory methods when teaching about sexuality education topics such as HIV and AIDS.

### **Critical self-reflection**

The ability of sexuality educators to reflect critically on their own beliefs and values is a vital skill (WHO-BZgA 2017). Researchers in the reviewed studies consistently cited the importance of self-reflection in sexuality education provision during ITE.

The findings from Vavrus's (2009), study indicated that self-reflection was critical to the development of a more understanding, and empathetic, approach to teaching. Harrison and Ollis (2015) emphasised the need to support teachers in the development of reflective practices. Ollis (2016) concluded that the opportunity for self-reflection would impact on student teachers' intention to include pedagogies of pleasure in their practice. Johnson's (2014) study indicated that engagement in reflection regarding the self and others, helped students to develop a better understanding of their own beliefs and assumptions. The findings



from Johnson's study, however, also show that increased opportunity for self-reflection, and exposure to critical interpretations of content, do not necessarily transfer to teaching behaviours. Gursimsek (2010) recommended the inclusion of critical self-reflection components on future sexuality education courses. His rationale is that such components would assist student teachers in clarifying their own social and sexual values, life experiences, and learning histories. This clarification then assists, and supports, maturation in terms of attitudes, beliefs, knowledge as they relate to sexuality education. Collectively, these findings indicate that educational inputs on sexuality education in ITE need to provide safe spaces for self-reflection on the part of student teachers and support opportunities for honest engagement with others.

### **2.3.3.2.3. Factors associated with student teachers' knowledge regarding sexuality education topics**

Two of the reviewed studies explored the topics student teachers perceived as important for school students to learn about, and the topics they themselves would like to study during ITE. Sinkinson and Hughes (2008) found that of the aspects of health education student teachers prioritised for school students, the most important were mental health (62%); aspects of sexuality (61.2%); and drugs and alcohol (46.8%). Mental health included 'personal development, relationships, emotional health and essential skill development such as decision making' (p. 1079). Student teachers' responses indicate that they saw personal and interpersonal topics as important aspects of health education.

Goldman and Grimbeek (2016) reported that during educational inputs on sexuality education at ITE, that student teachers would prefer to have social, psychological, and developmental factors associated with student/learner puberty and sexuality addressed. Older student teachers – those in the 22-48 year-old age range – were significantly more likely, than younger student teachers to strongly rate preferences for knowledge about wider sociocultural contextual factors.

### **Student teachers' confidence and comfort to teach sexuality education**

Three of the studies reviewed reported student teachers' comfort, and confidence in, teaching sexuality education (Johnson, 2014; Ollis, 2016; Sinkinson, 2009; Vavrus, 2009). Student teachers in Sinkinson's (2009) study suggested that increases in knowledge and learning about sexuality education topics increased comfort levels, and intention to teach sexuality education. Student teachers suggested that the opportunity to listen, learn, and discuss topics in an open environment reduced their embarrassment in discussing sexuality education issues. These opportunities increased their comfort for answering pupils' questions, and using language that they had previously considered taboo (Sinkinson, 2009). Vavrus, (2009) reported that having completed the educational input on sexuality education, all student teachers felt they would create an open and safe space for students. Some student teachers reported confidence in their ability to create content, and to think of topics to cover, relating to sexuality and gender identity. Responses also indicated challenges for student teachers regarding empathy; fears on how to respond to issues of sexuality and gender identity; lack of experience; feeling unprepared; and fear of reprisal for working outside traditional norms.

Cognitive dissonance between the knowledge student teachers acquired about LGBTQI+ issues during ITE, and their personal and familial belief system in Johnson's (2014) study was associated with discomfort for student teachers. Thus, findings from Vavrus's (2009) and Johnson's (2014) studies indicate that although ITE had provided student teachers with knowledge on sexuality education topics, wider sociocultural/systemic factors may influence student teachers' confidence and/or comfort to integrate or apply this knowledge outside of the ITE context.



A lack of student teacher knowledge about sexuality education topics, especially with regards to 'non-normative' areas, such as HIV/AIDS, was reported by Brown (2016) as associated with 'othering' and discomfort regarding teaching sexuality education content. Ollis (2016) reported the discomfort student teachers' experience with topics on sexual pleasure, and observed that engagement in teaching a 20-minute lesson on a positive sexual development theme – such as pleasure – resulted in increased confidence and skill to discuss sexual pleasure, orgasm, and ethical sex. The topic of student teachers' comfort and confidence provides a prime example of the interaction of all three competency areas; attitudes, skills, and knowledge in relation to sexuality education. Furthermore, the findings highlight that a more systemic consideration of these competency areas and teachers' comfort and confidence to teach sexuality education beyond the ITE context, to the lived experience of school contexts, is warranted.

## 2.4. Overview of emergent key findings

This Systematic Review sought to investigate the empirical literature on sexuality education provision to student teachers during ITE. Altogether 15 articles, reporting on 13 studies, met the criteria for the review. The findings reveal the varied nature of the provision of sexuality education during ITE for student teachers in predominantly Western, English-speaking contexts (Carman et al., 2011; McKay and Barrett, 1999; Rodriguez et al., 1997). The reviewed studies document an examination of sexuality education provision at institutional/programme level, and Individual Student Teacher level. The latter studies, in the main, reflected student teachers' experiences regarding a particular educational input on sexuality education, and to a lesser extent related to an examination of student teachers' general attitudes, skills, or knowledge of sexuality education.

Along with the acknowledged need to provide educational input on sexuality education in ITE, the findings reflect that sexuality education is perceived of as more than a stand-alone curriculum subject. Recommendations from the reviewed studies in respect of educational inputs provide some support for a more embedded and intersectional approach to sexuality education provision during ITE. For example, Vavrus (2009) concluded that there is a need for teacher education programmes that extend curricular attention to gender identity formation, and sexuality, beyond specific sexuality education modules, as it was suggested that this will help student teachers better understand sociocultural factors that influence their teacher identities. Harrison and Ollis (2015) acknowledged that – as student teachers may not have engaged with critical approaches to material previously, and may not have been provided with adequate time to consider these interpretations of gender and power – programmes over an extended period of time, or engagement with these topics, across the ITE curriculum may facilitate increased engagement and reflection on this content. The findings provide some support that more time invested in educational inputs on sexuality education on ITE programmes may be beneficial. Courses covered over a semester (Gursimsek, 2010; Sinkinson, 2009), for example, may be more beneficial than those covered over much shorter periods (Harrison and Ollis, 2015; Ollis, 2016).

We can conclude, that:

- Adequate time investment in sexuality education provision during ITE is warranted.
- Along with the provision of educational input on sexuality education at ITE, an embedded and intersectional approach to sexuality education at ITE programme level warrants further exploration.



The Training Matters framework states that an important prerequisite to teaching sexuality education is the ability and willingness of teachers to reflect on their own attitudes towards sexuality, and social norms of sexuality (WHO-BZgA 2017). The findings indicate that educational inputs which facilitate self-reflection and the development of critical consciousness may be particularly salient in supporting student teachers to teach sexuality education. Having the space and time to engage with one's own belief systems, and experiences, can provide student teachers with insights regarding factors that shape identity and human interaction, which are fundamental to a comprehensive approach to sexuality education. This is an important task for teachers and has been identified as a gap within existing teacher education programmes (Kincheloe, 2005, as cited in Vavrus, 2009).

With regards to pedagogical approaches for teaching sexuality education during ITE, the findings indicate that the use of tutorial groups, small group face-to-face discussions, case studies, participatory visual methods, and the inclusion of guest speakers sharing their lived experiences may create less threatening, and more comfortable, environments for student teachers to engage with sexuality education topics on a personal level (Brown, 2016; Goldman and Grimbeek, 2016; Johnson, 2014; MacEntee, 2016). A lack of practical teaching experience was acknowledged by student teachers as a barrier to teaching sexuality education topics (e.g., MacEntee, 2016; Vavrus, 2009). Given the reported (Ollis, 2016), and potential (Vavrus, 2009) benefits from engaging in the practice of teaching sexuality education, the inclusion of skills-based and practical teaching experience of sexuality education or its proxy, as a minimum, within the ITE context may be warranted.

As such, it may be concluded that:

- If student teachers are to meet their future school students' sexuality education needs, a foundational element of teacher preparation at ITE must involve actively addressing issues that are linked to teacher confidence and comfort in their implementation of comprehensive sexuality education. The reviewed studies broadly indicate that it may be beneficial to adopt opportunities for critical self-reflection, practice-oriented and small-group, dialogical, inclusive and participatory pedagogical approaches for the provision of sexuality education during ITE.

There are some examples of research regarding more positive sexuality education topics such as pleasure, sexual orientation, and gender identity, although the studies do not reflect an examination of topics fundamental to a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum. Studies did not consider, or examine, the impact of the internet and social media in relation to sexuality education. Apart from May and Kundert's (1996) study, the research did not reflect consideration of the provision of sexuality education for students with diverse learning abilities and needs. Some studies considered correlational factors pertaining to student teachers' attitudes regarding sexuality education. These included gender, geographical location of upbringing (Gursimsek, 2010), and student teachers' previous school experiences of sexuality education (Sinkinson and Hughes, 2008; Vavrus, 2009). Overall, in the studies reviewed there was a dearth of research on student teachers' attitudes about sexuality education, and the inter-dependence of factors that may influence student teachers' attitudes.

This points to the need for:

- Employment of a multi-dimensional, integrative approach, examining student teachers' attitudes to, as well as skills in and knowledge of sexuality education.

Given that this field of research is relatively new, the findings which may be inferred from the educational input studies (Brown, 2016; Gursimsek, 2010; Harrison and Ollis, 2015; MacEntee, 2016; Ollis, 2016; Sinkinson, 2009; Vavrus, 2009), are tentative. These studies are generally informative regarding a particular topic or educational input, but tend not to shed light on student teachers' experiences. Furthermore, the findings from Johnson's (2014), and Carman et al.'s (2011) studies, highlight the role of teacher educators in relation to the provision of educational inputs on sexuality education in ITE.

As such, it may be concluded that:

- Larger-scale studies employing robust methodologies to assess *inter alia* student teachers' attitudes, skills, and knowledge regarding sexuality education during ITE including student teachers' knowledge, comfort, confidence and preparedness to teach sexuality are warranted.
- Research which is inclusive of both student teachers' and teacher educators' perspectives, is also warranted.
- Adoption of a systemic approach examining individual-level and contextual factors relating to sexuality education provision during ITE is needed in order to develop theoretically-derived, research-informed, and evidence-based sexuality education programmes at ITE.



# Section 3:

## A documentary analysis of SPHE/RSE provision in primary and post-primary Initial Teacher Education

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### 3.1. Introduction

Given the broader socio-historical context of RSE as situated in the public domain, this study was designed to capture the public representation of SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision in ITE. Through the Documentary Analysis of publicly available documentation, the study offers a baseline of SPHE/RSE and CSE-related provision across 14 primary and post-primary ITE programmes in the Republic of Ireland, in the academic year 2019/2020.

Drawing on the findings of the Systematic Review, to date, a small number of researchers namely Rodriguez et al. (1997) in the USA; Canadian researchers, McKay and Barrett (1999), and Carman et al. (2011) in Australia have employed Documentary Analysis to determine the range and availability of SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related content topics on offer as part of the curriculum offered on ITE programmes. Curriculum has been conceptualised broadly and varyingly as *inter alia* a method of organising knowledge, a product, a process, as praxis and ultimately, as always contextualised (Smith, 2000; Brown Wilson and Slade, 2020). Highlighting the underpinning values-base of curriculum, and of relevance to the TEACH-RSE study, is the contention of Momeni et al. (2008) that the curriculum offered on a programme of professional development, in effect, for the profession in question, communicates both '*...what we can know and what is worth knowing*' (2008, p. 500).

#### 3.1.1. Aims and objectives

The specific aim of the Documentary Analysis employed in the current study was to identify, from publicly available documentary sources, SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision in a purposive sample of 14 primary and post-primary ITE programmes in the academic year 2019/2020.

### 3.2. Methodology

#### 3.2.1. Design

Documentary analysis is a research approach in which documents are interpreted by a researcher, in order to explore a specific topic of interest. The documents that may be used as part of a study can take many different forms including website content and college prospectuses. The analytic procedure involves searching for, selecting, understanding, and synthesising the data extracted from such documents (Bowen, 2009). The data is then categorised either thematically, or quantitatively, in a process known as content analysis (Labuschagne, 2003). Documentary analysis may be used as a stand-alone research method, but it is commonly triangulated with other analytic approaches to increase validity and reduce bias (Bowen, 2009).



A Documentary Analysis was deemed an appropriate method of capturing SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related ITE programme information. This is due to its apparent face validity; the publicly available documents subjected to analysis in the present study may also be accessed by members of the public – including prospective or current student teachers.

A quantitative content analysis was undertaken to classify the tabulated Documentary Analysis data through the use of a structured, systematic coding (i.e., replicable) scheme, from which descriptive conclusions could be drawn about the patterns in the data pertaining to SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision in ITE.

Documents (including publicly available website information, programme prospectuses and/or handbooks) were sourced from a purposive sample of 14 primary and post-primary ITE programmes. Seven ITE programmes offered at four sites of primary ITE, and seven offered at six sites of post-primary ITE were selected. These particular ITE sites were selected in conjunction with the Section 5 qualitative interviews with Initial Teacher Educators. In advance of interview, for the purpose of cross-validation, each of the 17 Initial Teacher Educators were provided with the Documentary Analysis data selected for their respective ITE programme/s.

### 3.2.2. Materials

A Documentary Analysis of the publicly available sources of information pertaining to each of the 14 selected programmes was undertaken in respect of the academic year 2019/2020. These sources included the selected ITE programmes' websites, programme prospectuses and/or handbooks. A detailed table for each programme was created specifically for the purpose of collating the available SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related information from these sources.

### 3.2.3. Procedure

The procedures for the Documentary Analysis process undertaken in this study were structured in three sequential steps, as follows:

#### 3.2.3.1. Documentary Analysis

##### 3.2.3.1.1. Step 1: Selection of the content for analysis

Given that the overall TEACH-RSE programme of research (including this current study) represents the first empirical investigation of SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision at ITE in an Irish context, a sample of ITE programmes were selected. Of the range of ITE programmes offered by providers of ITE across the Republic of Ireland (cf. Teaching Council: <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/teacher-education/initial-teacher-education/providers-of-initial-teacher-education/>), 14 programmes for which Initial Teacher Educator interview data were available (See Section 5 of the Report), were selected for inclusion in this Documentary Analysis study. A purposive sampling approach was employed in the qualitative study with Initial Teacher Educators.

##### 3.2.3.1.2. Step 2: Defining units of analysis, categories, and coding protocol

Having selected the content for analysis, the subsequent process of Documentary Analysis was underpinned by the following research question:

'Is there explicit reference to SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related concepts in the publicly available primary and post-primary ITE programme documentation?'



Relevant literature was consulted to provide a clear definition of SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related concepts to guide the Documentary Analysis process. As outlined in Section 1.3 of this report, there is an absence of a universally agreed definition of CSE in the literature. Guiding frameworks from a range of internationally recognised bodies/associations (e.g., WHO, 2006; UNFPA, 2014; UNESCO, 2018) which have CSE as a key focus in their work were utilised to develop the coding protocol for the Documentary Analysis. The coding scheme for this Documentary Analysis was based on the broad conceptualisation of CSE as outlined in Section 1.3 of the Report. This broad conceptualisation of CSE, in turn, informed the agreed working definition of SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related concepts and thus, the criteria for inclusion employed in the coding process for this Documentary Analysis of SPHE/RSE provision in the purposive sample of 14 primary and post-primary ITE programmes.

### **3.2.3.1.3. Step 3: Document coding as per agreed working definition**

The tabulated data were categorised based on the agreed working definition. For the tables, categories were identified from the documented sources containing objective characteristics from the broad concept of CSE and as they pertained to SPHE/RSE (e.g., relationships, sexuality).

The units of analysis focused on were:

- (a) explicit reference to SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related concepts in the documents; and
- (b) the phrases used to describe SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related concepts (e.g. relationships, sexuality).

The data were subsequently systematically extracted from each documented source (i.e., website, programme prospectus and/or handbook) for each ITE programme. Two members of the TEACH-RSE research team together with two interns were engaged in the process of coding, cross checking and establishing accuracy, content and face validity.

Applying the working definition and coding categories, as outlined, each website, programme prospectus and/or handbook (where available) for each ITE programme, was examined. Data were collected in respect of the following variables:

- ITE site and ITE programme;
- SPHE/RSE specific content included in programme-level and module-level descriptors;
- CSE-related content included in programme-level and module-level descriptors;
- SPHE/RSE and/or CSE/related content at modular level (Code, Name/Title of Module, Year);

Identifying features, including *inter alia*; the ITE site, module title and/or code, have not been included in the reporting of these findings, or where included have been anonymised through the systematic assignment of numerical codes/identities e.g. ITE P1 – representing primary ITE Site 1 and ITE PP1 representing post-primary ITE Site 1.

## **3.3. Findings**

In this section, findings are reported separately for primary and post-primary ITE programmes with subsequent breakdown by programme level i.e. undergraduate, postgraduate; and module status i.e. core, elective and core/elective status undeclared.

The information contained in Table 3.1., broken down by ITE programme level, is of significance in the interpretation of the study's findings, namely, the typical/average number of 5 credit modules per ITE

programme based on programme duration and the programme's overall European Credit and Accumulation Transfer System ECTS credit allocation. ECTS is a tool employed across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for the purposes of enhancing transparency in the transfer of credits across programmes and supporting the planning, delivery and evaluation of higher education programmes. ECTS credits represent learning based on defined learning outcomes and their associated workload. (Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects_en)). It is a student-centred system based on the student workload required to achieve the objectives of a programme of study. It is based on the principle that 60 ECTS credits measure the workload of a full-time student during one academic year.

**Table 3.1. Typical duration, ECTS and number of 5 credit modules by ITE programme level**

ITE Programme Level	Programme Duration	ECTS	Number of 5 credit modules
Undergraduate	4 Year	240	48
Postgraduate	2 Year	120	24

### **3.3.1. Documentary analysis: Module-level patterns of SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision on primary and post-primary ITE programmes**

#### **3.3.1.1. Primary ITE programmes**

##### **3.3.1.1.1. Undergraduate ITE programme/s**

Across the four primary ITE undergraduate programmes, a total of 26 modules (as per Table 3.1. from a potential of one hundred and 92 (4x48) 5-credit modules) met the working definition for inclusion employed in this study. No explicit reference to RSE was identified across these 26 modules.

Of the 26 modules, a total of five modules offered across three primary ITE sites, namely ITE P2, ITE P3 and ITE P4, made explicit reference to SPHE. SPHE was identified as being offered either as a dedicated SPHE module or as part of a composite module together with other subject areas. Information was not publicly available as to the core and/or elective status of these five modules. The modules were identified as being offered in either Year 1 or Year 2 of undergraduate ITE programmes, but were predominantly identified in Year 2.

The modules were offered by four ITE sites, signified with P for primary, (ITE P1, ITE P2, ITE P3, ITE P4), with the majority being offered by ITE P1. Half of those 26 modules identified were offered as core modules. The number of modules where the core or elective status was undeclared was almost as high. The modules were predominantly offered in Year 2 or Year 3 of study, and in the majority of instances were indicated as of one academic year in duration. There were just two elective modules offered at primary ITE undergraduate level that met the working definition.

##### **3.3.1.1.2. Postgraduate ITE programme/s**

Of the 9 postgraduate modules (as per Table 3.1. from a potential of 48 (2x24) 5-credit modules) offered at primary ITE that met the working definition, none of the 9 identified their core/elective status. Again, no explicit reference to RSE was identified across the 9 modules. Of the 9 modules, a total of 2 modules offered in one primary ITE site, namely ITE P3, made explicit reference to SPHE. SPHE was identified as being



offered as part of a composite module, information was not publicly available as to these modules core/elective status. One module was offered in Year 1 and one module in Year 2 of the programme.

Twice as many of the nine modules were offered in Year 1, as opposed to Year 2 of study, and were generally identified as being of one semester in duration (primarily delivered in Semester 1). These modules were offered by two ITE sites (ITE P2 and ITE P3), with the majority being offered by ITE P3.

### **3.3.1.3. Breakdown by core, elective and core-elective status undeclared**

While two ITE sites (i.e., ITE P1 and ITE P2) offered core modules which were identified as meeting the working definition, the majority of these modules were delivered by ITE P1. These core modules were offered across Years 1, 2, 3 and 4 of study, carried five credits in the main, and were largely of one academic year in duration.

The pattern of the two elective modules at primary ITE identified as meeting the working definition shows that both these modules were offered solely in ITE P2, carried 5 credits in the main, were offered in both Year 2 and Year 3 of study and were of one semester in duration.

Three primary ITE sites (ITE P1; ITE P3 and ITE P4) provided 11 undergraduate modules, identified as meeting the working definition, whose core/elective status remained undeclared. These 11 modules were identified as being delivered across Years 1, 2, and 3 of study, and carried a range of up to 5 credits. Two modules were of one academic year's duration. The remaining nine were – in equal measure – of either one semester in duration, or provided no details as to their duration.

Two primary ITE sites (ITE P2, and ITE P3) provided nine postgraduate modules which met the working definition and their core/elective status remained undeclared. The majority of these were offered by ITE P3, carried less than 5 credits and were offered in Year 1 of study. All nine were identified as of one semester in duration.

In summary, 26 modules met the working definition criteria for inclusion in the Documentary Analysis across the 4 selected primary ITE programmes at undergraduate level, with the majority offered at one primary ITE site (ITE P1). Approximately one-half of the modules, were identified as core, two identified as elective and the remaining with their core/elective status undeclared. Nine modules on two of the three selected primary ITE programme sites, offered at postgraduate level, met the working definition criteria for inclusion. Here again, the majority of these modules were offered at one ITE primary site (ITE P3). The core/elective status of all nine was undeclared. Where available, the timing of the delivery of these modules was predominantly in the earlier years as opposed to the final year at either programme level. SPHE was explicitly referenced in 5 of the 26 undergraduate modules offered in 3 of the 4 ITE sites and in 2 of the 9 postgraduate modules offered in 1 of the 3 ITE sites. No explicit reference to RSE was identified across the 26 modules at undergraduate level or the 9 modules at postgraduate level that met the working definition criteria for inclusion in the Documentary Analysis.

### **3.3.1.2. Post-primary ITE programmes**

#### **3.3.1.2.1. Undergraduate ITE programme/s**

In respect of undergraduate ITE programmes, the one post-primary ITE site, signified with PP for post-primary, (ITE PP5). included in the sample was identified as offering 4 core modules (as per Table 3.1. from a potential of 48 (1x48) 5-credit modules) which met the study's working definition for inclusion. No explicit reference to SPHE and/or RSE was identified across these four modules. These four modules were mainly



offered in Year 3 of study. No details were provided in respect of module credits or the duration/semester of delivery.

### **3.3.1.2.2. Postgraduate ITE programme/s**

Twenty-four postgraduate modules (as per Table 3.1. from a potential of 144 (6x24) 5-credit modules) offered at post-primary ITE, met the working definition for inclusion in the Documentary Analysis. Here again, no explicit reference to SPHE and/or RSE was identified across the 24 modules. Of these 24 modules, the majority did not identify their core, or elective, status. Two-thirds of these modules were offered in Year 1, as opposed to Year 2 of study.

Most of the respective post-primary ITE programme documentation did not provide information pertaining to the module duration or semester of delivery. The 24 modules were offered across the 6 post-primary ITE sites, with the majority being offered by ITE PP1, ITE PP3 and ITE PP6 (in almost equal measure). Although some modules carried up to 20 credits, the majority of the identified modules carried 5 credits.

### **3.3.1.2.3. Breakdown by core, elective and core-elective status undeclared**

Four post-primary ITE sites (ITE PP1; ITE PP2; ITE PP4 and ITE PP5) provided 8 core modules, identified as meeting the working definition. Although some details were missing from the public programme-related documents, it appears that the majority of modules carried 5 credits and were somewhat more likely to have been delivered in Year 1 of study. Four post-primary modules each worth 5 credits provided in 2 ITE sites (ITE PP2 and ITE PP4) were delivered on an elective basis across Years 1 and 2 of study. No details were provided about the duration of these four modules. Finally, 4 ITE sites (ITE PP1; ITE PP3; ITE PP5 and ITE PP6) provided 16 post-primary modules, identified as meeting the working definition, whose core/elective status remained undeclared. All 16 of these modules were offered on postgraduate post-primary ITE programmes. In general, these modules were found to be delivered in the Year 1 of study, and the majority carried 5 credits. The publicly available documentation for these respective modules did not provide information regarding the duration of the modules.

In summary, 24 modules met the working definition criteria for inclusion in the Documentary Analysis across the six selected post-primary ITE programme sites, offered at postgraduate level. The majority of these modules were offered across 3 of the 6 ITE post-primary sites (ITE PP1, ITE PP3 and ITE PP6) and their core/elective status was, in the main, undeclared. A total of four modules on the one selected post-primary ITE programme, offered at undergraduate level, met the working definition criteria for inclusion. Here again, the core/elective status of all four was undeclared. Information about module duration and/or semester of delivery was not generally available. The timing of the delivery of these modules was predominantly in the early year/s as opposed to the final year at either programme level. No explicit reference to SPHE and/or RSE was identified across the 4 undergraduate modules in the 1 ITE site, or the 24 postgraduate modules offered in 6 ITE sites which met the working definition criteria for inclusion in the Documentary Analysis.

## **3.4. Overview of emergent key findings**

Key patterns emerging from the Documentary Analysis of publicly available documentation for the 14 primary and post-primary ITE programmes suggest that SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision, as broadly conceptualised in the study's working definition, were identified across both primary and post-primary ITE programmes. Based on the frequencies of identifications of SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision, however, such presence, is relatively limited. Furthermore, an uneven, disparate pattern of SPHE/



RSE and/or CSE-related provision was identified at modular level across the selected 14 primary and post-primary ITE programmes. One of the four selected primary ITE sites offering undergraduate programmes was identified as providing the majority of the modules which met the working definition for SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision. With a similar pattern noted in respect of the postgraduate programmes, with one of three primary ITE sites offering the majority of the identified modules. While, at post-primary ITE, three of the six selected sites offering postgraduate ITE programmes, were noted as providing the majority of the modules which met the working definition for SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision.

A further key pattern which emerged was that the core and/or elective status was undeclared for the majority of both primary and post-primary ITE programme modules that met the working definition for inclusion. Thus, from the documentation available, it was not possible to ascertain whether all student teachers were offered these modules as a core component or only a cohort of students undertook these modules as an elective element of their primary or post-primary ITE programme.

In relation to the timing of delivery of the modules which met the working definition, a key pattern across both primary and post-primary levels indicated that the modules were predominantly offered in the earlier years as opposed to the final year of their respective ITE programmes. This pattern of provision has notable implications for the adoption of a developmental, spiral approach, whereby provision is, where feasible, returned to as the student teacher progresses through their ITE.

Acknowledging that SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related content may in 'reality' be provided for but not 'explicitly' identified within/identifiable from the public documentation, nonetheless, across the data reported as part of this Documentary Analysis, some notable absences were identified. Of high import to the TEACH-RSE research, was that no explicit reference to RSE was identified across the documentation on the 14 ITE programmes. Furthermore, only limited explicit references to SPHE were identified. There were seven references to SPHE, as either dedicated SPHE modules or in composite modules, at primary ITE level. This pattern has salience in respect of the perceived status and visibility of SPHE/RSE on ITE programmes, and indeed, has potential implications in terms of whether or not student teachers would identify having received SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related content input during their ITE programme.

One caveat to note, regarding the method of Documentary Analysis itself, is that published programme documentation, represents a public account of 'intended' provision on that programme. A myriad of circumstances may pertain, at programme level, where a module may not be delivered as per the module descriptor *inter alia*; modules may not be offered in a given academic year, the person/s who designed the module may not be those who deliver the module, the person/s assigned to deliver the module may change with consequent change to module content offered. When taken together with a host of non-programme-related, external circumstances, e.g. the impact of COVID-19 on ITE, all play a part, in how a module may come to be delivered and indeed, how student teachers come to experience such a module. Further research is warranted to ascertain the 'reality' of provision including, the student teachers' lived experience, through e.g. student teachers' self-reported experiences of the module and/or observational studies of module teaching and learning,

Finally, while key patterns of SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision have been identified, given its scope, as part of the larger TEACH-RSE research, the findings from this Documentary Analysis study pertain to the study's purposive sample of 14 ITE programmes which were selected in conjunction with the Section 5 qualitative interviews with Initial Teachers and were not intended to represent a generalisable account of current SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision across ITE programmes. A larger-scale dedicated

study of all, or a wider representation of, ITE programmes would afford such generalisability. The efficacy of employing a qualitative research design, namely, Documentary Analysis of SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related provision at ITE was, however, in affording a baseline, at a moment in time, from which to explore concurrences and/or tensions with the data collated in subsequent TEACH-RSE primary research. Thus, through the process of triangulation in addressing the key questions relating to the provision of SPHE/RSE and/or CSE-related input across primary and post-primary ITE programmes and the concomitant student teacher and Initial Teacher Educator experience and perceptions of such provision has the potential to yield rich data when reviewed in light of analyses of ITE programme documentation such as websites, programme prospectuses and/or handbooks through which programme information is communicated publicly.



# Section 4:

A mixed methods study of student teachers' experiences of, and attitudes towards, the provision of RSE in Initial Teacher Education and their perceived knowledge, comfort, confidence and preparedness to teach RSE

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## 4.1. Introduction

Systemically, student teachers play a role in shaping RSE provision at ITE. Drawing on studies from the Systematic Review, student teachers' demographic background, prior educational experiences of RSE, level of preparedness and attitudes towards teaching of RSE influence both their experience of RSE provision at ITE and their future intentions to teach RSE (Gursimsek, 2010; Johnson, 2014; MacEntee, 2016; Sinkinson and Hughes, 2008; Vavrus, 2009).

