

***'Let's talk about Sex, Baby'..... second-level students, parents/guardians, teachers and principals talk about the Relationships and Sexuality Programme***  
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## **Introduction**

In 1990, an all-female American hip-hop group called Salt-N-Peppa released a recording entitled 'Let's talk about Sex, Baby' which focused on safe sex, acknowledging the positives and negatives about sex, and decrying the silence and censorship in the media at that point about human sexuality. Its chorus goes '*Let's talk about sex, baby, Let's talk about you and me, Let's talk about all the good things and the bad things that may be, Let's talk about sex*'. That Salt-N-Peppa song encapsulates the focus of this paper, and our research project on the Relationships and Sexuality (RSE) Programme in Irish post-primary schools. We talked about, and listened to perspectives on RSE with 55 students from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> year, 22 RSE teachers, six principals and eleven parents/guardians in six second-level schools across the Republic of Ireland. Our project used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to ensure that participant perspectives and voices were central to the study. This paper focuses on one of the key enablers of, or barriers to talking about sex in the RSE classroom. It outlines how *teacher comfortability* is at the heart of positive experience for both teachers and learners in this regard. It explores a number of systemic factors that mitigate against *teacher comfortability*.

## **Developments and issues in Relationships and Sexuality Education in Ireland and internationally**

RSE was added to the curricula of Irish post-primary schools over two decades ago. The years preceding its introduction featured significant debate about a variety of issues touching on human sexuality across the country and involving numerous stakeholders (Nolan, 2018; Inglis, 1998a). Sex-related scandals in the 1980s presented a number of social shocks to Irish society and forced major, national debates around the issue of sex and sex education in a nation that was, for the most part, silent on the issue of sex and sexuality (Ferriter, 2009; Inglis, 2003, 1998a, 1998b).

The introduction of RSE was not without controversy. It serves as an example of the conflict of interests between Church and State where both argued to retain their status and assert power (Inglis, 1998a; West, 2018). The Department of Education (DES), mindful of the Constitutional rights of parents with regard to the moral education of their children as well as the rights of schools to uphold their ethos/patronage, treaded carefully to ensure that its actions were not 'over-reaching' and offending to some education stakeholders.

Efforts to develop an RSE module involved many stakeholders from the outset – patrons, principals, teachers and parents. Members of the Expert Advisory Group (1995) represented the Department of Education, parents, teachers, principals, a guidance counsellor and clerical/religious representation. Learner voices were not included in this consultation. Despite this collaboration, as RSE was in the process of being drafted and piloted, significant opposition to the programme emerged on a national scale with some parents' groups objecting to the programme and some teachers initially refusing to teach it (Inglis, 1998a). Responses to the NCCA report on RSE in 2019 continue to reflect discomfort with RSE being taught in school by a noticeable minority of parents.

Regardless of whether adults are uncomfortable, or silent or arguing about the morality or content of an RSE programme, young people continue to develop as sexual beings as part of the process of human maturation. A new data set was published in 2018 documenting sexual intercourse, age of initiation and contraception use among adolescents (Young et al., 2018). It outlined the reality that a proportion of teenagers are sexually active from a young age (22.8% boys and 13.4% of girls by the age of 14), indicating that some do engage in risky activity from both the perspectives of health and unwanted pregnancy. Rates of STI infections among adolescents and number of births to women under 20 years of age have both reduced compared with patterns among older cohorts (HSPC 2018, CSO Annual Report 2015).

The anxieties and ill-being experienced by adolescents today are complex (O'Brien, 2016). They relate to numerous socio-cultural and emotional factors. These factors include diverse sexualities and homophobia (Mayock and Byrne, 2004; Higgins et al., 2016). Other factors include bullying, peer pressure, eating disorders, alcohol and drug misuse, mental health challenges, self-harm and suicidal behaviour (O'Brien, 2008); the sexualisation/'pornification'

of society (Mulholland, 2015), and issues surrounding the use of social media in positive (Stevens et al., 2017; Simon and Daneback, 2013) and negative ways (Jones, 2018) and indeed along with the use of other forms of media (Ybarra et al., 2014).

It has been argued that most sex education occurs outside of school among family and peers (Welsh Government, 2018; Hall et al., 2016; Parker et al. 2009; Stephenson et al., 2008). While the internet serves as a positive force in the lives of young people seeking sex-education information, it is also known 'danger zone' for children and young people given the ease with which one can access a plethora of material. There are also dangers attached to a child's internet visibility/presence and the possibility that strangers can gain access to the child or young person. The advance of smartphone technology only serves to increase the private opportunities that people can have to view sexually explicit material, or indeed to be exposed to such material even when the initial intent to search for it is absent. Children and young people are unable to differentiate between risky and non-risky material and sources online nor do they have a full appreciation of the risks associated with uploading and posting personal information (McCann, 2017 cited in Pollock 2017).

