

# **Exploring the landscape of relationships and sexuality education in primary schools in New Zealand**

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**Te Kāhui Pā Harakeke  
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# Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 Background .....	5
1.2 Moving from 'sex ed' to sexuality education to relationships and sexuality education ...	6
1.3 Research aims.....	6
<b>2. Methodology and methods .....</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 Research questions .....	7
2.2 Appreciative inquiry.....	7
2.3 Data collection.....	7
2.3.1 Phase one: Nationwide online survey .....	7
2.3.2 Phase two: In-depth focus groups.....	8
2.4 Participants .....	8
2.4.1 Phase one: Nationwide online survey .....	8
2.4.2 Phase two: In-depth focus groups.....	8
2.5 Analysis .....	8
2.5.1 Phase one: Nationwide online survey .....	8
2.5.2 Phase two: In-depth focus groups.....	9
2.6 Ethical approval .....	9
<b>3. Results and discussion .....</b>	<b>10</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	10
3.2 Participants .....	10
3.3 Awareness and use of the Ministry of Education's RSE guide.....	10
3.4 Confidence about community consultation requirements, and ways of consulting.....	12
3.5 Whole school approaches .....	14
3.6 External providers.....	16
3.7 Teachers' perceptions of important RSE learning .....	17
3.8 Teachers' confidence: planning, cultural perspectives, teaching RSE.....	18
3.9 Barriers and enablers for teachers.....	19
3.9.1 Barriers .....	19
3.9.2 Enablers .....	20
3.10 Key issues for schools.....	20
3.10.1 Navigating community concerns .....	21
3.10.2 RSE implementation .....	22
3.10.3 Outside the comfort zone .....	23
<b>4. Recommendations and conclusion.....</b>	<b>25</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	25
4.2 Vignette: A created story to reflect effective practice.....	25
4.3 Questions to explore as the basis for recommendations leading to effective RSE practice	27
4.4 Closing comments.....	30
<b>5. References .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>6. Appendices.....</b>	<b>33</b>
Appendix 1 Survey questions.....	33
Appendix 2 Hui guide .....	35

## Figures

Figure 1: School leaders' awareness of 2020 RSE guide.....	10
Figure 2: Teachers' awareness of 2020 RSE guide.....	10
Figure 3: School leaders who have used 2020 RSE guide.....	11
Figure 4: Teachers who have used 2020 RSE guide.....	11
Figure 5: School leaders' confidence: consultation requirements.....	12
Figure 6: Teachers' confidence: consultation requirements.....	12
Figure 7: School leaders' confidence: whole school approaches.....	14
Figure 8: External providers used to support RSE .....	16
Figure 9: Teachers' confidence: planning responsive RSE.....	18
Figure 10: Teachers' confidence: integrating mātauranga Māori into RSE.....	18
Figure 11: Teachers' confidence teaching RSE .....	18
Figure 12: Word cloud of identified barriers to effective practice in RSE .....	19
Figure 13: Word cloud of identified enablers to effective practice in RSE.....	20

## Tables

Table 1: Ways of consulting by school leaders and teachers .....	12
Table 2: Actions to promote wellbeing as related to RSE .....	15
Table 3: Important learning in RSE .....	17

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Learning about sex, relationships, and sexuality in education contexts is a perennially controversial issue, no matter where in the world. Is it the role of the parents? Is it the role of the school? At what age or stage should this learning occur? How much information is “too much information”, or “too little information”? A search for new stories<sup>1</sup> from recent years in New Zealand reveals such headlines as “*More sex education should be taught earlier*”. “*Some schools wary of sex education for young*”. “*Principals reject sex education 'pleasure zone' teaching*”. “*Leave sex education to parents? No thanks*”. “*Sex ed's an issue for families, not schools*”. These sometimes conflicting headlines provide some insight into the controversy surrounding sex, relationships, and sexuality education in schools as it plays out in the wider public arena.

This research aims to shed light on the current landscape of relationships and sexuality education in primary schools in New Zealand, in order contribute to the limited research base that exists in this area.

Sexuality education has existed as part of the primary school health education curriculum in New Zealand since 1985, with earlier curricula (1929 and 1948) stating that “there is no place in the primary school for group or class instruction in sex education” (Department of Education, 1948, p. 8). In the 1985 syllabus, “understanding physical changes and establishing a personal code of health: pubertal change and associated body care” was one stated learning outcome, with a note stating “these are the elements which may form part of the sex education component of a school’s health programme” (Department of Education, 1985, p. 15). This learning outcome demonstrates a conservative approach to introducing the topic into the formal curriculum (Dixon, 2020), is somewhat ambiguous (what other parts exist and why are they not written into the syllabus?), and uses the term “sex education” which is the last time this term is used in New Zealand in formal curricula (but not in the media, as the above headlines attest to).

The 1985 syllabus was replaced in 1999 with *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1999) which brought health education and physical education together as a learning area. This curriculum was socio-critical in its intent and encouraged critical pedagogy through empowering students to take action to enhance their own and others’ wellbeing, and to think critically to challenge assumptions, inequalities, social injustices, and hegemonic relationships (Culpan & Bruce, 2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) is the current statement of official policy in New Zealand English-medium schools. Learning is mandated from year one to year 10 of the curriculum in all learning areas, which means RSE learning experiences should exist from the beginning of a child’s schooling journey. The learning areas in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) are currently undergoing a ‘refresh’, with development work for health and physical education to take place in 2024 for implementation in 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2022a).

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<sup>1</sup> Using the search function on [www.stuff.co.nz](http://www.stuff.co.nz)

## 1.2 Moving from 'sex ed' to sexuality education to relationships and sexuality education

The Ministry of Education has supported schools to implement sexuality education since the publication of their first guidance document for school leaders, teachers, and boards in 2002. This guidance was updated in 2015, and then again in 2020 with the most recent guidance document being *Relationships and Sexuality Education: a guide for teachers, leaders and boards of trustees* (RSE guide) (Ministry of Education, 2020a). In the RSE guide, the key area of learning was re-named from 'sexuality education' to 'relationships and sexuality education' (RSE). For the first time, two of the guide volumes were published: one for Years 1–8 (primary) and one for Years 9–13 (secondary) (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). Significant implications of these changes for primary schools are two-fold. First, targeted guidance for the primary years of schooling/primary school context. Second, the foregrounding of 'relationships' offers more expansive ways of incorporating sexuality education into local curricula from Year 1 and beyond (Dixon et al., 2022a).

Potential challenges to RSE implementation in primary schools include the following issues, upon which this research sought to gain contemporary insights. First, implementation of RSE is inconsistent across primary schools in the country (ERO, 2018). This may be related to the fact that primary school teachers are curriculum generalists, and therefore may lack knowledge and confidence in teaching RSE. Second (and related to the first issue), external providers are commonly used to directly deliver health and physical education learning in primary schools (Petrie et al., 2014; Powell, 2014), however it is unclear as to the extent of this occurring in RSE specifically. Third, the loud voices of religious or culturally conservative groups, or lobby groups with extremist views on gender issues, who oppose teachers' and schools' position to teach around gender diversity and other RSE-related topics. Fourth, health education (and RSE within) is the only subject in the curriculum for which schools must consult their community as outlined in the Education and Training Act 2020 (New Zealand Government, 2020) as well as the previous Education Act (Dixon et al., 2022a). Research evidence is needed as to teachers' and school leaders' understanding of the consultation requirements, the means by which they consult with their communities, and what changes are (or are not) made to the RSE programme, or what other action is taken as a consequence of this consultation process.

