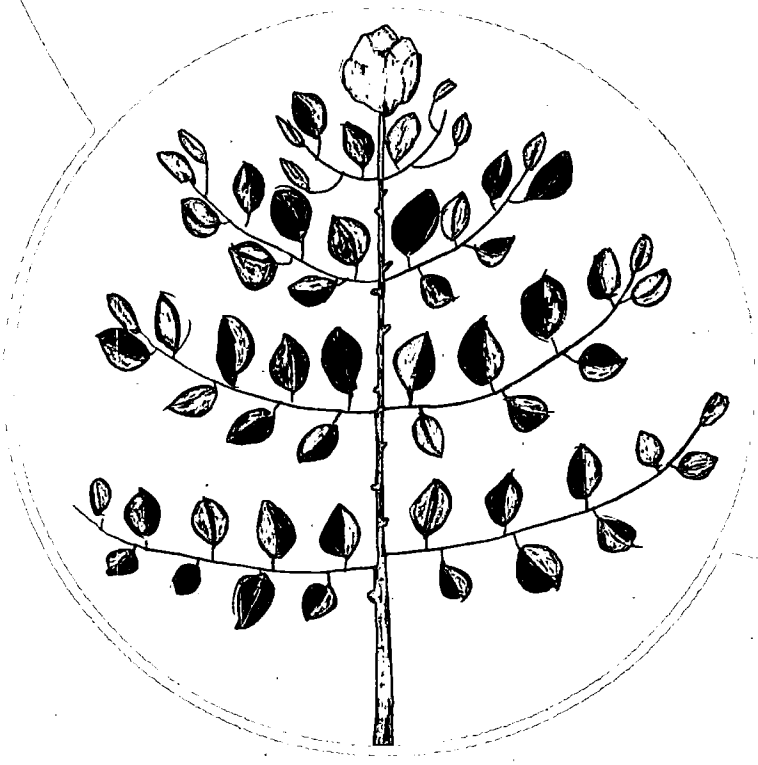




Relationships and Sexuality Education: An Evaluation and Review of Implementation

# **Relationships and Sexuality Education**

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Mark Morgan

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***Relationships and Sexuality Education***  
***An Evaluation and Review of Implementation***

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## **Preface**

This report presents the results of the evaluation of the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme, which has been introduced into primary and post-primary schools over the last four years. Much of the report is based on the views of teachers and parents. In particular, the results of surveys of primary and post-primary teachers and parents are set out. The main areas examined are the need for an RSE programme, the principles on which such a programme should be based, views on the delivery of in-service training and information sessions and the factors that influence implementation. Information obtained from the Education Centres on the delivery of the programme is also presented. Finally, up-to-date information on the actual implementation of the programme in schools for the years 1999 and 2000 is set out.

A study like this involving several large-scale surveys would not have been possible without the enthusiastic co-operation of several groups. Thanks are due, in particular, to the personnel in the RSE Training Support Service for Schools at Drumcondra Education Centre for their collaboration throughout the entire evaluation. Thanks are also due to the RSE Project Management Group for their guidance and help in carrying out the work. I am also grateful to the Research and Development Committee of the Department of Education and Science who commissioned the research. A special thanks to the RSE Implementation Group who supported the research from the beginning. The Directors of the Education Centres gave generously of their time for the interviews as did the RSE trainers. I am thankful to the National Parents Council (Primary and Post-primary) for their help in getting access to parents. Finally, the study would not have been possible without the help of the teachers, school principals and parents who completed questionnaires.

# Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Summary of Main Findings	7
<b>Chapter 1</b> Background and Context of the RSE Programme	21
<b>Chapter 2</b> The Relationships and Sexuality Education Programme	27
<b>Chapter 3</b> Primary Schools Programme and In-service Evaluation	31
<b>Chapter 4</b> Post-primary Schools Programme and In-service Evaluation	49
<b>Chapter 5</b> Views of Parents on RSE Programme	69
<b>Chapter 6</b> Organisational Features of the RSE Programme	87
<b>Chapter 7</b> Attitudes and Beliefs regarding RSE: School Type and Age Influences of Teachers	91
<b>Chapter 8</b> Implementation of RSE in Schools	101
<b>Chapter 9</b> General Conclusions	109
References	113

## ***Summary of Main Findings***

This report is based largely on four related surveys involving:

- (i) a national representative sample of 1,400 primary teachers,
- (ii) a sample of 440 post-primary teachers who had participated in training for the RSE programme,
- (iii) a sample of 343 parents who had attended meetings related to the introduction of the RSE programme into their schools, and
- (iv) a survey of implementation in primary and post-primary schools.

Information was also obtained from Education Centre personnel.

The focus of the evaluation is the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme which has been developed over the last four years, with a particular focus on the extensive in-service programme, organised largely between 1996 and 1998. The results of the evaluation are set in the context of the results of the effectiveness of other similar programmes.

Each of the first three surveys referred to above had a similar structure with a focus on the following:

- (i) the extent to which there was a need for an RSE programme, with particular reference to the present situation in schools and homes,
- (ii) the principles that should determine the way in which an RSE programme is organised and taught,
- (iii) the topics that should be included in an RSE curriculum ranging from matters to do with self-development (developing self-awareness, establishing healthy relationships) to more specific areas (understanding about birth and new life),
- (iv) the views of teachers and parents about the language for sexuality,
- (v) teachers' opinions about training for the RSE programme, as well as parents' views about the information made available to them, and
- (vi) teachers' opinions on factors which help in the implementation of RSE in their schools and factors which hinder such implementation.

The fourth survey was concerned mainly with the development of an RSE policy within schools and the actual implementation of the programme.

## **The Need for an RSE Programme**

Table S.1 presents a summary from the two teacher surveys relating to the need for the RSE programme. It can be seen that in over one quarter of schools (both primary and post-primary), there was no programme of any kind in the domain of relationships and sexuality education. Furthermore, what could be described as a comprehensive programme was found in only a minority of primary schools and in less than two fifths of post-primary schools.

It is worth mentioning what emerged in the parents' survey in this regard. The relevant question here concerned the kind of practice that existed in the home regarding relationships and sexuality education. Even bearing in mind that this group of parents might be expected to be among those who were most concerned about this issue, only about two fifths of the parents said that all aspects of relationships and sexuality education were dealt with in the home. About one sixth of the parents said that 'the basic facts regarding sexuality were discussed with the child on a few occasions', while a substantial minority resorted to other ways of dealing with relationships/sexuality education, viz., through use of a video or by getting someone else to talk to the child/children.

**Table S.1: Situation in Schools Prior to Introduction of RSE Programme**

	Percentage of Schools	
	Primary schools	Post-primary schools*
Comprehensive programme	12	39
Some programme	61	33
No programme	27	28

\*The figures given here are for first year in post-primary

Taken together these results carry the strong implication that a great many children might grow up without much formal education in the area of relationships and sexuality.

## **The Principles of the RSE Programme**

A number of questions were asked in the three surveys regarding the views of teachers/parents on the key principles on which the RSE programme is based. These included the nature of the role of the school in complementing that of the home, the importance of consultation, the importance of not having children rely on the media for information on sexual matters and the linking of relationships and sexuality education with attitudes and values. These principles were put to parents in the form of statements (sometimes in positive form and sometimes negative) and respondents were asked to indicate their agreement/disagreement with each one on a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

The results are summarised in Table S.2. From this table it can be seen that there is a remarkable level of agreement on the fundamental principles underpinning RSE. On the six major issues that are summarised, the agreement of teachers and parents was over 90 per cent for each one and in some cases there was close to unanimity. For example, on the fundamental question of RSE being an important part of education, 98 per cent of the teacher samples, together with 95 per cent of parents took the view that this was the case. Another important question concerns minorities (particularly the objections of even one parent). In this regard, 96 per cent of the teacher samples and 90 per cent of parents expressed the belief that the views of the majority of people should be most influential in decisions on implementing the programme. These and other principles are considered in detail in the main body of the report.

**Table S.2: Views of Teachers and Parents on RSE Principles**

	Percentage Agreement		
	Primary teachers	Post-primary teachers	Parents
School and home being complementary	92	90	97
Inappropriate to rely on media for information on sexual matters	96	90	90
Need to have information age-appropriate	97	96	96
Need to have RSE linked with values	90	94	97
RSE is an important part of education	98	98	95
Views of majority on RSE should determine programme	96	96	90



## ***Language for Sexuality***

In the questionnaire for primary teachers and for parents, there was a series of questions concerning teaching children the appropriate language for sexuality as well as accurate names of sexual organs. These questions were asked because it is a fundamental aim of the RSE programme that children should be able to communicate confidently about themselves, their sexuality and their relationships.

The results for teachers and parents are shown in Table S.3. It can be seen that both teachers and parents are in agreement on the importance of children learning the correct names for sexual organs in primary school. In fact, 86 per cent of primary teachers and an even higher percentage of parents agreed with this view. In addition more than three quarters of the teachers and the parents took the view that slang language was disrespectful of sexuality.

**Table S.3: Perception of Appropriateness of Language in Relation to Sexuality**

	Percentage Agreement	
	Primary teachers	Parents
Important that children learn the correct names for sexual organs in primary school	86	92
Slang language about sexuality is disrespectful	77	75

## Curricular Topics

Because the three surveys asked about the importance of including various topics in the RSE curriculum in school, it was possible to see how much agreement there was on what should be included in the curriculum, as suggested in the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines. Table S.4 shows the percentage of teachers who agreed that these particular topics were important features of the RSE programme in primary schools. The selected topics are part of a larger series of questions on these matters. It can be seen that there was a high level of agreement among all of those surveyed. In no case did the number agreeing fall below 80 per cent. It is also of interest that there was agreement on the various features of the RSE curriculum, i.e. not only with regard to the personal and social development topics but also with those that relate to sexuality.

**Table S.4: Importance of Topics for RSE Curriculum in Primary School**

	Percentage Agreement	
	Primary teachers	Parents
Self-esteem	100	99
Understanding different family patterns	95	98
Influences on lifestyle	97	96
Understanding birth and new life	98	96
Information on conception and sexual intercourse	81	87
Skills of communication	99	97

A similar set of questions was asked in the post-primary teachers' survey as well as the parent survey, in relation to topics on the Junior Cycle curriculum in RSE. The results are shown in Table S.5. The pattern here is very similar to that for the primary curriculum. It can be seen that there is a high level of agreement between parents and teachers on the importance of these topics (which are central to the RSE Junior Cycle curriculum). Considering that the range of topics includes a wide range of issues, it is reasonable to conclude that there is high degree of support for the curriculum among teachers and parents.

**Table S.5: Importance of Topics for RSE Curriculum in Junior Cycle**

	Percentage Agreement	
	Post-primary teachers	Parents
Knowledge of sexual organs and their functions	100	97
Understanding fertility and conception	97	95
Awareness of hygiene associated with puberty	100	96
Understanding consequences of sexual activity	92	94
Understanding of sexual orientation	93	86
Self-esteem	100	100
Relationships in families	100	99

A similar set of questions was asked of post-primary teachers and parents with regard to the Senior Cycle curriculum. As can be seen from Table S.6, the level of agreement on the importance of these topics was also very high.

**Table S.6: Importance of Topics for RSE Curriculum in Senior Cycle**

	Percentage Agreement	
	Post-primary teachers	Parents
Understanding range of emotions	100	99
Knowledge of sexual organs and their functions	91	98
Understanding fertility	97	100
Family planning	96	96
Sexually transmitted diseases	96	96
Understanding sexual orientation	100	96
Awareness of sexual abuse	96	98

In summary, there was substantial agreement between parents and teachers on the importance of the various topics for the RSE curriculum. This was true of all of the features of the programme including personal development, relationships and sexuality.

### ***Training for RSE***

Both primary and post-primary teachers were asked a range of questions about features of their training for teaching the RSE programme. Some of the questions were common to both groups and some were specific to each one. Table S.7 shows the level of satisfaction with some of the features that were common to both surveys.

A number of aspects of this table are of particular interest. Firstly, there was a high level of satisfaction with several features of training including the explanation of the aims of the RSE programme as well as the explanation of the RSE Curriculum and Guidelines. The majority of the teachers were also satisfied with experiential aspects of the training including that of helping them to discuss sensitive issues without embarrassment. The satisfaction with the skills acquired for teaching RSE was lower (especially in the case of primary teachers). This pattern is often found in in-service courses, i.e. cognitive outcomes are easier to bring about than skill-related outcomes, which require practice and feedback.

The other important point emerging from Table S.7 is that the satisfaction of post-primary teachers was substantially higher than was the case for primary teachers. There may be a relatively simple explanation for this in as much as all primary teachers were involved while in the case of post-primary teachers, only a small number were involved, from each school. It is likely that they may have differed from their colleagues in several respects (e.g. having a particular interest in this area). This in turn might be expected to be reflected in the ratings of satisfaction with training. In addition, the training at post-primary level was somewhat longer, thus allowing a more comprehensive treatment of the issues involved.

**Table S.7: Satisfaction of Teachers with Training for RSE**

	Percentage Expressing Satisfaction	
	Primary teachers	Post-primary teachers
Explanation of aims and rationale	80	94
Explanation of NCCA guidelines	54	72
Opportunity to reflect on own sexuality	42	75
Helping teachers discuss sensitive topics without embarrassment	64	76
Skills for RSE	24	58

## Implementation of the RSE Programme

Teachers were asked about the various factors that help in the implementation of the RSE programme and also about factors that would be likely to prevent its effective implementation. Table S.8 presents an overview of teachers' views regarding which factors 'helped a lot'. From this, it can be seen that two factors were regarded as being especially important, viz., the school Principal and the need to have a curriculum that is balanced and caters for the all-round development of children. It is of particular interest that the school Principal is almost always regarded as a key person in curricular innovation.

It is noteworthy that these 'immediate influences' were thought to be of much more importance than factors that had to do with the pressures and needs that might be exerted on a school, viz., the needs of modern society or the wishes of parents or the Guidelines of the Department of Education and Science.

**Table S.8: Factors Perceived as Helping in the Implementation of RSE**

	Percentage saying 'Helped a lot'	
	Primary teachers	Post-primary teachers
Needs of modern society	43	40
Curriculum for all-round development	71	83
Parental wishes	44	42
Guidelines of Dept. of Education and Science	29	49
School Principal	69	87

A further set of questions was concerned with the factors that are considered to be obstacles to the successful implementation of RSE in schools. Some of these were particular to either primary or post-primary schools. However, five of the factors common to both surveys are given in Table S.9.

Table S.9 shows firstly that there was a great deal of agreement between primary and post-primary teachers with regard to the factors that were considered to be 'major

problems' in implementation. By far the most important factor was the 'overcrowded curriculum'. The next most important factor was the lack of materials for RSE. (It should be pointed out that this was at a time when the resource materials had not yet been delivered to schools.) In contrast to these, it can be seen that views of parents/teachers were not a major problem – presumably because there was substantial agreement regarding the need for RSE. It is of interest to note that the 'vigorous objections of some people' were not regarded as a major problem by the teachers.

**Table S.9: Perceived Obstacles to Implementation of RSE in Schools**

	Percentage saying 'Major problem'	
	Primary teachers	Post-primary teachers
Overcrowded curriculum	71	71
RSE not seen as appropriate by parents	24	25
RSE not seen as appropriate by teachers	25	26
Vigorous objections by people against RSE	21	32
Lack of materials for teaching RSE	44	49

## **Awareness of Planning and Consultation**

In the three surveys questions were asked about participants' awareness of the planning and consultation that was a feature of the devising and implementation of the RSE programme. The results in Table S.10 show that the majority of teachers and parents were aware of this consultation. Furthermore, the level of agreement with this process was very high and was unanimous in the case of parents.

**Table S.10: Perception of Consultation in Devising RSE Programme**

	Percentage Agreement		
	Primary teachers	Post-primary teachers	Parents
Aware of consultation	94	97	88
Consultation was appropriate	87	90	100

Parents were asked if they had read the parent information booklet on RSE ('Going Forward Together'). Of the parents at the meetings, just over half had read the booklet. Those who had read the booklet were asked to rate it with regard to various criteria including the information, being user friendly and its relevance to RSE. The results showed that well over 90 per cent of parents thought that the booklet was either 'very good' or 'good' in these respects. Satisfaction was also expressed by parents with regard to the information meeting that they had attended.

## **School Type and RSE Provision**

An analysis was carried out on the extent to which there were differences between primary schools catering for boys or girls only and those for both boys and girls. As can be seen from Table S.11, there were quite substantial differences, especially with regard to having a comprehensive relationship and sexuality programme, at least in senior classes – something that was more than twice as likely to occur in girls' schools than in boys', with gender-mixed schools in between.

However, the greatest difference is in relation to those schools in which no provision had been made for relationships and sexuality education, prior to the formal introduction of the RSE programme. It can be seen from the table that 29 per cent of boys' schools were in this category, while this was true of substantially fewer girls' or mixed schools.



**Table S.11: Arrangement in Different Types of Primary Schools Prior to Introduction of Formal RSE**

Arrangements Prior to Formal RSE	Boys	Girls	Mixed
	Percentage		
A comprehensive programme for senior classes at least	7	16	12
Some arrangement for sexuality education (guest speakers, etc)	64	64	69
No aspect of sex/sexuality education being implemented	29	20	19

### ***Age/Experience of Teachers***

An examination was also made of the extent to which there were differences between teachers which were associated with age/experience. Was it the case that teachers with differing years of experience responded differently to the in-service training programme? Whether considered in terms of satisfaction with the in-service programme or their views on which aspects were most satisfactory, no substantial differences were found to be associated with age/experience. Thus, while it might have been expected that older teachers might be somewhat more resistant to an innovative programme, it might actually be that teachers with long experience of classroom (and indeed of life) may have become more aware of the needs of young people with regard to these important features of their lives.

### ***Implementation of the RSE Programme***

In the surveys of RSE implementation carried out in 1999 and in May 2000 a number of points emerged. Firstly, it is clear that the vast majority of schools have begun the implementation of RSE in the sense that they have established a policy committee and begun the drafting of a policy document. Secondly, it is also evident that a much smaller percentage of schools are currently implementing the programme in all classes. Thirdly, it would seem that the implementation of the programme has progressed relatively quickly in post-primary schools in the sense that more schools at this level are implementing the programme in classrooms. Fourthly, at both primary and post-primary levels there has been a major increase in all the indicators of implementation between 1999 and 2000.

## ***The Future of RSE***

The picture that emerges from this research suggests that RSE is likely to become an inherent part of the curriculum over the next few years, given the continuation of support. There are several grounds for believing this will occur.

Firstly, there is strong support among both parents and teachers for the principles on which the RSE programme has been devised as well as for the proposed curricular topics at both primary and post-primary levels. Secondly, the basis on which teachers and parents made judgements about RSE related to educational criteria rather than to any fixed position on the inherent value of the programme. The third reason for being hopeful about its future stems from the positive response from teachers to many of the features of the training which has provided a firm basis for their understanding of the aims and rationale of RSE. This was also true for parents who had sought similar information at either information meetings or through the explanatory booklet. Fourthly, the classroom materials have now been sent to schools – something that may have caused concern during the in-service training. Finally, in the revision of the curriculum, RSE is part of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE0) and thus becomes part of the general educational provision for children and young people.

However, there are also grounds for concern. It is noteworthy that the teachers overwhelmingly identified the 'overcrowded curriculum' as the main difficulty in the actual implementation of RSE. Thus, it will be crucial in the implementation of the revised curriculum in primary schools and the curricular developments at post-primary level that RSE receives the necessary attention. The role of the Principal has been identified as crucial in this regard.