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is not a subject in its own right like other subjects on the curriculum. Rather, it is one component part of the broader Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) at junior cycle. In senior cycle, the situation varies as schools provide for it in different ways, sometimes through other subjects such as Religious Education, Physical Education or through 'Guidance' and Pastoral Care. In an evaluation of SPHE/RSE (2010/2011) it was found that there was very good provision in schools noted by the Inspectorate (DES, 2013).

Promotion of SPHE in schools is different to the promotion of other subjects. The Education Act (1998, Part 2, Section 7):

*Obliges schools to promote the social and personal development of students 'in consultation with their parents' (McCormack and Gleeson, 2010: 395).*

In the context of second level education, the Department of Education and Science, issued guidelines about topics that may be taught as part of an RSE module for the three years of the junior cycle. It is important to note that these are not mandatory guidelines. In fact, it is

the responsibility of the school to develop and implement an RSE programme as per their students' needs in line with the school's own ethos. Indeed, in the Department's curricular document for SPHE, RSE is the only module that carries the following note:

*This module will be prepared in accordance with school policy on relationships and sexuality education. Further details are included in the Teacher Guidelines for Social, Personal and Health Education. (SPHE) (DES, 2000)*

Within a recent SPHE curricular document, the role of RSE is clearly defined at the outset,

*Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is important for young people at this stage of their lives. They are exposed to a lot of information about relationships and sex from informal sources, the media and online. SPHE provides the context within which young people can learn about important physical, social, emotional and moral issues around relationships, sexual health, sexuality and gender identity, including where to get reliable information from trusted sources. (NCCA, 2016: 4)*

SPHE is not assessed at the formal Junior Certificate examinations. It is described as a 'spiral' curriculum that builds on work previously done in primary level. Similarly, the Senior Cycle curriculum builds on work done at junior level and is not an examination subject.

The Inspectorate report noted that despite its "good" and "very good" provision across schools, issues emerged over its timetabling and hence, students' access to the curriculum:

*there were evident weaknesses that had a negative impact on the quality of student access to the subject in 13% of schools. These included a failure to timetable SPHE as a discrete subject for all of the academic cohort. 2 Circular letters are available on the Department of Education and Skills website: [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) 7 year; a failure to timetable SPHE for all students in all junior cycle year groups; the use of designated SPHE periods for purposes such as form-tutor duties, teaching other subjects, or providing study periods or learning support. In the context of the current junior cycle programme, school management should ensure that SPHE is provided for all students (DES, 2013: 6-7).*

The importance of a "supportive whole school environment" is at the heart of healthy schools that promote the personal and social wellbeing of students. The role of parents/guardians is also noted since SPHE is "primarily the role and responsibility of parents or guardians". It also acknowledges the contribution that parents/guardians can make towards planning the SPHE curriculum (NCCA, 2011: 9). Cross-curricular links with other subjects are noted, specifically

naming Religious Education, Home Economics, Biology and Physical Education. Schools have flexibility to plan their SPHE according to their “own unique setting” (NCCA, 2011: 12). It is a ninety-hour course and it is “recommended” that schools offer a double class, each week for the two years of the senior cycle programme and “ideally” one year of SPHE should occur during the Leaving Certificate year when students and schools experience greatest academic demand due to the nature of our high-stakes exam structure. SPHE does not feature as an exam subject on the Leaving Certificate programme of exams but students can complete a portfolio as part of the Assessment of Learning aim of the subject.

The first review of the implementation of RSE was in 1999 (Morgan, 2000). It found that teachers had support for the programme, benefitted from training, but that its implementation across schools was uneven. In fact, at that point, some schools had not yet fully engaged with the policy document requirements. Later studies (relating to RSE’s implementation) demonstrated that the time RSE had on the timetable decreased over time from first year to third year (Geary and Mannix McNamara, 2002 cited in Mayock et al., 2007: 33). By 2007, Mayock et al. revealed that RSE was not being taught in first year or second year in 11% of schools and this increased to 20% by third year. The authors also found that RSE implementation in Senior Cycle was low and this was cause for concern. Previous research in Ireland demonstrates that students wish for involvement in curricular design (O’Higgins and Nic Gabhainn, 2010). Students in this study also noted that they value the RSE programme. Mayock et al. (2007) reported similar findings.

Parents are important stakeholders in their child’s education in Ireland. They have a right to choose their child’s school, to appeal decisions not to enrol or to exclude (Section 29 appeal) and most notably, in the context of the current study, they have the right to withdraw their child from RSE on the grounds of “conscientious objection”. That right is enshrined in Article 42:1 of the Constitution.

*The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children. (Government of Ireland 2020)*

Historical evidence points to the fact that parents were supportive of school-based sex education programmes in the 1980s despite the morally-charged pre-secular Roman Catholic majoritarian milieu of that era (Nolan, 2018). When RSE was being proposed in the early-mid-1990s, some parents' groups and religious groups were vehemently opposed to its introduction into schools as noted by Inglis (1998a) for personal and religious/moral reasons. Parents in England also retain the right to withdraw their child from Sexuality and Relationships Education (SRE) though they do not have the right to withdraw their child from the science lessons that cover the biological aspects of human development and the reproductive roles of biological females and males (Long, 2017).