## 1.3 Research aims

How far has *critiquing* the inadequacies of sexuality education actually delivered us? (Allen, 2018, p. 3, emphasis in original).

As the quotation above from Allen (2018) suggests, and as noted above, investigations into RSE in New Zealand have provided persistent critique, but this critical scholarship has not translated into measurably improved practice in RSE in schools. Being cognisant of this notion motivated the researchers to conduct an appreciative inquiry. In the appreciative inquiry, aspects of RSE that schools find challenging and are still working on can be illuminated, but also aspects of practice can be highlighted that speak to possibilities for a more positive picture of the landscape to emerge. Therefore, the aim of the research is not only to explore challenges and tensions in relation to RSE, but to gain understanding of the positive aspects of RSE in primary schools in New Zealand and how these might be built upon, in order to open opportunities for school leaders and teachers to develop whole school approaches and curriculum programmes of learning that enable a responsive RSE for all ākonga.

This report is structured as follows. Following the introduction above is a description of the research methods, followed by the findings and discussion. Implications of the research are then explored, with a case study and questions approach to offer recommendations and ways forward for RSE practice in schools.

## 2. Methodology and methods

### 2.1 Research questions

The over-arching research question was:

*How do primary teachers and senior leaders navigate the complexities of the RSE space in their schools?*

This was supported by three sub-questions:

- What barriers and tensions exist towards implementing a responsive RSE?
- What enablers exist towards implementing a responsive RSE?
- What are the possibilities for supporting teachers and senior leaders to embed a responsive RSE in primary schools?

### 2.2 Appreciative inquiry

Founded in the area of organisational development (Clouder & King, 2015), appreciative inquiry was developed to reveal often overlooked positive aspects of experience, to generate theory about what works in practice, and to plan for a new reality – a new way of addressing old problems (Clouder & King, 2015). Appreciative inquiry has the potential to generate different kinds of insights and enables researchers to reconsider their role and agenda (Enright et al., 2014). Appreciative inquiry constructively and productively challenges the “fundamental stories (RSE teachers and school leaders) tell themselves about who they are and why they exist” (Enright et al., 2014, p. 921). Appreciative inquiry is mana-enhancing, which is befitting of the New Zealand context and respectful of the professional status of those participating in the research.

The impetus for an appreciative agenda for research comes from the sentiment conveyed by Allen (2018) that critiquing the shortcomings of sexuality education hasn't changed the way that RSE is enacted in schools. Enright et al. (2014) note that appreciative inquiry can offer a closer look at what works, to help build upon existing strengths rather than attempt to repair something that is broken. Moreover, appreciative inquiry has the potential to generate stories about RSE at its best: “stories that have the potential to enrich the body of knowledge in the field” (Enright et al., 2014, p. 922). By framing the research inquiry towards an appreciative agenda, the researchers have the opportunity to hear and tell stories about what is going well with RSE practice.

### 2.3 Data collection

#### 2.3.1 Phase one: Nationwide online survey

Two online surveys were created, one for teachers and one for senior leaders/principals. This was in order to explore RSE practice concerning curriculum or classroom practice as well as whole school approaches to the promotion of student wellbeing (inclusive practices, school culture, and leadership etc). The online surveys were created using the Qualtrics platform and consisted of a range of open-text questions and questions with Likert-type scales, which produced qualitative and quantitative data. Question logic was used – the answer to some questions pre-determined which question participants went to next, which meant that not all questions were answered by all respondents. See Appendix 1 for the survey questions.

### **2.3.2 Phase two: In-depth focus groups**

Data collection for this research phase consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviewing and a workshop approach involving participants working with extracts from the RSE guide (Ministry of Education, 2020a) and pre-prepared prompts to provoke dialogue between participants. See Appendix 2 for the interview guide, including the workshop prompts.

The three hui were between 90 minutes and two hours long. The hui were audio recorded, with written transcripts created for analysis. Supporting the interview transcripts were notes from participants' involvement in the workshop activities.

## **2.4 Participants**

### **2.4.1 Phase one: Nationwide online survey**

Participants were recruited for the survey via the School Directory on the Education Counts website. The directory builder feature of the website enabled us to export a spreadsheet of schools to include, which were English-medium contributing schools (Years 1-6), full primary schools (Years 1-8) and intermediate schools (Years 7-8). From the refined list, the email listed on the directory was used to send a request for teachers and senior leaders/principals to participate in the surveys. Social media was also used to promote the survey, through a post on the New Zealand Health Education Association Facebook page which was shared by Family Planning New Zealand on their Facebook page.

### **2.4.2 Phase two: In-depth focus groups**

Phase two schools were recruited through a question in the survey asking whether those completing the survey would be interested in participating in a group interview (hui) with the researchers. This resulted in six schools contacting the researchers. Three schools were chosen due to the schools' and researchers' availability to schedule and conduct the hui before the end of the 2021 school year. In order to protect the anonymity of the schools, the region of New Zealand within in which they are located, specific roll numbers, or decile is not disclosed. Between three and five teachers and senior leaders participated in each hui.

## **2.5 Analysis**

### **2.5.1 Phase one: Nationwide online survey**

The survey data was analysed using different methods to suit the nature of the different data generated. For the majority of the questions, data from the teacher survey and the senior leader/principal survey were analysed separately.

For the quantitative data (responses on Likert-type scales), descriptive statistics were used. Some of these questions were accompanied by open-text follow-up questions, and these were analysed at the content level, with common ideas grouped together to be presented as findings.

For the qualitative data that was generated in response to the questions posed to teachers about *barriers and enablers to effective RSE practice*, a content analysis was conducted, with word clouds from this analysis generated to present the findings. This was done to visually illustrate the data. For



the qualitative data that was generated in response to questions about *key issues schools are grappling with, barriers and enablers to effective RSE practice, and anything else you want to tell us*, a thematic analysis was conducted, with each of the three researchers first coding the data and generating themes independently, before working together to develop a consensus about the main themes.

### **2.5.2 Phase two: In-depth focus groups**

First, reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken both individually and collectively. The researchers worked together to familiarise themselves with the data, before independently coding and generating initial themes. They then came back together to revise and refine themes, before defining and naming themes. Working in this way added to each person's analytical thoughts to create a richer analysis overall (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Second, narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) was undertaken in order to create a vignette/case study which was an amalgamation of findings from the reflexive thematic analysis. The production of a vignette through narrative analysis (creating stories from research data) offers the opportunity to present the phase two findings in a way that connects to the appreciative inquiry framing for the research, as well as provoke new ways of thinking about RSE in primary schools. This vignette is presented alongside questions for different stakeholders to present recommendations from the research.

## **2.6 Ethical approval**

Ethical approval for the research was gained from the University of Canterbury's Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref: HEC 2021/136). The survey was anonymous to ensure the confidentiality of those who responded to the survey. The researchers ensured survey respondents and schools could not be identified in this report.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this section of the report, the results from the phase one surveys of senior leaders/principals (from hereon in, school leaders) and teachers are presented and discussed.

#### 3.2 Participants

There were 199 responses to the surveys. Sixty nine participants completed the teacher survey, and 130 participants completed the school leader survey. Some further information on participants:

- Teacher respondents were from eight regions of New Zealand, with Canterbury over-represented.
- There was a reasonably even distribution of teachers who taught different year levels (years 1-3, years 4-6, years 7-8).
- School leader respondents were from fifteen regions of New Zealand, with Canterbury over-represented.
- The majority of those who responded to the school leader survey were in a principal role.