It will also be important that the skills involved in the RSE programme, which are different from those in many other subjects, be cultivated in the context of other curricular developments. While it may not be possible to revisit the teaching skills that are central in the context of RSE, several other aspects of SPHE involve skills that are similar to those that underpin successful implementation of the RSE programme. This should be borne in mind in the context of the new in-service training programme for primary teachers.

It is also noteworthy that the programme is only now becoming firmly established in schools. There has been a major increase in the number of schools implementing the programme between 1999 and 2000. To ensure that this trend continues, RSE will require careful monitoring and support as is the case with any curricular innovation.

## **Chapter 1: Background and Context of the RSE Programme**

A number of contextual factors are important in considering the introduction and effects of the RSE programme in schools. These include:

- (ii) changing patterns of attitudes and behaviour of young people;
- (iii) international evidence on effectiveness of programmes similar to RSE, and
- (iv) curricular change in Ireland over the past two decades.

Each of these is considered in turn in this chapter.

### **Changing Attitudes and Behaviour**

Because achievement of reproductive maturity is occurring earlier than in the past, young people must learn to manage their sexuality long before they are ready to take on the functions of parenthood. Many features of our society militate against this preparedness. The mass media portray a great amount of sexual activity, while the tendency to acquire information (or indeed misinformation) about sexuality from peers, rather than from parents, adds to this distortion. The language of sexuality has acquired threatening overtones through slang and swearing, and this adds to the mystery and ignorance. However, unpreparedness does not deter young people from sexual ventures. In Ireland, as in other countries, there is evidence from several studies that young people are becoming sexually active at a younger age than was the case a generation ago.

A number of recent studies of the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of Irish people demonstrate the need for a Relationships and Sexuality Education Programme. These include a major study on crisis pregnancy commissioned by the Department of Health (Mahon, Conlon and Dillon, 1995), a study of women's health (Wiley and Merriman, 1996), and a more limited study by Hyde (1995).

The study by Mahon et al involved questionnaires to over 2,000 pregnant women, from whom three groups of women with a crisis pregnancy were identified for detailed study, as follows: (i) women who were having abortions, (ii) women who intended to have their babies adopted, and (iii) women who planned to continue with the pregnancy and become lone mothers. From their interviews with women having a crisis pregnancy, the authors of this study concluded that many were ignorant regarding fertility cycles and methods of contraception. Additionally, many of the women lacked the personal and social skills and even the language to ensure the ability to control sexual encounters as they would have wished.

The study by Wiley and Merriman (1995) consisted of a national sample of 3,000 women and found that just less than half said they had received formal sex education. One specific question was asked in this survey, viz., the time in the menstrual cycle when a woman was most likely to become pregnant. Overall, nearly three quarters of the sample gave the correct answer to this question. However, the level of knowledge/ignorance seems to depend greatly on the sample surveyed. For example, Merrigan-Feegan's (1995) study of 100 young pregnant women found that only 28 per cent said that mid-cycle was the most likely time for a pregnancy to occur, while the vast majority either did not know or were incorrect in their response. Similarly Hyde (1995) as well as an earlier study by Greene et al (1989) found that many single mothers who had not wanted to become pregnant were inclined towards an attitude of denial and wishful thinking which, in turn, led to a feeling of invulnerability. In other words, despite having relevant information about conception, they behaved in ways that indicated they believed that: 'It (pregnancy) will not happen to me.'

The Alliance Report (1997), although confined to the Cork area, is interesting in that it focused on relationships, alcohol, drugs as well as sexual practices. In this survey, 61 per cent of the men and 45 per cent of the women aged 15-24 had had sexual intercourse, with approximately half of these indicating that their first experience of intercourse was at age 16 or younger. The survey showed that many of the people in the sample felt they had received a very sketchy and inadequate sexual education. In particular they were critical of the fact that there seemed to be certain taboo subjects (e.g. homosexuality), and that in some cases a biological approach was taken which omitted the emotional and psycho-social aspects of relationships and sexuality education.

The report 'Get Your Facts Right' (1998) was commissioned by the National Youth Council of Ireland and supported by the Department of Education and Science and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. The study featured a sample of 1,400 people between the ages of 15 and 24 years at 64 different locations in the North and South of Ireland. While the report does not describe how the sample was selected (randomly, quota, etc.), it would seem that the people who responded are representative of the population of this age.

This study featured a range of questions concerning education, political involvement, voting intentions, entertainment, participation in community activities, substance use and advertising and the media. From the present perspective, two questions are of particular relevance. The respondents were asked whether they thought they had full access to information regarding sexual health (e.g. contraception, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases). Overall, 83 per cent responded in the affirmative with very little difference between males and females, or between urban and rural dwellers. When asked where they normally go to find such information, the most popular sources were GPs, family planning clinics, friends and school/college.

It should be noted that this question was quite limited in what it asked about, viz., whether respondents thought they had access to full information. It did not focus on the use of such information or on aspects other than information (e.g. attitudes and behaviour).

A study by Nic Gabhainn (n.d.) focused on risk-taking based on the earlier work on risk-taking by Bagnall and Plant (1987). A sample of 173 young people living in disadvantaged areas were interviewed with regard to a range of risky behaviours. The mean age of the sample was 19 years and 70 per cent were 20 years or younger. Just over 56 per cent indicated having had sexual intercourse at least once with a mean age of 16.7 years for first intercourse. Of those with sexual experience, 36 per cent had one partner, a further 36 per cent had 2-4 partners, while 22 per cent had 5 partners or more. A particular focus in this study was the participants' understanding of HIV infection. In this regard, it is of interest that 96 per cent were of the view that young adults (like themselves) need more information on this topic.

A study by Finlay, Shaw, Whittington and McWilliams (1995) was concerned with 276 women under the age of 20 who were attending ante-natal clinics in Northern Ireland. Most of these women described the sex education which they had received at home or in school as being inadequate to their needs. It is interesting that most of the respondents were quite well informed about how conception occurs and how it might be prevented; what they lacked were the interpersonal skills to put this knowledge into effect and to exercise control over their own lives. On the basis of this evidence the authors recommended an educational initiative that would not only inform young people but empower them to take control of their lives.

The report of the national health and lifestyle survey (Friel, Nic Gabhainn and Kelleher, 1999) included data on health information (obviously not the major focus of the present work). The most interesting outcome in this regard was that younger people were more likely to cite the media as the main source of information, whereas three quarters of people aged 55 and over relied on their GP. Significantly, three fifths of people aged 18-34 years claimed that their information on health came from the media. To some extent this indicates the power of the mass media, not only in relation to attitudes and values, but also with regard to knowledge and information.

There is also evidence from international literature that inappropriate sexual behaviour is influenced by a variety of factors including personal attributes, family, community and school. In a study by Neumark-Sztainer et al (1997) it was found that a risk-taking disposition was the single strongest predictor of such activity. Bonding to family, school and religion was found to be significant in determining attitudes to sexual activity. This study also showed that while there was some similarity between the factors determining sexual activity and other health-compromising behaviours (substance misuse, delinquency), the most important influences were specific to each domain of behaviour.

## ***Effectiveness of Relationships and Sexuality Education***

A vast research literature has examined matters related to the effectiveness of relationships and sexuality education (more especially sexuality education). A number of broad conclusions seem warranted on the basis of the available evidence.

Firstly, while a great many studies have been carried out, only a small number are rigorous enough in their design to allow for firm conclusions. A review by Oakley et al (1995) of 65 studies of sex education concluded that only 12 of these were methodologically sound. The other studies either did not have appropriate control groups or did not measure outcomes in ways that were in line with the aims of the intervention. A particularly common feature was simply to measure some knowledge outcome so that the evaluation was confined to indicating whether or not students knew more as a result of the intervention.

A second conclusion is that there is no evidence that programmes are harmful, i.e. there is no evidence that sex education leads to earlier or increased sexual activity among those who were exposed to it. In fact, in a major study of 19,000 people in the UK aged between 16 and 59, it was found that those adults for whom school was the main source of information on sexual matters were less likely to have sexual experiences before the age of 16 years than was the case for others whose primary source of information was the media or friends (Wellings et al 1995).

A third broad conclusion is that some programmes are relatively more effective than others. Kirby et al (1994) examined 23 studies of school-based sex education and identified the following distinguishing characteristics of those programmes that were most effective in reducing inappropriate and risky sexual behaviour: (i) Effective programmes went beyond the cognitive level; they focused on recognising social influences, changing attitudes, and building social skills. (ii) They reinforced values that were consistent with the students' cultural backgrounds. (iii) The effective programmes included age-appropriate, accurate information. (iv) The use of active learning methods (as opposed to passive learning of facts) was an important characteristic of effective programmes. (v) They included activities that addressed the social and media influences on sexual behaviour.

As in the case of several aspects of human behaviour (e.g. substance misuse), information does not of itself necessarily exert much influence over behaviour. Responsible management of sexual behaviour involves interpersonal relationships as well as a range of social and self-regulative skills. The teaching of sexual guidelines is easy; the problem of equipping people with the skills to put these guidelines into practice, in the face of counteracting social influences, is much more difficult.

A fourth conclusion is that while formal education programmes in schools are important, the informal features of school interaction with peers also play an important part in attitudes to sexuality. These effects are particularly important in relation to gender in as

much as what is learned varies for boys and girls. There is evidence that young people's understanding of the relationship between power and sexuality is heavily influenced by peer group interactions. There is also evidence that perception of health risks is influenced by such interactions (Epstein and Johnson, 1997; Wight, Abraham and Scott, 1998).

Finally, a number of studies have demonstrated the importance of teachers' training and attitudes in relation to the effectiveness of sexuality education programmes. For example, a study by Hamilton and Gingiss (1993) found that teachers' level of comfort and ease with a programme was significantly associated with students' satisfaction with the course and with how much they learned. Furthermore, an interesting study by Hammonds and Schultz (1984) showed that the effectiveness of a programme was dependent on the use of appropriate methodology. This study also showed that the most effective methodology varied with the topic within sexuality education. Thus, while the use of televisual media was most appropriate for physiological aspects of sexuality, group discussion was more appropriate for topics like self-awareness, feelings and emotions.

While little recent research in Ireland has examined the question, there is considerable evidence from other countries that the overwhelming majority of parents tend to favour school involvement in sexuality education. Research in England and Wales (summarised by Green, 1998), found that 94 per cent of parents were in favour of schools providing at least part of their children's sex education, and most of them thought that this should begin between ages 7 and 11 years.

## ***Curricular Change in Ireland***

The past two decades have witnessed more curricular change in Irish schools than at any time in the history of Irish education. Curricular reforms have affected primary and secondary schools and have involved changes in the subjects on the curriculum as well as teaching methods and techniques of assessment. While it is difficult to characterise these changes simply, it is important to consider at least some of the main themes so that the context in which the RSE programme is being introduced can be understood.

A first theme emerging in the curricular reform is a greater variety of subjects and a flexibility within subjects in order to cater for individual differences. This is set out explicitly in the principles underlying the 1971 primary curriculum and also in the principles of the Junior Certificate. One of the manifestations of this variety and flexibility is the increased possibility for teachers to select and adapt materials/texts for inclusion in the syllabus, and the wider choices of 'set' texts and courses. This trend is also evident in the development of variations of the traditional Leaving Certificate, e.g. the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme.

A second important theme, related to this variety and flexibility, is the relatively greater control by schools of the content and methodology of teaching. While Ireland has traditionally had an especially centralised 'national curriculum', there have been moves to give greater control to the individual school and staff. Manifestations of this greater independence of schools is seen in the significance of the *Plean Scoile* at primary level and the move towards whole-school evaluation, as opposed to the traditional forms of inspection of the work of individual teachers. There are also indications of relatively greater scope for influence by individual schools at second level especially in programmes like that for the Transition Year, which is largely designed by teams in each school in order to meet the specific needs of students attending that school.

A third important theme in curricular change is an emphasis on social and personal features of development and learning. While the principles of the 1971 Primary curriculum emphasised all aspects of development (including social, personal, intellectual and creative), it is only in recent years that programmes have actually been implemented that encompass these objectives. At primary level, these have included the *Stay Safe Programme* as well as various approaches to prevention of substance misuse. There has been a proliferation of similar-type programmes at post-primary level from traditional programmes in pastoral care, to non-examination programmes like '*On My Own Two Feet*', to the more formal Civics, Social and Political Education Programme (now an examination subject).

The emphasis on social and personal dimensions reflects a number of changes in the perceptions of what schools are concerned with. In particular, there is a recognition that school is expected to deal with social problems that were not relevant some decades ago, e.g. prevention of substance misuse. There is also a recognition that social and personal skills play a crucial role in preparation for work and everyday life.



## **Chapter 2: The Relationships and Sexuality Education Programme**

### **Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality Education**

The Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality Education (1995) set the tone for much of the subsequent programme development and in-service provision. In its definition of human sexuality, particular attention is given to '... affectivity, that is, the capacity to give and receive love'. It is suggested that 'Sexuality education seeks to provide young people with formal opportunities to acquire knowledge and understanding of human sexuality, through processes that will enable them to form values and establish behaviours, within a moral, spiritual and social framework.' The report also notes that several aspects of contemporary life point to a need for a soundly-based RSE programme. These include: the earlier physical maturation of children, earlier sexual activity, the informal and inappropriate channels through which they acquire information about sexuality, health issues relating to sexuality, and pressures on family life.

Central to the development of an RSE programme, in the report of the Advisory Group, is the development of school policy. The group recommended the setting up of a committee/structure to facilitate consultation among the partners including teachers, parents and management, arising from which a policy statement would be sent to the Board of Management for approval. Among the items included in this statement would be: the policy in the context of the philosophy of the school, the management of the programme, implications for training, and how the programme would be reviewed and evaluated.

The Advisory Group recommended that the RSE programme would be taught in the context of Social, Personal and Health Education – a new subject in primary and post-primary schools. It emphasised the importance of co-ordination at the whole-school level, whether by the Principal or by a designated co-ordinator. The methodology for RSE should be child-centred and age-appropriate and conducted in an atmosphere which respects the privacy of individual students. The proposed aims of relationships and sexuality education in the report are: (i) to help young people develop healthy friendships and relationships, (ii) to promote an understanding of sexuality, (iii) to promote a healthy attitude to sexuality and to relationships, (iv) to promote knowledge of and respect for reproduction, and (v) to enable young people to develop healthy attitudes and values towards their sexuality in a moral, spiritual and social framework.

The Advisory Group concluded that current provision is generally uneven, unco-ordinated and sometimes lacking, and that the school has a role to play in supporting and complementing the work of the home in the task of educating children in relationships and sexuality education. The school policy should reflect the school ethos and should be

developed with members of the school community. The group also concluded that while school provision should take into account the views of parents who have objections to the inclusion of RSE in the curriculum, it should also uphold the rights of the majority to have the programme implemented in the school.

## ***NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines for Relationships and Sexuality Education***

Following the Report of the Expert Advisory Group, an interim curriculum for both primary and post-primary schools was published (NCCA, 1996), together with guidelines for implementation. A central feature of these publications is the view that RSE should be an integral part of the broader subject of Social, Personal and Health Education. Thus, the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines are 'an interim measure in response to Circular 2/95 of the Department of Education in which the introduction of Relationships and Sexuality Education was announced' (NCCA Interim Curriculum and Guidelines for Primary Schools, p.5)

### ***Aims and Objectives***

The Curriculum and Guidelines for Primary Schools lists six aims for the RSE programme, while the post-primary syllabus lists five. For both sets of aims, the common factors have to do with an emphasis on 'understanding' and 'attitudes'. Thus, the aims that are listed feature such expressions as 'well-being', 'healthy attitudes', 'understanding and respect for', 'comfortable with', 'knowledge and respect for', 'positive attitude', 'develop attitudes in a ... moral, spiritual and social framework'. In contrast, there is little or no emphasis on aims that relate to mere knowledge without a specific attitudinal frame of reference.

In line with these aims the stated objectives of RSE place a strong emphasis on attitudes, values, and the social and personal context within which sexuality education takes place. Thus, outcomes like 'healthy friendships', 'developing respect for individuals', 'responsibilities of parenthood', 'personal moral integrity and respect for the rights and dignity of others', 'valuing family life', 'positive sense of self-awareness', are emphasised in the statement of the objectives.

Two other points are worth making. The first is the strong emphasis on responsibility and respect for the rights of others which is central to the statement of objectives at primary and post-primary levels. Thus, there is a strong moral dimension to the statement of each objective. The second point is that the statement of objectives for primary specifies 12 objectives that are broadly situated in the area of social and personal development; only two objectives refer to sexuality and both have an important context ... 'become aware of the variety of ways in which individuals grow and change and understand that their developing sexuality is an important aspect of self-identity' and 'acquire and use an appropriate

vocabulary to discuss feelings, sexuality, growth and development'. The idea that the programme is focused primarily on relationships is indeed borne out in the statement of objectives.

## ***Teaching and Learning***

The Curriculum and Guidelines for RSE (Primary) suggests that the teacher be involved in an informal level, '... acting as a resource, as a guide, as questioner, as affirmer, and as enabler'. It is suggested that the following techniques might be appropriate: (i) discussion, (ii) role play, (iii) interviewing, (iv) survey of attitudes, (v) analysing newspapers or TV schedules, (vi) hosting visitors, (vii) projects, (viii) providing models and examples, (ix) designing advertisements, (x) writing captions, (xi) ranking statements, (xii) describing photographs, and (xiii) viewing and discussing videos.

The Curriculum and Guidelines (Primary) also emphasises the importance of the integration of RSE with other curricular areas. A reading of the section on 'identifying opportunities for integration', indicates a variety of learning/experiences that can be enhanced through RSE. These include language, social and environmental education, science, religious education, physical education, and arts education.

Two aspects of the statement on integration are especially noteworthy. The first is the importance that is given to ensuring that such arrangements do not restrict 'any child's access to a comprehensive RSE programme'. The second is that, while it is not stated explicitly, it is to be understood that those lessons which have a specific focus on sexuality will not normally be integrated with other features of the curriculum.

A particularly strong emphasis is given in the Curriculum and Guidelines to the acquisition of appropriate language to '... enable children to communicate confidently about themselves, their sexuality and their relationships'. Thus, an important objective is to provide children with language through which they can understand growth and development, language which allows them to discuss and inquire about such development. The point is made emphatically that the everyday language of sexuality creates associations that are negative and threatening and that the school has an important role in de-mystifying these negative overtones so that, by the time children leave the primary school, they will have acquired a vocabulary that will allow them to deal with this central feature of their lives.

## ***Underlying Principles of RSE***

Based on the Report of the Expert Advisory Group, the following principles have been central to the subsequent development and implementation of the RSE programme:

- Implementation of RSE is a process of development that involves consultation with all the partners in education.
- RSE is an integral part of the general educational provision for students.
- RSE aims to provide opportunities for students to acquire knowledge and understanding of human relationships and sexuality through processes that will enable them to form values and establish behaviours within a moral, spiritual and social framework.
- While parents are the primary educators of children, most parents look to school to support them in fulfilling their obligation in this area of development. Thus the role of the school is to support and complement the role of parents in relation to RSE.
- Each school should develop a written school policy on RSE which would reflect the core values and ethos of the school.
- Once a school policy has been formulated, a programme on RSE will be drawn up for each school, based on the policy and the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines.
- RSE will be taught in the context of Social, Personal and Health Education.