The fact that Irish schools have maintained responsibility for designing their own RSE module is in keeping with the principle of subsidiarity. Additionally, significant variation exists across the country's schools in terms of the content that is taught, how it is taught, who teaches it, and the time that is devoted to this component of the SPHE curriculum. The first review of RSE's implementation (Morgan, 2000) noted that it was uneven. Furthermore, when RSE's implementation was described in a European-wide review, it was noted as "patchy" (Parker et al., 2009). Ireland is not alone on this on the international stage. Significant variation about what is taught in RSE is evident in the UK (Cavender Wilkinson, 2017; Pound et al. 2016, 2016 Wight and Fullerton, 2013; Wight, 2011) and in the USA (Santelli et al., 2017, 2005; Duberstein Lindberg et al., 2006).

Teachers in Ireland require no formal subject-specific university level qualification to teach RSE. For Teaching Council registration purposes, all post-primary teachers must hold a qualification in at least one approved curricular subject as well as, or as part of an initial teacher education qualification (The Teaching Council 2013). The extensive list of approved subjects does not include SPHE or RSE. In order to upskill for teaching RSE, teachers of SPHE and RSE engage with continuing professional development (training) through official channels such as the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the RSE and SPHE Support Services. PDST is part of the Teacher Education Unit of the Department of Education and Skills. Despite teachers' commitment to professional development, it rests against a clear subject hierarchy where SPHE, the curricular home of RSE, features low in the imagination of many stakeholders such as parents, the DES (Wilentz, 2016) and teachers

themselves. This type of subject hierarchy has been previously documented in Irish education studies and impacts of student-teacher relations and teacher-teacher relationships at school (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). Issues relating to teacher suitability, sensitivity/personality, and their training specifically relating to RSE and sex education, emerge in Irish research (Wilentz, 2016; McCormack and Gleeson, 2010) and in international research more generally (Pound et al., 2016; Buston et al., 2002).

In April 2018, the Minister for Education and Skills tasked the NCCA with undertaking a major review of the delivery of RSE in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> A final report was published in December 2019. Key findings include the centrality of teacher quality and teacher comfortability to the delivery of a good RSE programme and recognized that improved ITE and CPD is necessary to support this. The report noted that the provision of RSE is so varied that it can differ even within schools. The report acknowledged the need to update textbooks and other resources to include a wide range of issues such as internet safety, consent, pornography and LGBTQ identities. The report noted that there is a wide variety of views among the wider parent / guardian body and that negative views / concerns about negative views have a chilling effect on teachers and schools in terms of content. The report identified the need for more time to be allocated to RSE and acknowledged that SPHE/RSE has low status as a non-examination subject. The report noted concerns about the relatively loose nature of the guidelines and circulars regarding RSE and recommended input regarding updated content by a range of stakeholders including young people themselves. The report highlighted the importance of external oversight of the delivery of RSE within schools. The report acknowledged that the recent child protection requirements for schools will ensure regular reporting regarding the delivery of child safety related teaching and learning and RSE within schools and that the DES will have oversight of this process.

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<sup>1</sup> There isn't the space here to explore why a multiplicity of simultaneous studies were funded by the State on the same topic through different State agencies. However, it is a significant issue that should be considered and it is important that attention is drawn to it. This is particularly relevant when at least one of these extensive studies was not published by the funder therefore preventing State investment informing public debate on such a topic of significance.

## **Talking with stakeholders about RSE: methodology and ethical considerations**

This study focuses on the experiences and insights of principals, teachers, students and parents/legal guardians regarding the Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme in Irish second level schools. A hermeneutical or interpretative phenomenological perspective was chosen as the framework for this study. Phenomenology proposes that social experiences, things (inanimate objects) and events have no intrinsic meaning in and of themselves; they only hold meaning because human beings confer them with meaning (Jones 2003). Phenomenology is concerned with how individuals experience, describe, interpret and understand the phenomenon under investigation (Bergum 1989). In this way, such a methodological approach is particularly suited to the overall aims of this research which seeks to explore lived experience of principals, teachers, students and parents/legal guardians of the RSE programme in Irish second level education. Phenomenology is not only concerned with attitudes, perceptions and lived experiences on an individual level, but also strives to investigate the way in which that meaning is constructed collectively, socially and culturally, thus describing and interpreting ‘the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals in relation to a particular concept or phenomenon’ (Creswell 1998 p.51). As such, phenomenology examines the manner in which a single individual or several individuals construct reality based upon the interpretations and meanings they give to previous or similar situations.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Dublin City University’s Research Ethics Committee. A requirement from the funders was that a child protection policy for the study was developed to support the researchers through the process. The funders organised for a Barrister at Law to work with the Principal Investigator and the research team in developing this policy document. The Principal Investigator took responsibility for ensuring that the policy was implemented at each stage of the data gathering and analysis process.