#### 3.3 Awareness and use of the Ministry of Education’s RSE guide

For both surveys, respondents were asked if they were aware of the updated RSE guide (Ministry of Education, 2020a) and, if so, whether they have used the guide (and if so), how.

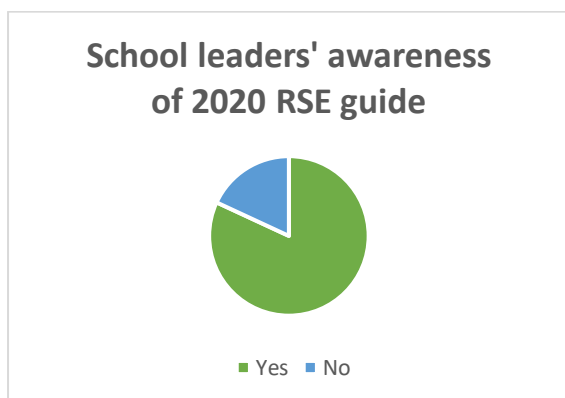


Figure 1: School leaders’ awareness of 2020 RSE guide

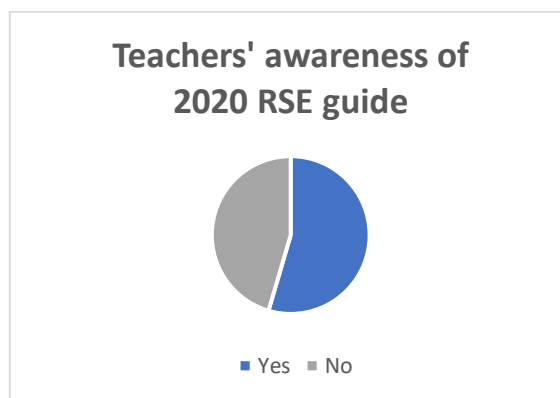


Figure 2: Teachers’ awareness of 2020 RSE guide

Figures 1 and 2 indicate that while the majority of school leaders who responded to the survey knew about the updated RSE guide, a little over 20% of respondents were not aware of the guide. In terms of teachers, respondents were less aware of the guide, with 55% indicating they were aware of the guide, and 45% indicating they were not. This finding likely reflects the nature of the primary school environment where teachers teach across *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) and are not likely to be employed as specialist health (or health and physical education) teachers.

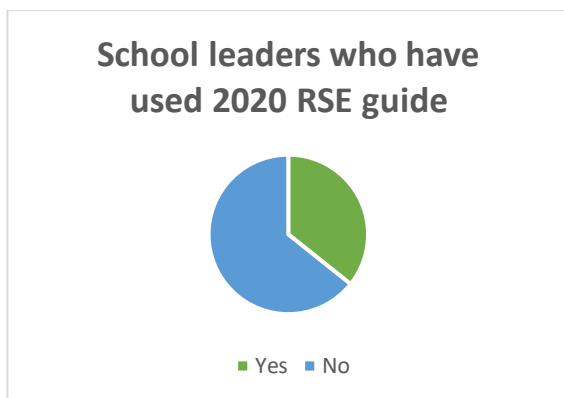


Figure 3: School leaders who have used 2020 RSE guide

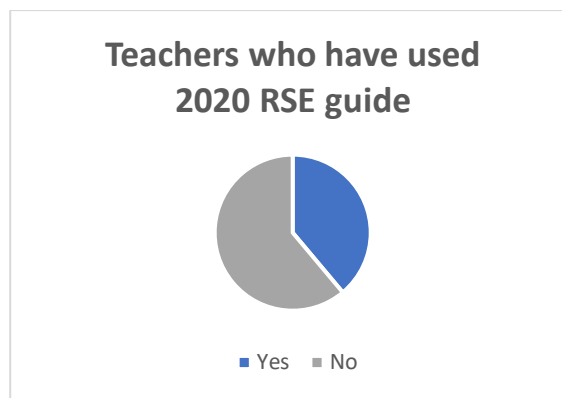


Figure 4: Teachers who have used 2020 RSE guide

As Figures 3 and 4 indicate, fewer than half of school leaders and teachers who knew about the RSE guide had used it in their school. The survey was conducted in late 2021, prior to the publication of materials to support schools' implementation of the messages in the RSE guide. It would be interesting to see whether the publication of support materials has had an impact on school leaders' and teachers' use of the RSE guide, or whether (as is likely) the lack of use of the guide is attributable to other reasons such as on-going COVID-19 disruptions, lack of time, lack of status of health education and RSE (see Dixon et al., 2022b for a discussion of such issues in secondary schools).

An open-text question in both surveys asked *how* school leaders and teachers had used the guide. Amongst the teachers who responded to this question, answers included: To plan and prepare for teaching RSE and health education in the following year, looking at the guide as a teaching team, de-redevelopment of the RSE programme, using the guide to check that the teaching programme is appropriate, and to guide teaching from year one. As would be expected due to the larger number of school leaders responding to the survey, they discussed a wider range of ways in which they had used the guide. These included the following:

- School leaders have attended PLD on the guide to then be able to consult with parents and share ideas with teachers.
- (Re)developing the school's RSE programme across the levels in alignment with the guide.
- Becoming familiar with up-to-date research, legalities, and terminology to inform RSE planning.
- Reviewing/checking/reflecting upon the school's programme in relation to the guide.
- Helping teachers to understand the whole school approach and develop consistency.
- Aligning messages from the guide to the school's Catholic character.
- Aligning with local HPE curriculum, placing a te ao Māori lens, focusing on inclusivity/diversity.
- To help teach puberty and about the rainbow community and acceptance of differences.
- To support setting up information evenings for whānau and to support the development of a delivery statement and the community consultation overall.
- Reviewing practice and then working with Family Planning to develop the RSE programme and consulting with parents.
- Conversations with staff and leadership about current practice and next steps.
- To address concerns of practice amongst staff.

In combination, the teachers' and school leaders' responses provide some insight into which aspects of the guide are valuable for schools in practice. The guide potentially provides the impetus to embed changes to enhance RSE programmes, whole school approaches, and community consultation processes.

### 3.4 Confidence about community consultation requirements, and ways of consulting

In both surveys, respondents were asked to rate their confidence in understanding the community consultation requirements for health education (Education and Training Act, 2020; section 91) (New Zealand Government, 2020). They were also asked about the ways they have consulted with their school community.