## **Chapter 3: Primary Schools Programme and In-service Evaluation**

The training of teachers was organised and delivered by the RSE Training Support Service for Schools in conjunction with the Education Centre Network throughout the country. Three days of in-service training were provided for over 20,000 primary teachers (including teachers of children with special needs) between April 1996 and June 1997:

A central feature of the approach to teacher training was the belief that RSE involves overall personal development and the integration of sexuality into personal life. Appropriate in-service education and training cannot be accomplished by traditional teaching methods where the teacher, in the role of expert, gives out information while the students sit passively. The teacher needs to have acquired a variety of skills for use in the classroom and must be at ease with the personal nature of the subject. This in turn requires that teachers must have reflected on their own attitudes and values with regard to relationships and sexuality and be able to discuss the more sensitive aspects of RSE without embarrassment. Thus, an important aspect of the training was the attempt to set the provision of information and the acquisition of skills in the context of the personal awareness of the teachers themselves. The link between self-awareness and skills acquisition was crucial to the in-service programme.

For primary teachers there were three in-service training days. The following were the main areas covered during these days:

- Day 1** Teachers were provided with an outline of the history and rationale for RSE, together with the context of Social, Personal and Health Education. An important feature of this day was the introduction of the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines, as part of which teachers traced a Strand Unit from Infants to sixth class. The final feature of DAY 1 was an outlining of the issues relating to the formation of the individual school's RSE policy.
- Day 2** The programme involved the following: (i) self-esteem; (ii) RSE and Junior classes, exploring issues surrounding sexual vocabulary, reviewing classroom approaches to teaching 'new life', and personal attitudes and values around these areas of the curriculum; (iii) RSE and Senior classes, with particular reference to identifying the main changes at puberty, and suitable methodologies for these topics.
- Day 3** The programme consisted of these areas: (i) reflection on personal relationships and identification of the values underpinning healthy relationships; (ii) development of teachers' expertise in dealing with sensitive issues and in responding to children's questions; (iii) review of the methodology used during the training sessions and its application to classroom situations; (iv) review of suitable classroom resources.

## ***Methodology of Survey***

The methodology of the survey of primary school teachers is described below. This includes: the aims of the survey, the selection of the sample, the content of the questionnaire, the distribution and response rate, data entry and analysis.

## ***Aims of the Survey***

The aims of the survey were to examine the following questions: (i) To what extent do teachers perceive a need for an RSE programme, with particular reference to the current situation in schools? (ii) What are teachers' views on the principles that underpin the development and organisation of the RSE programme? (iii) What are teachers' views on the partnership approach that has been central to the planning of the current RSE programme? (iv) What do teachers think should be included in an RSE curriculum ranging from broad matters to do with self-development (developing self-awareness, establishing healthy relationships) to more specific matters (understanding about birth and new life)? (v) What are teachers' views about the language for sexuality? (vi) What are teachers' opinions about the training for the RSE programme – their satisfaction with features ranging from explaining the rationale for the programme to the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own sexuality? (vii) Which factors help in the implementation of RSE in their schools and which factors hinder such implementation?

## ***Selection of the Sample***

A stratified random sample of 187 primary schools was selected for this survey. These schools, which were drawn from the official list of primary schools of the Department of Education and Science, were categorised on the basis of size and gender composition (single sex or mixed). Schools were selected using a probability proportional to size technique, since there are obviously more teachers and pupils in larger schools. Details of the sample are shown in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Type of Schools in RSE Evaluation Sample**

<b>Stratum Number</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>
1	Boys' large	25
2	Girls' large	25
3	Mixed large	40
4	Boys' medium	9
5	Girls' medium	9
6	Mixed medium	55
7	Mixed small	24

### ***Content of the Questionnaire***

There were five sections in the Questionnaire. Part A focused on background information including school size, gender of pupils and type of school. The perceived need for RSE was the main matter in Section B, inquiring about the existing situation in schools as well as the main principles that might determine the organisation and teaching of RSE. Section C was concerned with the RSE curriculum with particular reference to the topics that should be included in the programme, while the in-service programme associated with the introduction of RSE was the main focus in Section D. The final section of the questionnaire dealt with the actual implementation of the programme in schools.

For the most part, the items were structured multiple-choice questions or statements which required respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale. There were, however, a few open-ended questions that gave teachers the opportunity to develop particular points that were of special interest.

### ***Distribution to Teachers: Response Rate***

Since the school was the relevant sampling unit, the Principal of the school was written to, explaining the purpose of the survey and indicating that questionnaires would be sent for each teacher in the school including the Principal. Phone calls to the schools established the number of teachers in each school, following which questionnaires were mailed to the Principal.

Of the 2,010 questionnaires, 1,397 were returned, giving a response rate of just under 70 per cent. Such a response rate is regarded as being extremely satisfactory in a mail survey. An analysis of the characteristics of the respondents indicated that they were representative of known demographic characteristics of primary teachers.

## **Data Entry and Analysis**

On receipt of the questionnaires, the data were entered for analysis by means of the SPSS X statistical package. What is reported here consists mainly of a description of the pattern of responses (overall frequencies) for the various items in the questionnaire. In a later chapter further analyses and a breakdown of the results for particular sub-groups will be described, e.g. younger v older teachers, and teachers in single sex v co-educational schools.

## **Results**

### **The Perceived Need for RSE**

Teachers were asked to indicate what the situation was in their schools with regard to relationships and sexuality education prior to the formal introduction of RSE. The information is given in Table 3.2. From this it can be seen that only 1 per cent of teachers said there was a comprehensive relationships and sexuality programme for all classes in their schools prior to the introduction of the formal RSE programme. It is also interesting that in a significant number of schools, no aspect of sex/sexuality education was actually occurring. Another striking feature of Table 3.2 is that the most popular arrangement in schools was that a guest speaker gave talks to senior classes in some aspects of sex education.

It is interesting that 18 per cent of the respondents said that some 'other arrangement' existed in their schools. They were asked to describe these and the common factor in a great many (over two thirds) was that there were programmes to enhance social or personal development or self-esteem. However, in very few cases did the content have a direct bearing on relationships and sexuality education.

It can fairly be said that this information indicates the need that existed for an RSE programme in all types of schools. However, these results also indicate the lack of familiarity that teachers would have had with the area, since even in those schools that had some form of programme, teachers were often not directly involved. For example, as can be seen, guest speakers were frequently involved in this work.



**Table 3.2: Arrangement in School Prior to Introduction of Formal Relationships and Sexuality Education**

<b>Arrangements Prior to Formal RSE</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
A comprehensive relationships and sexuality programme for all classes	1
A comprehensive relationship and sexuality programme for students in senior classes	11
Some teachers were teaching a sexuality/sex education programme	9
Senior classes were given talks by guest speakers on some aspects of sex education	34
The school had planned a programme but this had not been implemented	3
No aspect of sex/sexuality education had been implemented in the school	24
Other situation	18

### ***Principles Relating to Relationships and Sexuality Education***

Respondents were given a list of statements about the ways in which relationships and sexuality education might be approached with children and were asked to indicate their agreement/disagreement with each one. These statements focused, among other matters, on the involvement of home and school in RSE, the importance of values in RSE, opinions on approaches to RSE, and the appropriateness of RSE in the school curriculum.

Many of these statements are based on the principles underlying the RSE programme. For example, the items regarding home/parents collaboration is meant to reflect the partnership approach which underlies the approach to introducing the programme.

There is a statement regarding the need for having age-appropriate education – a fundamental principle of the way in which the RSE programme is being taught. In addition the statement that 'RSE should always be linked with attitudes and values' is a fundamental feature of the philosophy of the programme.

The most striking feature of Table 3.3 is the extent to which there is agreement between the respondents on the various points at issue. Whether the statements are presented positively or negatively, there is a remarkable level of consensus. This is indicated by the fact that the endorsement/rejection of any given item is never below 85 per cent and is in many cases well over 90 per cent. This is an extremely important consideration, given the range of views that are frequently expressed on issues concerning relationships and sexuality education.

The first three items are designed to examine teachers' views of the role of the school, dealing as they do with the complementary roles of home and school, the importance of consulting parents on RSE, and the need for RSE in schools rather than having children dependent on the media for information relating to sexual matters. As can be seen from Table 3.3, there is almost unanimous agreement that the school has an important role in RSE, that parents should be consulted with regard to RSE, and that it is inappropriate that children should rely on media for information about sexual matters. It is also interesting that when aspects of these ideas were put in negative form ('The school should have no role in relationships and sexuality education'), there was an equally strong voice in the expected direction. Similarly, the idea that parents should not have a say in seeing materials relevant to RSE was strongly rejected.

Two other items in Table 3.3 examined teachers' views of two features of the RSE programme that are central to its philosophy, viz., (i) 'that information should be age-appropriate' and (ii) 'that RSE should be linked with attitudes and values' and 'should take place within a spiritual and moral framework'. It can be seen that the vast majority agreed with both of these ideas, while the number who disagreed was very small indeed. It is noteworthy that an item which took the opposite view ('Information should be presented in a science class') was rejected by the vast majority of respondents.

Some other aspects of the results of Table 3.3 are worthy of comment. It is evident that the teachers were of the view that RSE should have a central role in a broadly-based education. For example, there is almost unanimous agreement that RSE is an important feature of Social, Personal and Health Education. Interestingly, the teachers did not agree that RSE should be confined to religion classes. It is of interest to note that the respondents strongly rejected the view that a good education was all about examinations and getting a good job.

In summary, there was very strong agreement with some of the central ideas that lie behind the RSE programme as these have been expressed in the Report of the Expert Advisory Group and the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines. Teachers saw the importance of RSE but took the view that it should be taught in the context of attitudes and values and in ways that are age-appropriate and in consultation with parents.

**Table 3.3: Needs and Principles of Relationships and Sexuality Education**

	Strongly Agree /Agree	Hard to Say	Strongly Disagree /Disagree
	Percentage		
The role of the school is to complement the home with regard to relationships and sexuality education	92	7	2
It is important that parents be consulted with regard to relationships and sexuality education for their children	98	1	1
It is entirely inappropriate that children should rely on the media for their information on sexual matters	96	2	2
Information regarding relationships and sexuality should always be age-appropriate	97	2	1
Relationships and sexuality education should be linked with attitudes and values	90	6	4
Schools should have no part to play in relationships and sexuality education	2	8	0
It is important that relationships and sexuality education should enable young people to form values within a moral and spiritual framework	9	16	3
A good education should not involve preparation for relationships with the opposite sex	4	7	89
Some features of contemporary life make it essential to have a relationships and sexuality programme in schools	92	7	1
Relationships and sexuality education is an important feature of social, personal and health education	98	2	—
The development of a school policy is central to the organisation of a relationships and sexuality programme	94	4	2
Parents should not have any say in the materials and videos that are used in RSE	1	11	88
It is better to provide information about sex in a science class without further fuss	3	11	86
If a single parent objects to RSE in a school, then relationships and sexuality education should not happen, whatever the wishes of the majority	1	3	96
Relationships and sexuality education should be confined to the religion class	3	5	93
A good education is all about success in exams and getting a good job	1	1	98

## **Awareness of Planning and the Partnership Approach**

In planning the RSE programme, considerable attention was given to a partnership approach, involving teachers, management and parents as well as the Department of Education and Science. Teachers were asked about the extent to which they were aware of this planning and consultation. The results are shown in Table 3.4. Overall the vast majority of the teachers said that they were at least somewhat aware of this planning and consultation, with only 6 per cent being unaware of what was going on. Given that such discussions normally do not have a very high profile in the media, this is quite a satisfactory outcome, since it can be concluded that there was at least a general awareness of these discussions.

Teachers were also asked how appropriate this partnership approach was for the development of a schools' programme in relationships and sexuality education. The results in Table 3.4 show that the vast majority of the respondents took the view that such consultation was appropriate or very appropriate. In fact only 3 per cent disagree with this view. This clearly indicates that the schools are very strongly in favour of a partnership approach involving all the relevant parties including teachers, management, parents and the Department of Education and Science.

**Table 3.4: Awareness of Planning and Consultation**

<b>Awareness</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very aware	28
Quite aware	32
Somewhat aware	34
Unaware	6

<b>Appropriateness</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very appropriate	50
Appropriate	37
Hard to say	10
Inappropriate	2
Very inappropriate	1

## The RSE Curriculum

The teachers were asked about the importance that should be given to a number of features in a programme focusing on relationships and sexuality. These ranged from broad issues like raising self-awareness, to very specific issues like information on birth and new life.

**Table 3.5: Importance of Various Features in RSE Curriculum**

	Great Importance	Some Importance	Little/No Importance
	Percentage		
Developing self-awareness	85	15	—
Understanding how sexuality is an important part of self-identity	54	42	4
Developing an awareness of different family patterns	49	46	5
Developing skills to establish healthy relationships	92	8	—
Understanding moral influences on life-styles	60	37	3
Understanding influences on life-styles and decision-making	59	37	4
Improving skills of communication	87	12	1
Understanding about birth and new life	62	36	2
Information on sexual intercourse	23	58	19

Overall, almost all of the topics listed were considered to be of importance in an RSE curriculum. However, there were considerable differences in the extent to which topics were regarded as being of great importance. In fact, as can be seen from Table 3.5, the topics listed break into three broad groupings with regard to the extent to which they were perceived as being of 'great importance'.

Firstly, on broad questions like 'developing self-awareness', 'improving skills of communication', and 'developing healthy relationships', there was almost unanimous agreement that these were of great importance. As can be seen, approximately nine tenths of the respondents took this view and very few expressed the view that the topics were of little or no importance. Another set of topics included understanding moral influences on life-styles and understanding how sexuality is an important part of self-identity. About two thirds of the

teachers thought that these were very important, and up to one third thought they were of some importance. Because these topics are somewhat difficult in a cognitive sense, it is significant that a great number of teachers added a note to the questionnaire that such topics should be included only in the Senior classes.

Finally, two matters of immediate relevance to sexuality show interesting patterns. In response to the question on 'understanding birth and new life', 62 per cent said that this was of great importance in an RSE curriculum, while over one third said it was of some importance, and only a minority of 2 per cent indicated that it was of little or no importance. However, the responses to the item regarding information on sexual intercourse was quite different. Less than one quarter of the teachers thought this topic should be of great importance in an RSE programme and nearly three fifths indicated it should be of some importance. Again it should be stressed that many of the respondents added a note to the questionnaire indicating that they thought that this topic should be dealt with in senior classes only and that it was inappropriate for Junior classes.

### ***Language for Sexuality***

Included in the questionnaire was a series of questions concerning teaching children the appropriate language for sexuality as well as accurate names of sexual organs. One of the main points put forward in the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines is that the programme should '... enable children to communicate confidently about themselves, their sexuality and their relationships'. Thus, a particularly important objective is to provide children with language through which they can understand growth and development and which allows them to discuss and inquire about such development. The point was made strongly that the everyday language of sexuality creates associations that are negative and threatening and that the school has an important role in de-mystifying these negative overtones so that, by the time children leave the primary school, they will have acquired a vocabulary that will allow them to deal with this central feature of their lives.

**Table 3.6: Perception of Appropriateness of Language in Relation to Sexuality**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Hard to Say	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	Percentage				
It is important that young people learn the correct names for sexual organs in primary school	40	46	7	5	2
Learning appropriate language for sexuality can promote unnecessary curiosity	5	7	26	45	16
Slang language contributes to disrespect and misunderstandings about sexuality	26	51	16	4	3
Children in junior classes are much too young to learn the correct names of body parts	5	8	12	44	31

Table 3.6 shows the views of the teachers regarding various matters relating to language and sexuality. With regard to the specific content of the RSE programme, the first and last items are of particular interest, i.e. the appropriateness of young people (and those in junior classes) learning the names of body parts. Leaving aside the people who did not give a definite opinion ('hard to say'), it can be seen that the percentage agreeing that this was desirable outnumbered those disagreeing by at least five to one. The same margin was evident in relation to the similar item suggesting that learning appropriate language for sexuality can promote unnecessary curiosity.

On the general point behind the philosophy of the RSE programme ('Slang contributes to disrespect and misunderstanding'), about three quarters of the teachers agreed with this statement, with only a minority of 7 per cent disagreeing.

Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that the viewpoint expressed in the rationale of the RSE programme regarding language was endorsed by teachers. It is also of interest that the vast majority of the teachers endorsed the feature of the curriculum indicating the importance of teaching the correct names of body parts.

## ***Training for the RSE Programme***

The next part of the questionnaire was concerned with the experience of the training for the RSE programme. It will be recalled that the three in-service days focused on various topics including: the history and rationale of RSE; the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines; the formation of the individual school's RSE policy; self-esteem; the RSE curriculum, with particular focus on sexual vocabulary, reviewing classroom approaches to teaching 'new life' and personal attitudes and values around these areas of the curriculum; reflecting on personal relationships and identifying values underpinning healthy relationships; the development of teachers' expertise in dealing with sensitive issues and in responding to children's questions.

The respondents were asked to indicate their satisfaction with respect to several features of their experiences during the training days. These results are shown in Table 3.7. Overall it can be seen that the responses to these questions are not easily summarised as positive or negative, but vary considerably depending on the feature under consideration.

A convenient way of classifying learning experiences is in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. While it may be somewhat over-generalising, there is some merit in thinking of the first of these forms of learning (knowledge) as being inherently easier to achieve than is the case with either skills or attitudes. The problem with skills is that their mastery requires demands on time involving practice and feedback/guidance which is above and beyond what is required when knowledge is the only focus. Attitudes are also complex and attitudinal and belief changes require reflection, discussion and examination of existing belief systems. The results displayed in Table 3.7 should be seen in this context.

There was high satisfaction with some aspects of the training for RSE. For example, up to four fifths of the participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the explanation of the aims of the programme and with the rationale for the aims of the programme. Similarly, almost the same percentage expressed satisfaction with their understanding of how self-esteem is of central importance in relationships. There was also a high level of satisfaction with the explanation of how RSE is an inherent part of Social, Personal and Health Education.

There was a moderate satisfaction level with a number of features of the in-service programme which had an important attitudinal component. For example, with regard to the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own attitudes to sexuality, just over two fifths were satisfied, and somewhat less than this were dissatisfied, with a substantial number who found it 'hard to say'. However, there was a much higher level of satisfaction with 'helping teachers discuss issues related to RSE without embarrassment'.

Finally, teachers expressed lower levels of satisfaction with a number of areas pertaining to skills and methodology. See, for example, 'development of skills needed to teach the programme', 'modelling suitable methodology for facilitating RSE', and 'information on the use of the most appropriate methods and resources'. The level of satisfaction for these features of in-service training was much lower than for other features.



**Table 3.7: Satisfaction with Features of Training for RSE**

	Very Satisfied /Satisfied	Hard to Say	Very Dissatisfied /Dissatisfied
Percentage			
The explanation of the aims of the programme	80	8	12
The explanation of the rationale for the programme	76	10	15
The development of the skills needed to teach the programme	24	20	56
The opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own attitudes to sexuality	42	27	31
Modelling suitable methodology for facilitating RSE	25	22	53
Helping teachers to discuss aspects of RSE without embarrassment	64	22	14
Giving opportunities for experiential learning	26	34	40
Explaining how RSE relates to SPHE	60	17	23
Summary of the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines on RSE	54	25	23
Explanation of the procedures for devising a school policy	46	14	40
Helping to understanding how self-esteem is central to relationships and sexuality	76	11	13
Explanation of the RSE curriculum for junior classes	66	13	21
Explanation of the RSE curriculum for senior classes	47	22	31
Helping teachers understand relationships education (including values)	51	23	27
Helping teachers in handling sensitive issues in RSE	30	20	50
Information on the most appropriate use of methods and resources*	24	21	55

\* No classroom resource materials were available at the time of the RSE in-service training

## ***Implementation of RSE in Schools***

It is acknowledged that in any curriculum change, some factors will help the implementation of the change, while some other factors hinder its effective implementation. A number of these factors were listed and teachers were asked to indicate how much each factor helped (or hindered) in the implementation of the programme. These included societal factors, professional views of teachers, school factors, and the influence of management and the Department of Education and Science.