This research involved four cohorts of participants for interview: principals, teachers, students and parents/legal guardians who chose either one-to-one or focus group interviews. All participants in this research were recruited through second level schools. Initial invitation to participate was sent to 20 schools. The schools chosen reflected the range of Irish second



level educational providers. The aim was to access a range of school types (single-sex and coeducational schools, different types of patronage, size and location). Six schools participated, enabling access to interviews with 55 students (39 female, 16 male) from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> year, as well as 22 RSE teachers, 6 principals and 11 parents. Of the six participating schools, two were urban, one was suburban and three were rural. Two of these schools were denominational single-sex girls' schools, two were inter-denominational Community Schools, one was an inter-denominational Community College and one was multi-denominational Community College. We did not gain access to any single-sex male schools.

Almost all of the student participants in this study participated in a one-to-one interview (a handful were interviewed in pairs at their request). Principals and parents/guardians were also interviewed one-to-one. The interview schedule consisted of one question, which invited participants to reflect on her or his experience of the RSE programme:

*Can you describe your experience of the RSE programme?*

Further questions arose from the information the interviewee imparted giving rise to the prompt or probe questions, which sought clarity where necessary. Interviews ranged in duration from 10 minutes to 60 minutes. All focus groups with RSE teachers were 60 minutes long. Through interviews and focus groups the voices of principals, teachers, students and parents/legal guardians, can be heard, offering us an insight into their 'ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher' (Reinharz 1992 p.9).

The data was collected on a digital recorder and downloaded onto a USB key or memory stick. The data generated from the principals, teachers, students and parents/legal guardians was divided amongst the team who spent time with the data set through the spoken word, listening to principals, teachers, students and parents/legal guardians describe their experiences of the RSE programme. Describing how the interpretation of the data came into being is not an easy exercise as Smythe et al (2007 1392) suggest that "working with the data is an experience of thinking". It is a difficult task to unravel how the thinking happened. This study required the discipline of writing, reading, re-writing, re-reading until a text materialised. The initial writing was the first superficial interpretation (Smythe et al, 2007) but through the process of re-reading other interpretations emerged and will continue to emerge as we further distill the data. This is not a linear process. Rather, it is one of going

backwards and forwards until a text surfaces. Emergent themes were not necessarily similar for all participants; instead, they represented “*an understanding that we have something that matters significantly, something that we wish to turn the reader towards*” (Smythe et al, 2007: 1392).

### **Are we ‘talking about sex’ in Irish post-primary school RSE classes? Stakeholder perspectives on the supports and barriers to teaching and learning in RSE**

The conversations with RSE teachers, with students, with parents/guardians and with school leaders indicated a willingness to ‘talk about sex’, a recognition that it is a very important, core part of life and that one which young people need to learn about and talk about in order to flourish. As one of the participating teachers stated: *‘It’s just that it, as you know, sexuality colours every single aspect of your life’* (Carly, RSE teacher for 20 years, interdenominational Community School).

However, our conversations with the participants also highlighted the gaps and the silences there can be when ‘talking (formally) about sex’ in Irish post-primary schools. One principal expressed concern that, despite their best intentions, there was something missing from their RSE programme, boxes were not being ticked and there were areas of silence:

*It’s strange that today with all the progress that has been made in the area I would still struggle to actually say how or if our present students leave feeling any better than what I’ve currently described and that’s a huge concern for me considering all of this is in place and we should be meeting those needs but I don’t really believe that we are. ... I feel we’re not ticking many of the boxes here. Now that’s no disrespect to either our teachers or I’m hoping our management. (Principal denominational girls’ rural secondary school)*

Individual student participants drew attention to those silences or absences in their comments. One 5<sup>th</sup> year respondent noted how the absence of discussion about intimacy in the context of developing relationships as part of RSE impacts, believing that this was an important gap in the focus of RSE in her experience.

*like you meet someone, you have sex, and you get married and you have a baby. That’s kind of like what it was taught as, like only when you’re with someone and when you really like someone, but just because you really like someone shouldn’t mean that you should – that you have to have sex with them straight away, do*

*you know? If that makes sense? ... And for people to be able to take their time. I feel like it's – you don't really talk about – yeah, like when you do it in school it is literally like, you like someone, you meet someone, and you have sex. It's nothing like – yeah, like it's nothing in between. Which I guess would be beneficial. (Betty, 5<sup>th</sup> year female student, urban co-ed Community School)*

A 3<sup>rd</sup> year student talked about the silences around homophobic language which resulted in comments made by students in jest not being challenged or even acknowledged in her school.

