

Implementing Sexuality Education in Irish Schools: recommendations from research

Policy pathways to promote sexuality education implementation in schools

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

Clear national leadership for RSE is essential. A lead is required for RSE design, implementation and evaluation within the overall implementation system.

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

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

What is the issue?

The need to provide adequate information through sex education for adolescents is well-documented.¹⁻⁹ Although young people learn about sexuality and sexual health from numerous sources, schools play a fundamental role⁸. Sex education programmes that are delivered as intended have improved outcomes in comparison to those that do not remain faithful to the original content, design, or delivery techniques.¹⁰⁻¹² There are many implementation challenges in schools and understanding what comprises effective implementation of such programmes is a neglected research area.^{13,14}

In an Irish context, the implementation of the statutory sexuality education programme delivered in post-primary schools has been problematic.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Previous research on Irish RSE has highlighted gaps in our understanding of the underlying reasons for success or failure.^{15,16} Evidence on the relationship between professional preparation and teaching outcomes is scarce,¹⁸ particularly in an Irish context.¹⁵

Why is this issue important?

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

What did this research explore?

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

What were the main findings?

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

What are the implications?

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

Key policy recommendations

1. There is a need for leadership and support during programme development, teacher training and school implementation.
2. This study has re-emphasised the importance of context and the complexity arising from programme delivery in schools. These need to be considered at the very early stages of programme design and the pre-planning implementation stages.
3. Reviewing RSE should not only lead to agreed conceptual underpinnings or a new vision of RSE but must be translated into practice in a meaningful and evidence-based way.
4. The design and development of any new RSE programme must be based on the evidence and tailored to an Irish context. A clear, implementable, relevant, and measurable programme is needed. Existing evidence suggests that it is easier to develop a new programme than to try and change a programme in its sustainability phase.²⁰
5. The introduction of national teacher preparations standards for sex education must be seriously considered.^{21,22}
6. Teacher training should not be the only strategy for equipping teachers with the tools necessary for effective implementation. Adequate policy which plans, updates, supports, and monitors RSE in a purposeful way is required.
7. Clear national leadership for RSE is essential. The vital role that the Department or organisation responsible for RSE design, implementation, and evaluation can have in the overall implementation system is clear.
8. There is a need for improved links between national structures and local educational environments, ensuring that there is not overly top-down process for school-based sexuality education which do not work in localised contexts.
9. The development of a national coordinating committee for school-based sex education, which could operate as a policy lead, a key driver of both local and national level project training and a support centre for schools and teachers is recommended. This committee should make decisions based on the evidence base and best available practice and should actively include input from those working in relevant government agencies and NGOs, relevant PDST and HSE team(s), professional organisations within the teaching and health professions, sexual health promoters, and researchers, as well as family, youth and community advocacy groups. Possible functions for a national leadership co-ordinating structure are as follows:
 - Strengthen relations between education and health for school sex education
 - Provide adequate training, technical assistance and ongoing support to ensure that school-based sexuality education is implemented and sustained with high quality
 - Evaluate and monitor the progress of RSE implementation
 - Provide updated policy guidelines and advice to schools,²³ including:
 - Appropriate theoretical frameworks and suitable approaches
 - Specific approaches to including the broader school community
 - Recommended processes for planning, implementation and evaluation
 - Evaluation of the role of groups who aim to promote autonomy for schools

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