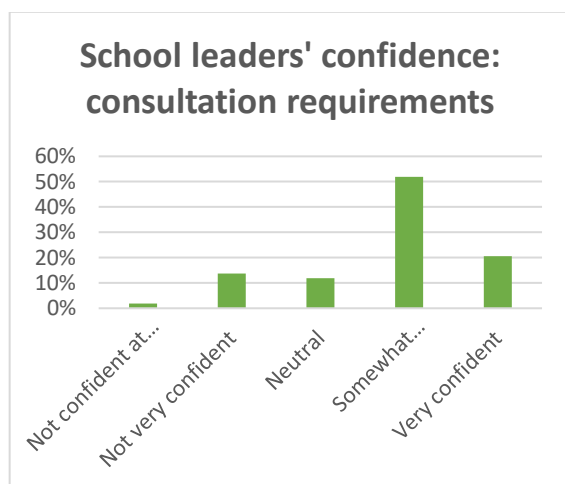


Figure 5: School leaders' confidence: consultation requirements

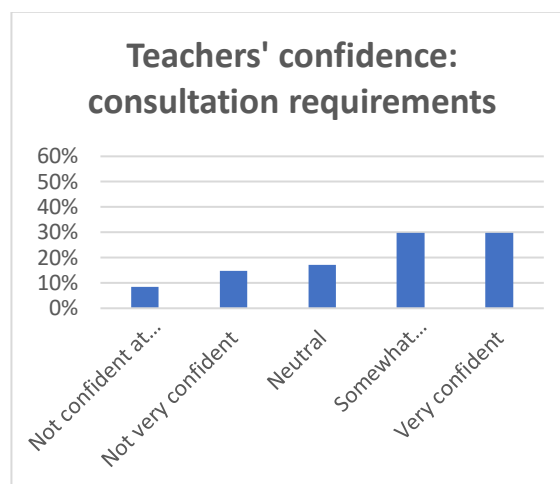


Figure 6: Teachers' confidence: consultation requirements

Forty-seven teachers and 102 school leaders responded to this question. Figures 5 and 6 indicate that overall, school leaders are more confident about their understanding of the community consultation requirements for health education, with 73% somewhat confident or very confident, compared with 60% of teachers who rated themselves somewhat confident or very confident. It is noteworthy that 16% of senior leaders rated themselves not confident at all, or not very confident, in this area. The RSE guide, as well as the more recent Mental Health Education Guide (Ministry of Education, 2022b) and resources from Tūturu (2020) provide extensive guidance and support for schools around not only the legal requirements, but also suggested processes and tools and templates. It may therefore be useful for these documents to be more widely promoted to primary school leaders, boards, and teachers.

In terms of ways of consulting, both teachers and school leaders recounted a wide variety of consultation methods. These are presented in Table 1 (grouped into ideas from across participants' responses).

Table 1: Ways of consulting by school leaders and teachers

Ways of consulting: school leaders	Ways of consulting: teachers
<p><b>Online methods</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online surveys via Google Forms.</li> <li>• Information in the newsletter.</li> <li>• Google meets.</li> <li>• Made a video for families talking about the health curriculum, in particular RSE. Shared paper resources and copies of our programme with a Google Form survey to get their feedback.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Online methods</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zoom with whānau over lockdown where we explained the RSE programme and where they could ask any questions.</li> <li>• Health, wellbeing and sexuality policies are shared with the staff and community via school docs. They are reviewed and feedback is given via this tool.</li> <li>• Consultation with parents at each year level via email with information about what will be</li> </ul>

<p><b>Face-to-face methods</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presented the "new" RSE programme, had a display of resources, and had three school leaders from each part of the school on hand to explain and answer any questions.</li> <li>Board-led discussions, parent and teacher communication meetings.</li> <li>Summary of programme and survey given out, as well as invitation to be part of a reference group. Reference group involves a more detailed presentation about health, and an opportunity to see the learning progressions for RSE and resources.</li> <li>Anecdotal comments, observations.</li> <li>Whānau hui, face to face at the gate.</li> <li>Surveys mainly - with the opportunity to feedback via online, paper, at the gate, on a school device (in the class or office iPad), workshops, hui.</li> <li>Consultation held at the same time as a community function/meeting.</li> <li>As part of the school's kaupapa and pedagogy we always involve whānau in discussions.</li> <li>Parent education evening and did a presentation, then had an interactive time with the resource and Q &amp; A at the end.</li> </ul>	<p>taught, made clear that they may opt out of lessons and invited parents to give feedback and view the teaching resource we follow.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Term newsletters, weekly newsletters, email.</li> </ul> <p><b>Face-to-face methods</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent/whānau evenings or hui prior to teaching, explaining our programme and answering their questions.</li> <li>Before teaching, invite parent/caregivers in our community who are interested to review lesson outlines and resources which are going to be used to teach the students.</li> <li>Met with the parents of the children in the class.</li> <li>Survey in person and in school newsletter.</li> <li>An information evening with Family Planning included so they could answer parents' questions.</li> <li>Through Google forms, followed by information evening and individual conversations with those who are anxious about the programme.</li> </ul>
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The responses in the table above indicate some differences in interpretation of the question. Senior leaders were more likely to refer to the legislated community consultation (every two years). Teachers were more likely to note more regular and on-going consultation events, and parent/whānau hui that were connected to teaching RSE – an opportunity for parents and whānau to learn more about the RSE programmes and view teaching resources, and answer any questions. This is quite distinct from the Education and Training Act 2020 requirement to consult with the school community on the delivery of health education more broadly (New Zealand Government, 2020). The responses in the school leaders' section indicate a range of ways that schools are consulting to reflect the needs of their communities.

Very few respondents noted that they haven't consulted with parents, or were in the planning stages of doing so. COVID disruptions were acknowledged as having been a barrier to meaningful consultation, as stated by two school leaders:

- “COVID has interrupted kanohi ki te kanohi consultation - so survey and sharing via online.”
- “Lockdown has prevented the anticipated consultation process; we are aware it needs to be genuine so this will now take place in 2022.”

Other challenges to consultation were also noted in the responses, for example

- “A newsletter that no-one replies to.”

Others noted that they were trying new ways of consulting due to poor response rates in the past:

- “We used to do a paper survey with very little response. We now use Google Forms and invite whānau to an information meeting.”

### 3.5 Whole school approaches

Featuring only in the school leaders' survey was the question: *How confident are you in relation to enacting a whole school approach to promoting student wellbeing in connection to relationships, sexuality and gender identity?* This was accompanied by a follow-up question asking about actions taken in the school to promote student wellbeing regarding relationships, sexuality and gender identity. Figure 7 shows the respondents' self-ratings of their confidence (91 senior leaders responded to this question).

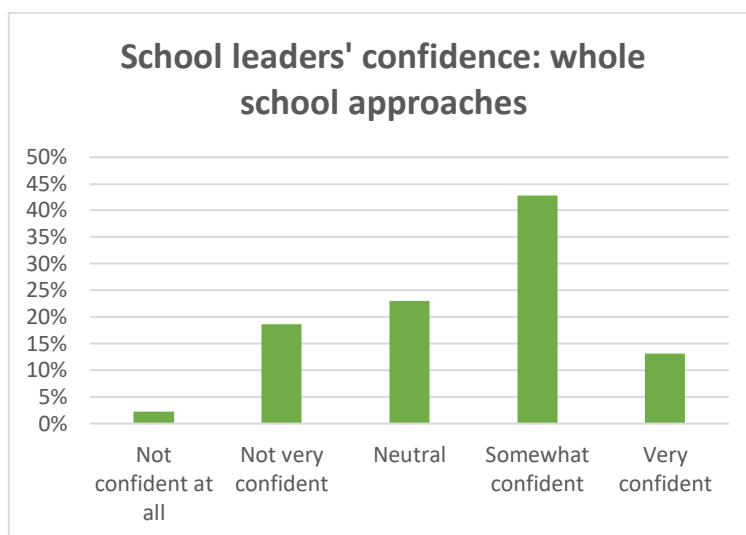


Figure 7: School leaders' confidence: whole school approaches

While self-report measures of confidence need to be interpreted with caution, the pattern of responses indicates that some school leaders lack confidence in enacting a whole school approach to promoting wellbeing in relation to RSE-related issues, with 21% not confident at all, or not very confident. At the other end of the scale, 56% of school leaders rated themselves as somewhat confident or very confident. The Ministry of Education National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP) (Ministry of Education, 2020b) being implemented in 2023, where objective one, priority one requiring that schools are safe, inclusive and free from racism, discrimination and bullying, including explicit mention of LGBTQIA+ students. Therefore, this result indicates that support from the Ministry of Education or other agencies may be needed if schools are to meet these requirements.