Of the various factors that were perceived as most helpful in bringing about the implementation of the RSE programme, it can be seen from Table 3.8 that three areas are perceived to be the most important: the need to have a curriculum that develops the full child, the professional concerns of teachers, and support of school Principals. To some extent it could be said that 'professional concerns' and 'need ... to develop the full child' are rather similar since professional concerns are likely to arise from the need to have a broadly-based curriculum.

It is noteworthy that a supportive attitude by the school Principal was perceived by 69 per cent of the respondents to 'help a lot'. This is in line with the planning of the programme, which was based on the premise that school Principals would have a key role in the development and implementation of RSE. It is also in line with other findings regarding curricular innovations, which have shown that Principals have a key role as curriculum managers in their schools.

It is of interest to contrast the perception of the significance of the Principal with that of two other major 'players', viz., the Department of Education and Science and Boards of Management. While both of these were regarded as important, they were not regarded as being as significant as the school Principal. It would seem that the influence within the school is seen as more immediate and therefore greater than in the case of the less immediate influences like that of the Board of Management. This finding has also emerged in a study of the implementation of the Junior Cycle syllabus (Morgan, 1998) which deals with the factors that are important in the subject choice being offered in secondary schools.

It is also worth noting that 'parental wishes' are regarded as relatively more important in the implementation of RSE than those of either the Department or Boards of Management. In other words, parents are seen to be important because of their immediate involvement in matters relating to their children.

**Table 3.8: Factors perceived as Helpful in the Implementation of RSE**

	Helps a lot	Helps somewhat	Hard to say	Does not help
	Percentage			
Perceived needs in modern society	43	45	8	4
The need to have a curriculum that develops the full child	71	27	2	1
Parental wishes	44	43	11	3
Direction from the Dept. of Education and Science	29	49	17	5
Professional concerns of teachers to do what is best for children	66	30	7	—
Views of the Board of Management	26	44	27	3
Support of School Principals	69	22	8	1

Participants in the survey were also given a list of factors that may hinder the implementation of the RSE programme in schools and asked to indicate the extent to which each was a problem with regard to implementation.

As can be seen from Table 3.9, there are major differences in the relative importance that is attributed to each of these factors by the teachers. One reason is perceived as being especially dominant, viz., the overcrowded curriculum. This was viewed as a 'major problem' by over 70 per cent of the respondents while only a tiny minority (2.8 per cent) took the view that this was 'no problem'.

Two other features were regarded by respondents as major obstacles to the implementation of the RSE programme, viz., lack of materials for teaching RSE and inadequate support. Approximately 90 per cent of the teachers were of the view that these were either a 'major problem' or 'something of a problem' with regard to the implementation of the programme.

It is interesting that three items regarding the perception of the suitability of implementing RSE in schools were seen more as 'something of a problem' than as a 'major problem'. For example, 'vigorous objections by some people to RSE' was perceived to be a major problem by just over one fifth of teachers. About the same number thought that parents' perception of RSE not being a suitable subject, was a major problem. A much smaller number thought that the 'danger of spoiling children's innocence' was a major problem.

Finally, a perception that the subject is being covered in other areas of the curriculum was viewed as a big obstacle by only a small percentage of the teachers. This is especially interesting given that it is sometimes argued that the area is 'already being covered' and that a new programme is not required.

**Table 3.9: Perceived Obstacles to Implementation of RSE in Schools**

	Major problem	Something of a problem	Hard to say	No problem
	Percentage			
Overcrowded curriculum	70.7	26.5	—	2.8
RSE not seen by parents as an appropriate subject for school	23.9	53.3	12.2	10.6
Lack of materials for teaching RSE	48.9	36.1	6.7	8.3
Inadequate support	44.6	43.5	6.2	5.6
Attitude of Board of Management	12.3	18.4	34.1	35.2
Vigorous objections by people to RSE	20.8	46.1	17.4	15.8
Danger of spoiling children's innocence	12.8	34.1	23.5	29.7
Teachers' professional view that it is not an appropriate topic	25.8	38.2	16.3	19.7
Perception that this area is already being covered in other areas of the curriculum	4.4	52.8	18.3	24.5

## ***Conclusions of Primary Schools Survey***

This survey showed that there was a major need for an RSE programme on the grounds that very few schools had a comprehensive relationships and sexuality programme prior to the formal introduction of the present RSE programme. There was very strong agreement with the principles and ideas that lie behind the RSE programme as these have been expressed in the Report of the Expert Advisory Group and the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines. Teachers recognised the importance of RSE but considered that it should be taught in the context of attitudes and values and in ways that are age-appropriate and in consultation with parents. There was also agreement that the major topics suggested in the Guidelines should be included in the programme. Additionally, the rationale of the RSE programme regarding language was endorsed by teachers. In particular the vast majority of the teachers endorsed the feature of the curriculum which indicated the importance of teaching the correct names of body parts.

With regard to in-service training, there was a high level of satisfaction with most aspects of the training for RSE, particularly with the explanation of the aims of the programme and with the rationale of the programme. There was considerable satisfaction with the experiential elements of the in-service programme and somewhat less satisfaction with areas pertaining to skills and methodology. With regard to implementation, the support of school Principals was identified by teachers as the major factor in helping to implement the programme, while the 'over-crowded curriculum' was regarded as the most important inhibiting factor.

## **Chapter 4: Post-primary Schools Programme and In-service Evaluation**

### **Curriculum and Guidelines for RSE at Post-primary**

The aims and objectives of RSE at post-primary level are broadly similar to those at primary level, while taking into account that the content and methodology will reflect the differences in age and maturity. The NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines for Post-primary schools are in three sections, dealing with: (i) developing policy, (ii) planning a module of RSE, and (iii) the teacher and RSE.

With regard to teaching methodology, particular attention is given in the guidelines to the learning environment for RSE and the learning experience. Emphasis is placed on the need to 'create an atmosphere which respects the privacy of each individual student and treats all students with due sensitivity and care'. With regard to the learning experience, the stress is placed on active rather than passive learning, thus highlighting the significance of the learning which arises out of the student's own experience, ideas and behaviour.

A number of methods that are expected to support this experiential learning are recommended in the Guidelines. These include group discussion, case studies, brain-storming, role play, artwork, narrative expression, debates and project work.

The three themes of RSE at post-primary level are: (i) human growth and development, (ii) human sexuality, and (iii) human relationships. The topics in (i) include: awareness of changes in the human life cycle; physical and emotional changes at adolescence; knowledge of sexual organs; development of a language for the expression of emotions; understanding of fertility, conception, pregnancy and birth; awareness of implications of sexual activity; understanding of sexually transmitted diseases.

### **Post-primary Training Programme**

The training programme for post-primary teachers involved six days in total as follows: (i) Two introductory days dealing with RSE in the broad context of Social, Personal and Health Education and (ii) Four days specifically focused on RSE teacher training. However, teachers who had already undergone extensive training in the area of social and personal development (e.g. in the Substance Abuse Prevention Programme) were exempt from the introductory days.

The overall aim of the training programme was to enhance the professional and personal development of post-primary teachers, so that they could effectively deliver an RSE programme in their schools. In this context, the objectives of Days 1 and 2 were: (i) to

clarify and formulate a vision of RSE in the context of Social, Personal and Health Education; (ii) to provide information on the NCCA Interim Curriculum and Guidelines on RSE; (iii) to explore issues of relationships and sexuality and help teachers to develop an ease with these dimensions of their own lives; (iv) to experience and practise different methodologies relevant to the RSE programme. A further set of objectives were targeted in Days 3 and 4: (i) to increase knowledge and understanding about issues related to RSE; (ii) to acquire a confidence and ease in teaching about sensitive issues related to RSE; and (iii) to practise a range of teaching methods for use in the classroom.

For those who had not already participated in the Substance Abuse Prevention Programme (or a similar one), the two introductory days were aimed at introducing teachers to SPHE as a context for Relationships and Sexuality Education. The aim was to formulate a vision of SPHE, to provide an opportunity to develop the core elements of SPHE (self-esteem, feelings, assertiveness), and to experience and practise different methodologies relevant to an SPHE programme.

### ***Questionnaire for Post-primary Teachers***

The questionnaire for post-primary teachers was parallel to that for primary teachers. Section A focused on background information including school size, gender of pupils and type of school. The perceived need for RSE was the focus in Section B, inquiring about the existing situation in schools as well as the main principles that might determine the organisation and teaching of RSE. Specifically, questions focused on the kind of provision in each year, from 'no provision' to regular classes organised on a 'stand-alone' basis. Another question in this section was concerned with the emphasis on the type of programme available, i.e. whether it dealt with relationships only, or with sexuality only, or with both. Section C focused on the RSE curriculum with particular reference to the topics that should be included in the programme. This was divided into two parts dealing with the Junior and Senior Cycles respectively. The in-service programme associated with the introduction of RSE was the main matter in Section D. The final section of the Questionnaire dealt with the actual implementation of the programme in schools.

As in the case of the questionnaire for primary teachers, the items were structured multiple choice questions or statements which required respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale. In a few cases open-ended questions gave teachers the opportunity to develop particular points that were of special interest.

### ***Sample and Response***

A sample of 700 of the 1,700 post-primary teachers who had undergone the RSE training was selected on a random basis for participation in the study. Their addresses were identified on the basis of their school address at the time of the training. The selection was

made on the basis of, and proportionate to, the following five strata: (i) secondary male, (ii) secondary female, (iii) secondary mixed, (iv) vocational, and (v) community/comprehensive. The number selected was proportionate to the number of schools/students in each category in the country as a whole. This sampling, therefore, does not address the question of the extent to which certain types of schools were more or less likely to have teachers attending the RSE in-service programme.

Obviously, the approach taken in identifying participants is less than fully satisfactory since some would obviously have moved to different positions in the meantime. Of the questionnaires that were sent to schools, 443 were returned, giving a response rate of 63 per cent.

Table 4.1 shows the distribution across the five types of schools. The number of respondents in the sample correspond broadly to the proportion of schools/students in each category, at the time of the survey. Thus, it can be said that the sample is representative of the various sectors in post-primary education.

**Table 4.1: Allocation of Sample in Post-primary Survey**

School Type	Number of Respondents
Secondary Male	89
Secondary Female	113
Secondary Mixed	82
Vocational	84
Community/Comprehensive	75



## Results

### *The Perceived Need for RSE*

Teachers were asked about the provision for RSE in their school prior to the formal introduction of the RSE programme. The options ranged from 'no provision' to regular classes on a stand-alone basis. Because of the fact that there may be different arrangements for each year, the respondents were asked to indicate what the situation was for each year.

The results are shown in Table 4.2. From this it can be seen that there was no provision for relationships and sexuality in nearly one quarter of schools (with only slight differences between the various years). It is also evident that there was a variety of arrangements in those schools which did make provision. In about one third of the schools classes in relationships and sexuality education were given within another subject (SPHE or Religion). In some other cases, classes were given on a 'stand-alone' basis, i.e. not in the context of another subject, while in approximately the same number of schools blocks of time were devoted to this topic. In around one tenth of schools (much more in first year) classes were given by a visiting specialist.

Overall, the provision is relatively consistent across the six years of post-primary education. As noted above, the percentage of schools where no provision was made tends to be similar for all years from first year through to Leaving Certificate. Otherwise, while there are some differences there is no striking pattern evident in Table 4.2. One point that emerges is that visiting specialist teachers tend to be involved relatively more often in first year than is the case with any other year. Another point that can be seen is that 'regular classes given within another subject' tend to happen less frequently in first year than is the case in the other years. Finally, 'regular classes on a stand-alone basis' tend to occur more frequently in Transition Year – although it has to be admitted that the difference between Transition Year and other years is not very great.

**Table 4.2: Situation Regarding Provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education before Introduction of Formal RSE Programme**

	No provision	Visiting specialist gave classes	Block of time on topics	Regular classes consistently within another subject	Regular classes on a 'stand-alone' basis
	Percentage				
First year	27.4	20.0	12.7	27.3	12.6
Second year	23.6	9.1	20.0	38.3	9.0
Third year	24.5	7.6	12.7	41.8	13.4
Transition year	22.7	8.3	15.5	35.5	18.0
Fifth year	24.5	10.1	18.2	35.5	11.7
Leaving Cert	21.9	10.3	13.7	41.1	13.0

The teachers were also asked about the extent to which existing programmes focused on either sexuality education, relationships education or both. The results with regard to this item are shown in Table 4.3. From this it is evident that existing programmes tended to focus on relationships and sexuality rather than on one aspect. It is especially striking that less than 2 per cent of existing programmes were concerned with sexuality alone, while only a small percentage focused on relationships alone. In contrast nearly three quarters of existing programmes were identified by teachers as being targeted at relationships and sexuality education. Note that this question was concerned with the overall programme that obtained in schools and did not inquire separately for different years.

**Table 4.3: Focus of Existing Programmes in Post-primary Schools**

<b>Focus</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Concerned with sexuality only	1.8
Concerned mainly with sexuality	7.3
Concerned with relationships only	5.4
Concerned mainly with relationships	9.2
Concerned with both relationships and sexuality	74.5
Hard to say	1.8

Two comments are worth making regarding the situation before the formal introduction of RSE. The first is that only in about half of the schools were regular classes given in this area (either within another subject or on a stand-alone basis). In the other half, either no provision was made or else this provision involved visiting specialists or a block of time. The second point is that there do not seem to be any major differences between the various years – although first years are somewhat more likely to have visiting specialists than are other years.

### ***Principles Underpinning RSE***

As with primary teachers, the post-primary teacher sample was given a list of statements about the ways in which relationships and sexuality education might be approached with children and were asked to indicate their agreement/disagreement with each one. These statements focused, among other matters, on the involvement of home and school in RSE, the importance of values in RSE, opinions on approaches to RSE, and the appropriateness of RSE in the school curriculum.

As can be seen from Table 4.4, most of these statements are based on the principles underlying the RSE programme. For example, the items regarding home/parents is meant to reflect the idea of partnership which underlies the approach to introducing the programme ('The role of the school is to complement the home with regard to relationships and sexuality education'). Furthermore, the statement that 'RSE should always be linked with attitudes and values' is a fundamental feature of the philosophy of the programme.

From Table 4.4 it can be seen that the post-primary teachers were in very strong agreement with the principles on which the RSE programme is based. There is a remarkable level of agreement with all of the central statements concerning the core philosophy of the programme. In nearly all cases the level of agreement with these views was over 90

per cent while the percentage indicating disagreement was very small indeed. It is also striking that even when items were reversed, the agreement with the RSE philosophical principles was still as strong. For example, it is striking that over 96 per cent of the post-primary sample disagreed with the statement that schools should have no part to play in relationships and sexuality education. Similarly, less than 10 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that parents should have no say in the videos/materials that are used in the schools for the RSE programme. These findings are all the more remarkable since levels of disagreement in questionnaires are generally well below those that are found for the same items when phrased positively.

### **Conclusions regarding Principles of RSE Programme**

The results from Table 4.4 suggest that the teachers in the post-primary sample were very much in favour of the principles on which the current RSE programme is founded. They favoured the view that the school has an important role in complementing the work of parents and that relationships and sexuality education is an important feature of a good education.

**Table 4.4: Needs and Principles of Relationships and Sexuality Education (Post-primary Teachers)**

	Strongly Agree /Agree	Hard to Say	Strongly Disagree /Disagree
Percentage			
The role of the school is to complement the home with regard to relationships and sexuality education	95.4	3.6	1.0
It is important that parents be consulted with regard to relationships and sexuality education for their young people	94.5	4.0	1.5
It is entirely inappropriate that young people should rely on the media for their information on sexual matters	90.3	1.8	8.0
Information regarding relationships and sexuality should always be age-appropriate	96.3	2.9	0.9
Relationships and sexuality education should be linked with attitudes and values	94.5	1.6	3.8
Schools should have no part to play in relationships and sexuality education	3.5	—	96.5

Table 4.4: Needs and Principles of Relationships and Sexuality Education (Post-primary Teachers)

	Strongly Agree /Agree	Hard to Say	Strongly Disagree /Disagree
	Percentage		
It is important that relationships and sexuality education should enable young people to form values within a moral and spiritual framework	92.7	3.8	3.4
A good education should not involve preparation for relationships with the opposite sex	9.1	1.6	89.3
Some features of contemporary life make it essential to have a relationships and sexuality programme in schools	96.6	3.0	0.4
Relationships and sexuality education is an important feature of social, personal and health education	98.6	1.4	—
The development of a school policy is central to the organisation of a relationships and sexuality programme	90.9	4.6	4.5
Parents should not have any say in the materials and videos that are used in RSE	9.1	20.8	70.1
It is better to provide information about sex in a science class without further fuss	5.5	3.2	91.1
If one parent objects to RSE in a school, then relationships and sexuality education should not happen, whatever the wishes of the majority	1.2	3.4	95.5
Relationships and sexuality education should be confined to the religion class	1.6	9.3	89.1
A good education is all about success in exams and getting a good job	1.1	—	98.9

## ***Awareness of Consultation with Regard to RSE***

Teachers were asked about their awareness of the consultation that has occurred with regard to the implementation of the RSE programme. Nearly all of the teachers said that they were aware of the consultation, while 3 per cent indicated that they were unaware. Teachers were also asked their opinion on the appropriateness of such consultation. The vast majority of the respondents (over 90 per cent) were of the view that it was appropriate while only 2.4 per cent took the opposite view.

These results indicate a high level of awareness of the consultation process as well as agreement with the underlying principles of consultation with the educational partners.

## **The RSE Curriculum**

Teachers were asked how much importance a programme focusing on relationships and sexuality should place on a list of areas in the Junior Cycle of the post-primary school. These included the major areas that were recommended for inclusion in the RSE programme in the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines. The areas on which teachers were asked to give their opinion on suitability included: understanding of 'fertility, conception, pregnancy and birth', 'understanding the implications of sexual activity', 'the emotions that are characteristic of adolescence', 'skills for personal safety', and 'developing skills for maintaining self-esteem'. It can be seen from Table 4.5 that the vast majority of teachers were of the view that all of these topics were of great importance for Junior Cycle students. Remarkably, for several of the topics not a single teacher took the view that the topic was of 'little importance' or of 'no importance'. These included 'awareness of the implications of sexual activity' and 'understanding the conflicting emotions associated with adolescence'. Likewise, in the case of 'knowledge of sexual organs and their functions' and 'skills for personal safety', not a single respondent thought that these were of little or no importance.

With several other topics, the minority who thought that the topic was of 'little importance' is very small indeed. This is the case with regard to an understanding of 'fertility, conception, pregnancy and birth'. Less than 1 per cent thought these matters were of little importance in the proposed Junior Cycle curriculum, while just 1 per cent thought they were of 'no importance'. Similarly, with regard to 'awareness of the qualities valued in friends and how friendships change', the minority who thought that this topic was of 'little importance' was less than 2 per cent while no one was of the view that the topic was of 'no importance'.

There were some differences in relation to the various topics but these were largely in the percentage who thought a topic was of 'great importance' as opposed to being of 'some importance'. For example, while in comparison to many other topics a relatively smaller percentage thought that 'awareness of and sensitivity to sexual orientation' was of 'great importance' it is significant that only a small minority thought that the topic was of 'little or no importance', while over 90 per cent were of the view that the topic was either of 'great importance' or of 'some importance'. In the case of the minority who thought that this was relatively less important, it may have been that they thought it should be treated at the Senior Cycle.