A sequential explanatory mixed methods study was conducted to investigate student teachers' experiences of, and attitudes towards, the provision of RSE in ITE. Their perceived knowledge, comfort, confidence and preparedness to teach RSE when qualified was also investigated. The findings presented in this section pertain to quantitative data from a sample of 130 student teachers who responded to an online survey and qualitative data from 6 student teachers, from the survey sample, who participated in follow-up focus group interviews. As the first of its kind in the Republic of Ireland, this study is exploratory and serves to complement the other key elements of the TEACH-RSE research study.

### 4.1.1. Aims and objectives

The aim of the study was to examine student teachers' experiences of, and attitudes towards, a range of key constructs relating to the provision of RSE in ITE. More specifically, the study aimed to ascertain how knowledgeable, comfortable, confident and prepared student teachers perceived themselves to be in respect of the teaching of RSE, and their future intentions to teach RSE once qualified. Consistent with an explanatory-sequential mixed methods design, follow-up focus group interviews had the aim of further exploring student teachers' experiences of, and attitudes and beliefs in respect of, RSE both pre- and during their programme of study in ITE, together with their intentions regarding their future teaching of RSE.

## 4.2. Methodology

### 4.2.1. Research design

Informed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), an explanatory-sequential mixed methods design was employed in this study of student teachers' experiences of RSE in ITE. The core rationale for the use of a



mixed methods design is predicated on the combined use of both quantitative and qualitative methods with the objective of providing a better understanding of the research field than offered by a single method (Tolan and Deutsch, 2015). Consistent with the research design employed, this study was undertaken in two separate, albeit interactive, phases. The first quantitative research phase involved an online survey of student teachers followed, in the second phase, by focus group interviews with a sub-sample of the survey respondents. The findings from the qualitative focus group interviews were intended to aid in explaining some of the initial quantitative online survey results and thus, proffer a better understanding of student teachers' experience and perceptions of RSE provision at ITE.

## **4.2.2. Phase one: Online survey method**

### **4.2.2.1. Research questions**

Phase One examined *inter alia* student teachers' perceptions of their knowledge of, and comfort with, teaching specific CSE content/topics, which were derived from the WHO-BZgA Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe (WHO-BZgA, 2010). Respondents' self-efficacy beliefs about their confidence in their ability to teach RSE, along with their future orientation towards teaching RSE once qualified, were also examined.

The following research questions were investigated:

1. How well prepared to teach RSE do student teachers perceive themselves to be?
2. What are student teachers' levels of knowledge across various WHO (2010) domains?
3. What are student teachers' levels of comfort in teaching the various WHO (2010) domains?
4. What are student teachers' levels of self-efficacy in relation to the teaching of RSE?
5. What are student teachers' future intentions in relation to the teaching of RSE?

### **4.2.2.2. Participants**

Data from a purposive sample of 130 student teachers ( $N=130$ ) recruited from across 5 ITE sites in the Republic of Ireland, are presented in this Section. Inclusion criteria required that participants were undertaking a programme of study in ITE, had received input on RSE as part of their ITE programme, and were at least 18 years of age. At the time of participation, respondents were at varying stages of their ITE and all, but one of the respondents were undertaking either an undergraduate or postgraduate programme in primary ITE. Key data on the demographic profile of the sample of respondents are presented in the Findings sub-section.

#### **4.2.2.2.1. Online survey response rates**

Altogether 400 participants had accessed the online survey between February and April 2020. An initial screening revealed 104 cases where the survey had not been commenced. Of the remaining 296 cases, where more than 50% of items had not been completed, these cases were removed from the dataset, leaving 130 meaningful cases for analysis for the purposes of this report. The decision was taken to set the threshold at 50% which allowed for a sample size of  $n = 130$  for the purposes of this reporting of the dataset. A move from an 80% threshold ( $n = 140$ ) to 50% ( $n = 130$ ) while removing 10 respondents, was found not to have resulted in a difference to the Cronbach's alpha scores of reliability on the composite scales.

Early in this recruitment period, arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Irish government initiated a national-level closure of all educational institutions, including ITE sites. Subsequent to these closures,



student teachers were directed to engage with their ITE programmes through online forums. It is difficult to ascertain, given the ongoing national public health crisis at that time, the overall impact on survey recruitment.

### **4.2.2.2. Reporting conventions**

It is important to note, in the reporting of the survey findings from the 130 survey respondents, that there was variance in the response rate across individual items, with the percentage of missing values falling broadly between 20 and 30 per cent. Information on item response rate and the percentage missing values is reported, where warranted, as a footnote of the respective table or in the narrative text. Instances where the missing values for an item/s fall outside this range are denoted with an asterisk\* in the footnote to the table. Along with non-response to the item, the missing values in this study are inclusive of additional varied responses of ‘prefer not to say’, ‘don’t know’, ‘not applicable’, pertinent to each item. Percentages are reported as rounded-up/down to the nearest whole number and thus, the overall percentages may not add up to 100% in some, limited instances.

Given the outlined response rates, descriptive analyses are presented. Consistent with the explanatory-sequential mixed methods approach employed in this study, relevant extracts from focus group interview data are interwoven in the narrative, to complement the quantitative findings.

### **4.2.2.3. Student teacher survey instrument**

In the absence of available standardised tools, a survey instrument was specifically constructed drawing on international frameworks and guideline documents for the delivery of RSE, empirical literature across other domains and from consulting with experts in RSE. Question and questionnaire design recommendations of Krosnick and Presser (2009) were utilised to guide the quality development of the survey instrument. The TEACH-RSE Steering Committee convened for the overall TEACH-RSE study reviewed a draft version of the instrument for content validity resulting in some changes and clarifications to a small number of items. Two students and two subject experts pilot reviewed the online version of the survey instrument for content validity, completeness, comprehensibility and feasibility. Qualtrics, an online survey system was used to administer survey questions online to respondents. The Student Teacher Online Survey Instrument comprised the following six questionnaires:

#### **4.2.2.3.1. Demographic background and ITE programme-level factors questionnaire**

A 13-item demographic and ITE programme-level factors questionnaire asked respondents about their age, biological sex, current gender identity, sexual orientation identity, culture/ethnicity, nationality, religiosity, programme and year of study, core or elective status of RSE input, perceived level of RSE input on their ITE programme and subject areas where RSE input was provided.

#### **4.2.2.3.2. Preparedness to teach RSE questionnaire**

A 25-item scale with 4 sections was developed to assess student teachers' perceived levels of preparedness to teach RSE. The following provides a brief overview of each section:

1. Quality of RSE experience Pre-ITE: Two items assessed the perceived quality of students' prior school experience of RSE (i.e., one item on prior experiences of RSE at primary school, and one item on prior experiences of RSE at post-primary school).
2. Beliefs about Preparation at ITE to teach RSE. One item assessed student teachers' perceived levels of preparation at ITE to teach RSE compared to other subjects. Seven items assessed student teachers' beliefs about their preparedness to teach RSE in diverse classroom contexts and/or to pupils/students with diverse needs.



3. RSE-related Skills Training Opportunities: Three items assessed whether student teachers perceived that RSE-related skills-based opportunities (i.e. to reflect on their own perspectives in relation to RSE, to practice teaching RSE and for training in media literacy relevant to RSE) had been provided as part of their ITE programme.
4. RSE-related Attitudes and Beliefs: There were ten items in this questionnaire.

#### **4.2.2.3. Perceived knowledge questionnaire: Student teachers' perceived knowledge of specific RSE content/topics**

This was assessed via a specifically constructed 48-item 'Perceived Knowledge Questionnaire', based on descriptions of 10 CSE topics derived from the WHO-BZgA Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe (2010).

#### **4.2.2.3.4. Perceived comfort questionnaire: Student teachers' perceived comfort for teaching RSE content/topics**

This involved a purposively constructed 48-item 'Perceived Comfort Questionnaire', an adapted version of the 'Perceived Knowledge Questionnaire'.

#### **4.2.2.3.5. Self-Efficacy questionnaire: Student teachers' self-efficacy beliefs pertaining to teaching RSE**

A 31-item scale with five proposed dimensions was developed specifically for the study to assess student teachers' levels of self-efficacy (i.e., student teachers' perceived confidence in their ability to deliver RSE).

#### **4.2.2.3.6. Future orientation towards teaching RSE**

Seven items assessed student teachers' future orientations regarding RSE teaching. These included student teachers' perceived levels of commitment to, and empowerment to teach, RSE; intention and aim to teach RSE; if there were aspects of RSE that they would not teach; and whether they believed that they would require further professional, or specialist training, to teach RSE effectively.

### **4.2.2.4. Procedure**

Student teachers were recruited to participate from 5 ITE sites in the Republic of Ireland. Prior to commencing the study, ethical approval for the online survey was, in the first instance, obtained from DCU Research Ethics Committee (DCU/REC/2019/222) and as required, was sought in respect of the other ITE sites where recruitment took place. The TEACH-RSE research team adhered to all required student recruitment protocols for each of the ITE recruitment sites. Information on the study, and an invitation to participate was circulated via email to student teachers. An accompanying plain language statement (PLS) emphasised the inclusion criteria for, and voluntary nature of, participation, and the respondents' right to withdraw from the study at any time. Having consented to participate, respondents were directed to the online survey which was included as a link in the email invitation. Respondents were asked to complete the survey on their own and were afforded seven days from the time that they logged into the survey to complete it. Based on initial piloting, participation was estimated to take 30 minutes. Recruitment took place over a four-month period from February to May 2020.

### **4.2.3. Phase two: Student teacher focus group interviews**

Student teachers who participated in the online survey in Phase One of this study were invited to include their contact details if they were interested in participating in follow-up research on the subject of RSE in ITE. Altogether 15 student teachers provided their email addresses, and were subsequently invited to participate in a follow-up focus group interview. Inclusion criteria for Phase Two mirrored those of Phase



One, in that the focus group interviewees were required to be undertaking a programme of study in ITE, to have received input on RSE as part of their ITE programme, and to be at least 18 years of age.

Six student teachers indicated their willingness to participate in the focus group interview study. Focus group participants were aged between 18 and 22 years of age. All six focus group participants identified as female, and were at different stages of undertaking a primary ITE programme of study.

#### **4.2.3.1. Student teacher focus group interview schedule**

The Student Teacher Focus Group Interview Schedule was specifically designed for the purpose of this study. Prompt questions on the following themes were included;

- Experiences of RSE when at primary and post-primary school
- Experiences of RSE provision at ITE
- Perceived competence and comfort in the teaching of RSE
- Preparedness to teach RSE when qualified
- Recommendations/priorities for RSE provision at ITE
- Perceived needs regarding continuing professional development (CPD) in RSE
- Perceived factors influencing student teacher engagement with RSE/RSE-related research

#### **4.2.3.2. Procedure**

Before commencing the interviews, ethical approval was obtained from DCU Research Ethics Committee (DCU/REC/2020/075). Participants were provided with details of the study through the PLS, and were alerted to the questions asked prior to their consent to participate being obtained. Participants were presented with online etiquette requirements prior to their participation.

Two focus group interviews, each comprising three participants, took place in May 2020. They were facilitated by one facilitator, with the support of a co-facilitator. Focus groups were conducted in an online mode, through the use of an online forum (Zoom), and were approximately 45 minutes in length. Each focus group was audio-recorded, and analytical memos were maintained by the co-facilitator. Audio-recordings were transferred to an encrypted DCU device and subsequently transcribed. The focus group interview transcripts were then coded using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12 (QSR International). Thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed.

### **4.3. Findings**

The findings in respect of the data collated from both the student teacher online survey and focus group interviews are presented in this sub-section.

SPSS Version 25 (IBM, 2017) was employed to undertake a descriptive analysis of the data. This included the reporting of means, standard deviations, and standard errors for continuous variables and frequencies; and percentages for categorical variables. Internal consistencies are also reported, where appropriate. For consistency of interpretation, valid percentages, unless otherwise identified, are reported throughout.



### 4.3.1. Demographic profile of survey respondents

Data are presented in Tables 4.1.a-d. on the following demographic variables; age, biological sex, current sexual orientation identity, nationality, culture/ethnicity, personal importance of religion, ITE programme level and year of study. The average age of respondents (n=87, Missing value 33%) was 21.75 years, across an age range of from 19 to 33 years, with 87% representing the overall majority of respondents, aged between 19 and 23 years old. The mean age for those respondents who identified as female was 21.6 years, while the mean age of respondents who identified as male was 22.9 years.

**Table 4.1.a. Demographic profile of survey respondents: Identified biological sex**

Biological sex	Percentage %
Female	91% (n=97)
Male	9% (n=10)

Biological Sex Item response rate n=107; Missing value 18%

The overall majority, 91%, of respondents identified their biological sex as 'Female', with 9% of respondents identifying as 'Male' (i.e., the general pattern of a predominance of female respondents in our sample replicated the general sex ratio patterning of student teachers at ITE in Ireland). In respect of respondents' current gender identity, 91% identified as 'Woman', 9% identified as 'Man', and one respondent (<1%) indicated their current gender identity as 'Non-binary'.

**Table 4.1.b. Demographic profile of survey respondents: Current sexual orientation identity**

Current sexual orientation identity	Percentage %
Heterosexual/Straight	90% (n=79)
Bisexual	9% (n=8)

\*Item response rate n=88; Missing values 32%

As can be seen in Table 4.1.b, 90% (n=79) of respondents identified their current sexual orientation as heterosexual/straight, 9% (n=8) identified as bisexual, and one respondent (<1%) self-described their current sexual orientation identity as 'somewhere in between heterosexual and bisexual'.

All of those who responded to the item in respect of nationality (Item response rate n=61; Missing values 53%), reported being Irish, with one respondent additionally indicating their culture/ethnicity as Asian.

Almost half of respondents indicated a level of agreement with the statement 'Religion is important in my life'. Close to one-third indicated a level of disagreement with the statement, while one-quarter indicated that they 'Neither Agreed nor Disagreed' with the statement. See Table 4.1.c.



**Table 4.1.c. Demographic profile of survey respondents: Personal importance of religion**

	<b>Personal importance of religion</b>
Strongly Agree	10% (n=10)
Agree	36% (n=38)
Neither Agree or Disagree	25% (n=26)
Disagree	15% (n=16)
Strongly Disagree	14% (n=15)

Item response rate n=105; Missing values 19%

In respect of their ITE programme, all of those who responded, with one exception, reported undertaking a programme in primary ITE. Table 4.1.d. presents the percentage breakdown of ITE programme level by year of study.

**Table 4.1.d. Demographic profile of survey respondents: ITE programme level by year of study**

<b>ITE programme level</b>	<b>Year of study</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Primary (Undergraduate)	2nd	24% (n=23)
	3rd	38% (n=36)
	4th	30% (n=28)
Primary (Postgraduate)	1st	4% (n=4)
	2nd	3% (n=3)
Post-primary (Postgraduate))	2nd	1% (n=1)

Item response rate n=95; Missing values 27%

Notably, over 25% of the survey sample did not indicate their year of study. Of those that did over one-third, indicated that they were in the third year and 30% in their fourth and final year of an undergraduate primary ITE programme. Almost a quarter of respondents indicated being in their second year of study on an undergraduate primary ITE programme. A smaller percentage of respondents indicated, being enrolled on the first and second year (4%, and 3%, respectively) of a postgraduate ITE programme. While, one respondent indicated that they were in their second, and final, year of a programme in post-primary ITE.

### 4.3.2. ITE programme-level factors

Student teachers responded to a series of questions pertaining to their experience of RSE at ITE. These questions explored the models of RSE input received i.e. core, elective; the extent to which RSE is provided for on their ITE programmes of study, and the subject area/s of such RSE provision.

#### 4.3.2.1. Model of RSE input

For the overall majority of respondents, RSE was reported as a core part of their ITE programmes. RSE was considered 'a combination of core and elective inputs' by 13%, and 'an optional/elective component' by 2% of those who responded to this item.



**Table 4.2. Model of RSE input at ITE**

	<b>Percentage %</b>
Core Input	85% (n=86)
Combination of Core and Elective Input	13% (n=13)
Optional/Elective Input	2% (n=2)

Item response rate n=101; Missing values 22%

#### **4.3.2.2. Student teachers' perceptions of how much input they have had on RSE at ITE**

In relation to student teachers' perceptions of how much input they have had on RSE at ITE, as shown in Table 4.3., 61% of respondents perceived the amount of input they had received in relation to RSE was 'Not Enough'. For a further 33% of respondents, the amount of input they received was perceived as 'Enough'. While one respondent perceived the amount of RSE input they had received at ITE was 'More than Enough'. In response to the amount of input on RSE they have had at ITE, five respondents indicated that they have had 'None' to date.

**Table 4.3. Survey respondents' perceptions of how much input they have had on RSE**

	<b>Percentage %</b>
More than Enough	1% (n=1)
Enough	33% (n=32)
Not Enough	61% (n=59)
None	5% (n=5)

Item response rate: n=97; Missing values 25%

The survey findings, in respect of respondents' perceived sufficiency of RSE input at ITE, were explored further with the student teachers who participated in the follow-up focus group interviews. Focus group interviewees' responses largely echoed those of the survey respondents:

'It just probably wasn't sufficient enough, time-wise. But I do think we did cover some good things, I think, in those. We had lectures, I think, for an hour or something a week, and then we had two-hour seminars, or were they one hour? I can't remember. I just don't think enough was probably done over the course of four years.' (FG1-Participant 1)

'I feel that we didn't get much. We had, is it X or Y weeks of SPHE at the start of second year, and that was it. But those Y weeks of SPHE were to cover the whole curriculum, so I reckon if we got one lesson on RSE, that's all we got, and that was two hours. So, to be able to go out and teach juniors to sixth class about RSE confidently, I just felt it wasn't [enough, as per question]' (FG1-Participant 2)

'It definitely wasn't the full two hours. It felt like we didn't get enough. Coming out now, it feels like that was so long ago I can hardly remember what they said in it, let alone any resources or anything.' (FG2-Participant 5)



### 4.3.2.3. Subject areas where survey respondents indicated receiving input on RSE

In respect of the subject areas where survey respondents indicated that they had received input on RSE, respondents could select one or more subject area options from a list provided. As would be expected, given the sample profile is predominantly student teachers in primary ITE, the subject area which the overall majority of the sample indicated that they received input on RSE was in SPHE. Albeit in lower frequencies, as shown in Table 4.4. a range of other subject areas were also selected from the options provided namely; Educational Sciences/Foundation Studies, e.g. Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology; Ethics; Physical Education; Religious Education; and Wellbeing. Two respondents selected the 'Other' option and both indicated that they had received RSE input in the subject area of policy. Note: As respondents could select more than one subject area, the sum of percentages will be greater than 100%.

**Table 4.4. Subject areas at ITE where survey respondents indicated receiving input on RSE**

Subject area	Frequency	Percentage of total sample (N=130)%
SPHE	n=102	78%
Foundation Studies	n= 17	13%
Ethics	n= 16	12%
Physical Education	n= 8	6%
Religious Education	n= 7	5%
Wellbeing	n= 7	5%
Other: Policy	n= 2	<2%

### 4.3.3. Student teachers' preparedness to teach RSE

#### 4.3.3.1. Quality of prior experience of RSE at primary and post-primary school

Two separate items assessed the perceived quality of respondents' own school experiences of RSE when they were primary and post-primary students. Percentage ratings of perceived quality of student teachers' prior experiences of RSE in primary and post-primary school are presented in Table 4.5.

**Table 4.5. Perceived quality of prior experience of RSE in primary and post-primary school**

	Primary school	Post-primary school
Good Quality	15% (n=14)	28% (n=26)
Neither Good nor Poor Quality	28% (n=26)	21% (n=19)
Poor Quality	35% (n=32)	36% (n=33)
Extremely Poor Quality	22% (n=20)	14% (n=13)
I did not receive RSE	-	1% (n=1)

Item response rate n=92; Missing values 29%

Item response rate n=92; Missing values 29%



In respect of RSE in primary school, only 15% of survey respondents indicated that their prior experience was of 'Good Quality'. Respondents' perceptions of the quality of their RSE experience at post-primary school appeared to be more positive, with almost twice as many of those responding indicating a 'Good Quality' experience of RSE at post-primary compared to primary School. One respondent indicated that they had not received any RSE at post-primary level.

A scale item also examined the quality of the RSE that respondents received in school. The scores ranged from 1 (i.e., 'I did not receive RSE') to 5 ('Excellent quality'). Higher scores on these items indicate perceptions of better quality of RSE experienced by student teachers in their primary and post-primary schooling prior to ITE. Respondents gave higher average quality ratings of their RSE experience in post-primary school (Mean = 2.6; sd = 1.07), than of their RSE experience in primary school (Mean = 2.4; sd = 0.99) indicating perceived better quality of RSE experienced by respondents in their post-primary, than in their primary schools.

In the focus group interviews, student teachers reported having limited or no previous experience of receiving RSE in their primary school education. Where RSE was provided, a number of the focus group interviewees noted that it was provided by a person other than the class teacher such as a nurse or a different teacher in the school. Interviewees reported that from their recollection RSE was left until the senior years of their primary schooling and was typically a one-off experience.

'I'd say in primary school, honestly, little to none [laughs]. That's why I was worried about coming on [the focus group interview], because actually just looking back on primary school, there really wasn't any that I remember.' (FG1-Participant 1)

'I felt RSE started once I more got into the senior room, as we call it, so from third to sixth. And like [X – other FG participant] we had the three-hour sex talk; it was fifth class I had it because they did it every second year, where the HSE nurse came in and did the talk.' (FG1-Participant 2)

'I remember I had an older lady as a teacher with two classes in fourth class. Instead of my own teacher teaching it, we were sent into the other class so there were maybe 60 in the room. As a child I think I was aware this is something really big and very different because we were moving classroom, it wasn't in our own classroom.' (FG2-Participant 6)

In respect of their experiences of RSE in their post-primary school education, focus group interviewees reported that the RSE provision they received was perceived of as more quality time and input on RSE.

'And secondary school, there's a bit of it throughout, let's say first, second, third year, but then in fifth year we had SPHE once a month and it was all sex education, the whole year through.' (FG1-Participant 2)

'And then post-primary, definitely a little bit more, but even still, when I was filling out the survey there were a lot of topics that just definitely weren't covered. SPHE would have been the only subject where any of that stuff, and definitely I hadn't come across half of the topics at all.' (FG1-Participant 1)

'In secondary school, we actually didn't get it through SPHE, we got it through Religion. I went to a kind of a [laughs] very, very Catholic school; it used to be owned by nuns, and it was filtered through that lens of religion, so it was... yes.' (FG1-Participant 3)



### 4.3.3.2. Beliefs about the preparation at ITE to Teach RSE

This section of the survey examined key issues in relation to student teachers' beliefs about the preparation at ITE to teach RSE compared to other subject areas and to diverse groups of children and adolescents.

#### 4.3.3.2.1. Beliefs about preparation at ITE to teach RSE compared to other subject areas

Notably as may be seen in Table 4.6., the majority (62%) of respondents indicated that their perceived preparation at ITE to teach RSE was 'Worse' (34%) or 'Much Worse' (28%) when compared to their professional preparation in other subject areas at ITE. A further 31% of respondents perceived that they were 'Neither Better nor Worse' prepared at ITE to teach RSE than other subject areas. Moreover, only 6% of respondents reported that they were 'Better' or 'Much Better' prepared to teach RSE comparative to the preparation received in respect of other subject areas at ITE.

**Table 4.6. Perceived preparation at ITE to teach RSE compared to other subject areas**

	Percentage %
Much Worse	28% (n=28)
Worse	34% (n=34)
Neither Better nor Worse	31% (n=31)
Better	5% (n=5)
Much Better	1% (n=1)

Item response rate n=99; Missing values 24%

Following up on this in the focus group interviews with student teachers, when compared with other subjects, focus group interviewees indicated that they perceived themselves to be less prepared to teach RSE:

'I know we're better prepared with the likes of your Maths and your SESE, but still, I just feel less prepared for SPHE [inclusive of RSE] and especially because it was so long ago. Second year seems [laughs] quite a while, even though it's only two years, but with all the placement, it seems like it's forever [laughs].' (FG1-Participant 2)

#### 4.3.3.2.2. Beliefs about preparation at ITE to teach RSE to diverse groups of children and adolescents

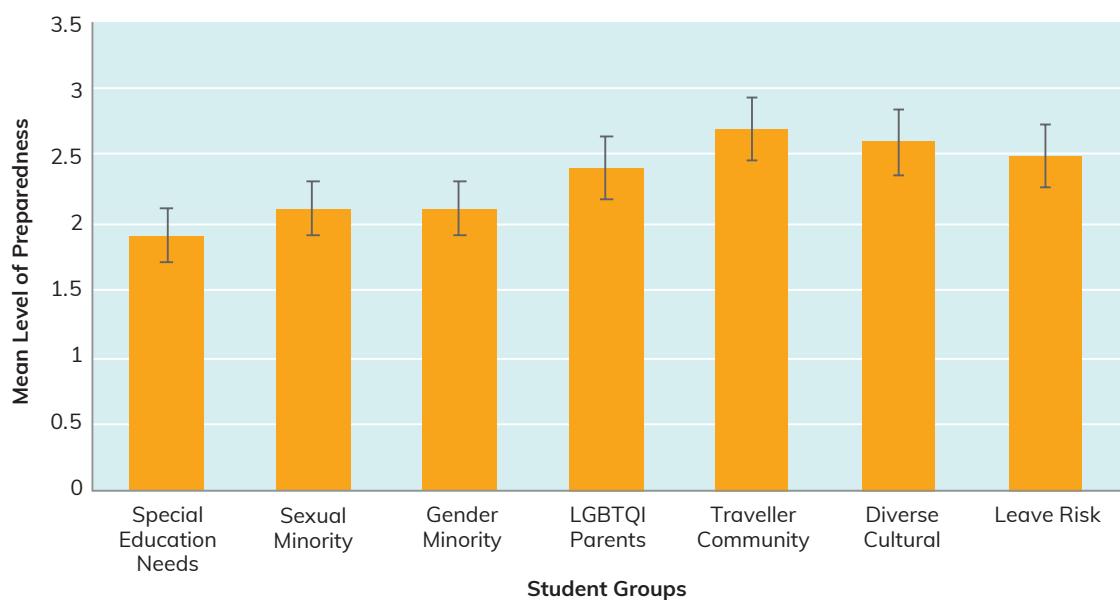
Seven items assessed student teachers' beliefs about preparation at ITE to teach RSE to diverse groups of children and adolescents. These groups of children and adolescents were as follows:

- children and adolescents with special educational needs;
- sexual minority children and adolescents;
- gender minority children and adolescents;
- children and adolescents who are from LGBTQI+-parented families;
- children and adolescents who are members of the Travelling Community;
- children and adolescents who are from diverse cultural backgrounds; and
- children and adolescents who are at risk of early school leaving



Responses to each item ranged from 1 ('Very Unprepared') to 5 ('Very Prepared'). Higher scores reflect higher ratings of preparedness.

The data from these seven items were grouped on the basis of their similarity of structure (i.e., response format) and function (i.e., beliefs about preparation at ITE to teach RSE; See Figure 4.1.). Total composite scores were computed by getting the average total sum score for each of the seven items. The reliability of the composite scores was largely moderate to high. With the exception of Children and Adolescents with Special Educational Needs ( $\alpha = .5$ ); the Cronbach's alphas for the remaining six of the seven domains was moderate to high (i.e., Sexual Minority Children and Adolescents ( $\alpha = .8$ ); Gender Minority Children and Adolescents ( $\alpha = .7$ ); Children and Adolescents with LGBTQI+ -Parented Families ( $\alpha = .7$ ); Children and Adolescents that are Members of the Travelling Community ( $\alpha = .8$ ); Pupils from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds ( $\alpha = .8$ ); and Children and Adolescents at Risk of Early School Leaving ( $\alpha = .8$ )).



**Figure 4.1. Mean ratings of preparation at ITE to teach RSE to diverse groups of children and adolescents**

The descriptive trends indicated in Figure 4.1. show that on average, respondents rated themselves as more prepared to teach RSE to children and adolescents who are;

- members of the Travelling Community (Mean = 2.7;  $sd = 1.2$ );
- from diverse cultural backgrounds (Mean = 2.6;  $sd = 1.2$ );
- at risk of early school leaving (Mean = 2.5;  $sd = 1.2$ );
- from LGBTQI+-parented families (Mean = 2.4;  $sd = 1.2$ )

when compared on average to their ratings of their perceived preparedness to teach RSE to:

- children and adolescents with special educational needs (Mean = 1.9;  $sd = 1.0$ ),
- sexual minority children and adolescents (Mean = 2.1;  $sd = 1.0$ ), and
- gender minority children and adolescents (Mean = 2.1;  $sd = 1.0$ ).



## Findings from the TEACH-RSE Research Project

When each of these scale items were examined as stand-alone variables, see Table 4.7., the emergent pattern supported the composite findings.

**Table 4.7. Beliefs about preparation at ITE to teach RSE to diverse groups of children and adolescents**

	Children and adolescents with special educational needs	Sexual minority children and adolescents	Gender minority children and adolescents	Children and adolescents from LGBTQI+-parented families	Children and adolescents who are members of the Travelling Community	Children and adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds	Children and adolescents at risk of early school leaving
Very Prepared		—	—	1% (n=1)	3% (n=3)	3% (n=3)	2% (n=2)
Prepared	10% (n=10)	11% (n=11)	13% (n=13)	23% (n=23)	27% (n=27)	27% (n=27)	24% (n=24)
Neither Prepared nor Unprepared	13% (n=13)	17% (n=17)	14% (n=14)	20% (n=20)	25% (n=25)	22% (n=22)	22% (n=22)
Unprepared	33% (n=33)	41% (n=41)	39% (n=38)	28% (n=28)	25% (n=25)	28% (n=28)	26% (n=26)
Very Unprepared	44% (n=44)	30% (n=30)	33% (n=32)	29% (n=29)	21% (n=21)	21% (n=21)	27% (n=27)
	Item response rate n=100; Missing values 23%	Item response rate n=99; Missing values 24%	Item response rate n=97; Missing values 25%	Item response rate n=101; Missing values 22%	Item response rate n=101; Missing values 22%	Item response rate n=101; Missing values 22%	Item response rate n=101; Missing values 22%

Thus, the majority (77%) of respondents indicated that they believed they were unprepared to teach RSE to 'Children and adolescents with special educational needs' (44% 'Very Unprepared' and 33% 'Unprepared'). A similar descriptive trend was evident in responses to items about preparation for teaching RSE to sexual minority children and adolescents and gender minority children and adolescents. On both of these items the majority – 71% and 72% respectively – of respondents indicated a belief that they were unprepared to teach RSE to sexual minority children and adolescents (30% 'Very Unprepared' and 41% 'Unprepared') and/or gender minority children and adolescents (33% 'Very Unprepared' and 39% 'Unprepared'). Conversely, there were smaller numbers of respondents, ranging from 1 to 3%, who reported they believed themselves to be very prepared to teach RSE to some of the identified groups of children and adolescents.