*I don't think so because it is very hidden, like say for example someone tripped over a chair they would just say something that would be like maybe 'faggot' or something like that, something rude, something derogatory to them and sure they would be only messing but in the same sense they would also be very rude towards that community. And it is very well hidden. (Fergie, 3<sup>rd</sup> year female student, single-sex girls' rural denominational secondary school)*

The absence of sufficient guidance on managing peer pressure regarding sexual relationships was highlighted, along with the need to understand consent, as well as guidance and discussion on managing one's digital identity and safely navigating social media. For example, a 6<sup>th</sup> year student refers to the speed at which social media images can 'go viral' in small localities and the implications of this for adolescent girls. She drew attention to the silence around self-care and how to manage peer pressure:

*...it's awful like girls don't really know what they're sending when they're sending it. And then, with a click of a button and the whole town has it, you know what I mean? So like they need to be taught how to be careful with those kind of (nude) pictures and don't be taking those pictures, no one needs to see them. (Zelda, 6<sup>th</sup> year female student, single-sex girls' rural denominational secondary school)*

One of the over-arching findings of our study was that while some students and RSE teachers are comfortable in the Salt-N-Peppa mode of talking about sex and relationships in the RSE classroom, many others do not share this ease of experience. Student participants from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> year, RSE teachers, principals and parents/guardians identified *teacher comfortability*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> We defined *teacher comfortability* as teachers assigned to teach the RSE programme having a sense of both ease and expertise with the subject matter as well as feeling confident and able to plan for and utilise the most appropriate pedagogical approach/es to teaching and learning in the RSE classroom.

as a key component in ensuring a positive, dialogic learning environment essential for good RSE learning. Part of challenge to that *comfortability* (for both teachers and learners) was understood by young people as being rooted in personal embarrassment (potentially by all concerned) due to the subject-matter.

*Some of us would like find it [sex] embarrassing to like talk about that kind of stuff.  
(Calleigh, female 1<sup>st</sup> year student, coeducational rural Community College)*

Students explained how embarrassment could result in a lack of teacher comfortability and avoidance of the topic in the classroom:

*I feel like it's kind of a topic where I don't mean to be bad on teachers but they obviously do feel a little bit awkward talking about it [sex], so they try and avoid it as much as possible... (Cait, 4<sup>th</sup> year female student, co-ed Community School).*

Students recognized that not all teachers were equally comfortable in teaching RSE and that their own learner comfort was very strongly linked to the comfort and ease of their teacher. Some students expressed sympathy for the teacher having to cover potentially uncomfortable content. A 2<sup>nd</sup> year student described her sense that RSE must be hard for the teacher to teach because it was uncomfortable for the students:

*I suppose it's just it must take a lot of guts to try to stand in front of a bunch of 14 year olds and go ... because like we're not that mature yet so we're like (laughs) sitting in the back of the class going 'Did I hear what Miss just said?' and she is trying to teach us all about it and we're like (laughter) 'She said ...' kind of like. Or laughing at a picture of like the diagram or something on the board and everything. Or some people laugh at it and some people are like 'Oh my God, what is she doing? Oh my God!', just 'when will this class end?' kind of thing so yeah. (Deidra, 2<sup>nd</sup> year female student, rural co-ed Community College)*

Teacher comfortability was identified as crucial by RSE teachers we interviewed.

*Not everybody is suitable to teach it either. You have to be very, very comfortable with allowing the classes to flow in the way of your students and being able to abandon what you had planned. (Cary, RSE teacher 10 years' service, multi-denominational Community College)*

*There are some people who are in the role who aren't comfortable, and don't want to teach it. (Farragh, RSE teacher, 25 years' service, inter-denominational Community School)*

Principals noted the centrality of teacher comfortability in being suited to the work.

*I'm happier at present that I have a staff, and particularly those who are assigned to the RSE areas, who are perhaps much more comfortable in addressing the issue. ....Definitely the teachers who are teaching RSE now I know that each and every one of them have no issue with it, but even if they have, they've a little network among themselves to say 'well I'll take your class while I'm doing it and you can go into mine if you feel very uncomfortable about that' and God there's no problem with that. (Eireann, principal denominational single-sex girls' school)*

Only one of the parents expressed a different view, seeing the teaching of RSE as a task to be got on with by any teacher assigned regardless of suitability.

*I think if teachers have to teach it, they have to teach it and that's it. (Caiden, father to 2 junior and senior cycle daughters, denominational rural single-sex girls' school)*

Where teacher comfortability was in evidence, good relationships and teacher ease encouraged learner comfortability.

*What I mean is it's my tutor, and he's also my geography teacher, so he's my closest teacher if I have to be close to a teacher. He's my tutor, which is the main person we met straight away. And that helps when it's your SPHE teacher as well, because - yeah, that's kind of needed because some topics can get quite personal, so you can kinda want someone who you know well. (Freddie, male 3<sup>rd</sup> year, coed urban Community School)*

One of the parents stressed the significance of those positive educational relationships and ease in the classroom to enable a positive learning environment and learner comfortability in RSE.