## **Conclusions regarding Topics for Junior Cycle Curriculum**

These results indicate that the topics proposed in the Junior Cycle curriculum are strongly supported by the teachers. In no case was any single topic considered by the teachers to be inappropriate. This is what might be expected given the support of the respondents for the principles discussed above. It would seem that the teachers favour the broadly-based combination of appropriate information coupled with the development of interpersonal

skills that will provide a basis for relationships and sexuality. Thus they supported components of the programme with a direct bearing on sexuality as well as those features that provide the interpersonal context for such components.

**Table 4.5: Perceived Importance of Topics in Junior Cycle in Post-primary Schools**

	Great Importance	Some Importance	Little Importance	No Importance
	Percentage			
Awareness of change in the human life cycle	80.0	18.3	1.7	—
Knowledge of sexual organs and their functions	72.7	27.3	—	—
An understanding of fertility, conception, pregnancy and birth	76.4	21.8	0.8	1.0
An appreciation of hygiene associated with puberty	83.6	16.4	—	—
An awareness of the conflicting feelings and emotions characteristic of adolescence	85.5	14.5	—	—
Awareness of the implications of sexual activity	81.8	18.2	—	—
An awareness of stereotyping and its influence on attitudes and behaviour	58.2	39.0	1.8	1.0
Information on and sensitivity to sexual orientation	29.1	63.6	2.0	5.3
Developing skills for personal safety	83.5	16.5	—	—
Developing skills for building and maintaining self-esteem	98.2	1.9	—	—
Awareness of the qualities valued in friendship and how friendship patterns change	82.0	16.1	1.9	—
Awareness of roles and responsibilities in relationships and in families	78.2	21.8	—	—

## **Senior Cycle Topics**

Teachers were also asked how much importance a programme focusing on relationships and sexuality should place on a list of areas in the Senior Cycle of the post-primary school. Again the major areas in the list were those suggested for inclusion in the RSE programme in the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines. These included 'awareness of fertility', 'understanding pregnancy and the development of the foetus', 'awareness of the importance of methods of family planning', 'the range and variety of human emotions', and 'skills for making choices about sexual activity'.

The respondents were required to indicate the importance of each of these topics ranging from of 'great importance' to 'not important'.

The results are shown in Table 4.6. From this it can be seen that the vast majority of teachers regarded all of the proposed topics to be very important features of an RSE curriculum. Less than one tenth of the sample took the view that any topic was of 'little importance' or of 'no importance'. For many topics every respondent thought that they were of 'great importance' or of 'some importance'. It is interesting that the topics that elicited this level of agreement were varied and included 'understanding of pregnancy and the development of the foetus', 'recognising the range of human emotions and ways to deal with these', and 'developing an understanding of the complex nature of love and loving relationships'.

For some topics the level of endorsement, while short of 100 per cent, was also very high. For example, with regard to the 'awareness of importance of methods of family planning', the vast majority were of the view that this was an important topic for the Senior Cycle. This was also the case with 'understanding of safe sexual practices and sexually transmitted diseases'. For both of these topics the minority who took the view that they were 'not important' topics in the Senior Cycle curriculum was only in the region of 2-3 per cent.

## **Conclusions regarding Topics for Senior Cycle Curriculum**

A number of conclusions seem warranted on the basis of these results. Firstly, all of the proposed topics were regarded as entirely appropriate for the curriculum. Secondly, there was agreement on topics that were relevant to social and personal development but also on those that relate directly to sexuality. In those cases where there was any disagreement, only a very small minority took the view that the topic in question was not appropriate for the Senior Cycle. Thus, it could fairly be said that the approach taken in devising the Senior Cycle curriculum is strongly supported by the respondents in this survey.



**Table 4.6: Perceived Importance of Topics in Senior Cycle in Post-primary Schools**

	Great Importance	Some Importance	Little Importance	No Importance
	Percentage			
Understanding the structure and function of sex organs	67.3	23.6	9.1	—
Awareness of fertility	89.1	7.6	3.3	—
Awareness of the importance and methods of family planning	76.4	20.0	3.4	—
Understanding of pregnancy and the development of the foetus	83.6	16.4	—	—
Recognising the range of human emotions and ways to deal with these	87.3	12.7	—	—
Understanding the relationship between safe sexual practices and sexually transmitted diseases	80.0	16.0	2.0	2.0
Consideration of male and female roles in relationships and in society	65.1	34.9	—	—
Awareness and understanding of sexual orientations	61.8	38.2	—	—
Understanding the concept of sexual harassment and its different forms	52.7	41.8	5.5	—
Skills for making choices about sexual activity	89.1	10.9	—	—
Developing an awareness of sexual abuse	61.8	34.5	3.6	—
Understanding the nature of peer pressure	65.5	32.7	1.7	—
Developing skills for resolving conflict	72.7	27.2	—	—
Understanding marriage as a loving commitment	76.4	18.2	5.5	—
Development of an awareness of the complex nature of love and loving relationships	85.5	14.5	—	—

## ***Training for RSE***

The next part of the questionnaire dealt with a range of matters which had been the focus of the RSE training for post-primary teachers. These included a variety of aims including cognitive ('explanation of the rationale and aims of the RSE programme'), affective aims ('opportunity for students to reflect on their attitudes to sexuality'), and skills ('development of the facilitation skills to teach the RSE programme').

The pattern of responses to these questions (shown in Table 4.7) indicates that the highest level of satisfaction was found in relation to 'explanation and understanding' of the RSE programme. For example, nearly 85 per cent of the teachers were satisfied with the explanation of the rationale of the RSE programme, and the level of satisfaction with the explanation of media influences was very similar. Also a very high percentage of the teachers expressed satisfaction with what they had learned in relation to dealing with 'human anatomy and the language of sexuality'.

It is of interest to note that while skill-elements of a programme often receive a low rating (since they are the most difficult to impart), this was not the case in this sample. In fact, nearly three fifths of the respondents were satisfied with the facilitation skills that they had acquired in the RSE training. On a broadly similar item ('modelling suitable methodology for teaching RSE') approximately the same number of participants expressed satisfaction with their experiences in this regard.

The majority of teachers also expressed satisfaction with a number of features that had to do with attitudes and feelings. For example, the question asking about the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own sexuality received a very high rating, with three quarters of the teachers saying that they were satisfied with this component of the RSE training. About the same percentage were satisfied with the extent to which the course helped teachers to discuss features of RSE without embarrassment.

On only two items were the satisfaction ratings rather low. One of these concerned sexuality and sexual orientation – areas which may be inherently difficult to deal with in a classroom situation. It is also of interest that there was some difficulty in relation to 'the most suitable methods and resources'. However, it should be noted that aspects of methodology were generally rated quite favourably.

**Table 4.7: Satisfaction with Features of RSE Training  
(Post-primary Teachers)**

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Hard to say	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
	Percentage				
The explanation of the rationale and aims of the RSE programme	34.5	60.0	—	2.0	3.5
Explanation of the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines on RSE	29.1	47.3	12.7	7.3	3.6
Understanding media influences on relationships and sexuality	30.1	53.5	12.7	2.6	1.0
Dealing with human anatomy and the language of sexuality	25.5	58.2	5.5	8.6	2.3
Dealing with matters related to family planning	10.9	41.8	14.5	28.1	4.6
Understanding childhood messages	12.7	45.5	27.3	11.7	2.8
Dealing with sexuality and sexual orientation	10.9	32.7	21.8	30.0	4.5
The development of the facilitation skills needed to teach the RSE programme	18.2	40.0	23.6	12.7	5.5
The opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own attitudes to sexuality	27.3	47.3	10.9	11.7	2.7
Modelling suitable methodology for teaching RSE	23.6	34.5	12.7	20.0	9.1
Helping teachers to discuss aspects of RSE without embarrassment	36.4	40.0	14.5	3.8	5.3
Giving opportunities for experiential learning	20.0	45.5	10.9	18.2	5.5
Information on the most appropriate use of methods and resources	14.5	38.2	12.7	29.1	5.4

## ***Conclusion on Effectiveness of Training***

Overall, the level of satisfaction with the training in RSE was very high. Not only were the teachers satisfied with the knowledge that they had acquired but there was also considerable satisfaction with the teaching skills and methodological aspects of the training. It was especially noteworthy that there was a high level of satisfaction with features of the training that focused on attitudes and feelings, including the opportunity for teachers to discuss aspects of RSE without embarrassment. The aspects which were rated somewhat lower may be due to the inherent difficulties in dealing with certain concepts (sexual orientation) or to the non-availability of suitable materials/notes at the time of training (methods and resources).

## ***Implementation of RSE***

The respondents were asked about the factors that affect the implementation of RSE. Firstly, they were asked to say how much each of several factors would help implementation, including some factors at societal level ('perceived needs of modern society'), curricular matters ('need to have a curriculum that develops the full person', and organisational factors ('support of school management'). The results are shown in Table 4.8.

From this table it is evident that management factors are considered by teachers to be extremely important in the implementation of the RSE programme. It is striking that more than four fifths of the sample thought 'support of school management' would 'help a lot' in the implementation of the programme, while an even greater percentage were of the view that the support of school Principals was crucial. It is interesting that the idea of having 'in-school support meetings for RSE teachers to plan the programme' also received a very high rating in contributing to implementation. This latter finding may be related to the fact that the organisation of such meetings would be indicative of management support.

Consistent with the findings on the importance of management support is the finding that the support of whole school staff contributes significantly to the implementation of the programme. It may also reflect the same general view that the time-tabling of RSE is seen as a critical factor in making the programme happen within schools.

It is noteworthy that while several other support factors are considered important, they are of less immediate influence and are therefore not rated as important as were management factors. These include the 'Guidelines from the Department of Education and Science', 'school ethos and traditions' and 'perceived needs of modern society'. It is not that these were not considered to be important but rather that they were not of immediate importance in the way in which the support of the school Principal/management was viewed.

The item concerned with the 'need to have a curriculum that develops the full person' was also thought to be a helpful factor in implementing RSE. Over four fifths of the teachers thought that this 'helped a lot' and not a single teacher took the view that it 'did not help'. This pattern of results can be explained by the very deep support for the principles on which the RSE programme was developed (discussed above).

It is interesting that the same pattern emerged in research conducted with school Principals on behalf of the NCCA (Morgan, 1998). This work showed that immediate factors at school level were perceived by Principals to be of most importance in deciding on curricular questions (like number of subjects in the Junior Cycle), while other factors like the guidelines of the Department of Education and Science were regarded as more remote and therefore of less importance.

**Table 4.8: Factors Perceived as Helpful in Implementation of RSE**

	Helps a lot	Helps somewhat	Hard to say	Does not help
	Percentage			
Perceived needs in modern society	40.0	41.8	7.6	10.6
School ethos and traditions	45.5	47.3	7.2	—
The need to have a curriculum that develops the full person	83.6	12.7	3.5	—
Parental wishes and support	41.8	40.0	16.2	2.0
Guidelines from the Dept. of Education and Science	49.1	41.8	5.5	3.5
Support of school management	81.8	12.7	2.7	2.7
Support of school principals	87.3	10.9	1.7	—
Whole school staff being fully informed and committed to its implementation	72.7	16.4	9.2	1.7
RSE being on school timetable as a module of SPHE	76.3	12.7	7.0	2.1
In-school support meetings for RSE teachers to plan and evaluate the programme	90.7	5.6	2.2	1.6

Teachers were also asked about factors that may hinder the implementation of the programme in schools. These included: curricular factors, management, and support at school level and at regional level. The breakdown of the results is shown in Table 4.9. From this it is evident that immediate teaching and organisational matters are of supreme importance in hindering the implementation of RSE. The single most important factor in this regard is the 'overcrowded curriculum'. Over 90 per cent of the respondents saw this as 'a problem' and only a small minority thought that this was 'no problem'. Related to this was the relatively large number of teachers who saw that 'SPHE not being on the timetable' was an important factor. Nearly three quarters of the teachers thought that this was either a 'major problem' or 'something of a problem'.

The other factors that were seen as being important in the prevention of the implementation of the programme were also of an immediate practical nature. These included 'not having enough trained teachers' and 'lack of materials for teaching RSE'. About three quarters of the respondents thought that these two factors were a problem in implementing the RSE programme.

It is worth noting that while ideological influences concerning the nature of RSE were of some importance, they were not considered to be as important as those immediate and practical considerations. For example, while about half of the teachers thought that 'vigorous objections by some parents' was a problem, this is substantially below the level who endorsed the 'overcrowded curriculum' as an important factor. The same is true with regard to 'RSE not being seen by teachers as an appropriate subject for school' and also with 'RSE not being seen by parents as an appropriate subject for school'. Again over half of the teachers thought this was a problem but in relative terms not as great as in the case of the factors discussed above.

Three support factors were considered to be important as can be seen from Table 4.9. These include school support, regional support, and the attitude of management.

**Table 4.9: Factors Perceived as Hindering Implementation of the RSE Programme in Post-primary Schools**

	Major problem	Something of a problem	Hard to say	No problem
Percentage				
Overcrowded curriculum	70.9	21.8	5.0	2.2
RSE not seen by parents as an appropriate subject for school	25.5	30.9	22.6	20.0
RSE not seen by teachers as an appropriate subject for school	26.5	35.4	12.7	25.5
Lack of materials for teaching RSE	43.6	29.1	10.0	16.4
Not enough teachers trained	41.8	38.2	7.3	12.7
Inadequate school support	35.5	33.5	10.9	20.0
Inadequate regional support	23.6	47.3	18.2	10.9
Attitude of school management	32.7	18.2	21.8	27.3
Vigorous objections by people against RSE being part of the curriculum	31.7	22.8	14.5	30.9
SPHE not on the timetable	47.3	23.6	7.0	22.1

## ***Conclusions regarding Implementation***

The data summarised here indicate that immediate support factors were the most important influences in ensuring the implementation of the RSE curriculum while the overcrowded curriculum was seen as being the major factor in preventing its full implementation. In contrast, deeply held beliefs by a minority were not regarded as especially important in hindering implementation. The guidelines of the NCCA and the Department of Education and Science, while being important, were not considered as being of the same immediate importance as school support factors. This pattern of results has been found in other studies that have examined curricular innovation and implementation.

## ***General Conclusion on Post-primary Teachers' Survey***

The first major conclusion is that, prior to the formal introduction of RSE, regular classes were given in this area (either within another subject or on a stand-alone basis) in about half the schools. In the other half, either no provision was made or else this provision involved visiting specialists or a block of time. The teachers were strongly in favour of the principles on which the current RSE programme is founded, especially the principle that the school has an important role in complementing the work of parents and that relationships and sexuality education is an important feature of a good education. The proposed topics for the Junior and Senior Cycles were regarded as entirely appropriate for the curriculum. Furthermore, there was agreement on topics that were relevant to social and personal development but also on those that relate directly to sexuality.

The level of satisfaction with the training in RSE was very high. Not only were the teachers satisfied with the knowledge that they had acquired but there was also considerable satisfaction with the teaching skills and methodological aspects of the training. It was especially noteworthy that there was a high level of satisfaction with features of the training that focused on attitudes and feelings.

With regard to implementation, the results suggest that immediate support factors were the most important influences in ensuring the implementation of the RSE curriculum while the overcrowded curriculum was seen as being the major factor in preventing its full implementation. In contrast, deeply held beliefs by a minority were not regarded as especially important in hindering implementation.



## **Chapter 5: Views of Parents on RSE Programme**

Given the importance of parental involvement in RSE and the partnership philosophy that was intrinsic to the work of developing and implementing the programme, it was appropriate that the views of parents should be sought to complement those of primary and post-primary teachers. This section of the report sets out the approach taken in this area.

### **Parental Sample**

Obtaining a national sample of parents would have been prohibitive in terms of time and cost. There would also have been a difficulty regarding the appropriate sampling frame for such a survey, given that what was needed was a sample of parents with children of school-going age. There was also a need to establish the views of those parents who had attended parents' information evenings which had been organised through the Education Centres nationwide.

With these considerations in mind, it was decided to opt for two purposive samples. Specifically, a random sample of parents attending parents' information nights was identified and participants were asked to complete a questionnaire, while a comparable sample of parents attending regional meetings of the National Parents' Council was identified in the same way. In each case, the procedure involved explaining to the participants the aims and nature of the survey, the confidentiality of responses and the methods by which the questionnaire would be returned to the evaluator.

In total 343 questionnaires were returned. About half of these (187) were returned during the information meetings while the remainder came through NPC meetings. The characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1: Characteristics of Parent Sample**

	Percentage
Gender:	
Male	23.3
Female	66.7
Children at primary school:	
None	3.4
One	46.1
Two or more	50.5
Children at post-primary school:	
None	7.1
One	39.3
Two or more	53.6

Obviously there are no benchmarks available to compare this sample with what could be regarded as a representative national sample of parents. What is relevant for the present purpose is that this sample is representative of those parents attending information nights organised through the Education Centres and those attending NPC meetings in mid-1999.

## **Results of Parental Survey**

### **Need for RSE**

Parents were first asked to describe the approach that they themselves took with regard to relationships and sexuality education, with their own children in their home. There were six options ranging from dealing with 'all aspects of relationships and sexuality education from a young age' to 'child being provided with a book or video' to 'found it difficult to talk about these issues'.

The results are shown in Table 5.2. From this table it would seem that there is considerable variety in the approaches taken by parents. Just over two fifths of the parents said that all aspects of relationships and sexuality education were dealt with in the home. If the data is considered another way, it means that nearly three fifths of parents dealt with RSE in the home which by their own admission was not fully complete. These include about one sixth of the parents who said that 'the basic facts regarding sexuality were discussed with the child on a few occasions'. There was also a substantial minority who resorted to

other ways of dealing with relationships/sexuality education, viz., through use of a video or by getting someone else to talk to the child/children. Finally, it should be noted that over 8 per cent said that they found it 'difficult to talk about matters relating to sexuality and relationships'. Since this was the last in the series of graded options, it is not unreasonable to infer that these parents had minimal involvement in the education of their children with regard to RSE.

It has to be stressed again that results can only be based on the responses of the parents who attended the meetings described above. Furthermore, only a single question was asked, since this was not the primary focus of the present survey. However, two further points are worth making. Firstly, parents who attend such meetings are more likely to be those who are interested in all aspects of their children's development and education and might be expected to have been more involved in the relationship and sexuality education of their offspring than parents not attending such meetings. Another consideration is the focus of the questionnaire. It was explicitly stated in the lead-in to the questionnaire that the issues being dealt with related to the RSE programme. This could have created an expectation of strong parental involvement in RSE in the home which in turn might have resulted in respondents being relatively more likely to indicate that they had had a greater involvement in this area than was actually the case. This phenomenon is frequently encountered in questionnaire design.

**Table 5.2: Approaches to RSE taken by Parents with their own Children**

Approach	Percentage
All aspects of relationships and sexuality education were talked about in the home	42.2
Most important features of relationships and sexuality education were dealt with	22.0
The basic facts regarding sexuality were discussed with the child on a few occasions	16.8
The child was provided with a book/video to learn most important features	5.7
We ensured that the child had an appropriate conversation with counsellor/relative or/similar person about the most relevant aspects	3.3
We found it difficult to talk about matters to do with relationships and sexuality education	8.6

Regardless of methodological issues, these results indicate that in many homes the area of relationships and sexuality education is not dealt with in ways which parents themselves consider adequate. It should also be recalled that the situation is to some extent mirrored by the results from a great many schools, as this was reflected in questions pertaining to the situation in schools prior to the formal introduction of the RSE programme. In turn this would mean that a great many children might grow up without adequate education in the domain of relationships and sexuality.