### 4.3.3.3. RSE-relevant skills-based opportunities

Three separate items assessed whether student teachers believed that their ITE provided RSE-relevant skills-based opportunities namely: opportunities to reflect on their own perspectives in relation to RSE, opportunities to practice teaching RSE and training in media literacy relevant to RSE. Scale scores ranged from 1 (i.e., 'Strongly Disagree') to 5 ('Strongly Agree'). Higher scores on these questions indicate that respondents were more likely to agree that the named RSE-relevant skills-based opportunities were provided on their ITE.



**Table 4.8. Provision of RSE-relevant skills-based opportunities**

	<b>Opportunities to reflect on own RSE perspectives</b>	<b>Training in media literacy relevant to RSE</b>	<b>Opportunities to practise teaching of RSE</b>
Strongly Agree	4% (n=4)	1% (n=1)	2% (n=2)
Agree	27% (n=27)	20% (n=20)	3% (n=3)
Neither Agree or Disagree	13% (n=13)	29% (n=28)	7% (n=7)
Disagree	38% (n=38)	38% (n=37)	42% (n=43)
Strongly Disagree	19% (n=19)	12% (n=12)	46% (n=47)
Item response rate n=101; Missing values 22%		Item response rate n=98; Missing values 25%	
		Item response rate n=102; Missing values 21.5%	

Over half, 57% of respondents, either disagreed or strongly disagreed that their ITE programme had, at the time of the survey, provided opportunities to reflect on their own perspectives related to RSE. Fifty percent of respondents indicated disagreement in respect of their ITE programme having provided opportunities for training in media literacy relevant to RSE. The overall majority, 88% of respondents, indicated disagreement that their ITE programme had provided opportunities to practise teaching RSE. Taken together, this descriptive analysis, as shown in Table 4.8., indicates that further consideration is warranted in relation to the provision of these key skills-based opportunities relevant to RSE.

Findings from the focus group interviewees reflected the survey findings in relation to opportunities to practice the teaching of RSE. Interviewees indicated that they did not have opportunities to practice teaching RSE:

'It was always something you steered away from, I think.' (FG1-Participant 2)

'Because there's nothing else that they're – not forbidding us to teach – but there's no topics in Maths that they'd say to stay away from. They throw you in the deep end in every other subject, so I don't know why not RSE, really.' (FG1-Participant 3)

'On my second year school placement on the observation day...I arrived on the observation and there were, I think, three other students in the school. They all went off to their classes and I was told that ACCORD were coming in to deliver RSE and that it wouldn't be appropriate for me to sit in the classroom so I had to sit in the staff room for the day and effectively missed out on my entire observation day.' (FG2-Participant 5)

Focus group interviewees also articulated their understanding as to the reasons why such school-based practice may not be optimal:

'I guess it kind of makes sense because I guess they're not your class, and there isn't that trust in their teacher established there. Because in addition to that stuff, it was emphasised in the college that they thought it's better that the class teacher teaches RSE because of that sense of trust. So, I guess it makes sense in that capacity.' (FG1- Participant 3)



While student teachers evidenced an understanding of reasons as to why they may not teach RSE while on school placement, they were, however, able to identify alternative modes to school-based teaching, to practice their teaching of RSE including *inter alia* micro-teaching, role plays, modelling and observations:

'We were told not to teach it on this placement that we were meant to have. I am not too sure about fourth year. I think we may have been told not to teach it then as well because of the sensitive nature and we don't know the kids and the class as well as the class teacher would.' (FG2-Participant 6)

'We did micro-teaching in first year before we went out on first placement. Something along those lines might be good. If we are not allowed to do it on placement, maybe we could do it in small groups – even a 10-20 minute lesson. Maybe an encouragement to do activities within the class to encourage dialogue. That could be very helpful as well.' (FG2-Participant 4)

### 4.3.3.4. RSE-related attitudes and beliefs

This sub-section presents findings in relation to student teachers' attitudes and beliefs in respect of the appropriate age at which RSE should start; children/adolescents rights to RSE and salience of school contexts for student teachers' future teaching of RSE. Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, which ranged from 1 (i.e., 'Strongly Disagree') to 5 ('Strongly Agree') with a higher score indicating a higher level of agreement with the item statement.

#### 4.3.3.4.1. Perceived age at which RSE should start

Response options 'At what age do you think RSE should start?' ranged from 0-18 yrs. While there was some variation in terms of the age respondents perceived that RSE should begin, all respondents indicated that RSE should commence at or under the age of 12, corresponding in the main to primary school years. Table 4.9. outlines the frequency and percentage breakdown across five age groupings, corresponding broadly to birth/early childhood, early years at primary, middle years at primary, senior years at primary and post-primary school ages.

**Table 4.9. Age at which RSE should start?**

	Percentage %
Birth to 3 years	4% (n=4)
4 to 6 years	41% (n=41)
7 to 9 years	29% (n=29)
10 to 12 years	26% (n=26)
13 to 18 years	-

Item response rate n=100; Missing values 23%

Although the mean age at which participants thought RSE should start was 7.2 years, the most frequently reported median age (n=26 respondents) was 5 years of age corresponding with the typical age of starting primary school.



School starting age was also the age referenced by student teachers in the focus groups. Starting RSE early in a child's school life was perceived to remove awkwardness or apprehension that may happen later in childhood/adolescence:

'I think from Junior Infants it should be at an age-appropriate level because dropping kids into it when they are in sixth class makes it far more of an issue than it needs to be. It should be being built up from Junior Infants.' (FG2-Participant 5)

'I don't see why it wouldn't be nearly from pretty much junior or senior infants at an age-appropriate level, then moved on depending on the content. That is, I think, what creates... I think in kids there is that awkwardness, that apprehension about RSE because it is introduced as something that is suddenly new in the senior classes that they have never done before. I remember myself there was the sending home of the consent slips, then it was the build-up to it, whereas if it was just a normal part like any other part of the curriculum, I think it wouldn't have that big sense of mystery about it.' (FG2-Participant 6)

Furthermore, adopting a developmental and spiral approach to the implementation of RSE in schools was endorsed:

'I think doing a little every year makes kids much more easy with the topic. Age-appropriate is a very important thing when you are doing it, especially with junior or senior infants. Even a small bit would be good to get them started.' (FG2-Participant 5)

#### 4.3.3.4.2. Rights to RSE

The overwhelming majority, 98% of respondents either 'Agreed' (18%) or 'Strongly Agreed' (80%) that 'RSE should be provided in all primary Schools' (See Table 4.10.). Less than 2% indicated that they 'Neither Agreed nor Disagreed' with the statement, while no respondent disagreed with the statement. Even more categorically, all respondents either 'Agreed' (11%) or 'Strongly Agreed' (89%) that 'RSE should be provided in all post-primary schools'.

**Table 4.10. Right to RSE provision in primary and post-primary school**

	Primary school	Post-primary school
Strongly Agree	80% (n=82)	89% (n=91)
Agree	18% (n=19)	11% (n=11)
Neither Agree or Disagree	2% (n=2)	-
Item response rate n=103; Missing values 21%		Item response rate n=102; Missing values 21.5%

The vast majority of respondents (92%) either 'Strongly Agreed' (51%) or 'Agreed' (41%) that 'Children under 12 years have a right to RSE'. Six respondents (6%) indicated that they 'Neither Agreed nor Disagreed' with the statement while two respondents disagreed with the statement. As may be seen in Table 4.11., the overall level of agreement rose to 100% of respondents providing either 'Strongly Agreed' (86%) or 'Agreed' (14%) responses to the statement 'Children/Adolescents over 12 years have a right to RSE'.



**Table 4.11. Right to RSE for children under 12 Years and children/adolescents over 12 years**

	<b>Right to RSE children under 12 years</b>	<b>Right to RSE children/ adolescents over 12 years</b>
Strongly Agree	51% (n=52)	86% (n=89)
Agree	41% (n=41)	14% (n=14)
Neither Agree or Disagree	6% (n=6)	-
Disagree	2% (n=2)	-

Item response rate n=101; Missing values 22%      Item response rate n=103; Missing values 21%

#### **4.3.3.4.3. Consideration of school context when teaching RSE**

Student teachers responded to items as to whether the religious ethos, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) status and urban/rural location of the school should be considered when teaching RSE. Respondents' attitudes and beliefs were measured with responses ranging from 1 (i.e., 'Strongly Disagree') to 5 ('Strongly Agree'). Table 4.12. provides the percentage breakdown of responses to those items pertaining to school context and the teaching of RSE.

**Table 4.12. Consideration of school context when teaching RSE**

	<b>Religious ethos</b>	<b>DEIS status</b>	<b>Urban/rural location</b>
Strongly Agree	7% (n=7)	9% (n=9)	6% (n=6)
Agree	16% (n=16)	30% (n=30)	16% (n=16)
Neither Agree or Disagree	21% (n=21)	21% (n=21)	18% (n=18)
Disagree	32% (n=32)	23% (n=23)	40% (n=41)
Strongly Disagree	25% (n=25)	17% (n=17)	21% (n=21)

Item response rate n=101;  
Missing values 22%      Item response rate n=100;  
Missing values 23%      Item response rate n=102;  
Missing values 21.5%

Student teachers expressed diverse levels of agreement on whether aspects of the school context should be considered when teaching RSE. While, more than half, (57%) of respondents indicated that a schools' religious ethos did not warrant consideration, almost one-quarter (23%) indicated that the religious ethos of the school merited consideration in terms of the teaching of RSE. With regard to the DEIS status of schools, 40% of respondents indicated that the DEIS status of a school did not warrant RSE consideration, with 39% indicating that DEIS status of the school ought to be considered with regard to the teaching of RSE. Almost two-thirds (61%) of respondents expressed a level of disagreement that the urban/rural location should be considered when teaching RSE, while, approximately one-in-five (22%) of respondents indicated that urban/rural location should be taken into consideration with regard to the teaching of RSE.

#### **4.3.3.4.4. School-home cooperation for RSE provision**

As can be seen in Table 4.13., the overall majority (85%) of survey respondents either 'Agreed' (49%) or 'Strongly Agreed' (36%) with the statement that 'Parents/Guardians and schools should closely cooperate for the provision of RSE'. A minority of 5% of those who responded to this item either 'Disagreed' or 'Strongly Disagreed' in respect of school-home cooperation for RSE provision.



One of the focus group interviewees perceived that further support at ITE in respect of working together with parents/guardians in the provision of RSE was warranted:

'...we didn't get, I don't think, much say about parents, and getting their consent, and that's definitely another thing that I'd be like, "You need to go and talk to someone." (FG1-Participant 2)

**Table 4.13. School-home cooperation for RSE provision**

	Percentage %
Strongly Agree	36% (n=36)
Agree	49% (n=49)
Neither Agree or Disagree	10% (n=10)
Disagree	3% (n=3)
Strongly Disagree	2% (n=2)

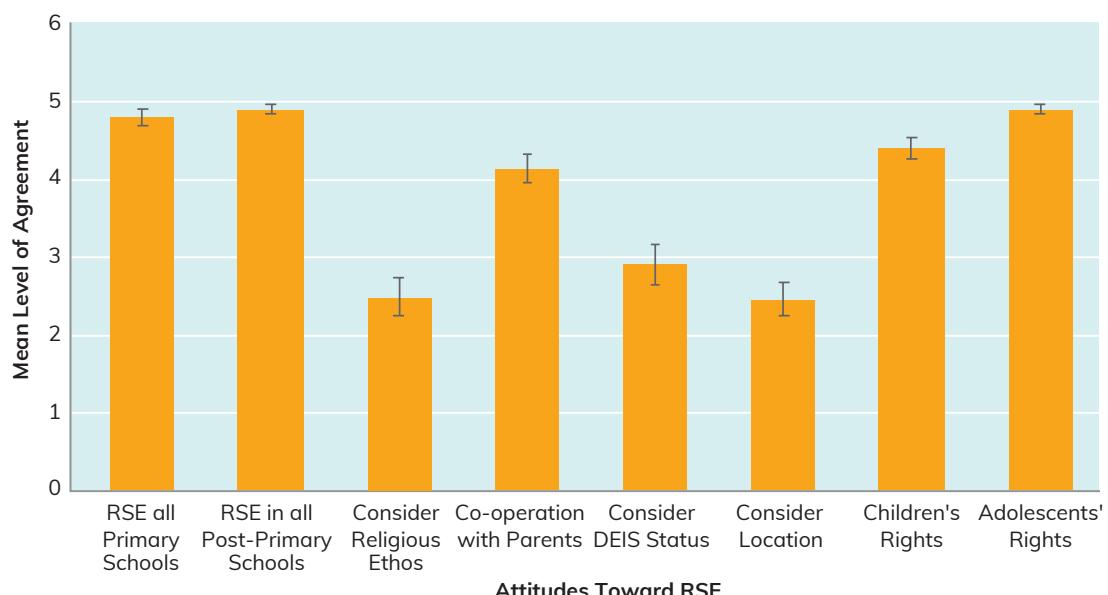
Item response rate n=100; Missing values 23%

#### 4.3.3.4.5. RSE-related attitudes and beliefs mean total scores

Data from the respective RSE-Related Attitudes and Beliefs items were grouped on the basis of their similarity of structure (response format) and function. Total scores were computed by obtaining the mean total score for each of the RSE-Related Attitudes and Beliefs items. Scale scores ranged from 1 (i.e., 'Strongly Disagree') to 5 ('Strongly Agree') and higher scores indicated higher levels of respondent agreement.

The reliability of these total score composites was low. Cronbach's alphas for each of the eight domains was low (i.e., RSE in all primary schools ( $\alpha = .1$ ); RSE in all post-primary Schools ( $\alpha = .1$ ); Consider Religious Ethos ( $\alpha = .2$ ); Consider DEIS status ( $\alpha = .5$ ); Consider School Location ( $\alpha = .4$ ); Cooperation with Parents/Guardians ( $\alpha = .2$ ); RSE as Children's Right ( $\alpha = .2$ ); RSE as Adolescent's Right ( $\alpha = .1$ )).

Figure 4. 2. presents the mean total scores for respondents to the RSE-Related Attitudes and Beliefs items.



**Figure 4.2. Mean attitudes and beliefs toward RSE (ITE; Error bars +/- 2 SE)**



In terms of mean RSE-Related Attitudes and Beliefs' scores in relation to their level of agreement with the respective statements, respondents indicated higher average levels of agreement that RSE should be provided in all post-primary schools (Mean = 4.9;  $sd = 0.46$ ), than in all primary schools (Mean = 4.8;  $sd = 0.31$ ). Likewise, in respect of children/adolescents' right to RSE, respondents indicated higher average levels of agreement that children/adolescents over 12 years have a right to RSE (Mean = 4.9;  $sd = 0.34$ ), than that for children under 12 years having a right to RSE. (Mean = 4.4;  $sd = 0.70$ ).

In relation to the teaching of RSE across diverse school contexts, respondents indicated higher average levels of agreement that the DEIS status of the school should be considered when teaching RSE (Mean = 2.91;  $sd = 1.26$ ), when compared with either a school's religious ethos (Mean = 2.49;  $sd = 1.22$ ) or urban/rural location (Mean = 2.46;  $sd = 1.16$ ).

Finally, respondents indicated the highest levels of agreement in respect of school-home cooperation for the provision of RSE (Mean = 4.14;  $sd = 0.86$ ).

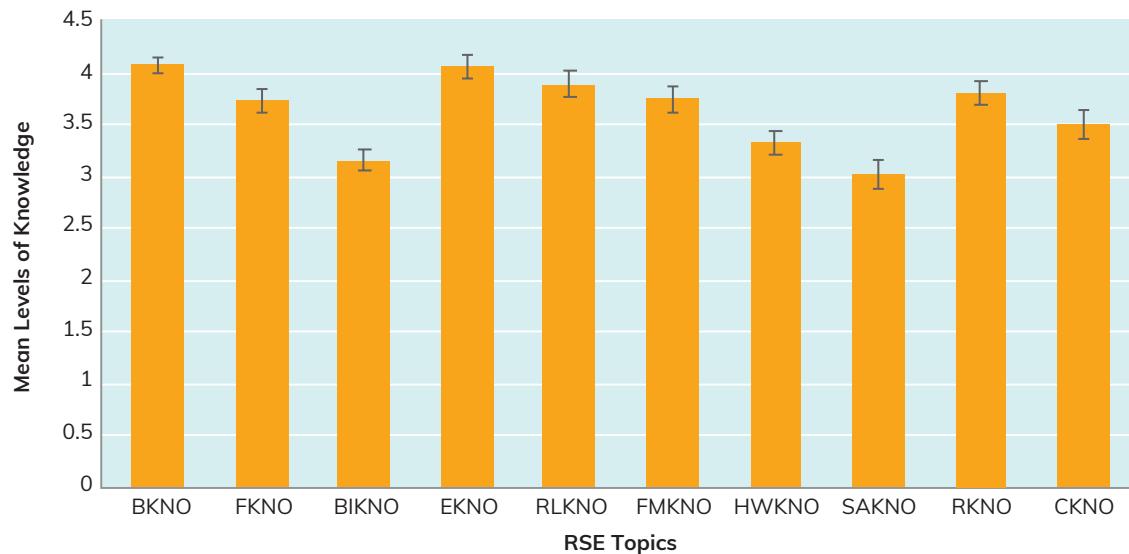
### 4.3.4. Perceived knowledge of specific RSE content/topics

The Perceived Knowledge Questionnaire had 10 key content/topics domain areas which were derived from the WHO-BZgA Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe (WHO-BZgA, 2010).

- Human Body and Human Development (BKNO: 4 items)
- Fertility and Reproduction (FKNO: 4 items)
- Sexuality: Behaviour and Identity (BIKNO: 10 items)
- Emotions (EKNO: 5 items)
- Relationships and Lifestyles (RLKNO: 6 items)
- Family Structures (FMKNO: 5 items)
- Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing (HWKNO: 6 items)
- Sexual Abuse and Coercion (SAKNO: 7 items)
- Sexuality and Rights (RKNO: 5 items)
- Social and Cultural Influences on Sexual Decision Making (CKNO: 7 items)

This questionnaire assessed perceived knowledge of the RSE content/topics instead of comfort and scores ranged from 1 ('no knowledge') to 5 ('excellent knowledge') of specific RSE content/topics. Consequently, higher scores indicate greater knowledge on the scale. Similar to the previous scale, the 10 separate knowledge subscale composite scores were computed by getting the average total score for each subscale. With the exception of Fertility and Reproduction (FKNO: Alpha = .5), Family Structures (FMKNO: Alpha = .6), Sexual Abuse and Coercion (SAKNO; Alpha = .5), Social and Cultural Influences on Sexual Decision Making (CAKNO; Alpha = .6), which all showed moderate levels of reliability, the Cronbach's alphas for the remaining six knowledge subscale domains were high (i.e., Human Body and Human Development (BKNO: Alpha = .7); Sexuality: Behaviour and Identity (BIKNO; Alpha = .8); Emotions (EKNO; Alpha = .7); Relationships and Lifestyles (RLKNO: Alpha = .7); Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing (HWKNO; Alpha = .7); and Sexuality and Rights (RAKNO; Alpha = .7). Taken together, the overall total knowledge scale had extremely high reliability (Alpha = .9).





**Figure 4.3. Mean ratings for knowledge of specific RSE content/topics (ITE; Error bars +/- 2 SE)**

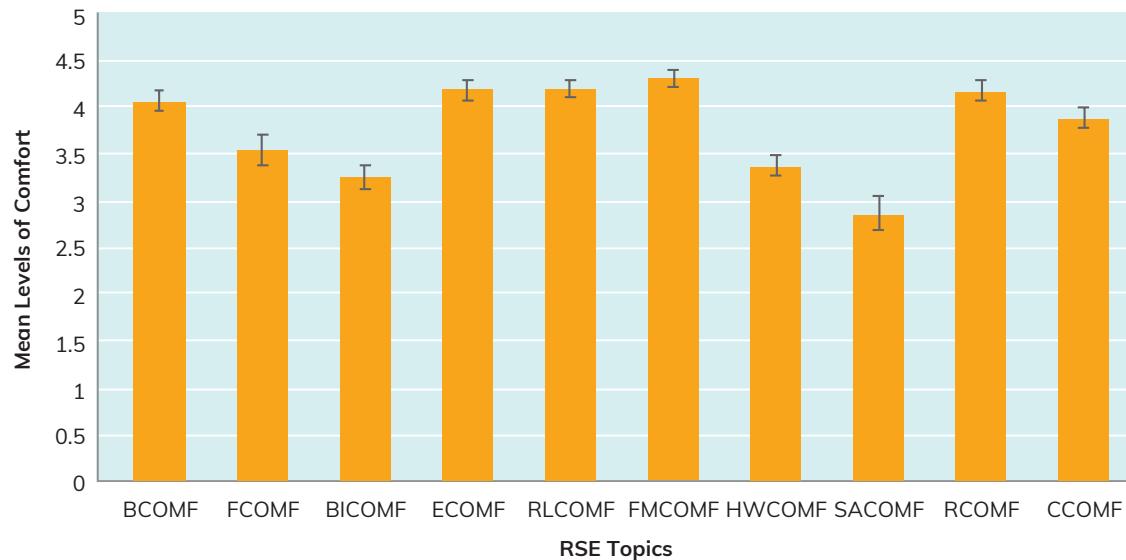
The data in Figure 4.3. indicates that descriptively, respondents perceived that they were less knowledgeable about teaching Sexuality: Behaviour and Identity and Sexual Abuse and Coercion when compared to all other knowledge content/topics domains.

#### **4.3.5. Perceived comfort for teaching specific RSE content/topics.**

The Perceived Comfort Questionnaire had identical content/topics domain areas to the Perceived Knowledge Questionnaire. Scores ranged from 1 (i.e., 'extremely uncomfortable') to 5 ('extremely comfortable'). Lower scale scores indicate less comfort with teaching specific RSE content/topics and higher scores indicate more comfort with teaching specific RSE content/topics.

The 10 separate subscale composite scores were computed by getting the average total score for each subscale. With the exception of Family Structures, Cronbach's alphas for the remaining nine subscale domains were high (i.e., BCOMF ( $\alpha = .7$ ); FCOMF ( $\alpha = .8$ ); BICOMF ( $\alpha = .8$ ); ECOMF ( $\alpha = .8$ ); RLCOMF ( $\alpha = .8$ ); FMCOMF ( $\alpha = .6$ ); HWCOMF ( $\alpha = .9$ ); SACOMF ( $\alpha = .7$ ); RCOMF ( $\alpha = .8$ ); and CCOMF ( $\alpha = .7$ )). The overall total scale had extremely high reliability ( $\alpha = .94$ ).





**Figure 4.4. Mean ratings for comfort to teach specific RSE content/topics (ITE; Error bars +/- 2 SE)**

The data from Figure 4.4. indicates that respondents were descriptively more comfortable with the concept of teaching Human Body and Human Development, Emotions, Relationships and Lifestyles, Family Structures, Sexuality and Rights and Social and Cultural Influences on Sexual Decision Making content/topics than Fertility and Reproduction, Sexuality: Behaviour and Identity, Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing and Sexual Abuse and Coercion content/topics. Taken together, these results indicate that the content/topics that the respondents were least comfortable about teaching were also those they perceived themselves as having least knowledge about.

Focus group interviewees also reported that they were unsure of their ability to provide the correct information to children and this made them feel less comfortable/confident:

'I don't know, I think the whole way along, we got so little of it that when I heard about it, I was like, Oh, I wonder how I'll feel when I have to confront teaching that, or if that arises, certain things. But I think it's just a fear of saying something wrong, maybe, regarding some of the topics, and that, as you said, classrooms are a dynamic place so the conversations and discussions, they tend to lead anywhere sometimes. So, it will just be keeping a cap on things and trying to say the correct information to give children and stuff.' (FG1-Participant 1)

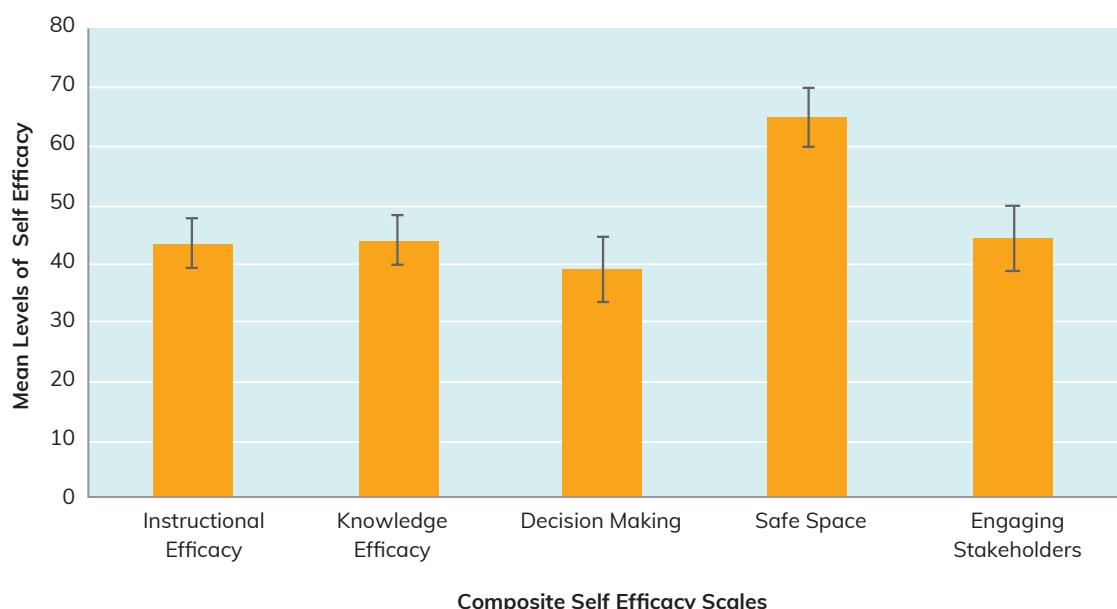
This following extract from an interviewee in the second focus group indicates that, in their opinion, providing misinformation to the children was something that they themselves were most concerned about:

'I think it is a subject that I wouldn't shy away from and I would be confident once I had that preparation done. I would be confident in my ability, but I feel like I would need to look into it a lot more and do a lot of preparation until I got there.  
I was going to add on there that I feel like my main worry would be misinformation and making sure that what I am giving the kids is correct. That would be my main issue.' (FG2-Participant 4)



### 4.3.6. Self-efficacy beliefs pertaining to the teaching of RSE

The 'RSE Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale' scores ranged from zero (i.e., 'Cannot do at all') to 100 ('Highly Certain can do'). Lower scale scores indicate less certainty/confidence, a score of 50 indicates moderate confidence and higher scores indicate more certainty/confidence in respondents' perceived ability to teach RSE. Subscales were computed by getting the average total score for each subscale. Cronbach's alphas for each of the five domains was moderate to high (i.e., Instructional Efficacy ( $\alpha = .8$ ); Knowledge Efficacy ( $\alpha = .8$ ); Efficacy to influence decision making ( $\alpha = .5$ ); ability to create a positive school climate and safe space in terms of RSE ( $\alpha = .8$ ); and Efficacy to Engage with Parental/Guardian, Community and Professional Stakeholders ( $\alpha = .8$ )). In addition, the overall total scale had high reliability .88.



**Figure 4.5. Mean ratings for self-efficacy beliefs pertaining to the teaching of RSE (ITE; Error bars +/- 2 SE)**

The descriptive trend indicated in Figure 4.5. shows that at the time of responding (i.e., 'as of this moment') respondents, in general, expressed relatively low (and equal) levels of confidence in their ability to perform the tasks associated with four of the five Self-Efficacy domains (i.e., Instructional Efficacy (Mean = 43.1,  $sd = 18$ ); Knowledge Efficacy (Mean = 43.7,  $sd = 17.6$ ); Efficacy to influence decision making (Mean = 38.9,  $sd = 21$ ); and Efficacy to Engage with Parental/Guardian, Community and Professional Stakeholders (Mean = 44,  $sd = 21$ )). Respondents did, however, express moderate to high levels of certainty (Mean = 64.6,  $sd = 21$ ) on confidence in their ability to create a positive school climate and safe space in terms of RSE.

The focus group interviewees echoed the online survey findings in respect of their perceived preparedness to teach RSE. Interviewees indicated that they were unsure of their own preparedness to teach RSE and felt that they would need to put additional time into preparing themselves to teach RSE when the time came to do so:

'I suppose I definitely could do it if I was just going by the book, but I don't know if that's sufficient, because children will have questions and they will be curious. So, with just the two hours that I got in college, I think I'd want to do CPD or my own research into it before I felt properly competent.' (FG1- Participant 3)



'Yes, the curriculum book is there, or the RSE book is there, but I feel like I'd need to do more, as [X – other FG participant] said, CPD or something to try and feel confident in myself to go and teach it. But then there's also an aspect of what class you're teaching. Fifth and sixth class RSE for junior and senior infants, it also depends what level your job is in.' (FG1-Participant 2)

'I wouldn't feel competent now. I feel like if I was to teach a class next week, I would have to put in a lot of preparation myself and research and put a lot of time into preparing myself. I think again, if you told me I had to teach it next week I could do it, but I would need to do a lot of work on it between now and then.' (FG2-Participant 5)

### 4.3.7. Future orientation towards teaching RSE

This section of the survey addressed key issues in relation to student teachers' future-oriented commitment, empowerment, intention, and aim to teach RSE once qualified. Whether there were aspects of RSE that they would not teach in future, and any additional professional development regarding the teaching of RSE that they perceived they would require.