There were eighty responses to the follow-up question: *What are some actions you have taken in recent years in your school to promote student wellbeing in connection to relationships, sexuality and gender identity?* Several responses spoke to no actions:

- "Nil."
- "We haven't had this brought to our attention in the past."

Others, however, discussed that this was a work in progress:

- "We are just starting on our journey."

There was, therefore, recognition that more work was needed in this area. Across the responses, a wide range of actions were identified, indicating that senior leaders are cognisant of the need to be proactive in the whole school space, and that a wide range of actions are needed across different dimensions of school life: curriculum, school leadership and culture, and community connections (Ministry of Education, 2020a). Table 2 illustrates actions that were identified (grouped into ideas from across participants' responses).

Table 2: Actions to promote wellbeing as related to RSE

**Professional learning and development and staff collaboration**

- Supported staff and a student through a gender transition by having appropriate speakers come and present at staff meetings.
- Teacher PLD from Family Planning on Navigating the Journey; PLD from other agencies, training with the Catholic Education Office.
- Team meetings and syndicate collaboration.
- Working with Qtopia re gender, reviewing policies.

**Pedagogical practices**

- Inclusive in our approach and encourage acceptance of diversity.
- Question boxes so students can ask questions confidentially.
- Learning focused relationships - play-based learning, student-centred/student ownership, students to share expertise (tuakana-teina) and take the lead.
- Whole school, class group and small group discussions and activities.
- External providers to teach (e.g. Nest Consulting, Life Education, Public Health Nurse).
- Programme is taught in a safe environment and parents can follow up on learning each day.
- Use of pronouns. Identifying that heteronormativity is an issue in schools, especially where teacher bias is concerned.
- Part of school culture is to hold circle time sessions with our classes each week – sharing strategies to promote student wellbeing.

**RSE-related learning**

- Keeping Ourselves Safe.
- Friendship units; mental health; wellbeing; relationships, self-esteem, interpersonal skills and puberty, accepting differences, discrimination, gender identity, anti-bullying, cyber safety.
- School kit unit on stereotypes.
- Programmes such as class dojo, Kidpower, peer mediation to name a few.
- Using Family Planning resources and altering them as necessary fo learner profile; using Navigating the Journey at all levels.

**School-wide practices and community connections**

- School-wide foci over past two years – tūrangawaewae and then this year whakapono and whakawhanaungatanga.
- Gender neutral toilets, making sure greet students as 'students' not girls and boys - conscious of the language used.
- Counsellor referral forms, health nurse involvement and when teaching the sexuality part, inform community of content.
- Pink Shirt Day initiatives, days promoting kindness to each other, PB4L.
- Teaching a sexuality and relationship programme across all year levels of the school. It was only previously taught from Yr 5-8.
- NZCER Wellbeing Survey and acting on it, Me & My survey Kahui Ako wellbeing survey.
- Hauora approach, mana potential is being developed to underly the basis of relationships and 'balance' for children, which also encourages self-management.
- Whole school wellbeing/positive education framework and evolving curriculum.
- Modelling the language and attitudes/ behaviours of inclusion and promoting positive around gender bias with staff and students.
- Whānau connection/hui, pānui.
- All curriculum teaching has been underpinned by wellbeing last year and this year.
- Reviewed policies, reviewed and refocused strategic plan, engaged in staff professional development, engaged with students around the vision and values of the school.
- A powhiri to welcome new whānau. A large part of term one developing positive relationships within the class, across teams and school wide. A school wide "fun picnic day" to welcome new families to our school and for children to spend time with their new classmates.

It is evident from the actions identified in Table 2 that a wide variety of actions are being taken in schools as part of a whole school approach to the promotion of student wellbeing as linked to RSE with responses traversing the three dimensions of school life: curriculum, school leadership and culture, and community connections (Ministry of Education, 2020a). Taking this action, however, is not without its difficulties: One respondent spoke to the difficulties inherent in negotiating differing values and attitudes between people in the school community: “not really sure where to go with gender identity etc., knowing some in our community have strong feelings about it.” In addition to balancing different viewpoints, issues relating to time, access to external resourcing, and buy-in from all members of staff are likely to complicate schools’ work in this area.

### 3.6 External providers

The teacher survey contained questions on whether external providers were used to support RSE, and if so, who and how they are used. Beginning with whether schools used external providers to support RSE, Figure 8 shows that a third of teachers (33%) responded affirmatively. In comparison, two thirds (67%) indicated that they do not use external providers. In hindsight, this would also have been a useful question to include in the school leaders’ survey, given the external providers they discussed as part of their whole school approach (section 3.5 above). It is promising that the majority of teachers who responded to the survey do not out-source RSE learning, given that this is a perennial issue in the health and physical education learning area (Petrie et al., 2014; Powell, 2014), perhaps due to the generalist nature of primary school teaching/teachers.

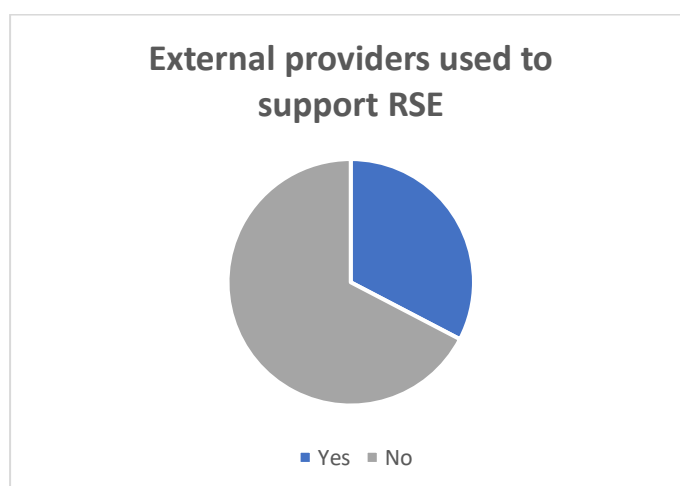


Figure 8: External providers used to support RSE

The follow-up questions (*who do you use, and how do you use them?*) yielded findings that reinforced those in section 3.5 above. Named providers were as follows: Family Planning, district health nurse, Nest Consulting, public health nurse, community police, InsideOUT.

Ways in which the above providers supported schools connected to the kaupapa and focus of the respective organisations. For example, Family Planning was used to provide PLD around using their ‘Navigating the Journey’ resource. InsideOUT was used to support the school with a student who was gender transitioning, and the police supported teaching Keeping Ourselves Safe. The health nurse and Nest Consulting were used to support teachers in teaching puberty and reproduction content.