Respondents were also asked about who was involved in the education discussed above. The results which are shown in Table 5.3 indicate that the two most common situations were that either both parents were involved or mother only. It is especially noteworthy that 'father only' and 'same sex as child' (boys with fathers, girls with mothers), account for a relatively small percentage of the involvement of parents in RSE in the home.

### **Conclusion regarding Need for RSE**

The information summarised here shows that there was considerable variation between families in the way in which relationships and sexuality education was dealt with. However, two outcomes were striking. Firstly, in many instances the arrangement made were, by the parents' own reporting, less than complete. Secondly, the participants in such interactions tended either to be both parents or mothers only.

**Table 5.3: Participation in Relationships/Sexuality Education in the Home**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Mother only	28.7
Father only	1.8
Same sex parents (boys with fathers, girls with mothers)	5.6
Both parents	58.1
Neither parent	3.4
Older brothers/sisters	3.1

## ***Principles of RSE Programme***

Parents were asked their views about the central principles that underpin the devising and implementation of the RSE programme. These included the nature of the role of the school in complementing that of the home, the importance of consultation, the importance of not having children rely on the media for information on sexual matters and the linking of sexuality education with attitudes and values. These principles were put to parents in the form of statements (sometimes in positive form and sometimes negative) and respondents were asked to indicate their agreement/disagreement with each one on a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

The results are shown in Table 5.4. It may be worth considering the main outcomes as they emerge from this table. Firstly as regards the role of the school in RSE, it can be seen that the overwhelming majority of parents took the view that the role of the school is to complement the work of the home in this regard. This is exemplified in the first item in Table 5.4 ('The role of the school is to complement the home with regard to relationships and sexuality education'). It can be seen that less than 2 per cent of the total sample disagreed with this statement. Furthermore, over half expressed strong agreement with the view. The same pattern is even more evident in another item on the same theme ('It is important that parents be consulted with regard to school programmes in relationships and sexuality education'). Less than 1 per cent of the respondents disagreed with this statement, while nearly three quarters expressed strong agreement. It is noteworthy that when a similar type of statement is phrased negatively, the parents tended to disagree, as might be expected. In response to the statement that 'Parents should not have any say in the materials and videos that are used in RSE', well over 90 per cent of the parents disagreed.

While it was the case that the respondents took a strong position on the need for partnership between parents and teachers, they did not take the view that individual parents should have a veto on what should happen in this area in school. This is demonstrated in the item 'If any one parent objects to RSE in school, then RSE should not happen regardless of the wishes of the majority'. As can be seen from Table 5.4, nearly 90 per cent of the respondents disagreed with this statement.

Table 5.4 contains a number of statements that reflect the principles on which the RSE programme is based. One of these is the need to have information that is age-appropriate. Almost the entire sample of parents agreed with this statement. A second important principle has to do with ensuring that RSE not only involves information but is linked with attitudes and values. Again almost all of the parents in the study agreed with this statement. Similarly, when confronted with the view that 'It is better to provide information about sex in a science class without further fuss', less than one tenth of the parents agreed with this statement while well over four fifths disagreed.

The results shown in Table 5.4 indicate that parents took the view that RSE is important in the school curriculum. This is shown in the responses to the statement that 'Schools should have no part to play in relationships and sexuality education'. Well over 90 per cent of the parents disagreed with this statement; only a small minority of over 3 per cent agreed with it. A similar pattern emerged with regard to the statement that 'A good education should not involve learning about relationships with the opposite sex'.

This idea about the importance of the role of the school is strengthened through an examination of other items that are concerned with the reasons why RSE is needed. In response to the statement that '... some features of modern life make it essential to have a relationships and sexuality programme in schools', 93 per cent agreed with this view while only a small minority disagreed. Similarly, over nine tenths of the respondents agreed with the statement that it is '... entirely inappropriate that children and young people should rely on the media for their information on sexual matters'.

It would seem that parents regarded RSE as being important enough to justify it being taught as a distinct part of the curriculum. Over 95 per cent of the respondents took the view that RSE was an important part of Social, Personal and Health Education, while just over 1 per cent disagreed with this view. The same general point can be seen in response to the item which suggested that RSE should be taught only in the religion class. Nearly 90 per cent of the sample of parents disagreed with this view.

### ***Conclusions on Parental Views on Principles***

A remarkably consistent picture emerges from the findings discussed above. Firstly, the parents took the view that schools and parents have complementary roles with regard to relationships and sexuality education, part of which involved consultation and partnership with parents in the development of the programme within schools. Secondly, while parents wanted consultation they did not consider that the objections of small minorities should result in the programme not being implemented. Thirdly, there was broad consensus that RSE should be age-appropriate and should be linked with attitudes and values. Finally, the respondents took the view that RSE was of such importance that it merited specific time in the time-table.

**Table 5.4: Parental Views on Underlying Principles of RSE Programme**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Hard to Say	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Percentage					
The role of the school is to complement the home with regard to relationships and sexuality education	51.6	45.3	1.3	0.9	0.9
It is important that parents be consulted with regard to school programmes in relationships and sexuality education	73.1	26.0	—	0.4	0.5
It is entirely inappropriate that children and young people should rely on the media (like TV, teenage magazines) for their information on sexual matters	75.3	15.2	6.3	2.7	0.4
Information regarding relationships and sexuality should always take into account the age of the child	76.2	21.1	1.3	0.9	0.4
Relationships and sexuality education should not simply involve information but should be linked with attitudes and values	73.1	23.3	2.2	1.3	—
Schools should have no part to play in relationships and sexuality education	2.2	1.3	3.1	38.1	55.2
It is important that relationships and sexuality education should enable young people to form values within a moral and spiritual framework	61.0	35.9	1.3	0.9	0.9
A good education should not involve learning about relationships with the opposite sex	4.5	2.7	3.1	36.3	53.3
Some features of modern life make it essential to have a relationships and sexuality programme in schools	48.0	44.8	4.0	2.2	0.8
Relationships and sexuality education are an important part of social, personal and health education	64.1	32.3	2.2	0.9	0.4
The development with parents of a school policy is important in the organisation of a relationships and sexuality programme	60.5	37.7	1.5	—	—

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Hard to Say	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Percentage</b>					
Parents should not have any say in the materials and videos that are used in RSE.	2.2	1.3	3.1	27.3	65.9
It is better to provide information about sex in a science class without further fuss	5.4	3.6	7.6	41.3	42.1
If any one parent objects to RSE in a school, then relationships and sexuality education should not happen, whatever the wishes of the majority	5.8	0.9	3.6	22.0	67.7
Relationships and sexuality education should only be taught in the religion class	2.2	4.0	5.8	35.4	52.9
A good education is all about success in exams and getting a good job	4.0	4.5	4.7	25.6	61.0

### **Perception of Planning and Consultative Process**

Parents were asked about the extent to which they were aware of the partnership approach involving teachers, management and parents as well as the Department of Education and Science. From Table 5.5 it can be seen that just under two fifths of the respondents said that they were 'very aware' of the partnership and consultation approach while nearly the same number were either 'somewhat aware' or 'unaware'. It is worth mentioning that this group of respondents were among those who might be expected to be especially aware of consultation, given that they had turned out specifically for a parents' meeting on the topic of RSE. This pattern of results could be taken to suggest that the level of awareness of consultation and partnership among parents in general may not have been very high.

**Table 5.5: Parents' Awareness of Planning and Consultation with Partners in Education**

Awareness	Percentage
Very aware	39.9
Quite aware	24.7
Somewhat aware	23.3
Unaware	12.1



The respondents were also asked about the appropriateness of the partnership approach for the development of a schools programme in relationships and sexuality education. As might be expected on the basis of the results in the last section, the respondents enthusiastically endorsed the partnership approach. The results (not shown in a table), indicated that just under 97 per cent of the parents were of the view that this approach was either 'very appropriate' or 'appropriate'. In contrast only a single parent took the view that this approach was 'inappropriate'.

It can be concluded that parents regard consultation as extremely important. In some cases, where national planning is involved, their awareness of what is happening in this regard may not be as great as desired.

### **The RSE Curriculum**

A full section of the questionnaire was devoted to parents' perception of the appropriateness of various topics for the RSE curriculum. These questions focused on the curriculum in the primary school, the Junior Cycle syllabus and the Senior Cycle syllabus.

With regard to the primary school syllabus, parents were asked about the importance of various topics that have been suggested in the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines for RSE. These were intended to reflect the broad range of aims and objectives of RSE and included 'building self-esteem', 'understanding moral influences on life-styles', 'dealing with peer pressure', and 'understanding about birth and new life'.

The results are shown in Table 5.6. They indicate that the vast majority of parents endorsed each and every topic listed. These included those topics that were concerned with social skills and personal development as well as those that had a focus on sexuality. For example, with regard to 'building self-esteem' and 'learning about feelings and emotions', close to 100 per cent of the respondents agreed that these topics were either of great importance or of some importance. Furthermore, the vast majority took the view that they were actually of great importance. In relation to the topic of 'dealing with peer pressure', again close to 100 per cent took the view that this topic was of great importance or of some importance. A broadly similar pattern was found with regard to 'health care including personal hygiene'. It is also of interest that 96 per cent of the respondents thought that 'understanding about birth and new life' was an important topic for the primary curriculum in RSE, while over 86 per cent took the same view regarding 'information on conception including an understanding of sexual intercourse'.

These results are remarkable in the extent to which there is agreement between the parents on the suitability of the various topics. Given the fact that the same pattern of agreement emerged among primary teachers, there is indeed a high level of consensus about what should be included in the RSE primary curriculum.

**Table 5.6: Parents' Perception of Importance of Topics for Primary School Curriculum in RSE**

	Great Importance	Some Importance	Little Importance	No Importance
	Percentage			
Building self-esteem	95.2	4.5	0.3	—
Understanding and appreciating family life	91.4	8.1	0.4	—
Developing an awareness of different family patterns	70.9	27.4	1.3	0.4
Learning about feelings and emotions	90.6	9.0	—	0.3
Developing skills to establish healthy relationships	89.2	9.0	1.5	0.2
Learning about RSE within a moral and spiritual framework	71.7	25.6	2.2	0.4
Understanding moral influences on lifestyles	74.9	23.8	1.2	0.1
Dealing with peer pressure	93.3	5.8	0.4	0.4
Dealing with media influences	77.6	20.2	1.3	0.9
Health care including personal hygiene	85.7	12.1	1.6	0.3
Improving skills of communication	85.2	11.7	2.6	0.6
Understanding about birth and new life	70.4	25.6	1.3	2.7
Information on conception including an understanding of sexual intercourse	55.6	30.6	6.9	6.8

Respondents were asked about the importance of various topics in the Junior Cycle RSE programme in the post-primary school. As in the case of the primary school, the topics identified were a sample of those that have been suggested in the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines. Among the topics were 'knowledge of sexual organs and their functions', 'an appreciation of hygiene associated with puberty', 'relationships skills such as communication, decision making and managing feelings', and 'information on and sensitivity to sexual orientation, i.e. being straight or gay'.

Table 5.7 shows the views of the parent respondents for these features. The results indicate that the overwhelming majority were of the view that all topics were important. These included topics with a direct relevance for sexuality as well as those pertaining to social and personal development. For example, 97 per cent of the parent respondents took the view that 'knowledge of the sexual organs and their function' was important – with the vast majority taking the view that this topic was of great importance. A very similar pattern was evident with regard to the 'understanding of fertility, conception, pregnancy and birth'. Close to 98 per cent of

the respondents thought that 'relationships skills such as communication, decision making and managing feelings' were important. Furthermore, over 70 per cent thought this particular topic was of 'great importance'. The results for the topic 'developing skills for building and maintaining self-esteem' were very similar, with nearly 99 per cent taking the view that this was important.

Only one topic was not endorsed to the same degree as these, but it has to be stressed that the overwhelming majority thought that it was an important topic. This had to do with 'information on and sensitivity to sexual orientation'. It can be seen that 85 per cent were of the view that this topic is of 'great importance' or of 'some importance'. Just less than 6 per cent took the view that this particular topic was of 'no importance'. It was the only topic listed that was regarded by even a small minority as not being important for the Junior Cycle curriculum. As in the case of the primary curriculum, there was a remarkable level of agreement among parents regarding the suitability of the various topics that are contained in the Junior Cycle curriculum. Given the support of teachers for these, it can be said that there is a high level of consensus regarding the syllabus.

**Table 5.7: Parents' Perception of Importance of Topics for Junior Cycle Curriculum in RSE**

	Great Importance	Some Importance	Little Importance	No Importance
	Percentage			
Knowledge of sexual organs and their functions	68.9	26.9	2.2	0.8
An understanding of fertility, conception, pregnancy and birth	70.4	24.6	4.0	0.9
An appreciation of hygiene associated with puberty	79.4	16.1	3.1	1.3
Relationships skills such as communication, decision making, and managing feelings	87.9	9.9	1.8	0.4
Awareness of the consequences of sexual activity	79.8	12.5	6.3	1.3
An awareness of sex-stereotyping and its influence on attitudes and behaviour of men and women	70.0	22.0	6.7	1.3
Information on and sensitivity to sexual orientation i.e. being 'straight' or 'gay'	54.3	31.8	8.1	5.8
Developing skills for staying safe	90.1	8.5	0.9	0.3
Developing skills for building and maintaining self-esteem	94.2	4.5	1.3	—
Awareness of roles and responsibilities in relationships and in families	83.0	16.1	0.9	—
Understanding of sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS	66.8	19.3	9.8	4.0

Respondents were asked about the extent to which they thought various topics were important in the Senior Cycle curriculum in RSE. Among the topics listed were those that were representative of the main areas that are suggested in the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines and included topics pertaining to interpersonal skills ('developing skills for resolving conflict'), personal development ('recognising the range of human feelings and ways to deal with these'), as well as topics with a specific focus on sexuality ('awareness and understanding of sexual orientation, i.e. being 'straight or gay').

The results are shown in Table 5.8. The pattern of results in this table indicate that, as in the case of the primary curriculum and the Junior Cycle curriculum, there was strong agreement that each and every topic proposed was indeed appropriate for the Senior Cycle. For example, there was 100 per cent agreement among the respondents that 'understanding fertility, pregnancy, and the development of the child in the womb' was an important topic in the Senior Cycle syllabus for RSE. Similarly, while other topics relating to sexuality elicited slightly less than 100 per cent agreement, the overwhelming majority of the respondents took the view that these areas were important. For example, over 96 per cent of the parent respondents were of the view that 'an understanding of the relationship between sexual practices and sexually transmitted diseases' was an important topic.

It is also clear that relatively more of the respondents took the view that 'awareness and understanding of sexual orientation' was an important topic at this stage, than was the case in the Junior Cycle. Over 95 per cent were of this view – a substantial increase over the corresponding figure for the Junior Cycle.

There was agreement that topics in social and personal development were of great importance for the RSE programme. For example, over 99 per cent of the parents were of the view that 'recognising the range of human feelings and ways to deal with these' was an important topic. Similarly, approximately the same proportion of respondents thought that 'developing skills for resolving conflict' was an important topic for the Senior Cycle syllabus.

The topic regarded by a minority as not being of great importance had to do with 'understanding sexual harassment and its various forms'. Again it must be stressed that nearly 84 per cent thought that this was an important topic for the Senior Cycle curriculum. However, in relative terms this was less than the other topics. We can only speculate on why this difference would have emerged. It may have been that some parents were of the view that this topic was less relevant to RSE than the other topics listed in the table.

**Table 5.8: Parents' Perception of Importance of Topics for the Senior Cycle Curriculum in RSE**

	Great Importance	Some Importance	Little Importance	No Importance
	Percentage			
Understanding the structure and function of sexual organs	84.4	14.3	1.3	—
Awareness of the importance and methods of family planning	81.2	15.2	1.8	1.8
Understanding of fertility, pregnancy and the development of the child in the womb	82.1	17.9	—	—
Recognising the range of human feelings and ways to deal with these	92.8	6.3	0.9	—
An understanding of the relationship between sexual practices and sexually transmitted diseases	81.2	15.2	2.6	1.0
Awareness and understanding of sexual orientation, i.e. being 'straight' or 'gay'	76.6	18.8	2.2	2.2
Understanding sexual harassment and its different forms	68.6	15.7	12.2	3.4
Skills for making choices about sexual activity	85.7	11.2	1.3	1.8
Awareness of rape and sexual abuse and identification of help agencies	87.9	10.8	1.3	—
Developing skills for resolving conflict	91.0	7.6	0.9	0.5
Understanding marriage as a loving commitment	86.1	11.7	2.2	—
Development of an awareness of the nature of love and loving relationships	92.4	7.2	0.4	—

### **Conclusions regarding Features of the RSE Curriculum**

The items regarding the RSE curriculum made up the longest and most demanding part of the parental questionnaire. However, the pattern of results emerging is very clear. Taken together, it can be seen that there was a strong endorsement by this sample of parents of the topics that have been proposed for the curriculum at primary level, as well as at the Junior and Senior Cycles. It is also clear that this agreement is not limited to any single feature of RSE but extends to all aspects of personal, social and sexuality components of the syllabus. Given the support of teachers for these same topics, it is evident that there is a broad consensus regarding the topics that are appropriate for the RSE programme in schools.

## Language for Sexuality

Three items on the parental questionnaire were concerned with teaching children the appropriate language for sexuality as well as accurate names for sexual organs. As in the case of several other topics, one of the items was reversed, i.e. the phrasing was opposite to another item which respondents had been asked about. The results are shown in Table 5.9.

From this table it can be seen that the vast majority of parents took the view that it was indeed correct that children should learn the accurate names for sexual organs and that language was perceived to play an important part in influencing attitudes to sexuality. In fact, over 90 per cent of parents thought that young children should learn the correct names for sexual organs in the primary school, while only just over 3 per cent disagreed with this view. When the item was 'reversed', the pattern was broadly similar ('Children in junior classes are much too young to learn the correct names for body parts') – any differences between the two items can be accounted for in terms of the fact that a classical finding in questionnaires is that there is usually more 'agreement' than 'disagreement'.

It is noteworthy that three quarters of the parents agreed with the view that slang language was 'disrespectful and hurtful', with only just over 6 per cent disagreeing with this view. There was quite a large 'hard to say' response (17 per cent on this item) – something which may be accounted for by the phrasing of the item ('disrespectful and hurtful').

It would seem that the views of parents on this topic are broadly in line with the outcomes of similar questions in the primary teachers' questionnaire. The language of sexuality is an important issue and there is a consensus that the correct names should be taught from the earliest stages of the RSE programme.

**Table 5.9: Parental Views of Children's Learning of Appropriate Language for Sexuality**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Hard to Say	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	Percentage				
It is important that young people learn the correct names for sexual organs in primary school	58.9	32.9	4.9	2.7	0.6
Slang language for sexuality is disrespectful and hurtful	44.9	31.8	17.0	5.8	0.4
Children in junior classes are much too young to learn the correct names of body parts	1.4	7.6	9.4	36.3	45.8

## Parent Information on RSE

Two features of parent information were examined in the questionnaire. The first had to do with the RSE parent information booklet while the second was the information meetings for parents pertaining to RSE. The results are considered in turn.

## Reaction to Parent Information Booklet on RSE

Respondents were asked if they had read the parent information booklet on RSE ('Going Forward Together'). Of the parents at the meetings, just over half (51.5 per cent) had read the booklet. Approximately one fifth (21 per cent) had heard of the booklet but not received it, while close to the same percentage (23 per cent) had not heard of the booklet. Of those who read the booklet, the majority (58 per cent) had obtained it from school, i.e. their child had brought it from school, and some (30 per cent) had received the book on the 'information night'.