#### 4.3.7.1. Commitment to teaching RSE in the future

Descriptive analysis, see Table 4.14., revealed that the overall majority (85%) of respondents indicated a level of commitment to teaching RSE in the future, with just over half (52%) reporting that they were 'Committed' to teaching RSE, while one-third (33%) reported being 'Extremely Committed' to teaching RSE in the future. A minority (2%) reported being 'Uncommitted', while 13% of respondents indicated that they were 'Neither Committed nor Uncommitted' to teaching RSE in the future.

**Table 4.14. Perceived commitment to teaching RSE in the future**

	Percentage %
Extremely Committed	33% (n=32)
Committed	52% (n=50)
Neither Committed nor Uncommitted	13% (n=12)
Uncommitted	2% (n=2)

Item response rate n=96; Missing values 26%

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Focus group interviewees underlined the importance to them of teaching RSE once they were qualified to do so:

'Yes, definitely, I think it's really important. And yes, like they [other FG participants] were saying, I think it's important to actually put the emphasis on it so that it does stay in the mind of the child.' (FG1-Participant 3)

'For me it was the feeling that RSE is important and there is a need for it in the primary school. It does protect children, it gives them necessary vocabulary and explains to them what they need to know – what's in the curriculum. That was why I thought I would come on [the FG interview], help out and give my voice a bit.' (FG2-Participant 4)



On the other hand, predicated on perceived responsibility for the provision of RSE given the experiences of external providers of RSE in earlier stages of their education, focus group interviewees, questioned the likelihood of their and their fellow student teachers teaching RSE in the future:

'I think the fact that generally it's outsiders that come in and do it, or have done it in the past, makes it seem like it's not the teacher's role, or like it wasn't. I think we should really try and move away from that, because it's kind of separating the teacher and that RSE content. That would be my view on it. I don't know, I don't feel totally comfortable teaching it. I would be nervous about some of those topics, because I don't think we saw teachers teaching them ourselves.' (FG1-Participant 1)

'Just for myself, it sounds a bit naive, but I remember in first year being in the library and – I don't know what year they were in; older year – I could hear people beside me talking about whatever they were doing for RSE in the teacher training and I remember I stopped in my tracks. I think it is because I didn't really have an experience of my own primary teachers delivering it. I remember thinking to myself, oh god, I forgot I will have to do that. I will have to be the one. It was this realisation that I hadn't really considered or thought of much. Then I was like, oh god, that will be me soon. I will have to do that. First year, we didn't do anything really on it. It was just something I had totally taken for granted and second guessed that I would actually have to do it or deliver that RSE input myself.'

(FG2-Participant 5)

'It is so common now for external bodies to come in to deliver RSE talks in schools that I think the impression of a lot of student teachers is: sure, but we won't be teaching this. ACCORD will come in or someone will come in. I don't think even people in the module really took it that seriously because they say, "More often than not, an external body will come in or someone else will do it." That was the impression that I got.'

(FG2-Participant 6)

#### **4.3.7.2. Empowerment to teach RSE**

Aligned to the findings in respect of commitment to teaching RSE are those related to feelings of empowerment to teach RSE. Despite the finding that the majority of survey respondents were committed to teaching RSE, respondents reported not feeling empowered to teach RSE.

As Table 4.15. shows a larger percentage, 35% of survey respondents reported feeling disempowered in respect of teaching RSE, either 'Disempowered' (25%) or 'Very Disempowered' (10%) when compared with 23% feeling either 'Empowered' (17%) or 'Very Empowered' (6%). Indeed, 42% of survey respondents reported feeling 'neither empowered nor disempowered' with regard to teaching RSE.

**Table 4.15. Perceived feelings of empowerment teach RSE**

	Percentage %
Very Empowered	6% (n=6)
Empowered	17% (n=16)
Neither Empowered nor Disempowered	42% (n=40)
Disempowered	25% (n=24)
Very Disempowered	10% (n=9)

Item response rate n=95; Missing values 27%



### 4.3.7.3. Future intentions to teach RSE.

The data from three items relating to beliefs about future intentions to teach RSE were grouped on the basis of their similarity of structure (i.e., response format) and function. Total composite scores were computed by getting the average total sum score for each of the three items. The reliability of the composite scores was moderate to high. Cronbach's alphas for each of the three domains was moderate to high (i.e., Intention to Teach RSE when Qualified ( $\alpha = .6$ ); Aim to Teach RSE After Graduation ( $\alpha = .6$ ); and Aspects of RSE that I Will Not Teach ( $\alpha = .5$ ). In addition, the overall total scale had high reliability ( $\alpha = .7$ ). The descriptive trends indicated in Figure 4.6. show that on average, respondents felt relatively equal in both their intentions (Mean = 4.4;  $sd = .6$ ) and aims (Mean = 4.5;  $sd = .6$ ) to teach RSE to children and adolescents in their future teaching careers.



Figure 4.6. Mean ratings for future intentions to teach RSE (ITE; Error bars +/- 2 SE)

Figure 4.6. also shows that in general, respondents indicated that they were descriptively less inclined to leave out RSE topics in their future teaching (Mean = 3.9;  $sd = 1$ ).

Table 4.16. Future intentions to teach RSE

	Intention to teach RSE when qualified	Aim is to teach RSE once qualified	Aspects of RSE would not teach when qualified
Strongly Agree	46% (n=46)	55% (n=51)	2% (n=2)
Agree	48% (n=47)	38% (n=35)	8% (n=7)
Neither Agree or Disagree	6% (n=6)	7% (n=6)	23% (n=20)
Disagree	-	-	34% (n=29)
Strongly Disagree	-	-	33% (n=28)

Item response rate n=99;  
Missing values 24%

Item response rate n=92;  
Missing values 29%

\*Item response rate n=86;  
Missing values 34%



Student teachers' responses ranged from 1 ('Strongly Disagree') to 5 ('Strongly Agree'). Consequently, higher scores indicate higher levels of agreement with the statements in question. Table 4.16. shows that an overwhelming majority, 93% of respondents indicated their agreement that both their aim (38% 'Agreed' and 55% 'Strongly Agreed') and intention is (48% 'Agreed' and 46% 'Strongly Agreed') to teach RSE in the future, with no respondent indicating that they did not aim/intend to do so.

Moreover, when asked if there were aspects of RSE that they would not teach once qualified, 10% indicated that there were topics that they would not teach (8% 'Agreed' and 2% Strongly Agreed'). Critically, the majority, 67% disagreed that there were aspects of RSE that they would not teach in future (34% 'Disagreed' and 33% 'Strongly Disagreed').

#### **4.3.7.3. Perceptions of additional teacher professional development requirements in RSE**

Two items assessed respondents' perceived level of agreement in respect of additional teacher professional development requirements in RSE after graduation. Specifically, as may be seen in Table 4.17., with regard to the need for 'further professional development to effectively teach RSE', 40% 'Agreed' and 50% 'Strongly Agreed' that such continuing teacher professional development was required. In a similar vein, 37% 'Agreed' and 41% 'Strongly Agreed' with the statement that 'specialist training for RSE is essential to effectively teach RSE'.

**Table 4.17. Perceptions of additional teacher professional development requirements in RSE**

	<b>Further professional development to effectively teach RSE</b>	<b>Specialist training for RSE is essential to effectively teach RSE</b>
Strongly Agree	50% (n=49)	41% (n=40)
Agree	40% (n=40)	37% (n=36)
Neither Agree or Disagree	6% (n=6)	13% (n=13)
Disagree	4% (n=4)	7% (n=7)
Strongly Disagree	-	2% (n=2)

Item response rate n=99; Missing values 24%	Item response rate n=98; Missing values 25%
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The data from the two questions about further training requirements were grouped on the basis of their similarity of structure and function. Total composite scores were computed by getting the average total sum score for each of the questions. The reliability of the composite scores was low. That is, Cronbach's alphas for each of the questions was low (i.e., Further Professional Development Requirements ( $\alpha = .3$ ) and Specialist Training Requirements ( $\alpha = .3$ ). The overall total scale had low reliability ( $\alpha = .4$ ). The descriptive trends indicate that on average, respondents expressed relatively equally strong perceptions about agreeing with a need for further professional development to effectively teach RSE (Mean = 4.4;  $sd = .8$ ) and the need for specialist training essential to effectively teach RSE (Mean = 4.1;  $sd = 1$ ).

Reflecting the survey findings, focus group interviewees suggested that more input on RSE should be provided in the form of small group discussions, along with opportunities for peer and micro-teaching also in small group contexts.



'Yes, so not just more input, but more time in terms of how to implement the curriculum. Because I feel like a lot of student teachers have that sense of "Oh, this is really awkward, what am I going to say? What if I say the wrong thing?" and even a little time to just realise that, "Okay, well I can teach Maths, I can teach this, it's grand." Just any kind of practice.' (FG1-Participant 3)

'For me, I feel with a smaller group it makes it easier to talk about things and talk to each other about things, whereas if you get a bigger group, people clam up and it is harder to have more of a discussion about things. I feel the learning is probably a bit better.' (FG2-Participant 4)

'I think most of our workshops or seminars would be quite engaging. You would be doing an activity. You might be doing peer teaching. You are modelling your own teaching, whereas in RSE – definitely that one lecture – it was none of that at all. Even the conversation, there was not much of a conversation at all. It was more just the lecturer speaking for the entire thing. Even if you have something like activities where you are practising your teaching or some style like that would have probably helped.' (FG2-Participant 6)

In thinking about their future as newly qualified teachers (NQTs), a call was expressed for support structures in place; such as mentoring in respect of their teaching of RSE. One student teacher participating in the focus group interviews commented:

'It would be great being an NQT that there's someone you can go and ask, your principal or whoever, and go "Right, what's the school rules around it?"' (FG1-Participant 2)

### 4.4. Overview of emergent key findings

The findings described above reflect the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of a sample of 130 student teachers undertaking, and at different stages, of primary and post-primary ITE programmes. Overall, the descriptive analyses were useful in terms of capturing and representing the respondents' opinions, both current and counterfactual (involving imagining their future selves).

Student teachers reported having limited, or no previous, experience of receiving RSE in their primary school education. A number of the focus group interviewees noted that where RSE was provided, that it was provided by a person other than the class teacher – such as a nurse or a different teacher in the school. Interviewees reported that RSE was left until their senior years of primary schooling, and was typically a one-off experience. In respect of their experiences of RSE in their post-primary school education, the RSE provision they received was perceived of as more quality time and input on RSE.

A key finding related to how students acquire their knowledge of RSE in the context of ITE. While the majority reported SPHE as the primary source of RSE input, a wide range of subject areas were also selected as inputting to RSE at ITE. In relation to their perceptions on how much input they have had on RSE, 61% of respondents revealed that the input they had received in relation to RSE was 'Not Enough'.

Related to the issue of knowledge acquisition, a less favourable pattern emerged around preparedness to teach RSE, in comparison to other subject areas. Most respondents reported a lack of preparedness to teach RSE, while 12% of respondents, reported feeling better, or much better, prepared to teach RSE in comparison to other curricular areas. Focus group interviewees also perceived themselves to be less



prepared to teach RSE than they were to teach other subjects. Interviewees further indicated that given that they were unsure of their own preparedness to teach RSE, they reported feeling that they would need to put additional time into preparing themselves to teach RSE, when the time came to do so. They further reported that they were unsure of their ability to provide the correct information to children and this made them feel less comfortable/confident. Adopting a spiral approach to the implementation of RSE in schools was endorsed. Focus group interviewees suggested there should be more input on RSE within ITEs, and this should be provided in the form of discussions along with some micro-teaching undertaken in small groups.

More than half of respondents reported that they felt they received inadequate training in the three specific skills related to RSE; reflexive practice, media literacy and in the practice of teaching. Focus group interviewees further articulated that they did not have enough opportunities to practice teaching RSE. They identified alternative modes to school-based teaching, in order to practise their teaching of RSE. These include micro-teaching, role plays, modelling, observations. Taken together, this descriptive analysis indicates that further consideration is warranted in relation to the provision of these key skills-based opportunities relevant to RSE.

Moreover, reflecting on their opinions on equality rights for children and adolescents, the majority favoured the provision of RSE at primary and post-primary levels; indicating strong endorsement of RSE provision in primary, and post-primary schools to children/adolescents across the age-spectrum. The mean age at which respondents indicated that RSE should commence was 7.2 years. The most frequently reported median age (n=26 respondents) at which it was thought appropriate to start teaching RSE was 5 years of age, corresponding with the average primary school starting age for children. Focus group interviewees perceived that starting RSE early in a child's school life was one of the ways to remove awkwardness, or apprehension related to learning RSE that may happen later in childhood/adolescence.

The majority of respondents indicated that they did not perceive that the school context should be taken into consideration when teaching RSE. A minority, however, expressed a belief that the context should be considered.

Respondents, when surveyed about self-efficacy vis-à-vis levels of comfort and knowledge, reported feeling comfortable and knowledgeable in many areas. With respect to sexual behaviour and identity, sexual abuse and coercion, respondents revealed that they were uncomfortable, and lacked knowledge on these WHO (2010) dimensions of sexuality education.

Finally, and of note, the overall majority of student teacher respondents were positively disposed in their aim, intention and commitment to teaching RSE. While high levels of commitment to teaching RSE were expressed, a majority of respondents indicated not feeling empowered to teach RSE, with a high number of respondents identifying continued professional development and further specialist training as important in order to effectively deliver RSE once qualified. Calls for further support post-ITE qualification, through mentoring in the teaching of RSE, were made by focus group interviewees to support them as NQTs. Focus group interviewees articulated their valuing of RSE's role in bringing positive change into the lives of future generations, which underlined the importance, to them, of the provision of school-based RSE. Given their experiences of RSE in earlier stages of their own education, they questioned the likelihood of their teaching RSE in the future, predicated on perceived responsibility for the provision of RSE in school contexts falling to external providers. They, nonetheless, expressed the hope that RSE will be implemented more extensively by primary, and post-primary teachers into the future.



# Section 5:

## Initial Teacher Educators' experiences of and vision for the provision of RSE in Initial Teacher Education

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### 5.1. Introduction

Initial teacher educators play a central role within the 'total ecology of teacher education', however, it is only in more recent decades that their perspectives on issues of relevance to teacher professional learning and development have received more consideration in educational research and scholarship (Murray et al., 2019; Swennen and White, 2021). Aligned with a complex systems approach, the provision of RSE within ITE, is acknowledged as situated within wider social and educational contexts (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014). Thus, RSE provision in ITE is influenced by wider systemic factors, including social and cultural contexts, school-level environments, leadership and governance and national-level statutory and regulatory frameworks for ITE. As highlighted in the findings from the Systematic Review, decisions regarding the provision of RSE at ITE, including the supportiveness of the teaching and learning environment for the teaching of RSE are shaped, in part, by Initial Teacher Educators working at programme and/or modular levels (Carman et al., 2011; May and Kundert, 1996; McKay and Barrett, 1999; Johnson, 2014). While Initial Teacher Educators do not per se have direct influence on the wider social, educational contexts or on the school environments in which their student teachers come to engage with during ITE or once qualified, as Airton and Koecher note, what is within their realm of influence is providing student teachers with '... the theoretical frameworks in which to understand the school and wider systemic environments and their own position, beliefs, etc. at an individual level.' (2019, p. 196).

#### 5.1.1. Aims and objectives

This study aims to ascertain, through undertaking in-depth, semi-structured interviews, Initial Teacher Educators' experiences with and perceptions of factors affecting RSE provision within ITE. Applying a complex systemic framework as espoused by Cochran-Smith et al. (2014) and overview of how the Initial Teacher Educators interviewed envision systemic change for RSE/RSE-related provision at ITE and across wider educational and individual student teacher systemic levels.

### 5.2. Methodology

#### 5.2.1. Participants

Seventeen Initial Teacher Educators with a remit in the preparation of student teachers to teach RSE/RSE-related areas were interviewed for this study. Interviewees were engaged across 14 ITE programmes situated within 10 ITE sites (4 sites of primary ITE and 6 sites of post-primary ITE). Levels of experience within ITE for the Initial Teacher Educators interviewed ranged from early career through to recognised authorities in their field, with the majority having five or more years teaching on and/or coordinating RSE/RSE-related modules and/or coordinating programmes in ITE.



### 5.2.1.1. Participant recruitment process

Initial email contact was made with relevant Deans/Heads of Schools of Education at ITE institutions across the Republic of Ireland, informing them of the TEACH-RSE research study. Subsequent to this, ITE Programme Chairs/Directors/Co-ordinators, and Module Co-ordinators/Lecturers in SPHE/RSE/RSE-related subject areas were recruited by email invitation to participate in the study. All email contacts were initiated through publicly available, institutional email contact addresses. An accompanying plain language statement (PLS) emphasised the inclusion criteria for, and voluntary nature of, participation. An email invitation to participate in the study was sent to 24 Initial Teacher Educators; 17 of the 24 invitees (71% response rate) accepted and provided their written consent to take part in the study. Nine of the participants responded to the interview in their role as ITE Programme Chair/Director/Co-ordinator, while eight responded in their role as Module Co-ordinator/Lecturer in SPHE/RSE/RSE-related subject area.

### 5.2.2. Interview schedule design

The TEACH-RSE Initial Teacher Educator Interview Schedule was specifically designed, for the purpose of this study. The interview schedule was tailored to the interviewee's roles as either Programme Chair/Director/Co-ordinator, and/or Module Co-ordinator/Lecturer. The first section of the interview schedule sought programme-level data in respect of current/planned delivery of RSE on the interviewee's respective ITE programme/s. The second section focused on the interviewees' perceptions of the provision of RSE in ITE and their vision for the enhancement of such provision.

### 5.2.3. Ethical considerations

The study was granted ethical approval by DCU Research Ethics Committee (DCU/REC/2019/116).

### 5.2.4. Procedure

Interviews took place across a four-month period between December 2019 and March, 2020. All interviews were conducted by the TEACH-RSE Principal Investigator. Interviews ranged from 44 to 84 minutes in length, with a mean duration of 61 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded, recordings were transcribed, and subsequently, identifying data was redacted. Formal approval of their redacted interview transcript was sought and obtained from each interviewee.

Approved interview transcripts were coded using NVivo 12 software. Informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis of the coded data resulted in emergent themes aligned with the complex systems theoretical framework (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014) adopted for the purposes of the TEACH-RSE research.

## 5.3. Findings

Two of the main themes which emerged through thematic analysis of the data from interviews with the 17 Initial Teacher Educators are presented herein. The two main themes and their respective sub-themes, are outlined in Table 5.1.



**Table 5.1. Summary of the main themes and sub-themes from interviews with Initial Teacher Educators**

MAIN THEMES
<b>1.Status and Positioning of RSE within Initial Teacher Education</b>
<b>2.Envisioning Systemic Change – Across Wider Education System, Institutional/Programmatic and Individual Student Teacher Levels</b>
<b>0.1. Wider Education System Level</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Holistic, Comprehensive, Rights-Based and Inclusive Approach to RSE</li> <li>• Socially-Relevant, 21st Century RSE Curriculum</li> <li>• Consideration of School and Community Contexts</li> <li>• Status and Visibility of RSE in ITE</li> <li>• Formalising Criteria and Guidelines for RSE in ITE</li> <li>• Specialist Qualification Pathway to Teaching SPHE/RSE</li> </ul>
<b>0.2. ITE Institutional/Programme Level</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Models of RSE Provision in ITE: Core Plus Elective/Specialism Subject</li> <li>• Visibility of RSE at ITE: Dedicated RSE Input and/or Integrated Across ITE</li> <li>• Explicit, Values-Based Pedagogy</li> <li>• Teaching, Learning and Assessment of RSE in ITE</li> <li>• Supportive Learning Environment</li> <li>• Time Allocation and Timing of RSE on an ITE Programme</li> <li>• Opportunities to Practise the Teaching of RSE</li> <li>• Assessment of RSE Input</li> <li>• Role of the Initial Teacher Educator of SPHE/RSE</li> <li>• Collective Forum for RSE in ITE</li> </ul>
<b>0.3. Individual Student Teacher Level</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student teachers' developmental life stage</li> <li>• Student teachers' knowledge of /prior experience in relation to RSE</li> <li>• Student teachers' skills in teaching RSE</li> <li>• Student teachers' attitudinal and values/beliefs in respect of RSE</li> <li>• Resourcing of student teachers' personal and professional development</li> </ul>



### 5.3.1. Status and positioning of RSE within Initial Teacher Education

This sub-section on the theme of the status and positioning of RSE within ITE presents findings on the perceptions of the Initial Teacher Educators in relation to the salience of RSE within ITE. Interviewees referenced the current relevance of and need for RSE given societal and contextual changes.

Their perceptions of RSE as a 'grey area' or 'Cinderella subject' when compared to other curricular areas, and the concomitant challenges thus posed for Initial Teacher Educators' practices in respect of RSE at ITE are delineated. Finally, calls for national-level leadership in respect of the positioning of RSE as a mandatory/core provision across both primary and post-primary ITE programmes, are outlined.

Captured by one interviewee, the 'value' of RSE provision in ITE was perceived of holistically, as scaffolding teacher development, both personally and professionally; ensuring that graduate teachers have the competence and confidence to create positive classroom and school environments that support their teaching of RSE. And that teachers' important contribution to this endeavour, is recognised and valued within the wider education system:

'We value RSE and SPHE, in and of itself, and we want our best graduates to be the ones who are really, really good at teaching RSE and SPHE, and we celebrate engagement with relationships and sexuality because we are not interested in producing a commodity, in terms of a student, we are interested in producing a fully developed teacher personally and professionally and we want them to contribute to the life of their school community and to have that contribution valued and recognised.' (Interviewee 14)

RSE was considered by Initial Teacher Educators as a highly salient, contributing factor to children's holistic development and wellbeing; connecting to, and with, children and young people's human development in this ever-changing, contemporary world in which they live and learn:

'But I see it as very important in terms of children's wellbeing, and it has a... much broader remit – for children in this day and age. Particularly as they navigate situations that we [as adults] never came across before.' (Interviewee 6)

'As young children are on the internet, they're looking at unsuitable material, they're engaging with pornographic material, and that's impacting on their behaviour. I saw a physiotherapist recently and she told me she has young teenagers coming into her and they just have such warped opinions about what their bodies should look like, of what sex should be. That's hugely significant.' (Interviewee 4)

One interviewee spoke, more broadly, to the centrality of RSE for our human development. Thus, a core objective of our public and community education, albeit, in their view, peripherally framed;

'...part of life course cycle... at the core of being human...The way it's [RSE] framed, again sort of tends to minimise and individualise what are very clearly public and community education concerns.' (Interviewee 14)

Highlighting the inter-connectivity of ITE and school contexts, Initial Teacher Educators identified that, given the extent and pace of social change in recent decades, RSE, as a component of SPHE, provision at ITE needed to remain current and reflective of the social and cultural diversity of contemporary school/classroom contexts:



'Where maybe eight or ten [SPHE] lectures might have been enough in the first year, 10 or 15 years ago, it's not now, and the reason for that is because our classrooms have become more complex, much more diverse, family structures have become a lot more complex and diverse. And all of this is arriving in classrooms every single day, and teachers are finding it difficult to cope with at a classroom level.' (Interviewee 7)

While Initial Teacher Educators identified both the salience and relevance of RSE, they highlighted that this was not necessarily reflected in the status of RSE more widely in the education system and within ITE. Comparative to other subjects/curricular areas, interviewees described RSE as a 'grey area' (Interviewees 1, 6, 8, 14), a Cinderella subject (Interviewees 1, 7, 16), and as a 'taboo' subject. (Interviewee 9)

Such positional vagueness, regarding RSE within ITE, was perceived to pose significant practical and structural barriers to high-quality provision of RSE within the ITE context. The systemic vagueness and lack of clarity was perceived to be supported by, and in turn to further support, the rhetoric of RSE as sensitive and controversial, with concomitant impact within ITE on RSE provision and assessment:

'It's such a sensitive area and such a controversial area.' (Interviewee 2)

'I think it's important to recognise the sensitivity of the subject but that is not an excuse to side-line it or to decide that the rest of us [in ITE] can't engage with it.' (Interviewee 14)

Connections were drawn between the status of RSE in ITE and how RSE was perceived as being offered in schools on an opt-in/opt-out basis, available by choice rather than as a mandatory part of the curriculum. One interviewee articulated that RSE should be offered as a core/mandatory element at school level, rather than positioned as peripheral/optional.

'So it's just to make sure that the gatekeepers like the Board of Management...can't say no to certain things, that having the mandatory component of it.' (Interviewee 13)

Options currently available at school level to opt-in/opt-out of RSE were perceived by interviewees as undermining the status of RSE at ITE. Consequently, Initial Teacher Educators noted the professional challenges, on their part, in preserving the integrity of RSE and articulated their need to be able to provide greater clarity regarding RSE to student teachers:

'And how can you give something solid, a solid delivery, on something when so many variables are in play?' (Interviewee 6)

'Ultimately, it's very hard to stand or sit in front of students in the Irish education context or in the school context and teach this material when students know that it's not valued by the system...the situation of RSE in teacher education and in schools is a symptom of the wider failure to support students holistically, support teachers holistically. It's all aspirational. It's rhetorical. It just does not come through in practice.' (Interviewee 14)

It was further rationalised that as RSE is formally, a mandatory subject on both the primary and post-primary curricula, then RSE needed to be provided on all ITE programmes.



'I think if it's a subject in schools ITE should be providing it...If there is a subject in schools the teachers need to be qualified in, then I think ITE providers should be offering that. So if we're not, why not?'  
(Interviewee 10)

Indeed, one interviewee, highly critical of the level of SPHE/RSE provision in ITE, articulated that:

'The lack of provision of SPHE and RSE teaching in teacher education in Ireland is appalling. It's embarrassing, actually, I would say. There's no excuse for it.' (Interviewee 14)

Strong calls were made for national-level, systemic leadership and policy development in respect of RSE as mandatory at both school level and consequently, within ITE.

'I think that there needs to be an updated policy and what I would like as part of that policy would be a mandatory component, that I think if it comes from the DES in a circular to schools and to school management, that this is a component that must be taught. I think it gives it significance and importance and that it's not an opt-in, opt-out, that it's actually a skill set, that you are doing a disservice to your pupils and your students [at ITE] if you are not covering it.' (Interviewee 3)

'In terms of change, what there needs to be is... and I know that the Oireachtas Committee have recommended actually that schools cannot opt-out, so I think that will be a very positive change. You can't opt-out of certain things.' (Interviewee 14)

Systemic change which, if brought about, would result in array of system-wide impacts on the effective implementation of RSE across all levels of the education system. The following sub-section, expands on this second main theme, reporting on Initial Teacher Educators' envisioning of systemic change across the wider education system, ITE institution/programme and individual student teacher levels.

### **5.3.2. Envisioning systemic change – across wider education system, institutional/programmatic and individual student teacher levels**

Initial Teacher Educators articulated their envisioned change as contributing to enhancing the quality of RSE in ITE and, through graduate teachers, ultimately, its effective implementation at school level. This sub-section reports on the analysis of the interview data across three systemic levels:

- wider education system
- institutional/programmatic and
- individual student teacher

As at the heart of a systemic approach, these levels are not discrete, operating separately from one another; rather they are, and were, perceived by Initial Teacher Educators as dynamically interconnected, with each level potentially shaping others. For the purpose of communicating the findings in this section, however, the reporting of the data analysis has been grouped under the three respective systemic levels.



### 5.3.2.1. Wider education system level

This sub-section reports on the wider education system factors articulated by the Initial Teacher Educators interviewed, in respect of their influence on the provision of high-quality RSE at ITE and its effective implementation at school level. Factors which emerged at this wider education system level, perceived of as contributing to high-quality RSE provision at ITE included inter alia:

- a holistic, comprehensive, rights-based, inclusive conceptualisation of RSE;
- an RSE curriculum reflective of societal change, fitting the experiences of student teachers, and meeting the needs of today's children and young people;
- being cognisant of school, home, and community contexts for the implementation of RSE, in partnership with parents/guardians; and
- national-level leadership for the enhancement and coherence of RSE provision, through teacher professional learning and development.