### 3.7 Teachers' perceptions of important RSE learning

Again featuring only in the teacher survey, teachers were asked *what do you think is important for children to learn about in RSE?* The results below have been organised by the three areas in the key learning charts in the RSE guide (Ministry of Education, 2020a): *Ko au* | all about me, *ko aku hoa* | friendships and relationships with others, *ko tōku ao* | me and the world. These three areas map to the personal, interpersonal, and societal layers of the socio-ecological perspective (Ministry of Education, 2007) and thus are a useful way to organise teachers' contributions. Similar responses have been grouped together in the bullet-points and are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Important learning in RSE

<p><b><i>Ko au</i>   All about me</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Awareness of body and feelings; how the body works and changes; periods and period products.</li><li>• The names of body parts; reproduction.</li><li>• Emotional regulation.</li><li>• Overall wellbeing; promoting the skills and attitudes for the wellbeing of yourself and others.</li><li>• Skills to make informed decisions and implement strategies when things go wrong; being safe and making safe choices.</li><li>• all sexual orientations are normal, it is okay to express yourself and to discover who you are; identity.</li><li>• Self-esteem and confidence; being happy with who you are.</li></ul> <p><b><i>Ko aku hoa</i>   Friendships and relationships with others</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Different types of relationships; forming and maintaining relationships; getting along with people; changes in relationships.</li><li>• What a healthy friendship and relationship looks like.</li><li>• Setting and respecting boundaries; consent; personal space; safe and unsafe touching.</li><li>• Incorporating respect for themselves, each other and the adults in their life.</li><li>• Tolerance and understanding; the importance of kindness.</li><li>• Rights and responsibilities.</li></ul> <p><b><i>Ko tōku ao</i>   Me and the world</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sexuality and gender diversity and acceptance of difference; celebrating difference.</li><li>• Safety including digital safety/ sexting/ pornography; social media.</li><li>• Gender stereotypes; gender versus sex.</li></ul>
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Organising the findings in this way enables a check against the curriculum levels 1-4 key learning charts in the RSE guide (Ministry of Education, 2020a). Overall, the responses above connect well to the key learning from the Ministry of Education, with some gaps including: Knowledge of practices in schools and communities to promote wellbeing in relation to gender and sexuality issues (including laws and policies), taking action to make change, understanding of bullying-free environments, romantic relationships (Ministry of Education, 2020a – see pages 30-33).

Some other notable responses that did not fit into the categories above included the following:

- “Like everything lately I don’t think this should be mandated-brought in on a case by case if necessary or requested by parent/child.”
- “Sexuality education is very important as it is a part of us in all that we do, and we need to understand about our sexuality.”

These comments indicate the divergent opinions that exist around the importance of RSE learning in primary schools.

### 3.8 Teachers' confidence: planning, cultural perspectives, teaching RSE

We asked teachers to rate their confidence on three planning and teaching-related matters: planning RSE that is responsive to identified learning needs of ākonga, integrating mātauranga Māori and other cultural perspectives into RSE, and teaching RSE. The findings are presented in Figures 9 – 11 below.

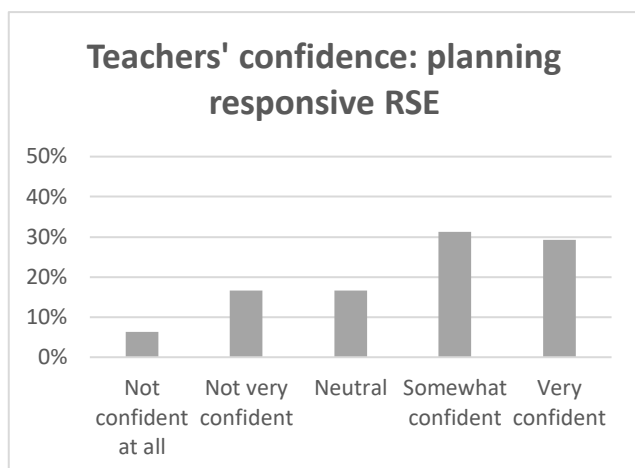


Figure 9: Teachers' confidence: planning responsive RSE

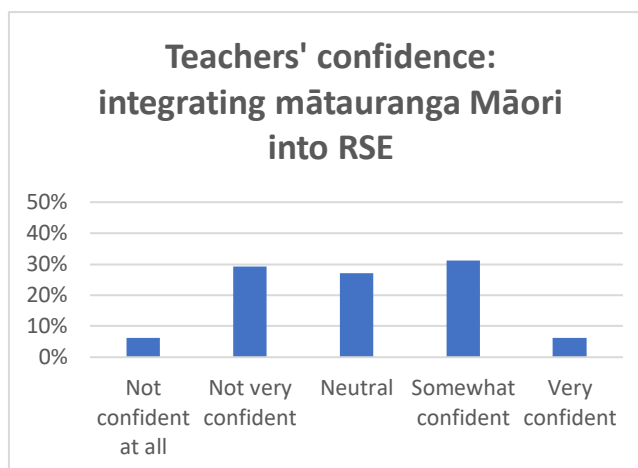


Figure 10: Teachers' confidence: integrating mātauranga Māori into RSE

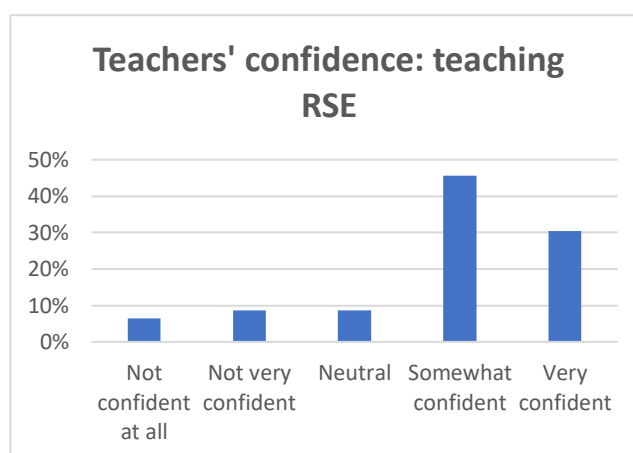


Figure 11: Teachers' confidence teaching RSE

Teachers were more likely to express confidence in relation to teaching RSE than planning a responsive RSE, or integrating mātauranga Māori and other cultural perspectives into RSE:

- For integrating cultural knowledges, 35% of respondents selected “not confident at all” or “not very confident”. Thirty-eight percent, however, responded “somewhat” or “very” confident.
- For planning responsive RSE, 23% responded “not confident at all” or “not very confident”, while 60% selected “somewhat” or “very” confident.
- For teaching RSE, 15% selected “not confident at all” or “not very confident”, while 76% responded “somewhat” or “very” confident.

Comparing these results with the recent survey of secondary school teachers (Dixon et al., 2022b), the primary school teachers indicated higher levels of confidence than secondary teachers with integrating cultural perspectives, but were notably less confident for planning and teaching RSE. It is important to note, however, that the secondary teachers surveyed were specialist health education or health and physical education teachers.

### 3.9 Barriers and enablers for teachers

Teachers were asked the following two questions: *What are some barriers to effective practice in RSE in your school and how are they hindering effective practice for you? What are some enablers to effective practice in RSE in your school and how are they supporting effective practice for you?* The responses to both questions provided evidence of common barriers and enablers, which were at times the opposite of each other (for example, lack of support from families as a barrier, and support from families as an enabler). The second part of the question was not answered by many respondents, thus the use of word clouds below was chosen as the way to communicate these findings.

#### 3.9.1 Barriers

Five teachers answered this question by stating they did not face any barriers. Interestingly, only nine different barriers were identified across the 33 responses to this question, with (a lack of) time and (a lack of support from) families being the most commonly identified barriers, as depicted in the world cloud below. The idea of ‘status’ was discussed once:

- “Lack of importance placed on the subject”.

This may have referred to lack of importance by the teacher or wider teaching team, or lack of status from senior leadership. In a recent nationwide survey of secondary school teachers of RSE, the latter was found to be a significant barrier to RSE, alongside lack of time (Dixon et al., 2022). As shown in the enablers word cloud, however, support for RSE from both SLT and BOT features, indicating a notable difference between the experiences of primary and secondary school teachers. This may point to primary schools placing more importance on matters relating to wellbeing than do secondary schools, however further research is needed to investigate reasons for any differences in perceived support for RSE (and health education) between primary and secondary schools.