Those who had read the booklet were asked to rate it with regard to various criteria including the information, being user-friendly and its relevance to RSE. The results are shown in Table 5.10. From this it can be seen that the vast majority of the parents rated the information booklet very highly under each of the headings. With regard to being relevant, user-friendly and easy to understand, it can be seen that well over 90 per cent of parents thought that the booklet was either 'very good' or 'good'.

**Table 5.10: Parents' Views on RSE Booklet**

	Very Good	Good	Not Sure	Not Good	Poor
	Percentage				
Good Information	47.2	48.0	2.9	0.6	1.3
Easy to understand	48.2	47.0	2.6	0.9	1.4
Relevant to RSE	46.2	49.1	1.8	1.1	1.7
User friendly	47.2	47.0	3.9	0.9	0.9

## ***Information Meeting for Parents***

The final part of the questionnaire was concerned with the information meeting for parents that they had attended, as part of the development of the RSE programme in their school. A first question concerned the various people who had attended this meeting. As can be seen from Table 5.11, these meetings tended to have representatives of all the relevant interests present including management, teachers, and outside speakers.

**Table 5.11: Attendance at Information Meeting for Parents**

<b>In attendance</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Member of School Management Board	95
School Principal	97
Teacher in school	99
Outside speaker	99

The respondents were also asked about their satisfaction with various features of that meeting for parents including the explanation of the RSE programme, understanding how parents are being involved in the development of school policy, and answering their questions about RSE. The results are shown in Table 5.12. These results indicate that the parents were satisfied with nearly all features of the RSE meeting. Nearly 95 per cent said that they were satisfied with the explanation of RSE as part of Social, Personal and Health Education. Somewhat less than this (90 per cent) expressed satisfaction with understanding how parents are being involved in the development of the programme. Similarly, about 93 per cent expressed satisfaction with the way in which their questions about RSE were answered.

There was only one feature of the information meetings with which a minority of parents expressed any dissatisfaction, viz., knowing about materials being used in RSE. More than two thirds of those attending the meeting were satisfied in this regard. However, just under one fifth expressed some dissatisfaction on this point. It may have been that the nature of such a meeting (large groups) made it difficult for parents to become as familiar as they would like to be with the materials involved.

It is worth stressing, again, that these answers come from a body of parents who were motivated and interested enough to come to a parent information meeting. However, certainly for those who came to the meeting, there was a great deal of satisfaction in having their questions answered and in getting an explanation of the rationale of RSE. As noted above about half of the parents had read the information booklet on RSE and almost all of those found it valuable.



**Table 5.12: Parents' Satisfaction with Various Features of the Information Meeting**

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Hard to Say	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Percentage					
Explanation of RSE as part of Social, Personal and Health Education	65.1	29.8	4.6	0.4	—
The explanation of the RSE programme	65.0	29.5	2.2	2.7	0.4
Understanding how parents are being involved in your school in the development of the programme	60.1	30.5	4.0	4.0	1.3
Knowing what will be taught in the RSE class	50.8	38.0	7.2	2.7	1.3
Answering my questions about RSE	58.0	34.7	4.0	1.8	1.3
Understanding how parents can be involved in RSE	53.7	35.5	6.3	2.7	1.8
The role of parents in drawing up school policy on RSE	58.2	30.0	4.9	4.0	2.7
Knowing about materials being used in RSE lessons	32.3	34.8	13.9	16.3	2.7

### **Conclusions on Parents' Views**

There was considerable variation between families in the way in which sexuality and relationships education was dealt with. In many instances the arrangements made for such education were less than complete. Parents took the view that school and home have complementary roles with regard to relationships and sexuality education, part of which involved consultation and partnership; this should not involve, however, small minorities having a veto in the implementation of the programme. There was a strong endorsement by this sample of parents of the topics in the curriculum at primary, as well as at Junior and Senior Cycles. This agreement was not limited to any single feature of RSE but extends to all aspects of personal, social and sexuality components of the syllabus. Finally, those parents who attended information meetings expressed satisfaction with the experience and the parents who read the information booklet found it valuable.

## **Chapter 6: Organisational Features of the RSE Programme**

This section of the report is concerned with the organisational dimension of the RSE programme. A particular focus will be on the role of the Education Centre Network which together with the RSE Training Support Service was responsible for the organisation of the training of the teachers as well as for managing other relevant features of the programme including policy seminars and parents' information meetings.

Because of the nature of the information being sought, it was thought that interviews would be the most appropriate mechanism for collecting this data. Between May and June 1999 interviews were conducted with six Directors of Education Centres throughout the country. The Centres selected were representative of the whole network and were identified following consultation with the relevant interests. An interview also took place with six trainers. As far as possible the RSE trainers were selected on the basis of a 'match' between Centres and trainers, i.e. individuals were identified on the basis that they had worked mainly from one of the selected centres.

The interviews, which normally took place in the relevant Education Centres, were open-ended, but particular attention was given to the following topics: (i) How was the in-service programme organised and how effectively did they perceive this organisation to be? (ii) What were the most valuable features of the RSE programme to the Centres? (iii) What major problems occurred in relation to the organisation? (iv) What were their experiences of the different components of the RSE introduction with particular reference to policy-seminars and parent information evenings? (v) How would they organise the programme differently, if it had to happen again?

These interviews generated a great deal of information, some of which is relevant to particular local and regional conditions, some of which is indicative of certain personalities and some which was relevant only to the year in which RSE training took place. The themes that are summarised below reflect matters that emerged in several interviews, themes that have a bearing on the broad questions of curricular change and in particular on the role of the Centres in future planning of such change.

### **Overview of Education Centres' Reactions**

The first point that emerged is that the organisation of the RSE in-service training together with the associated activities was the most demanding task that the Education Centres had ever encountered. This was true even for those which had been in existence for two decades. The demands were related largely to the sheer numbers involved, the variety and novelty of activities, and the sometimes controversial nature of RSE. Nevertheless, the organisation of the in-service seems to have been carried out remark-

ably smoothly. For example, there was not a single instance where a large number of teachers turned up at a venue without a trainer being present. The scale of the undertaking cannot be underestimated, especially where the task involved hundreds of small schools spread over a wide area and included catering arrangements, briefing of trainers, reimbursement for expenses, in addition to ensuring that the programme ran smoothly.

While acknowledging that the tasks were demanding, it is also true that the Centres developed a profile and involvement with schools that enhanced their status. This was especially the case in relation to schools and teachers with whom the Centres previously had little involvement. There was a sense in which the Centres acquired a centre-stage position which enhanced their reputation in schools.

### ***Factors Affecting Success***

It was apparent that the in-service programme enjoyed greater success in some areas than in others. This was something that was acknowledged by all of the Centres, even by those whose experience of RSE was not entirely happy. A great deal of attention was given during our interviews to the factors that helped the programme in cases where it was successful and to identifying the factors that caused difficulties.

The main factors as perceived by trainers and Directors of the Centres are considered here. Two factors were consistently put forward as being crucial in the effective running of the in-service programme. These were inter-related, viz., (i) the familiarity of the RSE trainer with the target area and (ii) the rapport between the trainer and the Education Centre. On balance the first of these was regarded by the Directors as possibly the more important. The point was made consistently during interviews that trainers' understanding of local conditions and attitudes was crucial to the success of the programme. Where difficulties emerged, these may on occasions have been due to a trainer being perceived as an 'outsider'. All the Directors favoured the idea of having trainers with local knowledge and with specific links to their own Centre.

At the same time, it should be stressed that trainers from areas outside their own 'catchment' area were frequently very successful. In the view of the Directors, this was often to do with the capacity of trainers to assimilate the information and briefing given to them. Whether this factor is as important as the Directors thought may be open to question. What is clear, however, is that the rapport between trainer and Directors was an important influence in the smooth running of the in-service programme.

How schools were clustered for the RSE training was considered to be important, especially by Directors. This factor was regarded as being of particular importance in rural areas. Directors did not think that there were strict guidelines that could be applied in how this should be done; rather it was something that needed local knowledge and intuition.

An incidental factor that seemed to have a significant influence on the smooth running of the in-service programme was the social/catering provision. Sometimes friction was caused by groups feeling that the location/catering for their seminars was not as good as in other areas.

In line with this latter point, it is worth noting that the areas of difficulty often had to do with minor matters, while relatively major issues were resolved with little difficulty. Two examples are worth mentioning. Firstly, it is interesting that the personal conviction of Directors regarding RSE seemed to have very little influence on how well the job was done. Normally they took the view that it was something that was required, regardless of their own views. A second example is the success with which trainers with primary and post-primary backgrounds worked with each other, despite the difference in the curricular traditions of the two systems.

### ***Support Features of RSE***

It seems that there was somewhat less uniformity for other features of the RSE programme (policy seminars, parent information sessions), than was the case with the in-service programme for teachers. For example, there was a particularly uneven picture between Centres with regard to the organisation of parental information sessions. Also, the attendance at policy seminars was generally poor, resulting on some occasions in seminars being cancelled.

In discussions with the Centres, it emerged that they did not see such features as being inherently as important as the in-service programme. There were also concerns about vociferous minorities creating difficulties at the parents' meetings. Some of the Centres also indicated that their local committees were not enthusiastic about such meetings.

### ***Education Centres: Central or Local Focus?***

The areas concerning the relationship between Centres and their local committees are of particular interest. The awareness here is indicative of the extent to which Centres saw themselves as largely serving their catchment area or as having a role in a national network. It is probably fair to say that both perceptions featured in the perspectives of the various Centres but that the relative emphasis was different from one to another.

An example of this difference in emphasis was to be found in the views of the Centres regarding the appointment of trainers. The view was expressed on a number of occasions that there would have been merit in having local trainers with some affiliation to the Education Centre.

## ***Experiences of Trainers***

A number of the themes emerging in interviews with the trainers are worth mentioning. Many of these are echoed in the discussions with the Directors of the Education Centres. In fact, there was a great deal of agreement between both groups on the various factors that contributed to the success/problems in the delivery of the in-service programme. As with the Education Centres, the trainers emphasised the importance of their familiarity with the schools, their knowledge of local conditions, and organisational smoothness. The trainers generally were also satisfied with the support services that had been provided, e.g. photocopying, overhead-projectors, etc.

The first striking feature of the trainers' experience was the sheer demand of the work. There were heavy physical demands as in travel, and there were also the heavy emotional demands of constantly meeting new groups and the uncertainty that this created. Particular mention was made of the requirement to drive long distances in winter and being away from home during weekdays. Such demands are not unusual in other work, but are quite novel with teachers who had been accustomed to exclusively classroom roles.

While the demands were very great, the trainers identified 'team-work' as their most important support element. Because the work usually involved working at least in pairs, the trainers were seldom without support. There is a vast body of evidence on the desirability of having such an arrangement to provide social support and the variety of ways in which it helps to deal with stresses. Certainly the team element was absolutely crucial in the successful management of the lives of the trainers.

The trainers did not have very clear expectations as to what the situation and experience of a trainer might be. While all of them had experience of in-service and many had vast experience of health education programmes, the combination of dealing specifically with RSE and with some teachers who were unsympathetic to in-service created uncertainties as to what would happen. Media reports and 'horror' stories did not help in this regard.

Overall the trainers did not have major criticisms of their training. Initially, because the nature of the experience of training was unpredictable to them, they did not know whether they were well-prepared or not. Looking back, they were satisfied with their training particularly with regard to the reflective, attitudinal, experiential features. They were less satisfied, however, with the skills features and were of the view that more effort should have been focused on such features.

In general, trainers expressed considerable satisfaction with their experience and seemed to have only one major misgiving, viz., their fear that the programme would not be implemented on a scale that was warranted by the effort that they themselves had expended on the training.

## **Chapter 7: Attitudes and Beliefs regarding RSE: School Type and Age Influences of Teachers**

In the description of the data emerging from the questionnaires, only the broad picture for each as a whole has been presented. It is possible also to provide a break-down for a variety of sub-groups within each sample, given the information available. Two matters are of particular interest. Firstly, what differences, if any, are associated with type of school, specifically whether the school is catering for boys only, girls only, or for both? Secondly, what differences are associated with age of teachers in relation to their views on RSE?

### **School Type**

The present data might be analysed in several ways with a view to examining differences associated with gender of teacher and/or students. Here the following differences are examined: (i) differences between types of school with regard to provision before the RSE programme was implemented, and (ii) differences between teachers in these schools regarding principles of RSE.

### **School Type and Provision before Introduction of RSE**

It will be recalled that primary teachers were asked to give a description of the provision for relationships and sexuality education prior to the formal introduction of RSE in their schools. The options ranged from 'a comprehensive relationship and sexuality programme' to 'no provision had been made'.

An analysis was carried out of the extent to which there were differences between schools catering for boys or girls only and those for both boys and girls. As can be seen from Table 7.1, there were quite substantial differences in the provision of a 'comprehensive relationship and sexuality programme in senior classes'; this was twice as likely to occur in girls' schools than in boys', with gender-mixed schools in between.

There were also major differences with regard to having guest speakers. It can be seen that this provision was more likely in mixed schools, next most likely in girls' and least likely in boys' schools. Given the perceived difficulty of dealing with all aspects of RSE with boys and girls in the same class, the greater use of the guest speaker in mixed schools is understandable.

However, the most significant difference is in relation to those schools in which no provision had been made for relationships and sexuality education, prior to the formal introduction of the RSE programme. It can be seen from the Table that 29 per cent of boys' schools were in this category, while this was true of substantially fewer girls' schools or mixed schools.

**Table 7.1: Arrangement in Different Types of School Prior to Introduction of Formal RSE (Primary Schools)**

Arrangements Prior to Formal RSE	Boys	Girls	Mixed
	Percentage		
A comprehensive relationships and sexuality programme for all classes	—	2	1
A comprehensive relationship and sexuality programme for students in senior classes	7	14	11
Some teachers were teaching a sexuality/sex education programme	6	10	11
Senior classes were given talks by guest speakers on some aspects of sex education	30	36	40
The school had planned a programme but this had not been implemented	5	2	3
No aspect of sex/sexuality education had been implemented in the school	29	20	19
Other situation	23	16	15

It will be recalled that the parallel question was somewhat different in the post-primary questionnaire, since it focused on each year. An analysis was carried out on the pattern of provision for each type of school for each year. Differences emerged which are illustrated by reference to first and third year. (Rather similar differences, but somewhat less pronounced emerged for the other four years.)

As shown in Chapter 5, about one quarter of the schools seemed not to have any specific provision in first year prior to the formal introduction of RSE. It can be seen from Table 7.2 that this tended to be rather more the case for boys' schools than for girls', with over 31 per cent of boys' schools having no provision while this was true of 25 per cent of girls' schools and slightly less than this for schools catering for both boys and girls.

Differences also emerged with regard to those schools which had made prior provision for relationships and sexuality education. In particular, in first year in boys' schools, there was a somewhat greater tendency to have 'visiting specialist teachers' to give classes than was the case in other schools. There were however, no differences between types of schools with regard to the percentage devoting a 'block of time' to this area. The biggest differences were with respect to having regular classes (the last two categories). These latter arrangements were found in just over 33 per cent of boys' schools but in about 44 per cent of girls' school and in schools catering for both boys and girls.

It can also be seen in Table 7.2 that the picture emerging from third year is rather similar to that for first year. In over 30 per cent of boys' schools, there was no provision for relationships and sexuality education prior to the formal introduction of the RSE programme, while this was true in only just over 20 per cent of girls' schools and those catering for boys and girls. There was little difference between the types of school in the numbers having visiting specialist teachers giving classes, but relatively more boys' schools devoted a 'block of time' to relevant topics. As in the case of first years, the biggest difference was found in relation to the most consistent provision, viz., regular classes (either on a stand-alone basis or within another subject). This was the arrangement in 47 per cent of boys' schools, but occurred in girls' and mixed schools over 60 per cent of the time.

### ***Conclusions regarding Differences in Provision***

The picture emerging from primary schools and from post-primary schools is remarkably consistent with regard to the differences in provision, before the formal introduction of the RSE programme. The evidence indicates that the tendency was for a greater percentage of schools to have no provision, and a less comprehensive programme in those schools in which some provision was made.



**Table 7.2: Provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education before Introduction of Formal RSE Programme in Various Types of Post-primary Schools**

	No provision	Visiting specialist gave classes	Block of time on topics	Regular classes consistently within another subject	Regular classes on a 'stand-alone' basis
	Percentage				
<b>First year</b>					
Boys' Schools	31.2	23.0	12.1	22.3	11.4
Girls' Schools	25.1	17.0	12.9	29.4	15.6
Mixed Schools	23.9	18.0	12.2	29.0	16.3
<b>Third year</b>					
Boys' Schools	30.5	8.4	14.1	37.4	9.6
Girls' Schools	20.4	7.5	10.2	45.2	16.7
Mixed Schools	21.2	7.0	10.6	44.6	16.6

### ***Views of Teachers on RSE Principles in Different School Types***

In order to see whether the differences between types of schools might be likely to be changed, it is worthwhile knowing whether the fundamental views of teachers in the various types of schools are somehow in correspondence with the difference in provision prior to the introduction of the RSE programme. With this in mind, a comparison was made between the views of teachers in these different types of schools with regard to their views on principles and fundamental aspects of RSE.

The results for primary teachers for five such principles are shown in Table 7.3. From this it can be seen that there were no differences between teachers in boys', girls' and mixed schools. In all cases the differences were minute and did not show any consistent picture. An analysis of the other statements in the questionnaire (not shown here), revealed a similar pattern to that shown above, viz., no differences between teachers in boys', girls' or schools catering for both boys and girls.

**Table 7.3: Principles of Relationships and Sexuality Education: Responses from Teachers in Different Types of School**

	Agree			Hard to Say			Disagree		
	Boys	Girls	Mixed	Boys	Girls	Mixed	Boys	Girls	Mixed
	Percentage								
The role of the school is to complement the home with regard to relationships and sexuality education	92	91	93	6	8	7	2	1	—
It is entirely inappropriate that children should rely on the media for their information on sexual matters	96	95	97	3	1	2	1	4	1
Schools should have no part to play in relationships and sexuality education	2	2	2	7	8	9	91	90	89
Some features of contemporary life make it essential to have a relationships and sexuality programme in schools	92	93	91	5	6	8	3	1	1
If one parent objects to RSE in a school, then relationships and sexuality education should not happen, whatever the wishes of the majority	1	—	2	4	2	2	95	98	94

A similar analysis was carried for the sample of post-primary teachers. The results of this breakdown are shown in Table 7.4. As in the case of the earlier table, there are no significant differences associated with school type. While the analysis shown in Table 7.4 is focused on five principles, an analysis of the other principles (not shown here) indicated a similar pattern, viz., no substantial differences.

**Table 7.4: Needs and Principles of Relationships and Sexuality Education (Post-primary teachers)**

	Agree			Hard to Say			Disagree		
	Boys	Girls	Mixed	Boys	Girls	Mixed	Boys	Girls	Mixed
	Percentage								
The role of the school is to complement the home with regard to relationships and sexuality education	94.4	96.0	94.8	4.1	3.2	4.9	1.5	0.8	0.3
It is entirely inappropriate that young people should rely on the media for their information on sexual matters	86.3	88.0	86.8	2.0	1.6	1.8	11.7	10.4	11.6
Some features of contemporary life make it essential to have a relationships and sexuality programme in schools	96.0	95.4	96.7	3.5	2.5	3.0	0.5	2.0	0.3
Schools should have no part to play in relationships and sexuality education	3.3	3.6	3.4	—	—	—	96.7	96.4	96.6
If one parent objects to RSE in a school, then relationships and sexuality education should not happen, whatever the wishes of the majority	1.4	1.2	1.7	3.0	3.2	2.8	95.6	95.4	95.5

### **Conclusions regarding Differences associated with School Type**

The results considered in this section indicate that there were differences in both primary and post-primary schools regarding the provision of relationships and sexuality education prior to the formal introduction of RSE. Specifically, there was a greater tendency to have less provision in boys' schools than in schools catering for girls, or for boys and girls. Girls' and mixed schools also tended to have more comprehensive programmes than did boys' schools.