#### 5.3.2.1.1. A holistic, comprehensive, rights-based, inclusive approach to RSE

Resonating with broad educational goals and with the child positioned definitively at the centre, the role of the teacher in providing high-quality RSE was perceived of by Initial Teacher Educators as linked to a holistic approach to human development. A strong system of values embedded within a rights-based framework, together with an unequivocal commitment to principles of equality and diversity were also identified:

'I think the school and the teacher, their role is to prepare students to live the best life that they can, to bring out their potential and to support them to be the best person they can be in the most holistic sense possible.' (Interviewee 13)

'I am about the holistic development of a child and it goes back to the values and belief systems that are enshrined in this. I don't think they are unique to RSE. What is good quality RSE? Good quality RSE is about good quality teaching and learning that is based on a strong value system that is holistic, it is outward looking, it is reflective. All of those things.' (Interviewee 1)

High-quality RSE provision was perceived as linked to a strong system of values embedded within a rights-based framework, which was perceived by Initial Teacher Educators interviewed as an important step forward:

'...we all know that children have rights and children need to be taught [RSE]' (Interviewee 6)

'I think we need to lead on a more rights-focused RSE, and that includes not just sexual rights, sexual identity, but religious rights in various forms, and ethnicity and understanding RSE in a global comparative perspective...So a really progressive RSE would be one that is focused on people's rights. There is minimum content that everybody would learn together, I think an extremely important...a really good example is Wales; the fact that they have now made it compulsory for RSE to be part of every student's experience...there is no reason why we can't do the same.' (Interviewee 14)

Commitment to diversity and equality was identified by the Initial Teacher Educator interviewees as imperative to, and for, high-quality RSE provision. Calls were made for the principles of equality, inclusive of gender identity and gender equality, to be mirrored across the RSE curriculum, and RSE teaching, learning, and assessment at both school level and at ITE:



'That there's clear guidelines for schools and that it's inclusive as well, especially in relation to LGBTQI+, that there are pupils now in schools and we have two mams, two dads and it can just be very disheartening for those pupils to realise that that's not acknowledged in the school library, in any images that are visuals that are shown by the class teacher, that maybe a list of recommended resources are there as well.' (Interviewee 3)

Highlighting that while high-level decisions needed to be made, interviewees espoused a holistic and inclusive conceptualisation of RSE that best realises the development potential of the child/young person and indeed, the broader universal goals of sustainable development:

'There is a huge impetus now with education for sustainable development, and a very important part of that is recognition of equality, diversity and inclusion.' (Interviewee 16)

### **5.3.2.1.2. Socially-relevant, 21st century RSE curriculum**

An RSE curriculum reflective of the complexity and diversity of Irish society in the 21st – was highlighted by Initial Teacher Educators:

'21st-century topics like online relationships, I think that needs to be included and how I suppose looking at the positives and negatives of that. Also... we can't ignore the impact of pornography, that needs to be included as well. Another issue that has been coming up is female genital mutilation, looking at gender orientation, ...that it needs to be an inclusive programme that represents the society and the landscape that children and adolescents are growing up.' (Interviewee 3)

'I would be interested in reading the national guidelines [reference to NCCA 2019 – Review of RSE]. I presume that they are based on the evolution of society, the whole opening up of sex and gender, and what that means, and that the openness towards LGBTQI+ issues...' (Interviewee 12)

Interviewees perceived that while coverage of LGBTQI+ on ITE programmes may be widely 'referenced' that it often lacked sufficient depth. Specific RSE content/topics mentioned by Initial Teacher Educators interviewees included: friendships, bullying, types of abuse and neglect, LBGTQI+, transphobia, homophobia, taking care of my body, gender, understanding of sex and sexuality, child safeguarding, kinship and constructions of family:

'...there needs to be an inclusive programme that represents the society and the landscape that children and adolescents are growing up in, so they have an opportunity to actually talk about these topics in a safe way.' (Interviewee 3)

It was further perceived that the RSE topics/content explored at ITE were influential in supporting and guiding student teachers in their teaching of such content.

As one Initial Teacher Educator highlighted, there is a critical need for an updated RSE curriculum, given its perceived influence on student teachers' perceptions of what their professional responsibility is, in terms of teaching RSE:

'We were discussing; should we be discussing the use of pornography and that side of relationships and sexuality... And the feedback that I got from this lecture was very much, "This is not our job, it's the parents' job to cover this. The teacher shouldn't be asked to do this" ...we will have to be



supported by an RSE programme that the teachers have confidence in.... I think they're very aware, student teachers are, of what's out there, and whether the policies are strong out there or not, in terms of sensitive topics like RSE. I think if they had more confidence in it; it's very much a grey area at the moment.' (Interviewee 6)

'So, hopefully that an SPHE course would, I suppose, not just reflect, absolutely reflect societal change, but also that it would guide. Because the whole point of education is to support and guide, rather than just reflect. So, that's what I would imagine, that the new guidelines [reference to NCCA 2019 – Review of RSE] are doing that.' (Interviewee 12)

### 5.3.2.1.3. Consideration of school and community contexts

Effective implementation of RSE was recognised by Initial Teacher Educator interviewees as influenced, in part at least, by a school's ethos and culture, leadership and/or governance/management structures:

'In a school situation, the culture of the school, the belief system of the principal all influence whether mandatory policy is deeply embedded in the school or becomes surface level ... Ethos is a very big issue. It's not something that student teachers can really have an influence over.' (Interviewee 1)

Acknowledging the emotional, and indeed fearful, nature of this work for many teachers and school leaders, particularly where aspects of RSE remain uncertain, one Initial Teacher Educator considered how the religious ethos of the school may, in effect, be experienced as a complicating factor, acting as a 'stopping force' for teachers.

'I think that there is a huge fear from school leaders and so on. There is an uncertainty about information for a start, uncertainty about the topic areas, about what that will impact, particularly at primary level, the impact that it will have on schools and teachers are afraid. Then there is the complication of ethos and religion around that. I think it has a role, in how it acts as a grey area where people are uncertain about what reach it is. I don't think it's to say that every school that is Catholic or has a Catholic ethos is somehow less progressive. I think there are lots of good people doing lots of good work in all sorts of spaces. You can't ignore the fact that it acts as a real stopping force though, for teachers...The lack of clarity.' (Interviewee 8)

Indeed, for one Initial Teacher Educator interviewee, a perceived, persisting connection between the Church and State raised questions as to the future of RSE:

'With the power of the Catholic Church, and that connection of Church and State which still exists, what is the future of RSE? Will much change?' (Interviewee 6)

For another Initial Teacher Educator interviewee, a school's religious ethos and effective RSE provision were not perceived of as mutually exclusive:

'You can talk about RSE and you can talk about the religious view on RSE and present different ways of looking at knowledge without undermining the ethos of the school...You should not opt-out of certain things, ethos is a red herring.' (Interviewee 14)

Along with school ethos and culture, Initial Teacher Educators also highlighted the role of the home–school–community nexus in the implementation of RSE within the wider education system. A partnership approach



between home and school was considered essential where parents/guardians – ultimately the primary educators of their child/ren – would be aware of school-based RSE input and its relevance to their child's education, health and wellbeing:

'I think it's a combination of school, parents and community. And remembering that it's acknowledged in our constitution that parents are the primary educators of the child.' (Interviewee 2)

While a parent's/guardian's primary responsibility for their child's RSE was identified, the challenges posed for parents/guardians was not underestimated, nor was the importance of dialogue and communication between school and home in respect of RSE:

'...in consultation with parents, a conversation with parents about "This is what we do," based on policies that come from the NCCA like the Stay Safe would have been. Yes, teachers and parents would have talked about "This is what we're doing." '(Interviewee 12)

'Parents should, but it is not the easiest and most comfortable thing for people to talk about. That is because we grew up in a society where it is secret. There is almost shame when it comes to talking about sexuality or sex.' (Interviewee 17)

Consideration of additional supports for parents/guardians in relation to RSE was keenly endorsed:

'I think something like that [a parent/guardian education programme] could be quite useful for parents, even for themselves to know what we are doing in school in RSE and to be able to complement or discuss that if they wanted to...I do think there is a place for that. Parents could come and do workshops in it.' (Interviewee 17)

Overall, the role of the school in the provision of 'standard knowledge' (Interviewee 6) around RSE was articulated:

'Well, I would consider it the school's role, because some parents will discuss it and some parents won't. But children need to receive a standard of knowledge [in RSE].' (Interviewee 6)

#### **5.3.2.1.4. Status and visibility of RSE in ITE**

Statutory agencies, including the Department of Education and Skills (DES), particularly the DES Inspectorate and the Teaching Council were identified as key stakeholders within the wider education system in terms of shaping the status and quality of RSE provision in the context of ITE. The lack of official standards/guidelines and ambiguity around RSE was perceived of as a key factor impacting on the status of such provision. To enhance the status and visibility of RSE in ITE, interviewees called for RSE to be more centrally located among national policy priorities:

'...in a systemic and structural context, the politics of teacher education is a focus on getting teachers to teach various different subjects and prioritising certain things like Maths or various different areas. So what's happened, obviously, in the last number of years, is that with the restructuring of teacher education, with the supply and demand issues, the Teaching Council and the Department of Education are very much focused on that, and the accreditation as well, all of that stuff, none of it is actually benefiting the teaching of RSE or SPHE. It's actually downgrading it further. It's silencing it further because it's not really being sought out. It's not really being prioritised in those processes.' (Interviewee 14)



Quality assurance through the Whole School Evaluation (WSE) process, and the concomitant role of the DES Inspectorate in the monitoring and evaluation of SPHE/RSE provision at school level, were specifically identified as a key mechanism for enhancing the status and visibility, and ultimately the quality of the teaching and learning experience, of SPHE/RSE provision at school level:

'I think that the inspectorate has a huge role to actually prioritise the whole issue of SPHE and RSE in schools, looking at school policies, looking at how SPHE and RSE features in [whole] school self-evaluation.' (Interviewee 2)

'And I suppose another component which can have a positive impact is the inspectorate level, that as part of the [whole] school self-evaluation that they do specifically look at an RSE policy and what's in place as well, that there's clear guidelines for schools and that it's inclusive as well, especially in relation to LGBTQI+'. (Interviewee 3)

### **5.3.2.1.5. Formalising criteria and guidelines for RSE in ITE**

Initial Teacher Educators, further acknowledged the key stakeholder role played by the Teaching Council in shaping how ITE applies standards of practice in respect of RSE. Furthermore, the Teaching Council were seen as providing a formal basis for evaluating RSE provision given their periodic reviews of ITE programmes. Thereby, offering an important means of leveraging the status of RSE, and SPHE within ITE and the wider education system.

A call for formal criteria and guidelines regarding teacher competencies for the teaching of SPHE/RSE, at both primary and particularly at post-primary level, was strongly articulated by a number of the interviewees:

'I think there needs to be a guideline framework from the Teaching Council for ITEs in relation to the hours that should be allocated specifically to RSE. Not just the SPHE curriculum but RSE, how many hours and that will help guide then teacher educators when they are designing their programmes. And again that when they are doing the X programme and Y programme review, that it's a spiral approach, that it is not just done in one year, that it's a continuation for the students and that it's a positive experience. I think that would be important.' (Interviewee 3)

'They should really have requirements [for SPHE/RSE].' (Interviewee 9)

'It's [SPHE/RSE] not listed as a subject in the Teaching Council documents on subject requirements. So, look, I don't know. The Teaching Council, their requirements have had all sorts of strange impacts and implications on student choices...I think perhaps it needs to be looked at more at a policy level, maybe from the Teaching Council. It's like anything; if the Teaching Council or some related body says it has to be there, and it has to be visible, then voilà, it appears.' (Interviewee 10)

'...that's where we're a little bit restricted, in terms of bringing in more specialisms. We've talked about the idea of bringing in SPHE as a specialism. What we find is that where you have two subjects that are reserved subjects... So by that we mean the methodology that you do in your Programme X has to match your undergraduate qualification, and there are some subjects that are reserved. CSPE interestingly is one of them, and Religious Education is another one, Maths is another one, Science is another one. So where you have people with those degrees, they have to take that methodology, or else they won't be registered with the Teaching Council afterwards.' (Interviewee 11)



'We can't put that [SPHE/RSE] on as a method, as an elective, because there are no Teaching Council criteria for it... to be a teacher of SPHE/RSE. We wouldn't be saying to students, "Fill your timetable with SPHE," because even though there are no criteria, you still need training.' (Interviewee 16)

Highlighting the inter-connections across the system levels, Initial Teacher Educators also pointed to the importance of strengthening inter-agency, collaborative structures for dialogue between Initial Teacher Educators and policy makers, and indeed other key stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs):

'I'm not sure how much political power they would have to actually lobby to raise the status of the subject [RSE]. In reality, you need the Heads of School and the Heads of Programme talking to policy makers.' (Interviewee 14)

Having an official position around criteria, qualifications and guidelines for RSE, as it is currently integrated within SPHE and under the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023), was not only perceived to facilitate RSE provision but also to elevate its status within ITE:

'... have general guidelines, principles, about how the area can be most effectively managed, taught, student learning assessed...we don't have an official position because it doesn't exist. We are going on our own intuitive sense of what might be important and appropriate... Having "guiding principles" for the system, which we in ITE then could embrace.' (Interviewee 13)

'I think it would be good to have a set of competencies specific to RSE.' (Interviewee 16)

#### **5.3.2.1.6. Specialist qualification pathway to teaching SPHE/RSE**

Strong calls were articulated by Initial Teacher Educators, for a specialist, accredited qualification in SPHE/RSE. This was seen as particularly necessary in respect of teachers of SPHE/RSE within post-primary education:

'...a mandatory requirement that teachers in post-primary schools have a recognised qualification in SPHE/RSE.... A specific qualification at post-primary level really, would be my key recommendation.' (Interviewee 2)

'If you had a specialist pathway for RSE, you would have a much better-developed programme where they would become teacher specialists in RSE. That is the way to go, as far as I am concerned.' (Interviewee 8)

Indeed, some concerns, or perceived 'dangers' (Interviewee 10), of not having qualified teachers of SPHE/RSE, were raised:

'Do you want a teacher at the top of the class teaching it if they don't believe in it? ...should there be specialists dealing with this out in schools that have deep expertise in that? That is another whole debate, if you are dealing with sensitive issues for some children, you need to know them.' (Interviewee 1)

Initial Teacher Educators articulated a range of perceived impacts of having a specialist qualification in SPHE/RSE, including the potential to raise the visibility and status of the subject, enhanced student subject



choice and consequent employment opportunities and as having the potential for strengthening the continuum between ITE and earlier stages of education. Interviewees raised the potential of a specialist qualification to enhance the visibility and status of SPHE/RSE:

'I think it goes back to the whole issue: the government considers this a very important area, lots of discussion about it, but they need to start investing serious money in it. And going back to my magic wand now for a minute, I would like to see an advertisement in a newspaper for an SPHE/RSE teacher in a particular school, with mandatory qualifications in the area. And I would like to see that advertised as a separate... Just as we will see Maths or French or History advertised. This is my ideal world.' (Interviewee 2)

'You wouldn't say that all teachers are teachers of Maths, in that sense...I would say that you need to honour SPHE/RSE in that same sense; it has to be honoured as having its own expertise.' (Interviewee 14)

Offering SPHE/RSE as a subject option/choice on a post-primary ITE programme was perceived positively, increasing students' subject options/choices and thus seen as viable 'second subject' (Interviewees 8, 11, 17) thereby, potentially enhancing student teachers' employability when seeking a teaching position:

'To be more employable, you do need a second subject to be able to teach so I think they are looking at that and seeing this as a good second subject...as an opportunity to have another string in their bow.' (Interviewee 17)

In the main, however, interviewees noted priority being given to input and subjects which student teachers could register to teach with through the Teaching Council:

'If you are looking as an individual student into the future, you are saying, 'I am going to opt for the subjects that are recognised, that I need a qualification in.' (Interviewee 16).

Even where opportunities existed to offer RSE input on an ITE programme, structural barriers in respect of post-ITE qualification requirements persisted, with a resultant adverse impact on the provision of RSE within ITE:

'They have to do it with the PDST so when a teacher qualifies as an SPHE teacher, they still have to do the two-day RSE training with the PDST. You can't teach RSE unless you have done these two days...I used to [provide input on RSE] but then there was no point if they were not able to teach it. I realised that they were going out to schools, but they weren't qualified technically to teach it. I felt there was no point because if they weren't being qualified, what was the point of me doing it with them?' (Interviewee 17)

Additionally, interviewees in both primary and post-primary ITE, where SPHE was on offer, outlined, for varying reasons, their need to prioritise certain aspects of SPHE e.g. curricular content that was a prerequisite for and/or most likely to be taught by student teachers while on their school-based placement. While, RSE was acknowledged as a key component of SPHE, particularly at primary ITE level, nonetheless, having RSE as a mandatory component with some accompanying level of evaluation/assessment of student teachers' learning, was perceived by a number of interviewees as having a concomitant, positive impact on enhancing its status and provision in ITE:



'Having the mandatory component of it like the Stay Safe, it gives it the status that it has to be taught.' (Interviewee 3)

'...it's not seen as relevant to them right now, and it's not assessed.' (Interviewee 6)

'I introduce child protection to them in first year, and every first year student has to complete the TUSLA introductory online seminar [as part of SPHE module].' (Interviewee 7)

Finally, from a systemic perspective, Initial Teacher Educators highlighted the continuum from primary through post-primary to ITE, and called for further standardisation of educational experiences of RSE in their primary and particularly, post-primary stages of education prior to ITE:

'Because I think for us as ITE educators, we need a sense that the students are coming into us having reached some level that we can then move on from that level, instead of nearly having to go back to basics and start. And then some of them will have done quite a lot in RSE so it's just a very difficult one for us. But I do think it would make the teaching of RSE at ITE level much, much easier.' (Interviewee 2)

### **5.3.2.2. ITE institutional/programmatic level**

#### **5.3.2.2.1. Models of RSE provision in ITE: Core plus elective/specialism subject**

A distinction was drawn between a specialist pathway post-ITE, and one within ITE. Some of the Initial Teacher Educators expressed mixed views, in terms of potential risks of compartmentalisation of SPHE/RSE at school level and contended that every , both primary and post-primary, should be perceived of as having responsibility for SPHE/RSE:

'It is part of the curriculum. It has to be core' (Interviewee 1).

'... so all of this information around relationships and sexuality or whatever it is, these nebulous areas, aren't necessarily curricularly-linked, are part of every teacher's job.' (Interviewee 10)

Particular reference was made by one interviewee to the influential role the subject of SPHE plays in shaping school climate:

'I think it's something that everybody needs, because of that third context in which we teach SPHE. Because it's not like any other subject where history has its own discrete time, and of course it's integrated with other subjects; SPHE has this other third all-important context around the whole school climate and the whole school approach, and the positive classroom atmosphere and everything.' (Interviewee 7).

The possibility of compartmentalising RSE to scheduled classes rather than a whole school endeavour, where all teachers have a responsibility in the creation of an inclusive environment, was also raised:

'But in the specialising, then you have the sense of it being, we only talk about that there, at that time, in those 40 minutes, on that day. And then that becomes too compartmentalised, in my view... so specialised qualification yes and no, because it's everybody's responsibility to be inclusive.' (Interviewee 5)



Given that SPHE/RSE was offered as a core element for student teachers at primary ITE, a number of Initial Teacher Educators, across both primary and post-primary ITE levels, noted that RSE should also be offered as a core component at post-primary ITE level:

'SPHE is that foundational important overall wellbeing core foundation for children on which to build all the other learning, then every single teacher needs to have some level of competence and confidence in teaching it.' (Interviewee 7)

'Maybe every teacher should have a level of comprehension of the issues. It is not that students can wait with their issues until a teacher comes once a year.' (Interviewee 9)

'...if Wellbeing is going to become a core area, every teacher needs to be a good teacher of the area and actually the teaching is the one part, how the child experiences you, the relationship the child builds with you, the atmosphere and the ethos of your classroom is so, so fundamental that I think the specialist model probably wouldn't support that. So I would be more in favour of bringing all teachers up to the best specialist level we can and maybe having an overall umbrella structure in a school that supports that.' (Interviewee 15)

Alongside the professional development needs of student teachers to have the competence and confidence to teach SPHE/RSE when qualified, one Initial Teacher Educator, noted the personal and professional development nexus. Acknowledging how SPHE/RSE at ITE contributes to the personal development of the student teacher during that time period in their lives.

'Yes. It should be mandatory. There is no question about that. It should be mandatory. We talk about personal and professional development as being intertwined but, really, what we are focusing on is professional development. In fairness, they are reflecting on challenging issues in terms of feeling personally challenged about classroom management and leadership and stuff but it comes to a halt when you think of RSE.'

'So, yes, there is that sense of the person. It has to be mandatory as part of developing the person in that X-year space for the Y programme at least...If we are sincere about holistic development... To be a little bit bolder and to say, 'Okay, this is entirely connected to the personal development of our teachers, our student teachers, and to really foreground it in that respect, that is one of the greatest values of it because it goes way beyond the discreet teaching of the timetable subject. It goes into your capacity to deal with things professionally, which have a personal impact.' (Interviewee 14)

There was also recognition of the need for further electivity/specialism/specialist offerings in SPHE/RSE at ITE.

'The point I am trying to make is I think there is some degree of specialism – maybe it is knowledge, maybe it is skills, maybe it is attitude, maybe it is all three – that we might aspire that our teachers of SPHE would have. It is like saying that every teacher can teach everything. I am not sure that is the case.' (Interviewee 13)

'RSE has a very specific training requirement. You shouldn't be going in to talk about those issues unless you have specifics... [suggestion] some recognition on their transcript that they have met certain criteria.' (Interviewee 16)



### **5.3.2.2. Visibility of RSE at ITE: Dedicated RSE input and/or integrated across ITE**

The perceived location of RSE was articulated by a number of Initial Teacher Educators as a constituent component of SPHE within ITE, and increasingly situated within the wider framework for Wellbeing. Indeed, calls were made to see RSE as a more integrative aspect of the SPHE curricular subject:

'...one of the big things that I would really like to see moving forward is that we don't look at SPHE so much in its disparate parts...we see SPHE sometimes in terms of Stay Safe, RSE, and that actually does it a disservice because so much of the values work, the attitudes work, all of that, is happening through so many strands and related strand units of the curriculum, not necessarily done through those lectures that specifically relate to RSE.' (Interviewee 15)

In addition to SPHE, RSE-related input on topics ranging from gender, gender equality through to diversity and/or inclusion was perceived of by Initial Teacher Educators as also integrated across an ITE programme *inter alia* Educational Sciences/Foundational Studies; Professional Studies; Inclusive/Special Education:

'Across the undergraduate programme...while the focus is not on RSE per se, a lot of the issues in SPHE and RSE are addressed.' (Interviewee 2)

Initial Teacher Educators noted, however, that while such input may be provided on an ITE programme, its visibility and implicitness, not being named/identified/articulated explicitly, as RSE, were raised:

'Those key skills, they get them from every angle across the programme. That's probably another way that they are getting the content, but not in a named way.' (Interviewee 11)

'Within certain subjects might lend themselves to a more visible and explicit understanding of the elements of RSE.' (Interviewee 16)

Explicit articulation/visibility of RSE within ITE programmes was perceived as crucial, and moving from implicit to the explicit articulation of RSE was perceived to be an important step forward.

'Where are we dealing with that? Then we have to ask ourselves: do we need to make these links more explicit for students? Are we expecting students to make those links naturally? Then the question is: are they making those links or are they not?' (Interviewee 1)

'The students are aware but sometimes you have to make those links very much explicit.'  
(Interviewee 10)

### **5.3.2.2.3. Explicit, values-based pedagogy**

The need to not only be transparent about RSE content on an ITE programme but also explicit about values, beliefs and philosophies underpinning RSE was articulated:

'You should be very explicit about values, beliefs and philosophies underpinning it. I think that should be foregrounded because that informs everything else.' (Interviewee 1)

A suitable RSE pedagogy, at ITE level, was perceived to be one that challenges the students in their thinking; creates opportunities prior to that engagement where students begin to think about their own beliefs and values systems:



'The tutor models good practice for the students, challenges the students in their thinking and we would have opportunities prior to that engagement where students begin to think about their own belief systems, their own value systems and where they are coming from. In the delivery of the programme – the delivery of anything – you are coloured... That is the thing about teaching. It is half you as a person...Challenge your thinking because otherwise it is going back to your lay theories, your apprenticeship of observation, all that. How you handle or deal with it is part of you. We have a duty to address that, to raise it and bring it up, and to begin to challenge some of those belief systems or at least deconstruct them, get them thinking. Just because this is the way I did it doesn't mean it is the right way of doing it.' (Interviewee 1)

'It is much more about having a particular inclusive mindset. And if you have the mindset you can actually develop your own tricks. Now of course we have tricks and methodologies and strategies to share with them, of course we do, but if the mindset isn't there, if the value of the commitment to social justice isn't there more generally, and to diversity.' (Interviewee 10)

### 5.3.2.2.4. Teaching, learning and assessment of RSE in ITE

#### Supportive learning environment

Dialogical teaching skills, good listening skills, pedagogical content knowledge, being able to mediate – translate complex issues for pupils/students were listed as key pedagogical skills needed to teach RSE. Indeed, the SPHE methodology was perceived of as an 'exemplar' teaching methodology (Interviewees 7, 12). Pedagogies supporting high-quality RSE provision which were referenced included building partnerships, using creative and art-based methodologies likely to engage students through different modes and media. Sufficient time allocations were perceived as a prerequisite for such participatory, dialogical approaches:

'Various modes of engagement with the material, time for dialogue and a lot of time for getting through what we know is a significant block for teachers, discomfort related to topics that have such grey areas behind them, or that has the potential of being "a controversy"; "partnerships", "real-life stories" and "arts-based, active, creative methodologies.'" (Interviewee 8)

Underpinnings of good teaching were perceived to be the same across the ITE programme:

'We also need to recognise this is ITE. It is a programme. The key underpinnings of the delivery of that programme are all about good teaching. We are all about good teaching in terms of are they taught good questioning skills, are they taught about being sensitive to individual differences within the context of the class? Absolutely. Are they taught about how to structure a good lesson, having good introduction, good development, closure? If you are going to teach RSE properly, you need those skills. The rest of it is content knowledge and a bit of confidence to get over maybe your own inhibitions about particularly the Sex Ed end of it that people seem to be uncomfortable about.'

(Interviewee 1)

In respect of a supportive learning environment for the provision of RSE at ITE, Initial Teacher Educators pointed to large groups as being unsuitable for complex RSE content to be delivered effectively. Small groups facilitating in-depth discussion, dialogical approaches were perceived as more likely to create a conducive learning environment that is more comfortable and less threatening to student teachers. RSE in ITE needs to be provided in spaces that are conducive to student teachers being able to engage with new knowledge, and in a way which enhances their confidence and comfort with the subject of RSE:



'We can't model good practice in large plenary sessions...In terms of approach, I think it needs to be in small workshop groups because there is the comfortableness about talking about these in that way...I think large plenary... you need a level of interaction and engagement. It is about that reciprocity of engagement and dialogue.' (Interviewee 1)

'...they actually do like discussing the issues of RSE in small groups rather than in the whole class scenario.' (Interviewee 2)

'So it's peer work, it's small group work. Yes, so it's interactive like that.' (Interviewee 6)

'And maybe some sort of, as I said, the equivalent of a retreat; an experiential experience for students.' (Interviewee 12)

'The type of classroom that facilitates active learning in terms of the setup of the classroom.'  
(Interviewee 15)

#### **Time allocation and timing of RSE on an ITE programme**

Time allocations on ITE programmes was raised generally in respect of SPHE and more specifically to RSE, which was reported as ranging from minimal input on a one-off basis to more extended input across one or more years of a programme.

'...Three lectures, possibly four, in the entire year. Each year we touch on it again, we come back to it and see if opinions have changed.' (Interviewee 6)

Insufficient time allocation limited to one lecture or workshop was seen as significant barrier to high-quality RSE provision.

'...Re: RSE I would say it's quite small. I'd say it could be one week, two weeks max.' (Interviewee 4)

'Because it's really just the one lecture, I tend to give a tiny bit of background in terms of the curriculum structure and the strands and the objectives.' (Interviewee 7)

'...it can't be done on a quick one-day workshop.' (Interviewee 9)

The teaching of SPHE/RSE was envisaged as needing to be grounded in continuum, spiral approaches that should be implemented across the educational system, from early childhood, through primary and post-primary and on into ITE. Initial Teacher Educators highlighted the importance of 'continua' (Interviewees 2,4,11), and developmental progression in relation to RSE provision. It was perceived that where RSE input is provided in more than one year of the programme, it communicates a positive message in terms of the status of SPHE/RSE:

'I suppose I'd like it to be valued, which I think is important, and I just feel at the moment SPHE and RSE, it's just not seen as being important and it's not valued and I think that sends a message to students that if they only have the subject in Z year... it's not important. So I think you need to send a message to students as well that if it's in every year, this is an important subject, but to be fair to the students, they recognise it.' (Interviewee 3)



Furthermore, the timing of RSE input was perceived to have an impact on student teacher's competence and confidence to teach some of the RSE issues, particularly those relating to the sexuality aspects of the curriculum:

'Well, I suppose there are other topics of other subjects that they may not feel comfortable enough to teach until they're actually fully trained. Because remember, these are only in Z year. If I had the opportunity to have them again, I would have no problem developing them in terms of their own confidence and competence around being able to teach some of these issues.' (Interviewee 7).

Aligned with the Training Matters Framework of Core Competencies for Sexuality Educators (WHO-BZgA, 2017), a multi-dimensional approach was also endorsed. RSE provision at ITE was perceived as most effective when inclusive of attitudes, skills, and knowledge dimensions:

'Would have to combine some knowledge elements and some reflective elements. Maybe practice as well.' (ITE 9)

Furthermore, Initial Teacher Educators articulated that both the time allocation, and the timing of RSE input on an ITE programme needed to match student teachers' stages of personal and professional development as they progressed through their ITE programme.

### Opportunities to practice the teaching of RSE

In relation to the skills required to teach RSE, Initial Teacher Educators reported across all or almost all ITE programmes that RSE was not taught by student teachers while on school placement/Teaching Practicum. Many explanations were offered as to why this was so. Some attributable to ITE institutional-level decisions; others attributable to school-level decisions, with others still, particularly at post-primary level, due to wider Teaching Council requirements. For some Initial Teacher Educators, the teaching of RSE on school placement was identified as a highly sensitive area, conditional on the development of the teacher-pupil/student relationship:

'And because the implementation of RSE is so varied we just don't feel it would be pedagogically or even ethically correct for our students to embark on teaching RSE, particularly if they're only in [X] year and they have very limited experience of it. So I would say, overall, probably not a huge number of opportunities for them.' (Interviewee 2)

'They believe that student teachers would not be able or ready to sufficiently deal with issues if they arose in class. If something was said that upset a student, would a student teacher here have sufficient, I suppose experience, to handle that properly? So, issues like bereavement are not taught, RSE isn't taught. Anything that's considered sensitive.' (Interviewee 6)

Some Initial Teacher Educators perceived that the decision is taken at school level, with the school as the 'gate-keeper' in relation to RSE provision:

'As far as we are concerned, they can teach this in the same way as they are prepared for everything else, but what you will find is that schools are reluctant to hand it over particularly around senior classes because they feel that the teacher has that relationship with the children, that some of those are sensitive topics and that you know where those children are with that.' (Interviewee 1)



'I know from dealing with schools and school management, trying to negotiate placements and all those things that the schools guard what they perceive as areas of teaching that the students shouldn't be involved in as student teachers. I perceive RSE to be in that space.' (Interviewee 13)

At post-primary level where ITEs are not offering SPHE/RSE as a methodology, student teachers would not be formally observed/evaluated if teaching RSE during their school-based placements:

'If we're not offering it as a methodology, they [student teachers] are unlikely to be "officially" teaching it.' (Interviewee 10)

Whatever, the rationale, for student teachers not teaching RSE while at ITE, the concomitant impact on provision of RSE at ITE were noted by one Initial Teacher Educator.

