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

Realising Optimal Sexual Health and Wellbeing Across the Lifespan

Findings from the TEACH-RSE Research Project

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Executive Summary

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

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

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

Key Findings

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

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

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

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

iv)   Qualitative interview study with Initial Teacher Educators

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

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

- There is a need for system-wide, research-informed, and systematically reviewed teacher professional learning and development standards for RSE provision in ITE.

- Teacher professional learning and development for RSE should be provided as a continuum with a model of core plus elective/subject specialism at ITE and further, specialist teacher professional learning and development programmes post-ITE.

- RSE provision in ITE should be conceptualised as holistic, comprehensive, inclusive, rights-based and developmental.

- At ITE programme level, adopting a multi-dimensional approach, RSE provision should address student teachers' content knowledge of, pedagogical skills in, and attitudinal dispositions toward RSE provision ensuring a clear SPHE/RSE pathway for graduate teachers.

- A system-wide, collaborative, integrated approach should be taken nationally to RSE provision including inter-departmental, inter-agency and across and within ITE programmes.

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

Section 8:

TEACH-RSE Recommendations

The creation of an enabling and supportive environment for RSE at ITE warrants system-wide leadership in relation to RSE provision in ITE, to ensure that primary and post-primary teacher graduates are more confident and competent in their roles as providers of high-quality, comprehensive, inclusive RSE to children and young people in our 21st-century classrooms. The overall aims of the TEACH-RSE Recommendations are to offer an evidence-based, stakeholder-informed framework for the optimal embedding of RSE within ITE, as part of the continuum of teacher professional learning and development. The TEACH-RSE research findings provide an evidence base for progressive policy and practice developments in relation to RSE provision in ITE. The development of TEACH-RSE Recommendations offers a framework for the direction of systemic change in teacher professional learning and development in RSE at ITE needed to meet the national strategic objectives and global sustainable development goals of lifelong optimal sexual health and wellbeing for all children and young people in Ireland, today and into the future.

TEACH-RSE RECOMMENDATIONS

**Teacher professional learning and development standards for RSE provision in ITE:
System-wide, research-informed and systematically reviewed**

- Collaborative development of teacher professional learning and development standards, and associated system-wide structural indicators, for the enhancement of RSE provision in ITE.

- Systematic, periodic review of RSE provision at ITE, aligned with system-wide structural indicators, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, and in accordance with the Teaching Council *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* (2020) and *Procedures for the Professional Accreditation of Programmes of ITE* (2021).

- Systematic, periodic review of the standards for RSE provision in ITE to ensure they remain informed by research and evidence-based developments in the field.

**Continuum of teacher professional learning and development for RSE:
Model of core plus elective/subject specialism at ITE and further, specialist teacher professional learning and development programmes post-ITE.**

- RSE to be provided as a mandatory/core component for student teachers in primary and post-primary ITE aligned with national policy priorities and international standards for sexuality education (WHO, 2010, 2017).

- RSE elective/subject specialism options to be offered to student teachers in primary and post-primary ITE, in addition to mandatory/core input in RSE.

- Development of accredited SPHE/RSE qualifications, post-ITE, aligned with models of good practice in respect of teacher graduate studies and the Teaching Council (2016) *Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning.*

- Adoption of a continuum approach to RSE provision across all education levels, from early childhood, primary and post-primary education through teacher's professional development.

- Strengthen structural inter-connections across the continuum of teacher professional learning and development in relation to RSE in alignment with Teaching Council frameworks for ITE (*Céim*, 2020) through Induction of Newly Qualified Teachers NQTs (*Droichead*, 2017, Revised) to continuing professional learning and development for teachers (*Cosán*, 2016).

- Complementary to continuing professional learning and development in RSE, development of a framework of supervision/mentoring supports for graduate teachers of RSE.

Approaches to conceptualisation of RSE provision in ITE:
Holistic, comprehensive, inclusive, rights-based and developmental approaches

- Adoption of a holistic, comprehensive, inclusive, values-based and rights-based approach to RSE provision in ITE.