*Good relationships, just to start off between teachers and pupils is the biggest starter and everything else just flows. (Clodagh, mother to junior cycle daughter and senior cycle son, inter-denominational Community College)*

Those with a positive experience of RSE realized that their experience was not a universal one. The point argued in the comments below from a Transition Year student and 6<sup>th</sup> year student was replicated in many other student interviews. This was a key reason that we argued that the major differences in student experiences of RSE were linked to their assigned

SPHE/RSE teacher(s) rather than being school-specific. Students in the same school could have a very different experience depending on teacher comfortability.

*Yeah it feels comfortable. I think it depends on who you have, like I was quite lucky that I had a teacher who felt comfortable telling all this stuff. You know like she even ... you know the bits that they're kind of like oh we don't really ... it's a bit awkward ... she didn't feel awkward at all, you know she just came out and said it and it makes the classroom feel a lot more relaxed you know everyone is like okay this is fine, you know. So it's a lot better just depending on who you have. (Doireann, female Transition Year student, suburban co-ed Community College)*

*Yeah, so that would be the SPHE teacher. So some of the SPHE teachers, like with my own, I know she was great, she was always there for you, she was always there. But there is some that perhaps they mightn't be as comfortable talking to students about certain issues. (Aaron, 6<sup>th</sup> year, coed urban Community School)*

A 5<sup>th</sup> year student recalled her junior cycle experience of SPHE in general and remembered that some of her teachers seemed to have taken a casual approach to input and engagement. She put this down to teacher discomfort with the subject resulting in lack of serious engagement by some teachers which impacted on the extent to which their students took the subject seriously.

*I mean so far this year we've just kind of watched movies it's usually kind of a free class, lots of people end up doing homework in it and stuff. As far as 3<sup>rd</sup> year, I know that we did SPHE but we had it once a week and a lot of the time it was a half an hour class and I think there's obviously like a lot of different teachers in the school that do SPHE because it's usually the tutor of a class group. But as far as my teachers or my tutors were concerned, I don't think a lot of them felt very comfortable doing kind of SPHE, so we ended up usually having a free class or a class to do homework or study.....We really never did (RSE). Like I know that there was an SPHE book, I never got it. So we really didn't do much SPHE, it was always kind of just a free class or a class that we could talk to our friends in. Like there was never much structure in it, probably some other classes got it I know, I have a sister in 3<sup>rd</sup> year she says they do SPHE but they again don't really do RSE. (Mia, female 5<sup>th</sup> year student, co-educational urban Community School)*

We identified a number of systemic factors mitigating against teacher comfortability in the case of RSE. First, there is no specific qualification in either SPHE or RSE (which is an embedded part of the SPHE curriculum) meaning that post-primary teachers are expected to

gain expertise as they go along rather than through an ITE programme as is the case for other subjects. One RSE teacher, reflecting on being a qualified expert in history and religion, making a comparison with RSE, noted that her sense of ease in her subject areas (history & religion) compares negatively with her unease in SPHE/RSE. This, she argues, impacts on the students' experience of learning as well her own experience of teaching. She states:

*I go in there energised, but when I go into my SPHE class, and I've the same class for religion, they even notice the difference, I'm just not motivated enough. (Mona, RSE teacher, 25 years' service, inter denominational Community School)*

Teacher focus group interviews indicated how teacher comfortability is strongly linked to the sense of mastery over a subject that a qualification enables. This is missing for many RSE teachers.

*I think it's when the teacher feels comfortable with the subject area itself. I think it is easier to teach. I think it's easier on the students as well. (Sorcha, RSE teacher, 20 years' service, inter-denominational Community College)*

Both school principals quoted below talked about making up the deficit in their initial teacher education for people teaching SPHE and RSE through targeted CPD.

*Training of staff is critical. We absolutely don't put people into SPHE and consequently RSE unless they are properly trained. ... the individuals are important, and I suppose that's where the training comes into it as well..... And I suppose just common sense is a great thing. (Callen, principal multi-denominational rural Community College)*

*I think constantly up-skilling our teachers. I think you can teach it for a while but things change and in the whole social media context, I think there's probably more training necessary. I think evaluating our program yearly is probably important. I think maybe looking at a program for students with special needs, we've already, one of our teachers is trained in that area and I think her disseminating that may be to the SPHE team so that when they're teaching, that they're mindful of these students who may be thinking of it in a different way. (Coline, principal, suburban inter-denominational Community College)*

RSE teachers reflected this sense of needing constant upskilling in order to best serve their students, as the two comments below demonstrate.

*It's more training I think we need (Lily, RSE teacher, 15 years' service, inter-denominational Community School)*

*I feel a great sense of duty to the students who are sitting in front of me to make sure that they get the most out of it and to make sure that I am up to date with it as well. (Cary, RSE teacher, 10 years' service, multi- denominational Community College)*

Second, because SPHE (including RSE) does not require a specific qualification to teach it, the subject can be used as a means of ensuring part-time and full-time teachers make up their full required, contracted hours. It is one of the few subjects with any flexibility in part also because it is not an examination subject. One of the consequences of the use of this subject to meet both contract and timetabling requirements is that in some schools the SPHE and RSE teacher of a cohort changes from year to year depending on timetabling needs.