'Our students are not allowed to teach it, even though the schools would welcome the student teachers to teach it. So, because of that, and because I've so many hours with the students, because our students are not allowed to teach RSE, it's kind of put on the backburner, to be honest.' (Interviewee 6)

#### **Assessment of RSE input**

When asked whether or not RSE input was specifically assessed on their programme, Initial Teacher Educators' provided a range of responses. Most typically, participants reported that where RSE was offered as a component of the core module of SPHE, RSE assessment was not specifically assessed but was integrated as part of the SPHE assessment:

'Are they [assessment/s] RSE specific? They link with other [SPHE] elements.' (Interviewee 3)

'...it's assessed as part of SPHE; they are not given a separate task to do on RSE, as we don't generally give a specifically separate task. So it would be part of an overall SPHE assignment.' (Interviewee 2)

Where electives were specific to RSE then assessment was RSE specific, whereas when electives were RSE-related, and where student teachers could self select a current issue to explore as their elective assessment, then the reported tendency was for students not to select RSE as their assessment issue:

'So that's making it very open to them. Interestingly, in my experience I haven't had an essay specifically on RSE, to date.' (Interviewee 2)

#### **5.3.2.2.5. Role of the Initial Teacher Educator of SPHE/RSE**

Initial Teacher Educators perceived themselves as having a key role in holistic student teacher/human development. ITE educators perceived qualities such as professional expertise, knowledge, skills, being passionate and interested in the area as well as having a background qualification as essential for high-quality RSE provision at ITE:

'You have to have some background in what you are going to teach...Certainly an interest, but I do think somebody who has maybe a background in certain areas. I am ring-fencing people, but certainly with the PE area and Wellbeing there, or maybe somebody who has been in the RE space who is vastly experienced in managing issues that certain content-subject area teachers would be less comfortable in doing.' (Interviewee 13)



Initial Teacher Educators' knowledge and ability to mediate to the students was also considered important:

'...their knowledge of the field, their knowledge of the literature, their knowledge about the evolving policy landscape, and their ability to mediate that to the students.' (Interviewee 12).

The ability to create a dialogic, safe environment seeking to reduce a student teacher's reluctance and/or embarrassment, and ultimately enabling the voices of the young people was also seen as important:

'...it would be an openness to provide a forum for the students in which they could explore their own experience of relationships and sexuality, broadly and specifically, in a safe environment, first of all. That there would be some facility for them to reflect on their own life experience, and be able to then, I suppose, have a sense of where their own little gaps are, or where their own blockages are, maybe.' (Interviewee 7)

'We care about their wellbeing, we listen to them and we would be spending a lot of time. Relationships is a big thing.' (Interviewee 9)

Ultimately, modelling an inclusive, supportive environment, for students in schools, where their voices would be heard and valued, and that experience would be a mutual one, transferring from the school context into their wider social worlds.

'...and there'd be space created where young people would feel that their voice was valued so that the piece about being able to be listened to, but to learn how to listen to each other, and to respect each other, and yes, to behave in a way in a class that is equal to the behaviour outside of it'

(Interviewee 5)

### 5.3.2.2.6. ITE institutional ethos

Some of the Initial Teacher Educators interviewed referenced the connection between Church and State within the wider education system. With particular respect to the context of schools, the ethos of their particular ITE was not perceived by interviewees as constraining their own practice. Such a view was articulated both generally and/or in respect of RSE, and including by those working within ITEs with an articulated denominational ethos:

'You may say the [ITE institution] is secular, the programme is secular, but they [student teachers] are all doing religion. Within that, has anybody ever said, "You can't do this," or has the Church intervened...coming in and saying, "You can't be doing this"? No, never.... As somebody coming down to me and saying, "You can't be teaching this and you shouldn't be touching those..." No, absolutely not. It has never been my experience...has anybody at any stage in the design, the accreditation, the validation of our programmes come in and said, "You couldn't be doing that"? No.' (Interviewee 1)

'I don't think the ethos would be a problem here [at ITE], to be honest. I don't think that is a barrier; I think it's just timing is the main issue, yes. And I think that sometimes ethos gets a lot of the spotlight and I think a lot of it depends... It varies from school to school and it varies from people's different experiences.' (Interviewee 3)

'Here [at ITE], no, I don't think so. I think just maybe we did have traditions and traditionalists, should I say, that are not so visible. It's just changed, and a lot of personnel changes, and a lot of... Yes,



the environment too and the appetite for more challenging conversations around education. I think that's happened in the last five or ten years. And I think it's in line with the national debate as well.' (Interviewee 5)

'There is no restriction on us from an ethos point of view preparing the students to the best of their ability to do the job that they need to do. From an institutional point of view, we don't have any boundaries or barriers in that respect.' (Interviewee 13)

In addressing how institutional ethos may be absorbed at the level of the unconscious, one Initial Teacher Educator acknowledges the possibility of its influence on their practice:

'I would say no, but I might be also conditioned by the messages I see around me. So not that I'm aware of, but maybe it happens at an unconscious level. I'm not pulling up the [ITE institution's] ethos and seeing how my module outcomes can speak to that or anything, but maybe I am influenced by it.... I would try to teach to human beings about human beings, rather than really trying to answer how this speaks to what the institution wants.' (Interviewee 11)

One interviewee referenced the need to adopt a more critical stance in relation to the ideological approaches to RSE [abstinence; human rights; health promotion] varyingly espoused at ITE, and more widely:

'...the other two types [the health promotion RSE and then the more rights-based] of RSE don't really tend to have very well-recognised religious perspectives on sex and sexual education and relationships...So, you know, that's not a sense of, "This one is perfect, the other ones are not."' (Interviewee 14)

#### **5.3.2.2.7. Collective forum for RSE in ITE**

A collective forum for RSE in ITE was named as one way of achieving greater visibility and empowering Initial Teacher Educators in their delivery of RSE:

'I know I'd welcome it. I think I'd feel much more confident in my delivery.' (Interviewee 6).

Given RSE's positioning as a component of SPHE, within both the primary and Junior Cycle curricula, some Initial Teacher Educators were unsure as to whether or not a collective forum specific to RSE should be developed and which would operate in parallel to, rather than in tandem with, the already extant SPHE Network:

I would be reluctant that there would be a parallel-group being set up because it is within SPHE. (Interviewee 2).

#### **5.3.2.3. Individual student teacher level**

Systemically, acknowledging the part that student teachers play, Initial Teacher Educators identified, and referenced, a range of factors at the level of the individual student teacher, which influence RSE provision at ITE. These include student teachers':

- developmental life stage and demographic background;
- prior experiences of RSE in their primary and post-primary education;



- knowledge of, and attitudinal dispositions towards, RSE; and
- skillset in respect of teaching of RSE.

Student teachers' agentic choices were also, albeit limitedly, referenced.

### 5.3.2.3.1. Student teachers' developmental stage

Student teachers' developmental maturity was considered by interviewees to be one of the most important factors in determining student teachers' competence in respect of teaching RSE:

'...like any other group of 20-year-olds or 19-year-olds; some of them are still trying to even establish their own sexuality... some of them may not even be gender sure, or they could be gender fluid.'  
(Interviewee 7)

Student teachers were generally perceived to be more comfortable with the 'Relationship' components of RSE than the 'Sexuality' components:

'So, the broad concept of relationships, they're very comfortable with that, generally speaking. But not the sexuality side. Sexuality is the difficult one for some of them.' (Interviewee 7)

Acceptance, self-awareness, and the need to feel comfortable with one's own sexuality were identified as contributing to individuals' competence to teach RSE. Student teachers' understandings around inclusion and diversity, and their ability to address intimate aspects of life with comfort, were also underlined by Initial Teacher Educators. Furthermore, student teachers' own stances, identity, and positionality were perceived as impacting on their overall comfort in teaching RSE:

'I think you need to be very comfortable with who you are yourself, be you straight or gay or whatever. I think you need to be able to talk about embarrassing, intimate aspects of life that not everybody is comfortable doing with teenagers.' (Interviewee 5)

'...their own understanding of the concepts of inclusivity, of diversity, of the gender of relationships.'  
(Interviewee 7)

'It's like that journey of going from I am a Maths teacher to I am a teacher of students. And there is resistance to this all the time until they realise the truth of it on practice, and they realise that unless I learn to relate to my students as people, forget it.' (Interviewee 10)

'You just need to be open and okay to talk about sex. That is the blunt answer on that. You have to be comfortable.' (Interviewee 17)

Initial Teacher Educators also highlighted the role of self-reflection and work around student teachers' positionality, and their evolving teacher identity in terms of comfort levels when they come to teach RSE in their own classrooms:

'I think so much work has to be done on people's own positionality and identity, because unless they're more comfortable themselves, how are they going to teach young people to be comfortable?'  
(Interviewee 10)



### **5.3.2.3.2. Student teachers' knowledge of/prior experience in relation to RSE**

In relation to their experience with RSE prior to ITE, when compared to other subject areas, a key challenge was identified in terms of ascertaining the level/standard of RSE knowledge when entering ITE:

'We can't assume, really, anything.' (Interviewee 2)

Moreover, Initial Teacher Educators perceived student teachers' lack of previous RSE experience. Their experience of RSE, seen as more often 'down to chance' (Interviewee 14).

'Student teachers, at any age, actually, who come through to us, they typically, I would say, again in the surveys that I would do, they've had extremely limited experience of RSE.' (Interviewee 14)

Within ITE, the sexuality education component of RSE was highlighted as particularly salient for student teachers, given the perceived and reported variance in their earlier primary and post-primary school experiences of RSE:

'The S (Sexuality) [in RSE] is really important, that we do with students, and it's funny when you speak to the students, even the other day I had a X programme student in here about a whole different matter and we just started talking about SPHE and she was saying – "I did none of that in school".' (Interviewee 15)

Here again, a 'continua' approach to RSE provision was perceived as key in shaping student teachers' teaching lives, and ultimately, in shaping the lives of those children and young people they will teach. This approach would see a student teacher's experience of RSE being incremental, and scaffolded from early childhood, through primary, post-primary schooling, ITE and into their Continuing Teacher Professional Development CPD:

'I suppose the number one is that time is considered, that in the ideal world that it would begin in [X/first] year and progress into [Z/final] year, so by the time they leave here I would feel confident that I am leaving teachers into the world that have the skill set to teach RSE in an effective manner.' (Interviewee 3)

'This needs to start at [junior] infants, it needs to be developmental, it needs to be incremental, it needs scaffolding up to sixth class like the curriculum recommends, so I would hope that they would be the advocates for those messages in the system.'" (Interviewee 15)

### **5.3.2.3.3. Student teachers' skills in teaching RSE**

In terms of perceptions of student teachers' competence to teach RSE, a distinction emerged for Initial Teacher Educators between becoming/being a generally skilful teacher and the need for a specific skill set to teach RSE. Interviewees recognised the need for student teachers to acquire practical skills to teach RSE, as otherwise the 'grey' nature of RSE in schools may result in student teachers perceiving that it is not their responsibility to teach the subject:

'There is an absence of it in their planning that would suggest they don't feel prepared for it or they don't feel that it's something they should be doing.' (Interviewee 4)



Interviewees, however, acknowledged that in reality, student teachers will learn to teach RSE while working, and/or will undertake further training in RSE as part of their CPD.

'They'll have to learn on the job, the way it's set up here, and the way it's only maybe three to four lectures for X/Y year for Z Programme students now. And it's not assessed, and they don't teach it on school placement, so they'll have to learn on the job.' (Interviewee 6)

Nevertheless, the relational skills necessary for a student teacher's to connect and relate to the children and young people in their classrooms were seen important aspects of a student teacher's competency to teach RSE.

'The skill is going back to what we said about that relational aspect, of knowing where your class or where your children are at, the level of content that they are able for.' (Interviewee 4)

'Knowledge of the actual curriculum and its relevance at the age and stage within the school...being able to be able to manage the questions and the conversation that comes from it, so that they are comfortable in asking.' (Interviewee 16)

Alternative ways to school placement/teaching practicum of getting practical skills proposed by Initial Teacher Educators included micro-teaching, role plays and observations in tandem with critical self-reflection.

### **5.3.2.3.4. Student teachers' attitudinal and values/beliefs in respect of RSE**

Initial Teacher Educators' conceptualisations of what constituted competency/expertise in relation to the teaching of RSE was often linked to the individual student teacher's attitudinal and/or belief/value system.

Expertise in RSE was perceived to be values-based, and an epistemological matter of valuing different types of knowledge. Initial Teacher Educators in the present study often indicated the importance of engaging student teachers in critical discussions/dialogues in respect of their values system; raising their critical awareness of its influence on their teaching of RSE across diverse school contexts.

'But, of course, you have the students coming in all with their preconceived ideas and working through that is sometimes tough. That influences the students maybe even more than the ethos of the institutions out there.' (Interviewee 9)

Challenging student teachers' value systems in this way was perceived as warranted, given that student teachers were identified, demographically at least, to come from a relatively homogenous background.

While homogenous in demographic terms, discussing values in a dialogical way was perceived to be particularly relevant in the context of ITE where student teachers were also identified as an 'ideologically diverse' group. (Interviewee 14)

'I think what we value as knowledge and what we value as ...their knowledge and their values going out into schools is really important.' (Interviewee 10)

Certain themes (i.e. 'teaching about the termination of pregnancy' Interviewee 14) were perceived to be more value/beliefs sensitive than others, and were articulated as requiring a greater level of self-reflectivity



and individual developmental maturity to teach. Along with the coverage of RSE content, supporting student teachers' critical reflection and interrogation of their own beliefs and values was identified as a key component of RSE provision in ITE:

'I think when you teach a subject area and particularly a subject area like SPHE/RSE, the values and the attitudes is part of the work.' (Interviewee 15)

'In my view the skills to teach these are actually more important than something that is seen as just highly content...more factual, perhaps, based.' (Interviewee 10)

While Initial Teacher Educators noted student teachers '...hunger for those things that give them the nuts and bolts stuff' (Interviewee 11), acknowledgement was also directed to the need to challenge their values and beliefs systems:

'In my view, actually, more expertise is needed to teach these subjects because they are about such fundamental values, life values, survival values and human development values.' (Interviewee 10)

'Every year I have people come to me and say "I never thought about it like this before." And that's what I see as my responsibility, to open up that diversity to them.' If that's successful, then that's brilliant.' (Interviewee 11)

Attitudinal/dispositional orientations towards diversity and inclusion, on the part of student teachers, were listed as highly relevant to the teaching of RSE:

'They need to have the capacity to deliver an effective RSE curriculum, they need to have empathy, they need to be non-judgemental, also creating a trusting atmosphere and caring atmosphere in their classroom and also to have a positive outlook on RSE.' (Interviewee 3)

'Open-mindedness, an appreciation of other ways of being and of living, and value. Maybe not so far value, but maybe just an appreciation of all sectors of life, not just the majority from which they've come from.' (Interviewee 6)

Inclusion of the voice of the child, and adopting a child-centred approach was also referenced, albeit in a limited manner, by Initial Teacher Educators interviewed. Furthermore, Initial Teacher Educators perceived that teachers of RSE needed to know how to listen and to be 'trusted adults in children's and young people's lives' (Interviewee 5), often as a key source of information and support for children and young people in relation to their understanding of their relationships and sexual development. Accessing and valuing students' voices, having time for students was envisioned as central to effective RSE provision in the school context:

'it is important imparting the knowledge to students to make their own choices.' (Interviewee 17)

## 5.4. Overview of emergent key findings

Provision of RSE at ITE was perceived by Initial Teacher Educators as a fundamental part of human development, of high relevance and foundational to a student teacher's ITE. In relation to the positioning of



RSE within the wider education system, and concomitantly within ITE, RSE was referenced consistently by Initial Teacher Educators as a 'sensitive', 'grey area', and a Cinderella subject. This positioning was, for some Initial Teacher Educators, linked to wider socio-historical/sociocultural discourses surrounding RSE. Such systemic vagueness of RSE was perceived of as a significant barrier to the high-quality provision of RSE within the context of ITE. The status of RSE within the wider education system, in general, offered on an opt-in/opt-out basis in schools, conditionally available rather than a mandatory part of the curriculum, was referenced by interviewees.

Initial Teacher Educators identified the lack of official criteria and guidelines for RSE provision at ITE, as leading to variance in the provision of RSE in ITE including in relation to *inter alia* the time allocated to it, whether or how it is being assessed. The importance of having criteria and guidelines for RSE at ITE level, was perceived mainly in terms of its impact on the continuum of learning across educational levels, and the need for ensuring consistency in relation to RSE provision across primary and post-primary school contexts and on into ITE. Initial Teacher Educators identified a need for strengthening inter-agency collaboration for the provision of RSE including all relevant stakeholders within the ITE and wider education systems *inter alia* Teaching Council, DES, DES Inspectorate, NCCA, ITE, Induction and CPD supports e.g. Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT). Working together with NGOs that provide RSE-related input to children and young people in school/out of school contexts to raise the status of RSE was also referenced, albeit tangentially.

Conceptualising RSE as the remit and responsibility of all teachers, the optimal model of RSE provision in ITE was where RSE is offered as a core/mandatory component on both primary and post-primary ITE programmes. With additional RSE electivity/specialism options available to student teachers motivated to pursue further and more specialised RSE knowledge and skills. The majority of post-primary Initial Teacher Educators, indicated that RSE, where provided, was done so implicitly within the context of other subject areas, rather than as stand-alone, dedicated provision. Some exceptions, however, were reported. Whether RSE/RSE-related content was included on the ITE programme, at that level, or was explicitly named as such for students, was to an extent dependent on the interest and expertise of the Initial Teacher Educators themselves. Reported time allocations to RSE input on ITE programmes were reported as, in the main, minimal/limited. Where provided, they were typically indicated as being one-off inputs. In terms of the nature of that input, where provided, the 'S' sexuality component of RSE was referenced as receiving lesser focus than the 'R' relationship dimension of RSE.

A conducive learning environment was perceived as key to facilitating high-quality RSE provision at ITE. Initial Teacher Educators referenced the need for small student teacher group sizes to ensure that complex RSE content is delivered effectively. Small groups of student teachers were perceived to offer more optimal opportunities for dialogical approaches to be employed. This, in turn, was perceived as creating a more comfortable, and less threatening environment for student teachers – which is conducive to critical engagement with, and reflection on, their own values and beliefs about RSE. Sufficient resources – including adequate time provision, and human resources for smaller group sizes – were identified as prerequisites for high-quality RSE provision at ITE.

Initial Teacher Educators highlighted the importance of scaffolding student teachers to critically engage with, and reflect on, their values and beliefs with respect to RSE. This is particularly important, given that student teachers were perceived of as coming from largely homogenous, demographic backgrounds. Interviewees, however, also acknowledged that the student teachers while demographically similar, are ideologically diverse in their attitudes and beliefs towards RSE. Indeed, sociocultural factors – such as



familial background and religion – previously found to influence student teachers' attitudes in respect of their teaching of RSE could pose challenges for integration of previously-held belief systems with knowledge, skills and attitudes newly-acquired during ITE. Further research on such factors is warranted, particularly given the positioning of RSE within a progressively more diverse society.

A wide range of RSE/RSE-related topics were reported as being covered at ITE level including, *inter alia*, friendships; bullying; types of neglect; abuse; LBGQT+ issues; transphobia; homophobia; body care; gender; understanding sex and sexuality; child protection, and safeguarding. With respect to the adoption of an inclusive approach to RSE, however, Initial Teacher Educators perceived that this area has been widely 'referenced', but often lacked sufficient theoretical depth. Given such perspectives, a question emerges as to how to optimise RSE provision at ITE level to support student teachers' development of critical consciousness.

While Initial Teacher Educators did not make explicit links between the ethos of their ITE institution, and possible influence on the RSE content or the manner and extent of RSE provision in ITE; they did, however, reference that RSE delivered in the context of school is often shaped by the culture of the school – including its ethos, Board of Management, etc. Initial Teacher Educators' responses indicated that these sociocultural factors made it challenging to integrate certain aspects of RSE into student teachers' school-based placement experiences and indeed some Initial Teacher Educators perceived that, for them, it would be neither pedagogically, nor ethically, correct for student teachers to embark on teaching RSE on their school-based placement. Nonetheless, Initial Teacher Educators acknowledged the importance of getting practical pedagogical teaching skills, while recognising the necessity for student teachers to acquire practical skills, to teach RSE. It was also identified that in reality, they are likely to learn on the job or receive further input on RSE as part of their CPD post-ITE. Further consideration is warranted in respect of the provision of alternative RSE skills development opportunities for student teachers during their ITE.

Initial Teacher Educators reported that a developmental or spiral approach to teaching RSE is the exception within ITE. It is, difficult, therefore, for student teachers to build on the 'little skills' in respect of RSE that are gained in ITE. Moreover, these skills associated with teaching RSE were believed to be best acquired in small groups through dialogic, active learning, arts-based (visual participatory methods) approaches.

At the level of the individual student teacher, self-awareness, and the need to feel comfortable with one's sexuality in order to teach RSE, were highlighted by Initial Teacher Educators. In the present study, student teachers' developmental stage was referenced and linked with their comfort and confidence to teach RSE. In terms of their learning histories, some interviewees noted that student teachers' prior educational experiences with RSE – while varied – was more often than not minimal.

When discussing their vision for future RSE at ITE, Initial Teacher Educators referenced the human rights' approach to RSE provision. Such an approach supports commitment to diversity and equality, which was seen as imperative for high-quality provision of RSE across the systemic levels. The importance of equality, including gender equality issues, to be mirrored in RSE provision in ITE, was acknowledged. Again, further research is warranted to explore how equality issues, inclusive of gender equality, are being represented, and taught, at ITE level.

Overall, this study offers an account of Initial Teacher Educators' experiences and perceptions of RSE provision at ITE. At all times, the complex space of ITE, and the competing demands therein, which must be negotiated by Initial Teacher Educators were acknowledged. Nonetheless, Initial Teacher Educators



explicitly recognised the importance, and value, of RSE for human development and also spoke to the necessity for systemic change. The emergent key findings suggest that it is necessary to transform the model of RSE provision at ITE to one where RSE is provided as a core/mandatory element of the ITE programme, through a developmental, spiral approach and that is explicit about the 'S' sexuality dimensions, together with the 'R' relationships dimensions of RSE. It was also acknowledged that the approach to RSE needs to be inclusive. Initial Teacher Educators articulated an awareness of a need to shift towards positioning RSE from a 'rights-based' perspective, with the majority indicating their hope that such changes would facilitate wider and positive societal transformation.



# Section 6:

## Synthesis of TEACH-RSE research findings

### 6.1. Introduction

The TEACH-RSE project adopted a systemic approach and employed a multi-perspectival, mixed methods and multi-phased research design to explore teacher professional learning and development in RSE. These research findings have extended our understanding of factors that facilitate student teachers' competence and confidence as providers of high-quality RSE to children and young people in their classrooms of the future.

### 6.2. Parameters of the synthesis

This synthesis and triangulates the emergent key findings across the constituent TEACH-RSE research studies as follows:

- A Systematic Review of the international peer-reviewed literature on the provision of sexuality education in ITE to student teachers;
- A Documentary Analysis of the publicly available documentation for the academic year 2019-2020 on RSE and RSE-related provision across a sample of 14 primary and post-primary ITE programmes;
- A mixed methods study, employing an online survey and focus group methodology, of student teachers' perspectives on RSE provision at ITE (sample predominantly from primary ITE programmes);
- A qualitative interview study of Initial Teacher Educators' perspectives on the provision of RSE on primary and post-primary ITE programmes.

Before synthesising the key findings from the constituent TEACH-RSE studies and inferring implications for policy and practice, it is important to highlight the limitations of this synthesis.

#### 6.2.1. Limitations of the TEACH-RSE research findings

These findings should be interpreted with some caution given the potential limitations to the methodologies employed. The typical strengths and limitations of qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were somewhat addressed by the mixed methods design utilised in this research. Nonetheless, there were additional factors which may have influenced the findings. Given the small sample size across the studies, particularly the student teacher study (survey response rate overall and very small sample of post-primary student teachers), caution should be exercised in the generalisability and inferences made from the findings.



The COVID-19 pandemic emerged during the data collection phase for the mixed methods study with student teachers. This affected both recruitment and participation for this element of the research. The survey and focus group interviews were held online, which likely affected the nature of engagement. Given the sensitive nature of some of the data being collected, this online method may have facilitated responses but may also, in the focus group interviews, have hindered the organic discussion that face-to-face engagement can encourage.

This study was the first of its kind in an Irish context to examine student teacher preparedness in this manner and overall as emerged in the Systematic Review reported in Section 2 there is a limited scholarship in the field. As such, there were limited instruments available for examining these research questions. The questionnaire employed in the student teacher study was developed by the research team and as such the psychometric properties were unknown until the data was collected. The questionnaire was administered using an online survey platform. This is one of the most popular tools in educational research (Saleh and Bista, 2017) and brings with it many advantages, including time and cost efficiency for the researcher and convenience for the participant. There are, however, also disadvantages including a low response rate which is generally found with such research (Manfreda et al., 2008).

The sensitive nature of some of the items examined on sexuality and relationships may have hindered some individuals' willingness to participate or their engagement when they did participate. Furthermore, response error may have resulted in a bias in the data if the respondents differed from the non-respondents within the sample. As with all self-report methodologies, social desirability may have influenced the data obtained. This may have been the case particularly with the Initial Teacher Educators' interview data, where the researcher who conducted the interviews also works in the area of ITE and was known to some of the participants in that study.

The bias of the TEACH-RSE researchers, should also be acknowledged, particularly in relation to the qualitative elements. The lead researcher, who conducted the interviews and focus groups, is an academic psychologist working within the Initial Teacher Education field, with a particular interest in human rights and developmental approaches. This particular perspective may have influenced the research design and analysis.

### 6.3. Synthesis of TEACH-RSE research findings

Given that the research findings were generally presented from a systems perspective, this synthesis adopts a systemic approach, integrating findings across the levels of the individual, namely student teacher and Initial Teacher Educator; of the ITE programme/institutional level and of the wider educational system, together with interactions across these system levels. As articulated earlier in the report, RSE provision in teacher professional learning and development is influenced by a myriad of systemic factors relating, *inter alia*, to the student teacher body, Initial Teacher Educators, governance/regulatory structures pertaining to ITE; all of which are situated within wider sociocultural context/s. Changes in/to one systemic level will have a concomitant impact on other levels of the system. Thus, RSE provision at ITE, cannot be separated from the remit of statutory organisations in the governance of ITE, RSE provision at school level, nor from the families and communities where schools are located and children and young people live.



### 6.3.1. System-wide leadership: Teacher professional standards for enhancing the status and visibility of teacher professional learning and development in RSE

A number of findings from across the TEACH-RSE research studies pertained to the need for system-wide leadership to enhance the status and visibility of RSE provision. The low status and visibility of RSE within the wider education system, and at ITE, were consistent themes, highlighting the lack of clarity regarding RSE provision at both school and ITE levels, referred to as 'greyness' and 'vagueness' by Initial Teacher Educators.

A key finding at ITE institutional/programmatic level, was that RSE was not explicitly referenced in the publicly available documentation analysed pertaining to the 14 selected primary and post-primary ITE programmes. Furthermore, explicit references to SPHE were not identified across all primary ITE programmes. No explicit reference to either SPHE or RSE was identified in the post-primary ITE programme documentation reviewed. These patterns of provision emerging from the TEACH-RSE Documentary Analysis study were found to be consistent with the variance of sexuality education provision in ITE internationally as found in the Systematic Review.

Emergent findings from the mixed methods research with student teachers were also relevant to the status and visibility of RSE provision at ITE. The majority of student teacher respondents to the online survey perceived that the amount of input they had received in relation to RSE at ITE was not enough and that their preparation at ITE to teach RSE was worse, compared to their professional preparation to teach other subject areas. Such findings were echoed in the follow-up focus group interviews. Where SPHE/RSE was offered on ITE programmes, Initial Teacher Educators in both primary and post-primary ITE outlined, for varying reasons including the circumscribed time allocation for the subject on ITE programmes, their need to prioritise certain aspects of SPHE e.g. curricular content that was prerequisite for and/or most likely to be taught by student teachers while on their school-based placement, with the acknowledged effects of such prioritisation on RSE provision in ITE. Furthermore, Initial Teacher Educator interviewees, particularly with respect to post-primary ITE programmes where SPHE/RSE was not formally offered, articulated that as RSE was not explicitly provided for, it was for the student teachers, themselves, to make the connection between any related input provided and RSE.

Concerns were raised by Initial Teacher Educators, particularly those at post-primary ITE, in relation to there not being specific qualification criteria i.e. curricular subject requirements for registration of post-primary teachers for the teaching of SPHE/RSE. Such concerns related to SPHE, and RSE as one of its constituent subjects, not being listed in the Teaching Council's curricular subject requirements, notwithstanding, the recent revisions to both programme and graduate teacher standards with the publication of Céim (Teaching Council, 2020) this exception remains in the 2020 revision to the curricular subject requirements for teacher registration at post-primary level (cf. Teaching Council, 2020a Revised). Given that SPHE, with RSE as a component, is provided as a core subject at primary ITE level, this exception has most relevance for the preparation of teachers on post-primary ITE programmes to teach SPHE/RSE. The findings suggest that this reduces the likelihood of ITE programmes offering SPHE/RSE as a subject option/choice for student teachers.