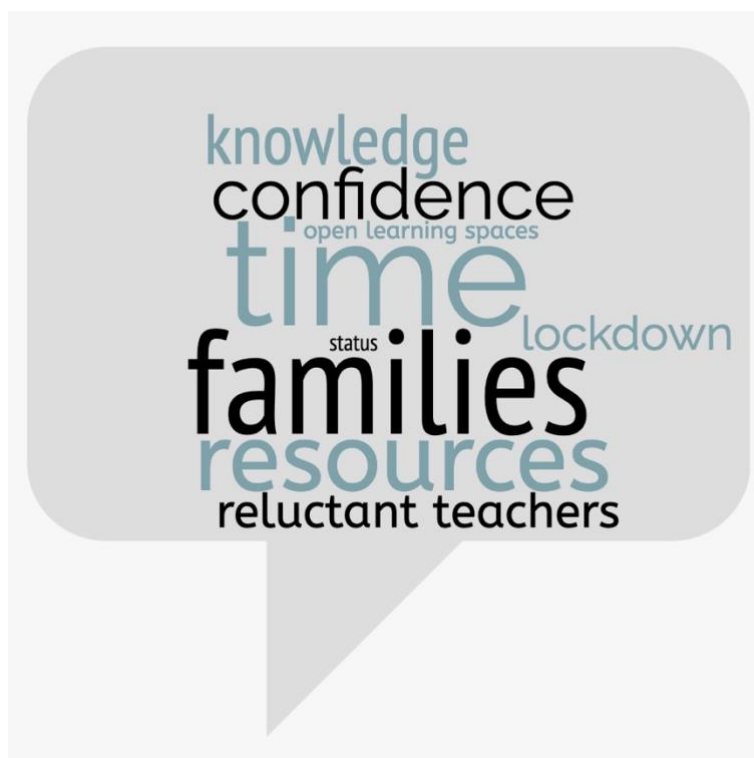


Figure 12: Word cloud of identified barriers to effective practice in RSE

### 3.9.2 Enablers

We received 47 responses to this question, suggesting that primary school teachers can more readily identify enablers to RSE practice rather than barriers which is a promising finding. The most frequent enablers that were mentioned were: Collaboration (between teaching colleagues), (support from) families, SLT support, resources, and support/resources from Family Planning.



Figure 13: Word cloud of identified enablers to effective practice in RSE

### 3.10 Key issues for schools

The final questions for both the senior leaders' and the teachers' survey were more open-ended, lending themselves well to thematic analysis (see section 2.5.1 of this report). These questions were: *What are some key issues that you are grappling with in RSE, and what support or actions do you think are needed to help resolve these? Is there anything else you want to tell us?*

Overall, the nature of the responses were similar between the senior leaders' and teachers survey. There was, however, slightly more emphasis on teaching and learning-related issues by the teachers; and slightly more discussion of bigger picture issues by senior leaders, which is not unsurprising. Following on from the barriers and enablers explored above, the 'key issues' that senior leaders and teachers are grappling with provide a more nuanced account of the challenges and strengths to RSE practice in primary schools. It is important to note that six senior leaders and seven teachers responded that they were not currently grappling with any issues in RSE. For example, one leader responded:

- "We are not grappling with anything. The revised programme was very well received by whānau and ākonga, appropriate to our school community, and to the understandings of children we teach".

The majority of respondents, however, indicated a wide range of issues which were on the whole, framed as problematic.

Resulting from the thematic analysis of the responses to these questions was the creation of three key themes, which we discuss in turn:

- ***Navigating community concerns***
- ***RSE implementation***
- ***Outside the comfort zone.***

Like in section 3.5 above (whole school approaches), these themes map to the three dimensions of school life: curriculum, school leadership and culture, and community connections (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

### ***3.10.1 Navigating community concerns***

This theme is centred upon three main issues: people’s misunderstandings of RSE, parental opposition to RSE, and the balancing act needed to account for differing perspectives.

A number of school leaders discussed misunderstandings that exist – mainly from parents – about the nature of RSE. This was encapsulated in the following comments:

- “Parents’ misunderstanding of what this is about.”
- “The term ‘sexuality education’ in the past has been misconstrued.”
- “Parents not seeing the difference between sex ed and sexuality ed.”
- “The assumption that RSE is sex education (it isn’t) and that we are teaching students in areas that perhaps parents aren’t comfortable with.”

These misunderstandings perhaps then played out in concerns about RSE from members of the school community (again, predominantly parents and whānau, but also community groups).

Opposition to, or concerns about, RSE was discussed by both teachers and school leaders:

- “Parents thinking this stuff isn’t important.”
- “Community feedback from a small but vocal group who think teaching around these issues is a family concern.”
- “Parents not welcoming the teaching around gender-related issues and sexuality.”

One school discussed how they dealt with concerns through holding a hui:

- “At our parent evening the only concern that came through was that we were going to ‘teach’ that you can change gender... Face-to-face conversations enabled us to address this.”

Finally, respondents spoke about the intricacies involved in balancing people’s differing attitudes, values and beliefs.

- “I respect their culture and family values, but it is coming from a medical and informative place and they should be able to ask questions about what is happening to their bodies.”
- “A lot of parents believe the content far exceeds what they need to know at the particular age it is targeted to.”

A number of the comments above suggest that consultation with parents, whānau, and other members of the community (such as is required by section 91 of the Education and Training Act 2020, alongside more informal consultation and information sharing) is critical in order to dispel misunderstandings and assumptions that exist about RSE, to ascertain parents’ views on RSE, and to ensure that RSE meets the needs of the school community. As evidenced from the comments above, balancing people’s diverse views is not easily done in practice. Moreover, given that educational policy (such as the RSE guide and the NELP) also need to be considered, as well as learners’ (learning) needs, this is a complex area to navigate.

### **3.10.2 RSE implementation**

This theme encompasses issues relating to resourcing RSE: Time, teaching and learning resources, professional learning and development (PLD), and planning for age and stage appropriate RSE. These issues were discussed in similar ways by both school leaders and teachers.

Time to plan for, and teach, RSE was raised as an issue by both school leaders and teachers:

- “Time for teaching everything required is the biggest issue!”
- “We need time to sit and look at how we provide for RSE within an already busy curriculum.”
- “Time is always an issue, but as long as we make it a focus then we have some great learning experiences.”
- “Time to include in a crammed curriculum.”

Another respondent alluded to the wide range of changes that schools and teachers are currently, and will soon be, facing (such as the curriculum refresh). Thus, updating RSE programmes to align with Ministry of Education guidance is one of many tasks facing school leaders and teachers.

The need for high quality teaching and learning resources was also discussed by respondents. For example, comments such as:

- “Appropriate and relevant resourcing that can give teachers confidence to teach the unit.”
- “(There is a) lack of resources to help teachers and leaders to plan.”

Others mentioned the resources that they have found useful:

- “The programme we use gives lots of support to cover potentially tricky topics.”
- “The guide is very helpful and we particularly appreciate the glossary in the back to get us up to speed with the terminology and acronyms.”
- “We used a mix of MoE resources and Family Planning.”
- “If it wasn’t for having the Navigating the Journey programme, I would be charting very unknown territory with what to teach the students and how much detail to go or not go into.”

These comments make the connection between access to quality, relevant and appropriate resourcing, and teacher confidence when planning and teaching RSE.

Connected to the above is time and access to PLD, which was discussed by a number of respondents. Comments in this area related to the importance of PLD:

- “Educating staff in the importance and relevance of RSE and providing PD to up-skill staff.”
- “We are in a re-development phase in health education in our school – so any support and guidance is greatly appreciated.”
- “I think the more we can access resources, particularly groups such as Family Planning and Rainbow Youth, who can come in and talk and facilitate discussion with our teachers, the easier this becomes.”