*...it's unfortunately kind of the precedent that perhaps was here and the culture that we had. We just didn't hit the ground running and we didn't ... if there was an urgency with this it went over our heads. It was a tag-on and it still remained a tag-on..... I won't lie to you, is it the priority in the timetable? It's not. It's not. I'm worried about who is going to teach my honours maths class and my honours English class and I get those sorted first. (Eireann, denominational single-sex girls' school)*

Students reported covering the same content in RSE each year from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> year because of annual changes in personnel.

*Int: Have you had the same teacher every year for RSE and SPHE?*

*Fionn: No. In 1<sup>st</sup> year we had Miss X, she left the school so then we got Miss Y, and then she was still in the school but we got Miss Z for 3<sup>rd</sup> year.*

*Int: So you've had three different teachers and were they covering different stuff each year in RSE these three different teachers?*

*Fionn: No, it was the same videos. (Fionn, 4<sup>th</sup> year male student, co-ed urban Community School)*

Third, there is no mandatory State curriculum for RSE and, as noted earlier, it is not an examination subject. Instead, there are guidelines regarding content, and advice that RSE content should take account of local needs and concerns including seeking the views of parents and accommodating school ethos.



*I like teaching it [RSE] as well. I'm comfortable teaching it. The parts I might be uncomfortable around say when we were devising our programme, because it's not really a set national programme, there's guidance or whatever but we're only getting to be doing 12 lessons and we picked the topics, you know. (participant in Shaughnessy RSE teachers' focus group, denominational single-sex girls' school)*

Teachers in the focus groups talked about their wish that the State would take greater responsibility for RSE – the phrase 'with a harp on it' was used to indicate a wish for a mandatory curriculum in case of potential parental objections.

*I find at junior, I think it is a bit clearer, you know it is more clear, just the fact that the contraception isn't clearly included you know, keeping healthy, keeping safe, I'm sorry that's very vague, you know what I mean, I want clarity, I want clarity from the top and I would like more modern up to date resources with the Harp on them. (Shaughnessy RSE teacher focus group, denominational single-sex girls' school)*

Teachers and principals talked about their own anxiety about (and potential avoidance of) RSE material they saw as potentially controversial in the eyes of parents.

*it's just that it, as we know, sexuality colours every single aspect of your life and it comes up everywhere and in all subjects, I'm teaching history as well and it can come up and, but I was teaching religion and theoretically you're not talking about RSE, but we're doing morality and so I just started to talk to them about consent, this is in third year now and I was very much aware of like well how much, how far can I kind of go with this? I mean so we're talking about consent, clearly talking about people then that don't consent, that's rape. I mean can I say the word? Am I allowed? Am I allowed? Where am I with this? ... So, you're gingerly kind of approaching sometimes. (Carly, RSE teacher, 22 years' service, inter-denominational Community School)*

The lack of State required content of the subject was reported by school staff as a cause of uneasiness.

*I don't know and I never have but there is a kind of thing in the back of your head that like would parents be questioning 'are you doing this?' (participant in the RSE teachers' Shaughnessy focus group, denominational single-sex girls' school)*

*So I try and stick with the book you know as much as I can but even after that discussion I felt a bit nervous about you know what was said in the discussion and could it have offended anybody. Could parents have maybe been a bit ... if they had heard you know things out of context that we were discussing – lesbianism, transgender, you know. They may be frightened by it. So, I feel there's a little bit*

*of ... a bit of a fear in me about actually doing ... (laughs) you know talking about it again. (Nola, RSE teacher, denominational single-sex girls' school)*

It is worth noting that in our study the parents/guardians who volunteered to take part in a one-to-one interview were generally positively disposed to RSE. This contrasts with the findings of the NCCA (2019) review of RSE where a noticeable minority of parents/guardians expressed negative view or worries about the programme. However, that may be explained by the impact of different methodologies on inclusion or exclusion of a range of voices and perspectives. Teachers reported that there was significant disparity in the amount of knowledge learners had about human reproductive biology and human sexuality. Teachers commented on the significant differences in what their students had learned at home.

*I found if I asked them who has the talk at home, who has the sex talk at home but less than half of them have put their hands up because they actually haven't talked at home. (Riloh, RSE teacher, 20 years' service, inter-denominational Community School)*

Students explained that they did not always feel comfortable talking about sexuality with their parents, indicating that the learner comfortability issue is not confined to school.

*It's kind of good, because it kind of explained a lot of stuff that like parents couldn't really not as much ... you kind of feel a bit kind of awkward asking your parents certain questions kind of ... We didn't really talk about it too much (in class), but I think they kind of the same thing, it'd be kind of weird kind of asking your parents maybe a bit. (Maurice, 3<sup>rd</sup> year male student, co-ed urban Community School)*

Our parent/guardian contributors were generally supportive of RSE as it was being taught to their children. Some described having a hands-off approach to RSE in that they didn't study material sent home, consult the textbook or engage with the school about the RSE programme. They trusted the school to 'get on with it' rather than seeing themselves as partners in the process.