The need to develop dedicated professional standards, criteria, and guidelines for the teaching of RSE, integrated within SPHE, was articulated. Such a call, strongly aligns with developments internationally in respect of teacher preparation standards for sexuality education (FoSE, 2014; Barr et al., 2014; Collier-Harris and Goldman, 2017). In addition, a range of methodologies for the evaluation of CSE in schools are



emerging which have potential applicability to the ITE context. One such example is Keogh et al.'s (2019) index to measure the quality of CSE implementation in low- and middle-income countries comprising of seven key components/'indicators of success' namely: range of topics, values imparted, teaching methods, teacher training, resources available, monitoring and evaluation, and the school environment.

Initial Teacher Educators acknowledged the key stakeholder role played by the Teaching Council in shaping how providers of ITE come to apply standards of practice, thus, offering an important means of leveraging the status of RSE, and SPHE within both ITE, and the wider education system. The development of professional standards for the teaching of RSE, would in turn allow for the systematic, periodic review and evaluation of RSE provision on ITE programmes. ITE programme-level reviews include meetings with/consultation of relevant stakeholders including, inter alia, student teachers, and recently graduated teachers (Teaching Council, 2011b, 2021). Initial Teacher Educators identified such programme-level review as an existing mechanism which could be employed in assuring the high-quality of RSE provision on ITE programmes. Professional standards for teaching RSE would further offer a basis for the development of indicators of quality of RSE provision at ITE.

Altogether, the absence of formal teacher professional standards, criteria and guidelines for SPHE/RSE in ITE was perceived as a key factor impacting on the status and visibility of SPHE/RSE provision in ITE. Calls were made for RSE to be more centrally located among national policy priorities. Leadership at a national level, particularly by those statutory agencies with responsibilities for ITE and teacher professional learning and development more widely, including key stakeholders such as DES, the DES Inspectorate, and the Teaching Council, were identified as playing a key role in enhancing the status and visibility, and ultimately the quality of provision, of RSE in the context of ITE. An important finding was the enabling role that these statutory agencies can play through the development of criteria and guidelines delineating teacher professional standards for the enhancement of RSE provision at ITE.

### **6.3.2. Systemic Approach: Coordinated, collaborative, integrated and partnership approach to RSE provision**

The need to employ a systemic approach to the dynamic, formal, and informal inter-connections across school levels, partnerships between home, school and community, and across the wider education system was a consistent theme across the research studies.

At school level, belying RSE being a mandatory component of primary and post-primary curricula, Initial Teacher Educators identified RSE as conditionally implemented, offered on an opt-in/opt-out basis. The effective implementation of RSE was recognised as influenced, in part at least, by a school's ethos and culture, leadership and/or governance/management structures. Acknowledging the emotional nature of the work of implementing high-quality RSE, for many teachers and school leaders, particularly where aspects of RSE remain uncertain, school-related factors were perceived as a complicating factor, potentially acting as a 'stopping force' for teachers' implementation of RSE.

Student teachers expressed a range of perspectives on whether aspects of the school context should be considered when teaching RSE. While more than half of respondents indicated that a school's religious ethos did not warrant consideration, almost one-quarter indicated that the religious ethos of the school merited consideration in terms of the teaching of RSE. Overall findings in relation to the teaching of RSE across diverse school contexts, student teachers indicated higher average levels of agreement that the DEIS status of the school should be considered when teaching RSE when compared with either a school's religious ethos or urban/rural location. In turn, Initial Teacher Educators' responses indicated that these



sociocultural factors made it challenging to integrate certain aspects of RSE into student teachers' school-based placement experiences.

For Initial Teacher Educators, a home-school-community partnership approach was deemed essential, whereby parents/guardians – acknowledged as the primary educators of their child/ren – would be actively consulted about their child/ren's school-based RSE and its relevance for their education, health and wellbeing. In respect of school-home cooperation for RSE provision, student teachers were also in agreement with the need for close school-home cooperation for RSE provision. The descriptive trends show, however, that at the time of responding (i.e., 'as of this moment'), respondents expressed a relatively low level of self-efficacy for engagement with parent/guardian, community and professional stakeholders as regards the teaching of RSE.

Inter-connections between ITE institutional-level programme review processes and national-level review/s of RSE policy, curriculum and/or practice were referenced by Initial Teacher Educators as another means to strengthen the continuum of teacher professional learning and development in respect of RSE. ITE's contribution to and active engagement with national-level reviews (e.g. NCCA, DES Inspectorate) of SPHE/RSE policy, curriculum and/or practice were highlighted as an important mechanism through which ITE can contribute to national-level policy and practice development. Likewise, a bi-directional engagement of national-level developments with ITE was also endorsed. Albeit to a lesser extent, Initial Teacher Educators also identified a need for strengthening inter-agency collaboration for the provision of RSE including all relevant stakeholders within the ITE and wider education systems.

Actively engaging in networking with other teachers and teacher educators, together with building communities of practice relating to the teaching of RSE were identified by Initial Teacher Educators as structures which at a systemic level, have the potential of empowering teachers and teacher educators in their provision of high-quality RSE. A collective forum for RSE within the wider education system was identified, as one such structure. Initial Teacher Educators also referenced the potential of a coordinated, collaborative approach in building the capacity of those providing RSE within and across ITE programmes and institutions.

### 6.3.3. Continuum of teacher professional learning and development for RSE

Adoption of a continuum approach to teacher professional learning and development for RSE, aligns with the Teaching Council's frameworks of standards across the stages of teacher professional learning and development namely; ITE (Céim, 2020), Induction (Droichead, 2017 Revised) and Continuing Professional Development (Cosán, 2016). Conceptualising teacher professional learning and development as a continuum acknowledges that while ITE provides the foundation steps in the teaching profession, as teaching is a dynamic and relational process, that teachers are 'always learning', with ITE marking the commencement for teachers '...of their formal learning journey' (Teaching Council, 2020, p 2).

At the level of the individual student teacher, findings from the TEACH-RSE research, reflect that their learning journey in relation to RSE begins, earlier in their educational lives, prior to their entry to ITE. The findings based on student teachers' responses to the online survey, indicated that only a minority (15%) of student teachers rated their prior experiences of RSE in primary school as 'Good Quality'. Average quality ratings were more positive at post-primary level, with 28% of student teachers rating their prior experiences of RSE in post-primary school 'Good Quality', nonetheless, about half of student teacher respondents rated their prior educational experiences of RSE overall as of 'Poor Quality'. Acknowledging the small sample size, notwithstanding, follow-up focus group interviewees recollected having limited/no prior experience of



RSE in primary school and where RSE was provided, interviewees noted a pattern of provision on a one-off basis, in a senior primary class and by a person other than the class teacher. RSE's perceived role in bringing positive change into the lives of future generations was referenced by focus group interviewees, who also underlined the importance to them of school-based RSE.

### **6.3.3.1. Continuum of teacher professional learning and development in ITE**

The salience of a developmental, continuum approach to the provision of RSE was highlighted in the emergent findings from the online survey of student teachers, which indicated that the majority of student teacher respondents perceived that the amount of input they had received in relation to RSE at ITE was insufficient and that their preparation at ITE to teach RSE was poorer, compared to their professional preparation to teach other subject areas. Furthermore, over three-quarters of respondents, predominantly attending primary ITE, were in agreement that, after graduation, further specialist training for RSE was essential to effectively teach RSE.

A key finding from the Initial Teacher Educators, was the discourse on SPHE/RSE as the remit and responsibility of all primary and post-primary teachers. RSE was perceived of as foundational to human development and, given that RSE is a mandatory subject at primary and post-primary school levels, at a minimum, a core, foundational level of RSE provision at ITE, as a requirement for all primary and post-primary teachers was proposed. Building on this model of RSE as core within ITE, were strong proposals to offer student teachers the opportunity to further hone and deepen their skills in SPHE/RSE through the provision of additional SPHE/RSE specialist/specialised/elective options. Thus advocating a model of Core plus+ Elective/Specialism provision of RSE in ITE. Such a model of provision was perceived of as more closely reflecting the mandatory provision of RSE at both primary and post-primary levels. While, RSE was acknowledged as a key component of SPHE, particularly at primary ITE level, nonetheless, having RSE as a mandatory/core component, with some accompanying level of evaluation/assessment of student teachers' learning, was perceived by Initial Teacher Educator interviewees as warranted.

### **6.3.3.2. Dedicated RSE input and/or RSE input integrated across ITE programmes**

Student teacher respondents were almost unanimously attending primary ITE. Therefore, unsurprisingly, the overall majority indicated the RSE provision they received was primarily as a component of SPHE, although they also referenced RSE/RSE-related input across a range of other Foundation Studies and Professional Studies areas. While references were made to RSE-related input as integrated across subject areas, the predominant view articulated by Initial Teacher Educator interviewees in primary ITE was of RSE as a dedicated, curricular component of SPHE. Given that at post-primary ITE, SPHE currently does not have specific subject criteria or guideline requirements for Teaching Council registration, RSE/RSE-related input was reported as more varied in its provision. Electivity in RSE was offered on a minority of the post-primary ITE programmes, and where available, Initial Teacher Educators in post-primary ITE identified that RSE was provided as a component of the SPHE subject option. More typically, RSE/RSE-related input was identified as being provided, albeit in a fragmented 'bits here and there' way, as more implicitly integrated across post-primary ITE programme/s. This was consistent with the findings from the Documentary Analysis that where SPHE was identified, solely on primary ITE programmes, it was more commonly offered as part of a composite module together with other curricular subjects with concomitant potential impact on the extent of provision of its constituent RSE, as part of a module in ITE.

Emergent findings from the Systematic Review studies in respect of sexuality education input provide some support for a more embedded and intersectional approach to sexuality education provision during



ITE internationally. Such an embedded, integrated approach to RSE provision, however, may impact on the visibility of RSE on ITE programmes. On the basis of current practice in Ireland, that all teachers are teachers of SPHE/RSE, rather than an either/or model of provision, a dedicated plus+ integrated model of RSE provision at ITE ensures both dedicated and an integrated approach to RSE at ITE, inclusive of both theoretically informed and practice-based provision of RSE across Professional and Foundation Studies at ITE programme-level.

### 6.3.3.3. A pathway for specialist qualification in SPHE/RSE

Findings from the research with Initial Teacher Educators suggested that a specialist qualification in SPHE/RSE, situated within the continuum of teacher professional learning and development for RSE, was a key mechanism which, if in place, would enhance the status and visibility of SPHE/RSE across school and ITE levels of the system. Distinctions were drawn between a specialist qualification pathway in SPHE/RSE post-ITE, and one within ITE. Further and more nuanced requirements were also identified by Initial Teacher Educators in respect of the development of specialist qualification pathways for primary and post-primary teachers in the teaching of SPHE/RSE.

In primary ITE, as previously stated, student teachers receive input on SPHE/RSE as part of their core programme, albeit there is variance, dependent on the time allocations and extent of SPHE/RSE input provided across primary ITE programmes. Specialist pathways in SPHE/RSE within primary ITE, while limited, are available, where student teachers on some primary ITE programmes are afforded the opportunity to select specialism/elective options in SPHE/RSE.

However, in post-primary ITE, Initial Teacher Educators noted the need for prioritisation of input/subjects which enabled student teachers to meet the requirements for registration to teach with the Teaching Council. Given that there are no criteria requirements for SPHE/RSE as set out by the Teaching Council, the provision of specialist/subject options in SPHE/RSE is more circumscribed. Drawing on the interviews with Initial Teacher Educators, there are some post-primary ITE programmes which offer student teachers the opportunity to take SPHE/RSE either as a subject option, or as part of an extracurricular offering. Such offerings were perceived positively as increasing students' subject options/choices, with SPHE seen as a viable 'second subject' for student teachers, thus, potentially enhancing their employability.

Even where opportunities existed to offer SPHE/RSE input on a post-primary ITE programme, structural barriers persisted in respect of post-ITE qualification requirements. To teach RSE at post-primary level, post-primary teachers are currently required to have undertaken a two-day RSE programme of professional development offered by the PDST. This current requirement is understandable to a point given the limited input on RSE at ITE. The perceived impact of such a requirement, however, was articulated as having the effect of forwarding responsibility for RSE provision to post-ITE CPD, concomitantly making it less likely that RSE input was provided at ITE level.

Some of the Initial Teacher Educators, in both primary and post-primary ITE, expressed mixed views in relation to the effects at school level of having specialist qualification pathways in SPHE/RSE, in terms of potential risks of compartmentalisation of these subject areas to dedicated classes/times, rather than as integrated across the curriculum. The contention was articulated that every teacher, primary and post-primary, should be perceived of as having responsibility for SPHE/RSE. This highlighted again the need that all student teachers have core input on SPHE/RSE at ITE, as the foundation step or 'céim' on their teacher professional learning and development journey.



Overall, strong calls were articulated for a specialist, accredited qualification in SPHE/RSE. This was seen as particularly warranted in respect of post-primary teachers of SPHE/RSE so that as a mandatory requirement which teachers in post-primary schools should have a recognised qualification in SPHE/RSE. Initial Teacher Educators articulated a range of perceived impacts of having a specialist qualification in SPHE/RSE, including the potential to raise the visibility and status of SPHE/RSE, enhanced student subject choice with the potential for a more diverse teaching body and increased employment opportunities. Most significantly, however, from the perspective of the TEACH-RSE research, from a developmental perspective, Initial Teacher Educators also articulated the potential of teachers with a specialist qualification in SPHE/RSE as impacting positively on their provision of high-quality RSE, thus enabling the realisation of optimal sexual health and wellbeing of the children and young people in their classrooms and wider school contexts.

### **6.3.3.4. Teachers' continuing professional development and support needs in the teaching of RSE**

The complex and dynamic sociocultural contexts, together with the realities of teaching RSE in school settings, strengthen further the grounds for a continuum of teacher professional learning and development in RSE, beginning with the foundations of teacher professional learning and development in ITE. Findings from the Systematic Review studies highlighted, in particular, that student teachers' experiences with sexuality education during ITE alone cannot address deeply rooted social conditions related to sexuality education including, *inter alia*, gender/power relations, heteronormativity, diversity of learners needs. The international studies reviewed as part of the Systematic Review highlighted a number of perceived challenges to teachers' competence and confidence which remained even after ITE, and there being a need for continuing teacher professional learning and development in respect of RSE.

A similar need for further CPD was highlighted in the TEACH-RSE research with both student teachers and Initial Teacher Educators. While positively disposed in their aim, intention and commitment to teaching RSE, nonetheless, the overall majority of student teacher respondents perceived that following their graduation, further CPD, would be required to effectively teach RSE. When thinking about their future as Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs), and to enhance their teaching of RSE in school contexts, student teacher interviewees anticipated needing further non-cognitive, interpersonal supports structures, such as mentoring (cf. Scully et al., 2020 for an exploration of the interpersonal dimension of teaching in an Irish context). Initial Teacher Educators referenced the need to strengthen links across the continuum between ITE, Induction and CPD in alignment with the Teaching Council's *Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning* (2016). One mechanism referenced by Initial Teacher Educators was enhancement of the relationship between ITE and the PDST.

### **6.3.3.5. The role of the Initial Teacher Educator**

Findings from both the Systematic Review and interviews with Initial Teacher Educators highlighted the central role which ITE faculty play in a range of RSE-related matters including, *inter alia*, conceptualisations of RSE espoused, decisions about RSE content/input included at ITE, modelling of good practice in the teaching, learning and assessment of RSE etc. The Systematic Review identified whether and to what extent sexuality education was provided on ITE programmes was largely contingent on the interest and expertise of the respective teacher educators. Consistent with this finding, Initial Teacher Educators in the TEACH-RSE research, perceived themselves as playing a key role in holistic student teacher/human development. Qualities, on the part of the Initial Teacher Educator, such as professional expertise, knowledge, skills, being passionate and interested in the area, as well as having a relevant background qualification, were perceived as essential for high-quality RSE provision at ITE. Initial Teacher Educators'

knowledge and ability to mediate complex, and potentially, sensitive material in relation to RSE was also considered of salience to the student teachers. Initial Teacher Educators further identified that their ability to create a dialogic, safe environment which would reduce a student's initial reluctance and or embarrassment as important.

Overall, a continuum approach to teacher professional learning and development for RSE was perceived as key in shaping student teachers' teaching lives, and ultimately, in shaping the lives of those children and young people they will teach. A continuum approach across the personal and professional development would facilitate a student teacher's experience of RSE as incremental, and scaffolded from early childhood, through primary, post-primary schooling, ITE, Induction and into their continuing teacher professional learning and development (CPD).

### 6.3.4. Conceptualisations of RSE in ITE

#### 6.3.4.1. Adopting a holistic, inclusive, human rights approach to RSE provision in ITE

How RSE has/is to be conceptualised within ITE was a consistent theme raised across the research studies. Central were those conceptualisations of RSE as central to our human development and optimal in realising at an individual level, the holistic development and wellbeing of the child/young person/student teacher, and at the societal/global level, in meeting the core objectives of public education and the universal goals of sustainable development. Conceptualisations of RSE provision at ITE were thus linked to, a holistic approach to human development, a strong system of values embedded within a rights-based framework, and an unequivocal commitment to an inclusive approach to RSE provision, embedded in principles of equality and diversity.

The Systematic Review found that student teachers identified that respect for the diversity of experiences and views of others was critical in ensuring a safe and inclusive environment in which sexuality education provision takes place. A gap, however, was identified in the review in relation to provision of sexuality education for children and young people with diverse learning abilities and needs.

The demographic profile of student teacher respondents to the online survey was broadly; female, identified as heterosexual, with religion as personally important. In relation to their sense of preparedness to meet diverse learners' needs in relation to RSE, descriptive trends showed on average that student teachers rated feeling more prepared to teach RSE to pupils who are members of the Travelling Community; from diverse cultural backgrounds; at risk of early school leaving; from LGBTQI+-parented families when compared on average to their perceived preparedness to teach RSE to children and adolescents with special educational needs, sexual minority children and adolescents or gender minority children and adolescents. Over three-quarters of student teacher respondents indicated that they felt that they were unprepared/ very unprepared to teach RSE to 'Children and adolescents with special educational needs'. With similar patterns of responses evident in relation to student teachers' perceived preparation to teach RSE to sexual minority children and adolescents and gender minority children and adolescents. Notwithstanding their reported feeling less prepared to teach RSE to diverse learners, student teacher respondents to the TEACH-RSE online survey, expressed moderate to high levels of self-efficacy/confidence in their ability to create a positive school climate and safe space when teaching RSE.

From the perspectives of the Initial Teacher Educators interviewed, how student teachers' come to conceptualise diversity and inclusivity in relation to inter alia SEN, sexual or gender identities was of salience. Initial Teacher Educators noted the role of ITE, and of Initial Teacher Educators themselves, in



raising the matter of learner diversity and supporting student teachers' development of an 'inclusive mindset'. Individual-level factors on the part of the student teachers' understanding of the concepts of inclusivity and diversity, and attitudinal/dispositional orientations towards diversity and inclusion were referenced as being of high relevance in relation to student teachers' adoption of an inclusive approach to the teaching of RSE.

The provision of RSE-related input on topics ranging from gender, gender equality through to diversity and/or inclusion was perceived of by Initial Teacher Educators as also integrated across an ITE programme inter alia Foundation Studies/Educational Sciences, Special/Inclusive Education, Professional Studies and School Placement components. Albeit, Initial Teacher Educators made reference to some inclusive approaches not being theoretically deep but rather more surface level. For Initial Teacher Educators an optimal, inclusive RSE pedagogy, at ITE level, was perceived to be one that challenges the students in their thinking; creates opportunities prior to that engagement where students begin to think about their own belief and value systems: Acceptance, self-awareness, and the need to feel comfortable with one's own sexuality were identified as contributing at an individual-level to student teachers' competence to teach RSE. Student teachers' understandings around inclusion and diversity, and their ability to address intimate aspects of life with comfort, were also underlined by Initial Teacher Educators. Furthermore, student teachers' own stances, identity, and positionality were perceived as impacting on their overall comfort in teaching RSE.

Commitment to diversity and equality was identified by the Initial Teacher Educator interviewees as imperative to, and for, high-quality RSE provision. Calls were made for the principles of equality, inclusive of gender equality, to be mirrored across the RSE curriculum, and RSE teaching, learning, and assessment at primary and post-primary school levels and at ITE. While Initial Teacher Educators did not make explicit links between the ethos of their ITE institution, and possible influence on the RSE content or the manner and extent of RSE provision in ITE; they did, however, reference that RSE delivered in the context of school is often shaped by the culture of the school – including its ethos, Board of Management, etc.

Student teacher respondents expressed a strong endorsement of children's rights to RSE. With the vast majority of student teachers indicating their agreement that children under 12 years of age have a right to RSE, with student teachers' level of agreement rising to 100% in respect of children/adolescents over the age of 12 having a right to RSE. Similar high levels of agreement were reported by student teachers that RSE should be provided in all primary and post-primary schools. High-quality RSE provision was perceived by Initial Teacher Educators as linked to a strong system of values embedded within a human rights approach, which in turn was referenced as an important step forward in RSE provision at ITE and in the wider educational system. A human rights approach to RSE provision was perceived of as enabling a commitment to diversity and equality, seen as imperative for high-quality provision of RSE across systemic levels.

### 6.3.5. Teaching, learning and assessment of RSE at ITE

#### 6.3.5.1. Time allocations for and timing of RSE provision in ITE

The adequacy of time allocations for and the timing of RSE provision were motifs running across the constituent TEACH-RSE research studies. While difficult to engage in comparative analysis across the diverse timelines and geographical locations of the individual ITE programmes, the emergent findings from the TEACH-RSE research studies are reflective of similar patterns of variance in time allocation to sexuality education at ITE as reported internationally in the Systematic Review.



Findings from the Documentary Analysis highlighted that, where SPHE/RSE and CSE-related provision was identified, it was predominantly in the earlier stages of the respective ITE programme. Where data was available as to the timing of module delivery, it was predominantly in the earlier year/s as opposed to the final year of both primary and post-primary ITE undergraduate and postgraduate-level programmes.

Initial Teacher Educators, particularly those in post-primary ITE, drew a link between the absence of official criteria and guidelines for RSE provision at ITE, and variance in the provision of RSE in ITE including in relation to inter alia the time allocated to RSE and whether or not RSE is being formally assessed. Although lecture format was referenced, RSE input was, in the main, referenced as being provided in a workshop format with smaller student group sizes. Core, dedicated input on RSE on primary ITE programmes was reported as ranging from minimal input on a programme of study of a one-off lecture/workshop, through to 5 hours representing circa 25% of a module through to input of circa 3-4 hours per year across 3 years of a 4-year programme. As RSE was not provided as a core component on post-primary ITE, greater variance extracurricular offerings and/or as component of a SPHE subject option, where available.

For Initial Teacher Educators, in both primary and post-primary ITE settings, insufficient time allocation was identified as a significant barrier to high-quality RSE provision. Even when RSE input was explicitly provided as a core input on an ITE programme, Initial Teacher Educators identified a range of factors which they perceived as potentially impacting on student teacher's receiving that input, including inter alia: one-off/ limited pattern of RSE provision, timing of input and limits on/capping of student numbers taking RSE/RSE-related electives where offered. Further references were made to the componential dimension of RSE, being one part of a part of a curricular area, thus, competing for time allocation on what was perceived as an overloaded ITE curriculum. As outlined above, student teachers in the mixed methods study also perceived that the level of input they had received in relation to RSE on their ITE programme was not enough.

Given the complex nature of the subject matter, and the time required to scaffold student teachers' RSE-related knowledge and skills, a spiral approach to RSE provision in ITE was perceived by Initial Teacher Educators as warranted. Such an approach would allow for the provision of RSE input at both an early and at a later point in the ITE programme, thus, affording student teachers further opportunities while in ITE to deepen their RSE-related knowledge and skills. This spiral approach would deepen student teachers' knowledge of SPHE/RSE, remaining cognisant of student teachers' stage of progression at ITE.

Consistent with the WHO-BZgA (2017) framework of core competencies, sexuality educators should 'be able to use a wide range of interactive and participatory student-centred approaches' (p. 28). The creation of a supportive, conducive learning environment emerged from the Systematic Review findings in relation to student teachers' preferences for small group discussion and participatory methods. Student teachers, in the reviewed international studies, identified that the opportunity to listen, learn, and discuss topics in an open environment reduced their embarrassment in discussing sexuality education issues, and increased their comfort in teaching sexuality education. Initial Teacher Educators in this study consistently referenced the need for dialogical approaches when teaching RSE and identified small group size as a prerequisite to the effective implementation of such dialogical/participatory methodologies.

### **6.3.5.2. A comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to RSE provision in ITE**

Aligned with the UNESCO (2018) definition of CSE together with the WHO-BZgA (2017) Training Matters Framework of Core Competencies for Sexuality Educators, the TEACH-RSE research studies employed a developmental, comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach, inclusive of knowledge, attitudes and skills, in their exploration of RSE provision in ITE.



### 6.3.5.2.1. Knowledge

Emergent findings from the Systematic Review studies indicated a paucity of and/or minimal coverage in respect of comprehensive sexuality topics covered across the reviewed ITE programme curricula.

Where broad CSE topics were reported as covered, the top three identified were; human development, relationships, and society and culture. While, the topics reported as least emphasised were sexuality-related such as masturbation, sexual orientation or 'positive' sexuality topics such as desire, intimacy.

Findings from the mixed methods study indicated that the domains which student teacher respondents were least comfortable in teaching about were also those domains which they perceived themselves as having least knowledge about. This is consistent with findings from the international studies reviewed in the Systematic Review which indicated that increases in student teachers' knowledge and learning about sexuality education were reported to increase their comfort levels, confidence in creating an open and safe learning environment for their students, and their intention to teach sexuality education in school contexts. In a similar vein, drawing on the Initial Teacher Educators' perspectives on the content of RSE input, they noted that where provided, the 'S' sexuality component of RSE was referenced as receiving lesser focus than the 'R' relationship dimension of RSE. This was echoed in the findings from the mixed methods study which indicated that student teachers perceived that they were most knowledgeable about teaching on the Human Body and Human Development and Emotions and less knowledgeable about teaching Sexuality: Behaviour and Identity and Sexual Abuse and Coercion when compared to the other knowledge content/topics domains.

International studies reviewed in the Systematic Review reported on student teachers' preferred sexuality education content knowledge areas covered during ITE; predominantly related to individual-level social, psychological, and developmental factors associated with their future pupil/students' pubertal and sexual development. The international studies reviewed, furthermore, noted some persistent challenges for student teachers in respect of their integrating new acquired awareness and knowledge at ITE with their personal and familial attitudinal, belief systems and highlighted tensions between student teachers' intention to teach sexuality education, and the wider sociocultural contexts of their familial/community and anticipated future schools.

### 6.3.5.2.2. Attitudes

The WHO-BZgA framework of core competencies holds that 'student teachers' own experiences, attitudes and behaviour influence their way of educating learners' (2017, p. 25). Cognitive dissonance, associated with discomfort for student teachers, was noted between the knowledge student teachers acquired during ITE, and their personally held/familial attitudes and belief systems.

Findings from the Systematic Review brought to light challenges for student teachers in developing their critical consciousness during ITE. A number of the international studies reviewed identified that demographic variables were factors associated with student teachers' attitudes regarding sexuality education and further, indicated that teacher education programmes which facilitate student teachers' critical self-reflection and critical consciousness may be particularly salient in supporting their adoption of comprehensive, inclusive approaches to their teaching of sexuality education. These international researchers cited the role of ITE in scaffolding student teachers' critical reflection on their attitudes, leading to greater levels of awareness of student teachers' own and others' biases, and to increased understanding of gender relations, sexual minorities and special educational needs in relation to sexuality education. Critical self-reflection was also identified as key to student teachers' expression of an intention to include pedagogies of pleasure (positive sexuality) in their future practice. Whether or not student teachers'



heightened awareness and understanding of sexuality education and their expressed intentions to teach sexuality education once qualified, shape their practices in school contexts is less clear. A myriad of wider sociocultural/systemic factors remain in influencing student teachers' confidence and/or comfort, at the individual-level, to integrate or apply this knowledge outside of ITE in the school context.

Consistent with the findings reported in the Systematic Review, the Initial Teacher Educators interviewed also highlighted the influence of student teachers' attitudes on their comfort and confidence to teach RSE. In the context of ITE, Initial Teacher Educators interviewed raised issues regarding challenging student teachers' implicit attitudes and belief systems, foregrounding evidence-based, theoretically informed underpinnings to their teaching. Together with the provision of adequate time for and a conducive learning environment for RSE provision at ITE, student teacher's critical reflection was identified by Initial Teacher Educator interviewees as a key facilitator of effective teacher professional learning and development in RSE. Furthermore, Initial Teacher Educators highlighted the salience of engaging student teachers in critical reflection and discussions in respect of their attitudinal/beliefs/values system and for raising their critical awareness of its influence on their teaching of RSE across diverse school contexts. Critically engaging students in both self-reflective practices, and dialogue with others on their attitudes/beliefs/values relating to sexuality and sexuality education was perceived to be particularly relevant in the context of ITE in Ireland, where student teachers were identified as demographically homogeneous, albeit also acknowledged as ideologically diverse. Indeed, patterns of student teacher responses in the online survey, indicated in the main, positive dispositions towards RSE provision in school contexts.

In relation to the experiences of student teacher respondents while attending ITE, findings from the online survey indicated that approximately one-third of student teachers agreed/strongly agreed that opportunities to reflect on their own perspectives related to RSE were provided in ITE. While over half of student teacher respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed that their ITE programme had, at the time of the survey, provided opportunities to reflect on their own perspectives related to RSE.