- Ensure core principles and values of equality and diversity are embedded in RSE provision in ITE.

- Explicit naming and integration of diverse categories of identities through the adoption of an intersectional (gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, socio-economic status, ability, race, ethnicity) approach to the provision of RSE in ITE.

Systemic approach to RSE provision at ITE:
System-wide, collaborative, integrated approach including inter-departmental, inter-agency and across and within ITE programmes

- Build inter-agency collaboration across governmental departments and agencies including inter alia Department of Education and Skills; Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Department of Health, HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme SHCPP; Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth and between statutory and non-statutory organisations to strengthen RSE provision in ITE and across the wider education system.

- Adoption of a partnership approach, inclusive of the voice of children and young people, parents/ guardians, student teachers, NQTs and experienced teachers, school leadership and patron bodies, youth and community advocates, and within the context of the wider sociocultural landscape, in the development of teacher professional learning and development in RSE, aligned with international and national good practice in rights-based, democratic principles of consultation.

- Build capacity for RSE through developing new, or strengthening existing, network/peer learning structures at local/regional-level and at national/international-level.

- Development of coordinating structure/s, at ITE level, to support the coherence of RSE provision, associated curricula and resources, across primary and post-primary ITE programmes.

- Support for the engagement of ITE with national-level reviews of SPHE/RSE policy, curriculum and/or practice (e.g., National Council for Curriculum and Assessment NCCA, Department of Education and Skills DES Inspectorate) and in wider national review processes (e.g., the review and redevelopment of the National Sexual Health Strategy).

Teaching, learning and assessment of RSE at ITE:
ITE programme-level factors pertaining to student teachers' content knowledge of, pedagogical skills in, and attitudinal dispositions toward RSE provision, ensuring a clear SPHE/RSE pathway for graduate teachers

- Ensure a clear SPHE/RSE pathway for graduate teachers, aligned with WHO (2010, 2017), through programme-level audit/mapping identifying inter alia time allocated to, positioning of SPHE/RSE and RSE-related provision, and assessment of student teachers' learning in relation to RSE across primary and post-primary ITE programmes.

- Designation of specialist Initial Teacher Educators to SPHE/RSE provision on primary and post-primary ITE programmes.

- Integration of SPHE/RSE and RSE-related provision across Foundation Studies and Professional Studies to ensure RSE provision on primary and post-primary ITE programmes is both practice-based and theoretically informed.

- Implementation of a developmental, spiral approach to SPHE/RSE provision at programme-level, progressively deepening student teachers' knowledge and skills in SPHE/RSE.

- Employment of diverse, participatory methodologies, including inter alia active, experiential learning; small group teaching; modelling of good practice and facilitation of dialogical methods.

- Development of student teachers' understanding of the diversity of learners' needs in relation to RSE and their implementation of evidence-based, pedagogical approaches to RSE provision that meets the needs of all learners.

- Ensure student teachers' critical awareness of developments in evidence-based policies, research, practice and resources relevant to the teaching, learning and assessment of RSE at ITE.

- Adoption of a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach (WHO, 2017; UNESCO, 2018), ensuring that student teachers' attitudes, as well as knowledge and skills, are addressed in RSE provision in ITE .

- Embed opportunities for student teachers' engagement in critical self-reflection on RSE-related attitudes and norms, exploring and clarifying personal and societal values and experiences of RSE.

- Ensure a wide range of student teachers' RSE-related skills are addressed including inter alia media literacy, along with pastoral and relational competencies.

- Support student teachers' competence and confidence in teaching of RSE through the provision and scaffolding of a range of RSE-related skills during ITE, including inter alia to:
  - practice planning for/teaching of RSE, through e.g. micro-teaching, lesson plan and scheme of work construction, and where approved, school placement-based practice;
  - hone skills in communicating and working in partnership with parents/guardians and within their school and wider community contexts.