An examination of the attitudes of the teachers in these different types of school did not show that there were major differences in their views regarding the value or importance of RSE. This in turn suggests that the differences between types of school is not inevitable but has to do with traditions and beliefs about the differing needs of boys and girls and even with views about the nature of sexuality in the case of boys and girls. It is also of interest to notice the rather lower involvement of fathers with sexuality education in the home, as revealed in the parental survey.

## ***Teachers' Age-Group and Attitudes/Beliefs***

An important question concerns the extent to which there are differences associated with experience/age-group of teachers with regard to RSE. Is it the case that more experienced/older teachers have views that are different from that of their younger colleagues?

Because older teachers were brought up when attitudes towards sexuality were less liberal, it might be expected that they would have difficulties with some of the proposed topics in the RSE curriculum. On the other hand, the experience of older teachers may lead them to become convinced of the value of a programme like RSE for dealing with the variety of situations that young people are likely to have to deal with.

This issue was examined by dividing teachers into three groups on the basis of the years of experience which they reported on the questionnaire. In turn a breakdown was made for each of these age-groups with regard to the importance that they attached to each of several topics that have been proposed for the primary curriculum in RSE. The results for primary teachers are shown in Table 7.5. From this it can be seen that there are no systematic differences between the age-groups. In fact, for each of the topics the differences between the age-groups are very small. It is also of interest that the lack of differences extends to the full range of topics that are central to the RSE programme, i.e. those that are concerned with personal development, those having to do with relationships, and those that focus on sexuality.

**Table 7.5: Importance of Various Features in RSE Curriculum**

	Great Importance			Some Importance			Little/No Importance		
	Teaching Experience (years)								
	<10	10-20	≥20 yrs	<10	10-20	≥20	<10	10-20	≥20
	Percentage								
Developing self-awareness	83	86	85	16	13	15	1	1	—
Understanding how sexuality is an important part of self-identity	52	55	55	43	41	40	5	4	7
Developing an awareness of different family patterns	49	51	48	47	45	55	4	4	7
Developing skills to establish healthy relationships	93	91	92	7	8	8	—	1	—
Understanding moral influences on life-styles	58	61	59	38	36	36	4	2	5
Understanding influences on life-styles and decision-making	59	60	59	36	37	38	5	3	3
Improving skills of communication	86	88	87	12	10	10	2	2	3
Understanding about birth and new life	60	64	61	34	33	36	6	3	3
Information on sexual intercourse	22	24	21	56	58	56	22	18	22

A similar analysis was carried out with regard to the suitability and importance of a selection of topics that have been proposed for the RSE curriculum at the Junior Cycle level. The results are shown in Table 7.6. From this it can be seen that the differences between the age-groups were not substantially or statistically significant with regard to their views on the importance of the various topics. This was the case with the full range of topics including those on personal development, self-esteem and sexuality as well as relationship skills.

**Table 7.6: Perceived Importance of Topics in Junior Cycle in Post-primary Schools**

	Great Importance			Some Importance			Little/No Importance		
	Teaching Experience (years)								
	<10	10-20	>20 yrs	<10	10-20	>20	<10	10-20	>20
	Percentage								
Awareness of change in the human life cycle	81	79	79	18	17	19	1	4	2
Knowledge of sexual organs and their functions	72	74	70	28	26	30	—	—	—
An understanding of fertility, conception, pregnancy and birth	75	74	73	21	22	24	4	4	3
An appreciation of hygiene associated with puberty	84	86	84	16	14	16	—	—	—
An awareness of the conflicting feelings and emotions characteristic of adolescence	85	83	87	15	17	13	—	—	—
Awareness of the implications of sexual activity	81	79	80	19	21	20	—	—	—
An awareness of stereotyping and its influence on attitudes and behaviour	56	54	58	40	38	39	4	8	3
Information on and sensitivity to sexual orientation	28	27	29	66	67	65	6	6	6
Developing skills for personal safety	82	85	84	18	15	16	—	—	—
Developing skills for building and maintaining self-esteem	98	97	99	2	3	1	—	—	—
Awareness of the qualities valued in friendship and how friendship patterns change	82	84	81	16	15	17	2	1	2
Awareness of roles and responsibilities in relationships and in families	78	80	77	22	20	23	—	—	—

## ***Conclusions regarding Effects of Age/Experience***

A number of similar analyses of the data were made and, for each one, there was no evidence of systematic difference associated with age/experience. For example, there was no indication that teachers with differing years of experiences responded differently to the in-service training programme. Whether considered in terms of satisfaction with this programme or views on which aspects were most satisfactory, no substantial differences were found.

This pattern (or absence of a pattern) may be somewhat surprising, since it might have been expected that teachers who were brought up and trained in a different era might be expected to have somewhat more resistance to an innovative programme. On the other hand, as noted above, it may have been the case that teachers with long experience of the classroom (and indeed of life) may have become more aware of the needs of young people with regard to these features of their lives.

It is also of interest that the interviews with trainers tend to be broadly consistent with these findings. A number of trainers made the point that the most supportive and helpful comments during the training came from relatively older teachers.

## **Chapter 8: Implementation of RSE in Schools**

In April 2000, a questionnaire on the implementation of the RSE programme was sent to all primary and post-primary schools. This followed a similar questionnaire that had been sent in 1999. The questionnaire was concerned with: (i) drafting a policy document in the schools, (ii) establishing a policy committee, (iii) distributing information booklets to parents, (iv) the extent to which the RSE programme was being implemented in schools, and (v) further supports that would help with implementation.

Since this information is being analysed and presented in a separate document, only the major highlights of the 1999 and 2000 surveys will be presented here.

In 1999, a total of 2,096 questionnaires were returned from primary schools, giving a response rate of 66.3 per cent, while the corresponding figure for post-primary schools was 490 schools (response rate of 64.2 per cent). In 2000, 2054 questionnaires were returned from primary schools (65.7 per cent) and 357 were returned from post-primary schools (45.7 per cent). These response rates can be regarded as satisfactory given the time-constraints (especially in the 2000 survey).

### ***Policy Development and Consultation***

Table 8.1 shows the situation with regard to the development of an RSE policy document in primary schools, for the years 1999 and 2000. From this table it can be seen that in 1999 about two thirds of schools had established a policy committee but only about one fifth of these had actually finalised a policy document. It is evident that between 1999 and 2000 there have been increases with respect to all features of policy development. This was especially the case in relation to drafting the policy document; twice as many schools had drafted such a document in 2000, compared to 1999.



**Table 8.1: Situation on Policy Development for RSE in Primary Schools**

	Percentage of Schools	
	1999	2000
Established policy committee	66.7	73.7
Drafted policy document	28.8	57.9
Consulted community	35.5	57.3
Finalised policy document	12.4	40.6
Circulated policy document	10.4	35.5

Table 8.2 shows the corresponding information for post-primary schools. This table shows that in 1999 about two thirds of post-primary schools had established a policy committee and somewhat less than half of these had finalised a policy document. By the year 2000, nearly three quarters of the schools had established a policy committee and the vast majority of these had drafted a policy document. There were substantial increases in the percentage who had finalised and circulated the RSE policy document.

Despite the increase in the percentage indicating that they were drafting/completing the document, there is still a substantial number of schools where apparently little has happened. It is a particular cause of concern that an RSE policy committee seems not to have been established in about one quarter of schools.

**Table 8.2: Situation on Policy Development for RSE in Post-primary Schools**

	Percentage of Schools	
	1999	2000
Established policy committee	67.8	72.2
Drafted policy document	45.5	66.2
Consulted community	51.4	65.6
Finalised policy document	29.0	49.9
Circulated policy document	20.0	44.7

## Information Booklet

Schools were asked whether parents had received copies of the RSE parent information booklet. Results for both primary and post-primary schools are shown in Table 8.3. From this it can be seen that in 1999 more than two thirds of schools had distributed the RSE information booklets to parents. In the year 2000, the figure was slightly greater for primary schools, while in the case of post-primary schools almost exactly the same percentage was found as in 1999.

**Table 8.3: Distribution of Information Booklets to Parents**

	Percentage of Schools	
	1999	2000
Parents received information booklets (primary schools)	68.5	72.6
Parents received information booklets (post-primary schools)	68.0	66.2

## Implementation of School Programme

Schools were asked a series of questions regarding the actual implementation of the RSE programme. These ranged from whether the school had drawn up a programme to whether it was being implemented in all or some classes and whether it was intended to implement the programme during the coming year.

The results of these questions for primary schools are displayed in Table 8.4. From this, it can be seen that in 1999 one sixth of schools had drawn up a programme, while somewhat less than this number were implementing it. By 2000, the situation had improved substantially. It can be seen that one third of schools had drawn up a programme and the programme was being implemented in approximately the same percentage of schools (either in some or all classes). It is also noteworthy that the percentage intending to implement the programme next year is much higher than the percentage currently implementing it.

**Table 8.4: Implementation of RSE Programme in Primary Schools**

	Percentage of Schools	
	1999	2000
Drawn up programme	16.3	36.0
Made programme available to parents	8.8	23.4
Implemented programme in all classes	13.8	19.0
Implemented programme in some classes	10.3	20.9
Intend to implement in all classes next year	<i>not asked</i>	58.6
Intend to implement in some classes next year	<i>not asked</i>	18.6

The corresponding information regarding implementation of the RSE programme in post-primary schools is shown in Table 8.5. This table shows that in 1999, just over half of the post-primary schools had drawn up a programme, and somewhat less than this were implementing the programme in their schools. In 2000, it is evident that there is an increase in the percentage who have drawn up a programme and also an increase in the number who have made this available to parents. However, the biggest increase is in the percentage of schools who report that they are implementing the programme in all classes. In 1999, less than 30 per cent of schools indicated that they were implementing RSE in all classes but in 2000 the figure is substantially greater (42.7 per cent). The intentions with regard to the following year remain broadly the same, and somewhat higher than is the case with current implementation.

**Table 8.5: Implementation of RSE Programme in Post-primary Schools**

	Percentage of Schools	
	1999	2000
Drawn up a programme	52.9	63.6
Made programme available to parents	32.7	42.7
Implemented programme in all classes	29.8	41.5
Implemented programme in some classes	37.6	39.5
Intend to implement in all classes next year	34.9	42.1
Intend to implement in some classes next year	42.9	42.1

### **Further Supports**

Schools were asked about further supports that would help implement the RSE programme in their schools. Since these were ranked by schools, they are shown in rank order (first choice) in Table 8.6, for primary schools. Overall, it can be said that the further supports requested were similar to those originally provided at the introduction of RSE. This response is understandable given the schools' lack of experience in dealing with initiatives of this sort. However, it is interesting that broadly the same pattern emerged in both years, indicating the need for support especially in connection with the organisation of events and meetings at school level.

**Table 8.6: Rank Order of Further Supports for RSE Implementation in Primary Schools**

	Percentage of Schools	
	1999	2000
Policy development seminar	1	4
School-based support meeting	2	1
Parent information seminar	3	2
Further copies of RSE resource materials	4	5
RSE/SPHE resource materials available through Education Centres	5	6
Support meetings for school RSE co-ordinators	6	7
Optional training in RSE/SPHE for teachers	7	3

The corresponding information for post-primary schools is shown in Table 8.7. From this it can be seen that there was a good deal of agreement in the two years on the main support services required. In particular, two features were regarded as being most needed, i.e. training for teachers and support for RSE co-ordinators. It should be noted that both of these are of immediate relevance to schools.

**Table 8.7: Rank Order of Further Supports for RSE Implementation in Post-primary Schools**

	Percentage of Schools	
	1999	2000
Optional training in RSE/SPHE for teachers	1	1
Support meeting for school RSE co-ordinators	2	2
Whole-school staff information seminar	6	3
Further copies of RSE resource materials	3	4
Policy development seminar	4	5
Availability of RSE/SPHE materials through Education Centres	5	6
Further parent information seminars (clustered schools)	7	7

### ***Conclusions on Implementation***

A number of conclusions are warranted, based on the evidence presented in this chapter. The vast majority of schools have established a policy committee and in most of these schools a policy document has now been drafted. In most schools, both primary and post-primary, the information booklet has been circulated to parents.

In primary schools, a relatively small number of schools were implementing the programme in 1999 but this number had increased in the year 2000. A large percentage of schools have still not implemented the programme but the percentage intending to do so, next year, is high. With regard to post-primary schools, relatively more of these were implementing the RSE programme either in all classes or in some classes.

Schools saw a need for further supports, especially at the level of organising events in schools.

The indications are therefore that schools have now begun to introduce the programme. The extent to which this process continues will depend on a number of factors, particularly the support of management and the extent to which RSE becomes an intrinsic part of Social, Personal and Health Education. As was clear from earlier chapters there is strong support among both parents and teachers for the principles on which the RSE programme is devised, as well as for the curricular topics.

However, there are also grounds for concern. It is clear, from earlier chapters, that the 'overcrowded' curriculum is a major difficulty in the implementation of RSE. The programme will need continued support and monitoring if it is to become an established, integral part of the curriculum.

## **Chapter 9: General Conclusions**

This last chapter of the report summarises the main conclusions of the research. In interpreting these conclusions attention should be given to the methodology of the research as described in the relevant chapters of the report.

A major conclusion of the present study is that there was a need for a relationships and sexuality programme in schools. This is borne out by the information that is available on the provision for such education before the formal introduction of RSE. It is apparent that in both schools and homes, relationships and sexuality education was not adequately catered for. In over one quarter of schools (both primary and post-primary), there was no programme of any kind in the domain of relationships and sexuality education. Furthermore, what could be described as a comprehensive programme was found in only a minority of schools. With regard to provision for such education in homes, it emerged that only about two fifths of the parents in the sample said that all aspects of relationships and sexuality education were dealt with.

In line with the perceived need for a programme, there was agreement among teachers and parents regarding the key principles on which the RSE programme is based. These included the nature of the role of the school in complementing that of the home, the importance of consultation, the importance of not having children rely on the media for information on sexual matters, and the linking of relationships and sexuality education with attitudes and values. For example, on the question of RSE being an important part of education, 98 per cent of the teacher samples, together with 95 per cent of parents, took the view that this was the case. Another important question concerns minorities (particularly the objections of even one parent). In this regard, 96 per cent of the teacher samples and 90 per cent of parents expressed the belief that the views of the majority of people should be most influential in decisions on implementing the programme.

There was agreement among parents and teachers regarding the importance of the topics that are included in the NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines for RSE. For example, over 95 per cent of teachers at primary level and a similar percentage of parents thought that 'self-esteem', 'understanding different family patterns', 'influences on lifestyle', 'understanding birth and new life', and 'skills of communication' were important topics for the RSE curriculum in primary school. With regard to the RSE curriculum for the Junior Cycle, it emerged that over 90 per cent of post-primary teachers and parents were in agreement that 'knowledge of sexual organs and their functions', 'understanding fertility and conception', and 'understanding the consequences of sexual activity' were important topics for the curriculum. There was also agreement on the curricular topics that should be central to the Senior Cycle RSE programme. It is especially important to stress that the approach taken in the programme was to deal with sexuality in the context of relationships, attitudes, and values. This approach was strongly endorsed by parents and teachers.



Both teachers and parents are in agreement on the importance of children learning the correct names for sexual organs in primary school. In the questionnaire for primary teachers and for parents, there was a series of questions concerning teaching children the appropriate language for sexuality as well as accurate names of sexual organs. These questions were asked because it is a fundamental aim of the RSE programme that children should be able to communicate confidently about themselves, their sexuality, and their relationships. Furthermore, in excess of three quarters of the teachers and the parents took the view that slang language was disrespectful of sexuality. With regard to in-service training there was a high level of satisfaction with several features of training including the explanation of the aims of the RSE programme as well as the explanation of the RSE Curriculum and Guidelines. Furthermore, the majority of the teachers were also satisfied with experiential aspects of the training including that of helping them to discuss sensitive issues without embarrassment. Teachers' satisfaction with the skills acquired for teaching RSE at post-primary level was substantially higher than at primary level. There may be a relatively simple explanation for this in as much as all primary teachers were involved while in the case of post-primary teachers, only a small number from each school were involved. In addition, the training at post-primary level was somewhat longer, thus allowing a more comprehensive treatment of the issues involved.

There were differences at both primary and post-primary levels regarding the provision of relationships and sexuality education prior to the formal introduction of RSE. Specifically, there was a greater tendency to have less provision in boys' schools than in schools catering for girls, or for boys and girls. Girls' and mixed schools also tended to have more comprehensive programmes than did boys' schools. However, it is interesting that when an analysis was made of the age/experience of teachers, no major differences emerged between age-groups with regard to their views on attitudes and beliefs relevant to RSE.

The surveys of RSE implementation carried out in 1999 and in May 2000 indicate that while the programme is being implemented in many schools, a substantial number of schools still require support. It is clear that the vast majority of schools have begun the implementation of RSE in the sense that they have established a policy committee and begun the drafting of a policy document. It is also evident that a much smaller percentage of schools are currently implementing the programme in all classes. The implementation of the programme has progressed relatively quickly in post-primary schools in the sense that relatively more schools at this level are implementing the programme in classrooms. There has been a major increase in all the indicators of implementation both at primary and post-primary levels between 1999 and 2000.

Finally, there are several grounds for believing that more schools will fully implement the programme over the next few years. As noted above, there is strong support among both parents and teachers for the principles on which the RSE programme has been devised as well as for the proposed curricular topics at both primary and post-primary levels. Furthermore, the basis on which teachers and parents made judgements about RSE related to educational criteria rather than to any fixed position on the inherent value of

the programme. As well as this, in the revision of the primary curriculum and the developments of the curriculum at Junior Cycle, RSE is part of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and thus becomes part of the general educational provision for children and young people.

However, there are also grounds for concern. It is noteworthy that the teachers overwhelmingly identified the 'overcrowded curriculum' as the main difficulty in the actual implementation of RSE. Thus, it will be crucial in the implementation of the revised curriculum in primary schools and the curricular developments at post-primary level that RSE receives the necessary attention. The role of the Principal has been identified as crucial in this regard. It is worth re-stating that the programme is only now becoming firmly established in schools. There has been a major increase in the number of schools implementing the programme between 1999 and 2000. In order to ensure that this trend continues, RSE will require careful monitoring and support as is the case with any curricular innovation.

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# NOTES

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## ***Relationships and Sexuality Education***

Relationships and Sexuality Education was first introduced into primary and post-primary schools in 1995. It was based on the the recommendations of the Expert Advisory Group on RSE and the curriculum and guidelines drawn up by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and approved by the Minister for Education. The training programme for teachers, agreed by the RSE Implementation Group, representative of the Partners in Education, took place between 1996 and 1998. Development and implementation of the curriculum, in consultation and collaboration with the NCCA took place shortly thereafter. This evaluation report presents the views of parents and teachers on the RSE programme and their experience of information seminars and inservice teacher training. Up to date information on the implementation of RSE in schools for the years 1999-2000 is included.

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