Overall, across the TEACH-RSE studies, the salience of student teachers' engagement in critical reflection was both acknowledged and endorsed by Initial Teacher Educators. Ensuring adequate space and time on ITE programmes was perceived as important pre-requisites to facilitate and scaffold student teachers' critically reflection on their own experiences and attitudinal/beliefs/values systems relating to relationships and sexuality, sexual norms and sexuality education. Thereby, supporting student teachers' personal and professional development thus, empowering their implementation of high-quality, comprehensive and inclusive RSE.

#### **6.3.5.2.3. Skills**

Skills development, as part of ITE and teacher professional learning and development more broadly, is recognised a key component of the comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to the teaching of sexuality education (WHO-BZgA, 2010, 2017). Opportunities for skill development in the following domains relating to sexuality education, including the practice of teaching, media literacy and working in partnership with familial and school communities, were highlighted across the TEACH research studies. An absence of reference to media literacy skills was noted in the Systematic Review and Documentary Analysis. While, Initial Teacher Educators referenced the salience of social media use in young people's lives and concomitantly that teachers needed to be prepared for contemporary societal issues.

Skills-related to the practice of teaching RSE were also referenced across the TEACH-RSE constituent studies. Drawing on emergent findings from the Systematic Review, a number of the international studies



reviewed indicated the need for student teachers to have opportunities through the practice of teaching, to develop the skills to teach sexuality education during their ITE. A lack of practical teaching experience was acknowledged by student teachers as a barrier to teaching sexuality education topics. These international studies further reported on some of the specific skills which may be developed during ITE, including structured opportunities, such as, engagement in micro-teaching lessons, construction of lesson plans, as salient means to support the countering of student teachers' acknowledged fears regarding the teaching of sexuality education.

School-based placement is the model at ITE in an Irish context which affords student teachers formal opportunities to practice teaching and develop and hone their teaching skills as part of their ITE programme of study. School placement is designed to give the student teacher an opportunity to integrate educational theory and practice in a variety of teaching situations and school contexts. Findings from the mixed methods study indicated that student teachers perceived that their ITE provided RSE-relevant skills-based opportunities namely: opportunities to reflect on their own perspectives in relation to RSE, opportunities to practice teaching RSE. The overall majority of student teachers, indicated disagreement that their ITE programme had provided opportunities to practice teaching RSE. Student teachers articulated a range of understandings as to why such school-based practice may not be optimal but did, however, identify alternative modes to school-based teaching, to afford opportunities to practice their teaching of RSE including micro-teaching, role plays, modelling, observations.

Initial Teacher Educators at primary ITE noted across all or almost all of the seven ITE primary programmes indicated that the teaching of RSE on school placement was generally not occurring. A range of explanations were offered, some attributable to ITE institutional decisions; others attributable to school level and finally to wider DES policy requirements. While Initial Teacher Educators, in the main, articulated a number of cogent rationales for student teachers not teaching RSE on school placement including inter alia the sensitivity of RSE content; that RSE should be provided by the class teacher, having established relationships with pupils. Nonetheless, Initial Teacher Educators acknowledged the importance for student teachers of acquiring the necessary practical skills, to teach RSE. It was also identified that, in reality, student teachers are likely to learn on the job or receive further input on RSE as part of their CPD post-ITE. Given the reported and perceived benefits from engaging in the practice of teaching sexuality education the inclusion of skills-based and practical teaching experience of sexuality education or its proxy, further consideration is warranted in respect of the provision of alternative RSE skills development opportunities for student teachers during their ITE.

In respect of school-home cooperation for RSE provision, as referenced above the overall majority of student teachers agreed with the concept of close school-home cooperation for RSE provision. Student teachers also indicated that they required further support at ITE in respect of working together with parents/guardians in the provision of RSE.

### **6.3.5.3. Assessment of student teachers' skills/competences in RSE**

The salience of aligning assessment together with teaching and learning is well documented, including within an Irish context (Lysaght et al., 2019). These authors note that experience of diverse forms and conceptualisations of assessment is integral to effective teaching and learning. Furthermore, assessment modes and experiences at ITE also have significance for the modelling of good practice in relation to student teachers' assessment of their pupils' learning in relation to SPHE/RSE in classroom contexts.



The Systematic Review, found, in relation to assessment of sexuality education at ITE, that student teachers expressed preferences for independent research, and group-based and self-assessment. In interviews with primary Initial Teacher Educators, when asked as to whether RSE input was specifically assessed on their programme, primary ITE educators' responses, particularly from those closest to providing RSE input namely Module Coordinators/Lecturers, provided a range of responses. Most typically, the primary ITE educators reported that as RSE was offered as a component of the core module of SPHE, RSE assessment was not thus specifically assessed, rather it was integrated as part of SPHE assessment on their ITE primary programme. RSE, in the main, assessed as a component of SPHE through Continuous Assessment methods with student self-selection. As RSE was provided as a component of the core SPHE module, assessment of RSE was not specifically assessed per se but typically integrated within an overall SPHE assessment.

## 6.4. Conclusion

This synthesis of TEACH-RSE research findings informed the development of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations. As may be seen from international studies reviewed in the Systematic Review, the empirical study of the provision of sexuality education in ITE to student teachers is a relatively limited, albeit growing field of research. The TEACH-RSE research, while exploratory, extends the scholarship in the field, specifically illuminating the Irish context of RSE provision in ITE, offering a significant contribution to an under-researched and, indeed, under-theorised field.

Overall, as the first study in an Irish context of Initial Teacher Education for Relationships and Sexuality Education, TEACH-RSE offers strong foundations for further building of the research evidence base in this area. There are a number of avenues through which this research could be expanded in the future. Currently it is important that research examines Initial Teacher Educators' levels of preparedness and needs regarding the delivery of a new RSE curriculum to student teachers. While this research gave us valuable insights into student teachers preparedness to teach RSE, the qualitative aspect of this report with student teachers could be expanded further to examine those implicit and explicit factors that impact on their perceived ability to engage with the subject. The dearth of data on the experiences of post-primary student teachers needs to be addressed. Given the particular nuances of their teaching qualifications, and the lack of a specific qualification to teach RSE, this would warrant a research project designed specifically for this cohort. Additionally, a longitudinal study that tracked individual teachers from student teachers, to Newly Qualified Teachers, to experienced teachers would help identify the development of their learning and competence and confidence in the teaching of RSE. Furthermore, the clear findings pertaining to the development of specialist teacher graduate qualifications in SPHE/RSE warrant a needs analysis to examine the translation of TEACH-RSE research knowledge to inform meaningful and sustainable programme design and development in ITE.

The next section reports on stakeholder consultation in respect of the development of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations.



# Section 7:

## Stakeholder consultation on the development of TEACH-RSE Recommendations

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### 7.1. Introduction

A participatory, collaborative approach through multi-stakeholder engagement and consultation was adopted in the development and refinement of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations. The employment of such an approach represented an important means through which the insights and perspectives of multiple stakeholders, with a shared interest in RSE and its provision in ITE and the wider education system, were garnered (Barr et al., 2014; Collier-Harris and Goldman, 2017; Fetterman, Rodriguez-Campos and Zukoski, 2017). This process of stakeholder consultation with stakeholders was considered imperative to ensure the TEACH-RSE Recommendations were contextually relevant and informed by stakeholders from across the education system, both nationally and internationally. Situating the TEACH-RSE Recommendations within the broader educational and societal contexts in which ITE operates was important, as was representing the contexts in which the teacher graduate would work (Brown Wilson and Slade, 2020; Adagale, 2015; Steketee, et al., 2013).

#### 7.1.1. Aim and objective

The aim of this study was to develop contextually relevant TEACH-RSE Recommendations, through consultation with key stakeholders, with the objective of informing and shaping future, national policy and practice developments in relation to RSE provision in ITE.

### 7.2. Method

#### 7.2.1. Design

A two-phased qualitative research design was employed. In the first phase, stakeholders were invited to review and provide written feedback on initial, provisional recommendations. In the second phase, stakeholders participated in an online focus group to discuss the revised stakeholder-informed TEACH-RSE Recommendations and any outstanding issues of relevance to the development of the final version of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations.

#### 7.2.2. Participants

A purposive sampling method was employed to identify stakeholders. Representatives from across a range of national and international groups/organisations, were identified as key informants on teacher professional learning and development and RSE and invited to participate in the TEACH-RSE stakeholder consultation process.



Overall, a total of 36 stakeholders (N=36) contributed to phase one and/or phase two of the TEACH-RSE stakeholder consultation process. Participants in the TEACH-RSE stakeholder consultation were drawn from diverse stakeholder groups/ organisations inter alia:

- parents/guardians through their representative associations;
- second-level students through their representative unions;
- student teachers and HEI students through their representative unions;
- teachers and teacher representative unions;
- school principals and school management bodies;
- representatives working in non-governmental/non-statutory organisations;
- representatives working in governmental/statutory organisations/agencies;
- representatives working in Initial Teacher Education;
- researchers working across both national and international contexts; and
- stakeholders involved in international standards for teacher preparation in sexuality education.

### **7.2.3. Materials**

#### **7.2.3.1. Phase one**

An initial, provisional draft of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations was developed through the synthesis of findings from the constituent TEACH-RSE research studies, reported in Section 6, and international guidelines on sexuality education. Key information sources included; international guidelines and standards for sexuality education, including on teacher preparation for sexuality education (FoSE, 2012, 2014, 2020; WHO-BZgA, 2010, 2017; UNESCO, 2009, 2018; Renold and McGeeney, 2018); the Systematic Review of peer-reviewed publications on the provision of sexuality education at ITE for student teachers; and TEACH-RSE findings from primary qualitative and quantitative research with student teachers and Initial Teacher Educators. The initial, provisional draft of recommendations provided the stimulus material for the first phase of the stakeholder consultation process.

#### **7.2.3.2. Phase two**

Formal written feedback from stakeholders on the initial, provisional recommendations from phase one was collated and integrated into a revised set of TEACH-RSE Recommendations which were the stimulus for stakeholder consultation in phase two.

### **7.2.4. Ethical considerations**

Given that the stakeholder consultation process was a key component of the TEACH-RSE research, ethical approval was sought from and granted by the DCU Research Ethics Committee (DCU/REC/2020/076).

### **7.2.5. Procedure**

Stakeholders were invited to participate in both phases of the consultation process.

#### **7.2.5.1. Phase one**

A range of stakeholders received an email invitation to participate in the TEACH-RSE stakeholder consultation process. Those stakeholders that accepted the invitation to participate received a plain language statement (PLS) outlining the consultation and research processes together with a consent form



which they were asked to complete and return via email. Original identifiable copies were stored in secure password protected files. Any subsequent working copies of data were anonymised.

Stakeholders were presented with the draft of the initial, provisional recommendations and invited to give written feedback on these. More specifically, they were asked to provide their views on each specific recommendation, make suggestions for additional/alternative recommendations not addressed, and comment on issues considered relevant to the development of these recommendations which had not been included. This information was communicated in written format through email. Formal written feedback on the initial, provisional recommendations was received from 26 stakeholders.

Collated feedback from stakeholders was independently reviewed by two members of the TEACH-RSE research team. Each researcher independently developed a 'feedback synthesis', drawing together the data from stakeholders' feedback. Working collaboratively the initial, provisional recommendations were refined on the basis of the Phase one stakeholder feedback. The data from this phase was integrated to develop a revised, stakeholder-informed iteration of recommendations for phase two of the study.

### 7.2.5.2. Phase two

A focus group methodology was employed as it provided the opportunity for stakeholders to share insights and to hear one another's perspectives. Multi--stakeholder communication through group interaction, is an important component in the cultivation of a synergistic and systemic approach to change (Kitzinger, 1994)anecdotes, shared world views.Can at times cause censoring of what might be said privately but equally may be less inhibiting because of the support.Differences in opinion force parts to examine how they reach their opinion. Prevents the researcher from assuming they know how/why an opinion is held. The way people challenge each other reveals their own attitudes. Advises use of categories in analyzing the group eg question, cited source, deferring to the opinion of others, changes of mind. see the article for 10 advantages of using the groups. Ends with interesting and valid points about context and construction-no means of gaining information is true-so differences in data obtained from individual interviews vs groups are there for discussion and understanding, not that one is more right than the other.", "author": [{"dropping-particle": "", "family": "Kitzinger", "given": "Jenny", "non-dropping-particle": "", "parse-names": false, "suffix": ""}], "container-title": "Sociology of Health & Illness", "id": "ITEM-1", "issue": "1", "issued": [{"date-parts": [[1994]]}], "page": "101-121", "title": "The methodology of Focus Groups:the importance of interaction between research participants", "type": "article-journal", "volume": "16"}, "uris": ["http://www.mendeley.com/documents/?uuid=2fb4ebaa-0512-3791-9f0c-f2758138e9ac"]}, "mendeley": {"formattedCitation": "(Kitzinger, 1994)."}]

As part of phase two, and in advance of the online focus group consultation, stakeholders received a protocol for online group etiquette. Stakeholders were also notified, in advance, that the focus group would be recorded. The focus group consultation was facilitated by the PI with the support of another member of the TEACH-RSE research team. Throughout phases one and two, email communication was conducted on an individual basis or within individual organisations, as appropriate, to ensure stakeholder confidentiality

The revised, stakeholder-informed iteration of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations was circulated to stakeholders ahead of an online focus group. Stakeholders were invited to attend an online focus group to provide feedback on the revised recommendations and to identify any remaining issues in respect of the proposed recommendations.



Stakeholders who participated in the focus group were also invited, should they wish to do so, to provide any follow-up feedback they may have through written email communication with the PI.

The data from the focus group transcription, analytic memos, and any additional written feedback were collated. Key messages from the stakeholder consultation were identified and are reported in the following sub-section.

## 7.3. Emergent Key Messages

Stakeholders both recognised and welcomed the timely development of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations and the opportunity extended to them to engage in the stakeholder consultation process. Broadly endorsing the revised stakeholder-informed iteration of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations, stakeholders emphasised the following particular issues:

- Acknowledgment of RSE as being situated in a multicultural and evolving societal context;
- Exigence for teacher professional learning and development for RSE;
- Centrality of the voice of the child and parents/guardians;
- Endorsement of an inter-agency, collaborative approach to RSE.

### 7.3.1. Acknowledgement of RSE as being situated in a multicultural and evolving context and society

Stakeholders referenced RSE as being situated and taking place within societies and contexts that are multicultural, diverse, complex and ever evolving. They reflected that given contextual factors this will influence what is done, what has been done and what can be done in relation to RSE:

'This has been an issue on the education agenda which hasn't really got addressed for very complicated sociocultural and other reasons.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 15)

'There's going to be children coming from very diverse backgrounds in terms of how they're going to be taught at home on this issue.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 10)

'The sense of intervening now ...The curricular reform so that RSE intervenes in that debate but that also it's conceptualised in a way that allows it to dialogue with the other areas that are really important at the moment...multiculturalism and the politics of education.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 6)

The nature of the ever-evolving context in which RSE is taught was identified as a strong rationale for the need for ongoing support and education to be provided to teachers in relation to RSE:

'...different sexual identities, multiple, fluidity, all that type of thing, the knowledge base in this area is really changing significantly... it is very complex...Teaching in really diverse cultural classrooms where you have strong religious, cultural, social shall we say, norms about individuals and society and sexuality and identity.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 15)

'The absolute need for ongoing capacity building for teachers in this ...as this space is evolving so quickly.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 18)



'The situation changes so often now, so that has to be continuous so we're good at possibly doing it on a one-off basis but it's actually doing it on an annual or a bi-annual basis we're not good at.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 1)

'The field of sexuality and relationships among young people is changing really quickly so five years ago we didn't have all the exchanging of images of people and Instagram...the access to pornography is a lot, lot stronger now...teachers need to be able to know how to deal with this so we need to ensure the syllabus covers that.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 3)

### 7.3.2. Exigence for teacher professional learning and development for RSE

Identifying persistent challenges within teacher professional learning and development which exist stakeholders made reference to concerns regarding teacher's comfort levels in relation to the teaching of RSE and the need for further teacher professional learning and development to address teachers' attitudes regarding the teaching of RSE. Stakeholders also identified an urgency in respect of the professional development of teachers who currently teach RSE or will do so in the future.

Teacher professional learning and development was identified as a particular weak link in relation to RSE provision:

'The weak link has always been teacher preparation... I think the curriculum will get there, we have the resources, it's always been the teaching comfort and expertise.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 12)

'Very often, you know in once off CPD sessions which a lot of teachers avail of today we aren't maybe able to get down to those deeper levels of training, that it might be more knowledge based as opposed to skills, knowledge and skills based as opposed to getting down to the attitudes which is the third pillar that's really important.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 18)

'But the teacher who really in effect is very uncomfortable and uneasy teaching SPHE and no disrespect to any course, no matter what happens it's not going to change their inane discomfort and if a teacher is visibly uncomfortable with students... that is going to manifest itself in the classroom.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 22)

'The post-primary students picked up some teachers lack of comfort and lack of self-assurance in working in the subject area and some students then felt they were less willing or less likely to engage with that teacher or to contact the teacher or discuss perhaps sensitive issues perhaps that they would like to discuss but where students found teachers had more open dialogical approaches that they were really delighted.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 23)

Reference was made to barriers that may create discomfort for student teachers:

'...context that teachers are teaching in because a lot of them would love to do work with children in a better, more comprehensive way but may feel vulnerable in terms of management or the ethos of a school and particularly teachers who themselves feel vulnerable because of their sexual orientation or whatever.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 4)



Another stakeholder indicated that there is a real need to look at the support framework for RSE because it is a different type of subject:

'...teaching RSE really IS different from teaching other subjects and so that whole issue about teacher discomfort needs to be directly addressed. The point was well made by several people that the curriculum in relation to RSE permeates the whole school experience and therefore needs buy in from all...Because it IS different, it requires a different support framework to other subjects. The teaching does rely on the personal qualities of the teacher – ability to build rapport, warmth, non-judgemental attitude, openness to awareness that one's own prejudices and biases impact on one's ability to teach this subject and arising from that, openness to explore these in some context that would support one's teaching.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 25)

Stakeholders identified RSE as being broader than a curricular subject area; as a way to interact, engage and support students in the wider school context:

'It is really important that teachers are ready to deal with RSE issues as they come up informally during the day and not just during formal RSE lessons... It is so important that when issues arise informally teachers are prepared to take these opportunities to help the children learn from them. Sometimes these informal moments are extremely relevant for the students. Teachers need to be confident in dealing with issues as they arise.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 10)

'The idea of teacher comfort, I think that it's really critical...in that sex education is not in the curriculum per se but across the curriculum.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 12)

'It wasn't just about the subject and the teacher, it was as much about that as it was about the environment that was created within the school.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 14)

The proposed TEACH-RSE Recommendations were identified as a valuable framework when considering the salient role of teacher professional learning and development in RSE provision, particularly in relation to differentiating between teachers' competence to teach RSE and their comfort in doing so:

'The conversation about teacher comfort or disposition for this, I think one of the possibilities of this framework is to shift that, shift the conversation away from individual people's dispositions or comfort to a conversation about professional training and competence... we can all be professionally trained and competent across multiple areas of the work that we do.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 21)

Further feedback in relation to comfort regarding RSE that this not only relates to a teacher's ability to teach sexuality education but relates to fundamental human rights and a teacher's ability to protect and respect young people and create environments in which discriminatory and offensive behaviour is challenged:

'...so issues like consent or sharing or mutuality or respect or not making jokes that are genderist or are sexist or homophobic and young people being challenged when they do that, that's equally part of RSE, so if somebody doesn't feel comfortable actually standing up and teaching sex ed. Which some people don't, they can at least be empowered, if not instructed as part of their professional role to challenge any behaviour which isn't respecting human rights or other people's right to live as they wish to live... Attitudes includes values and values may well include how you resolve ethical



dilemmas which you can't say there's a right or wrong answer but you can at least give people some of the tools with which to think about how to address issues (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 3)

### **7.3.3. Centrality of the voice of the child and parents/guardians**

The approach of listening and actively taking into consideration the voice of children and parents/guardians was discussed as an intentionally collaborative approach and of great importance. Including the voice of children and parents/guardians was seen as a way of acknowledging that teachers are not on their own in relation to how young people come to understand and explore relationships and sexuality with young people themselves, playing an active role in their sexual health and wellbeing. Parents/guardians were also acknowledged as key role models in young people's lives:

'The importance of the inclusion of the voice of children and parents, I think is vital. That we're not on our own as teachers just teaching it, it's something that we must connect with parents and we must listen to the children.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 10)

'A subject like this happens not just within the school walls but outside it, it's part of ongoing life of young people.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 14)

Several stakeholders made reference to the fact that by listening to young people we can ensure that the RSE curriculum is relevant and meets young people's needs. These responses indicate that any RSE curriculum must be flexible and have the ability to adapt to young people's diverse and evolving needs:

'This is ongoing, ever-changing and it must meet the current needs of the young people now, it's never going to be a static curriculum and it's really important that we ensure that the voice of the young person continues right throughout this.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 14)

'The voice of children and young people shaping what happens next and making sure that whatever changes come that children and young people continue to be at the centre of those things and in that way then we can respond to children's lives as they change.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 2)

Parents/guardians were acknowledged as a cohort who could support teachers in relation to RSE:

'The role of parents is just so essential obviously for the young people and the parents and their relationship but also to support teachers.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 15)

'Teachers will get a lot of support from parents if they work in partnership with them.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 29)

### **7.3.4. Endorsement of an interagency, collaborative approach to RSE provision**

Stakeholders reflected that within the school context teachers who may teach RSE will need support from the wider school and education community:

'Teachers who are taking the initiative in this area will need to be supported by their management and will need to get help on how to cope with some of the abuse they'll get...It is crucially important

that school managers and those at higher level are protecting those taking the risk.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 3)

'When they are teaching what they have been trained to teach that they actually are supported in doing that and that there isn't a conflict with whether they'll get promotions or the management or ethos.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 4)

Inter-agency collaboration was identified as being particularly significant for the recommendations to be enacted:

'By not having enough engagement and exchanges with those working in the youth sector we're really missing out...I'm so glad that you have this wide constellation, this wide participation today.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 15)

'...or me was almost the most important one, this inter-agency collaborative approach because I think there's so much expertise and it's been referred to both in the formal, non-formal sector between government agencies, NGO's, Initial Teacher Education, those involved in CPD but mostly working independently and unless we can get beyond that and find new ways of working I don't think we're going to really be able to implement most if not in fact any of these recommendations, so for me that way of working in a more coordinated, collaborative and integrated manner I think is really critical to moving forward with more effective RSE at all levels.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 24)

'I think it's really important that we hear the voice of parents and work in partnership with them otherwise I just think that it won't go anywhere.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 29)

Stakeholders identified the need for a collaborative and continuum approach to teacher professional learning and development in RSE:

'There's obviously a role for the Teaching Council here and in terms of accredited ITE courses there's the congruence with the kind of curriculum framework that the NCCA is designing and then of course the whole area of, which really is the difficult one, it's all very good ITE, you can do a lot of stuff there but the challenge is to keep that, how should we say, the lifelong learning for the teacher.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 15)

'That it's about ongoing capacity building for teachers so not just about the initial training but about capacity building available throughout their teaching career and that's not just training but access to peer support and to organisations.' (FG Stakeholder Consultation: Participant 14)

## 7.4. Conclusion

The TEACH-RSE stakeholder consultation process offered a valuable opportunity to ensure that the research-informed TEACH-RSE Recommendations were contextually relevant. Wherein key national and international informants on teacher professional learning and development and RSE, through individual written submissions and collective dialogue, contributed to the development of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations. The final version of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations is comprised of 28 recommendations presented under five key headings and is presented in the subsequent and final section of this report.



# Section 8:

## TEACH-RSE Recommendations

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The creation of an enabling and supportive environment for RSE at ITE warrants system-wide leadership in relation to RSE provision in ITE, to ensure that primary and post-primary teacher graduates are more confident and competent in their roles as providers of high-quality, comprehensive, inclusive RSE to children and young people in our 21st-century classrooms. The overall aims of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations are to offer an evidence-based, stakeholder-informed framework for the optimal embedding of RSE within ITE, as part of the continuum of teacher professional learning and development. The TEACH-RSE research findings provide an evidence base for progressive policy and practice developments in relation to RSE provision in ITE. The development of TEACH-RSE Recommendations offers a framework for the direction of systemic change in teacher professional learning and development in RSE at ITE needed to meet the national strategic objectives and global sustainable development goals of lifelong optimal sexual health and wellbeing for all children and young people in Ireland, today and into the future.



## TEACH-RSE RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Teacher professional learning and development standards for RSE provision in ITE: System-wide, research-informed and systematically reviewed**

- Collaborative development of teacher professional learning and development standards, and associated system-wide structural indicators, for the enhancement of RSE provision in ITE.
- Systematic, periodic review of RSE provision at ITE, aligned with system-wide structural indicators, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, and in accordance with the Teaching Council Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education (2020) and Procedures for the Professional Accreditation of Programmes of ITE (2021).
- Systematic, periodic review of the standards for RSE provision in ITE to ensure they remain informed by research and evidence-based developments in the field.

### **Continuum of teacher professional learning and development for RSE: Model of core plus elective/subject specialism at ITE and further, specialist teacher professional learning and development programmes post-ITE.**

- RSE to be provided as a mandatory/core component for student teachers in primary and post-primary ITE aligned with national policy priorities and international standards for sexuality education (WHO, 2010, 2017).
- RSE elective/subject specialism options to be offered to student teachers in primary and post-primary ITE, in addition to mandatory/core input in RSE.
- Development of accredited SPHE/RSE qualifications, post-ITE, aligned with models of good practice in respect of teacher graduate studies and the Teaching Council (2016) Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning.
- Adoption of a continuum approach to RSE provision across all education levels, from early childhood, primary and post-primary education through teacher's professional development.
- Strengthen structural inter-connections across the continuum of teacher professional learning and development in relation to RSE in alignment with Teaching Council frameworks for ITE (Céim, 2020) through Induction of Newly Qualified Teachers NQTs (Droichead, 2017, Revised) to continuing professional learning and development for teachers (Cosán, 2016).
- Complementary to continuing professional learning and development in RSE, development of a framework of supervision/mentoring supports for graduate teachers of RSE.



### **Approaches to conceptualisation of RSE provision in ITE: Holistic, comprehensive, inclusive, rights-based and developmental approaches**

- Adoption of a holistic, comprehensive, inclusive, values-based and rights-based approach to RSE provision in ITE.
- Ensure core principles and values of equality and diversity are embedded in RSE provision in ITE.
- Explicit naming and integration of diverse categories of identities through the adoption of an intersectional (gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, socio-economic status, ability, race, ethnicity) approach to the provision of RSE in ITE.

### **Systemic approach to RSE provision at ITE: System-wide, collaborative, integrated approach including inter-departmental, inter-agency and across and within ITE programmes**

- Build inter-agency collaboration across governmental departments and agencies including *inter alia* Department of Education and Skills; Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Department of Health, HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme SHCPP; Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth and between statutory and non-statutory organisations to strengthen RSE provision in ITE and across the wider education system.
- Adoption of a partnership approach, inclusive of the voice of children and young people, parents/guardians, student teachers, NQTs and experienced teachers, school leadership and patron bodies, youth and community advocates, and within the context of the wider sociocultural landscape, in the development of teacher professional learning and development in RSE, aligned with international and national good practice in rights-based, democratic principles of consultation.
- Build capacity for RSE through developing new, or strengthening existing, network/peer learning structures at local/regional-level and at national/international-level.
- Development of coordinating structure/s, at ITE level, to support the coherence of RSE provision, associated curricula and resources, across primary and post-primary ITE programmes.
- Support for the engagement of ITE with national-level reviews of SPHE/RSE policy, curriculum and/or practice (e.g., National Council for Curriculum and Assessment NCCA, Department of Education and Skills DES Inspectorate) and in wider national review processes (e.g., the review and redevelopment of the National Sexual Health Strategy).



**Teaching, learning and assessment of RSE at ITE:**

**ITE programme-level factors pertaining to student teachers' content knowledge of, pedagogical skills in, and attitudinal dispositions toward RSE provision, ensuring a clear SPHE/RSE pathway for graduate teachers**

- Ensure a clear SPHE/RSE pathway for graduate teachers, aligned with WHO (2010, 2017), through programme-level audit/mapping identifying *inter alia* time allocated to, positioning of SPHE/RSE and RSE-related provision, and assessment of student teachers' learning in relation to RSE across primary and post-primary ITE programmes.
- Designation of specialist Initial Teacher Educators to SPHE/RSE provision on primary and post-primary ITE programmes.
- Integration of SPHE/RSE and RSE-related provision across Foundation Studies and Professional Studies to ensure RSE provision on primary and post-primary ITE programmes is both practice-based and theoretically informed.
- Implementation of a developmental, spiral approach to SPHE/RSE provision at programme-level, progressively deepening student teachers' knowledge and skills in SPHE/RSE.
- Employment of diverse, participatory methodologies, including *inter alia* active, experiential learning; small group teaching; modelling of good practice and facilitation of dialogical methods.
- Development of student teachers' understanding of the diversity of learners' needs in relation to RSE and their implementation of evidence-based, pedagogical approaches to RSE provision that meets the needs of all learners.
- Ensure student teachers' critical awareness of developments in evidence-based policies, research, practice and resources relevant to the teaching, learning and assessment of RSE at ITE.
- Adoption of a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach (WHO, 2017; UNESCO, 2018), ensuring that student teachers' attitudes, as well as knowledge and skills, are addressed in RSE provision in ITE .
- Embed opportunities for student teachers' engagement in critical self-reflection on RSE-related attitudes and norms, exploring and clarifying personal and societal values and experiences of RSE.
- Ensure a wide range of student teachers' RSE-related skills are addressed including *inter alia* media literacy, along with pastoral and relational competencies.
- Support student teachers' competence and confidence in teaching of RSE through the provision and scaffolding of a range of RSE-related skills during ITE, including *inter alia* to:
  - ◆ practice planning for/teaching of RSE, through e.g. micro-teaching, lesson plan and scheme of work construction, and where approved, school placement-based practice;
  - ◆ hone skills in communicating and working in partnership with parents/guardians and within their school and wider community contexts.



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