*I don't really know much about what the school is doing except the basics of it. We don't get told what ... the children don't tell us what is happening. Yes, I know it's happening, yes. I'd like to know probably a bit more the topics that's being covered but that we don't get. (Kyan, father to junior and senior cycle boys, inter-denominational Community College)*

*Like, I haven't sat down and looked at the book or you know whatever book that they use or anything so I don't actually know the whole content of the subject. (Imogen, mother to junior cycle boy, inter-denominational Community College)*

These comments from parent/guardian interviews indicate that parents/guardians and their children are tending to avoid in-depth, personal conversations about sexuality and, as the participant below explains, are happy to leave this chat to the school.

*I think most parents are happy to leave that kind of chat up to the school. Now, see our eldest is 17 so he has a girlfriend and we did ask him was he being careful and everything else – no point in pretending things aren't happening. ... And he said, obviously there's nothing going on, but I said if there was you know you respect the girl and whatever and he said yes. So, he seems to, you know, we had the books going on when they were from 12 on. But apart from that, it wouldn't really be something that we would really be chatting about. It would be in passing or that. We're not prudish or anything like that, they do know about sex and they see it on the TV obviously all the time. But it's not something that they would ever ask us about. Which I'm kinda happy about. (Tanya, mother to two girls in junior cycle and one son in senior cycle, inter-denominational Community School)*

### **Concluding comments**

The study reported on here indicated that there were specific factors in schools and classrooms that either supported or undermined the ability of teachers and learners to 'talk about sex'. What emerged from our conversations with students aged from 13 to 18 years of age was that their experiences of RSE differed both between schools and within schools. Different interviewees attending the same school described quite varied experiences of the RSE programme. This was also reported by the parents/legal guardians. The diversity in experiences resulted in some students reporting positively regarding the developmental and pedagogical approaches experienced while others in the same school reported that RSE could be ignored and treated as a study period or a free class. The latter finding here reinforces Mayock et al's (2007:29) finding when they stated that some teachers may be unsuitable or 'not sufficiently interested in SPHE/RSE'.

*Teacher comfortability* was at the heart of the delivery of good RSE in individual classrooms as places where teachers and learners could 'talk about sex', acknowledging the positives, the

negatives, the concerns, the need for consent, safety and protection from harm. The comfortability of the teacher in turn facilitated learner comfortability, enabled active, dialogic learning in an atmosphere of trust and safety. Attaining that place of comfortability was made more challenging for our participating teachers because SPHE and RSE are not areas of specific qualification in their initial teacher education programme. Along with this, the subject's status suffered by dint of not being part of the State examination suite in an already overcrowded post-primary curriculum.

One of the chilling factors that RSE teachers and principals in our study outlined was a fear of potential parental objection, both to the delivery of RSE and, in particular, to the inclusion of topics that might be regarded by some as controversial. The NCCA study (2019) indicated that a significant minority of parent/guardian respondents were negatively disposed to the teaching of RSE in schools. RSE is one of those trigger points that makes liminal the deep-rooted tensions between pre-secular, secular and post-secular Ireland. It touches on the tensions in the relationship between State and family; concerns about the negative impact on childhood innocence in terms of knowledge of, or ignorance about human sexuality; and contested ideas about school ethos. Nolan (2018) outlines how the contested views about RSE in the Irish context both mirror international experiences and reflect the particularistic experiences in this jurisdiction. She argues that Ireland, like many other countries, has been experiencing a shift from a morally absolutist, conservative underpinning societal model to a more liberal, morally relativist model. These tensions and the changing attitudes towards, and experiences of, RSE are part of that broader story.

Teachers and principals in our study noted the concern about potential parental objections as a source of anxiety about RSE that is not shared with other subjects. It is important to acknowledge that RSE is not treated by the State in the same way as most other subjects. The programme is organised into modules and guidelines rather than having mandatory content. Local schools are supposed to have the freedom to respond to local needs, and the NCCA (2019) review continued to favour this flexibility. In the primary sector, the State does not decide the content of what is called the Patron's Programme, namely Religious or Ethical Education. These programmes are designed by the Patron bodies rather than being left to individual schools to decide content based on guidelines.

It is ironic that the one subject where people may struggle with their own comfortability to discuss the content openly (as well as lacking a specific mandatory qualification in that area in order to teach it) is the one where schools are given most freedom (or responsibility) to decide that content. Schools and teachers have to do this in the absence of a full qualification in that area and are dependent on ongoing CPD to build skill and confidence. It would seem that we all need to 'talk about sex' at national level if we are to produce a better climate for teaching, learning and talking about RSE, one where everyone is more fully informed and more comfortable to talk about a topic that is both personal and universal, one that touches on our most intimate selves and experiences, one that reflects the various ethical perspectives people hold very dear.

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