Comments also related to the lack of PLD:

- “With covid... schools have not had the right professional learning support to do service to the new direction.”
- “Haven’t had any specific PLD in this area yet.”
- “While we realise these things are important, it is hard to find the time to upskill sufficiently in all areas we are expected to be experts in. Resourcing for PLD, both in time and resources, is needed.”

Finally, issues relating to planning for age and stage appropriate RSE featured from a number of respondents, particularly in relation to multi-level teaching:

- “Students are at different stages. I have a class of year 7 and 8 students. Some are wanting to talk very in-depth about sex and relationships. Others are not even thinking about intimate relationships or even started puberty. So it is hard to pitch the lessons at the right stage.
- “Mixed-level classes can at times be a barrier to keeping discussions and content appropriate for everyone.”

- “It can be difficult at times to answer tamariki pātai in an age appropriate way, however they are always patient as we seek advice and ‘mull over it’ for a day.”

This was also discussed in terms of gender:

- “Gender diversity issues – how to discuss this in a way which students feel comfortable and are also age appropriate.”

The RSE guide (Ministry of Education, 2020a) provides some guidance around possible learning across the levels of the curriculum, and the Navigating the Journey resource from Family Planning consists of four different volumes across the primary schooling years. However, as the teachers noted in their responses, deciding where to ‘pitch’ RSE is more complex in practice, particularly in smaller schools where multi-level teaching may be more commonplace.

### **3.10.3 Outside the comfort zone**

In this theme, we discuss how RSE can take teachers outside of their comfort zone, in relation to RSE topics, teacher beliefs, whether RSE is the core business of schools, and overall teacher confidence, knowledge and capacity.

Respondents discussed the RSE topics that they, their colleagues and/or their school community viewed as potentially problematic, or tricky to navigate in practice. Most often mentioned in this way were gender identity/diversity and sexual identity:

- “Conservative views around gender and identity.”
- “Sexuality and gender-related issues.”
- “Teacher confidence when dealing with gender diverse issues – ways to approach these conversations.”

However, this was also discussed in relation to anatomy and sexual and reproductive health matters:

- “They (senior leadership) felt uncomfortable with students knowing the Knowledge of body parts.”
- “Our teachers are concerned and some are uncomfortable with having to teach the growing and changing component – menstruation, conception etc.”.

Further identified topics that could be difficult for teachers were as follows:

- “Social media.”
- “Online issues such as bullying.”
- “Body image issues.”

Comments from school leaders alluded to challenges they face as a staff around teachers whose personal beliefs are at odds with some RSE content:

- “Staff reluctance and personal views.”
- “This is quite a challenge for some staff and is contradictory to their personal religious beliefs.”

This was connected to the Catholic nature of the school by one school leader:

- “It’s very challenging for the teachers.”

However, schools were able to work around these challenges:

- “For these teachers we have found reasonable workarounds because we teach and work in collaborative groups, so there are some aspects they do not directly teach or answer questions from our students around.”

The difficulty reconciling teachers’ beliefs with content in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) may not be easy to solve, however other aspects of educational and human rights policies and laws, including the NELP (Ministry of Education, 2020b) and *Our Code, our Standards* (Education Council, 2017) reinforce the importance of this area of the curriculum, and teachers’ obligations therein.

Following on from above, a number of respondents questioned whether RSE is the core business of schools:

- “I see sexuality education as a side topic and not our core purpose. I know important, but time consuming...”
- “Too much is expected of teachers and what is expected should be taught at home.”
- “Teachers aren’t trained professionals in this area... teachers aren’t trained specifically for this, but are able to teach it in a broad sense. I don't think teachers should be given the increased pressure to address more complex issues, but they are and with very little help.”

Comments also connected to the business of outsourcing RSE, with the underlying implication that the topic matter is outside the expertise of a classroom teacher:

- “You cannot expect teachers to be the experts of everything... resourcing needs to be used to get experts into schools. Don’t rely on teachers as the messengers all the time.”
- “This needs to be done with sensitivity, using trained experts...”

Given that educational policy (The New Zealand Curriculum, the RSE guide) includes RSE (as a key area of learning within the health and physical education learning area), it is very much the role of the generalist primary school teacher to be able to teach the subject. The comments above point to implications for those working with teachers pre-service (initial teacher education) and in-service (professional learning and development), as well as school leaders themselves.

Finally, respondents discussed a lack of teacher knowledge, confidence, or capacity to teach RSE:

- “Not all teachers have the confidence.”
- “Teacher knowledge and comfort zones.”
- “Teacher understanding.”
- “The ability to teach the content.”

A lack of teacher confidence to teach RSE is connected to the potentially trickier topics, teacher beliefs, and the role of schools and teachers in RSE as discussed above, and actions are needed across the three dimensions of school life – curriculum, leadership, community partnerships (Ministry of Education, 2020a). This includes investment in on-going PLD opportunities for teachers, as well as support from senior leadership, others in the community with expertise in RSE-related matters, and the whānau community in relation to matters connected to RSE.



## 4. Recommendations and conclusion

### 4.1 Introduction

In this section of the report is a case study (vignette) and questions approach to offer recommendations and ways forward for RSE practice in schools. The vignette was developed through narrative analysis of phase two data: in-depth interviews and workshop with three primary schools (see section 2.5.2). Using an appreciative inquiry lens (as discussed in section 2.2) enabled the researchers to create a story of effective practice that was an amalgamation of data for the three schools, and that reflects the recommendations for schools moving forward, as based on the findings in section 3 above. Accompanying the vignette are questions that can be used by school leaders, teachers, and others to interrogate their practice in RSE. The report ends with some closing comments.

### 4.2 Vignette: A created story to reflect effective practice

Hauora Primary School (HPS) is a state school in a main centre of New Zealand, with around 600 students from Years 1-8. They are part of a Kāhui Ako with other nearby schools.

#### ***Ethos and environment: school leadership, policies, and culture***

*“It’s the school culture that diversity is seen as normal and is celebrated” (B, School 2).*

HPS prides itself of being supportive of diversity, and providing a positive, safe, and inclusive environment both inside and outside of classroom spaces. Teachers and staff are role models within the school, and pastoral support systems are well established. Recent work has been led by school leadership to review the school’s policies, and this has resulted in updated anti-bullying, school uniform, and child protection policies, including with a focus on Rainbow students, as guided by InsideOUT’s ‘Creating Rainbow-Inclusive School Policies and Procedures’<sup>2</sup> and the Ministry of Education’s RSE guide. New teachers are made familiar with the policies and associated procedures when being inducted into the school, with an annual refresher staff meeting, to ensure they understand RSE and wellbeing policies and practices. One recent change is that staff at HPS are trying, where possible, to organise aspects of school life by ways other than gender. The school is supportive of wellbeing and wellbeing-related learning, drawing on a range of data to support a school focus on wellbeing, such as NZCER’s wellbeing@school tools<sup>3</sup>, other wellbeing data, student voice, achievement, and progression data. Finally, a student wellbeing group works on 1-2 student-led projects per year, and adds their voice to matters relating to health and wellbeing.

#### ***Community connections***

*“We feed off the face-to-face communication... You know just seeing the people respond and just having the communication and conversation evolve naturally” (A, school 1).*

HPS is part of a Kāhui Ako with local schools. They have a focus on wellbeing as one achievement challenge. The across school teacher lead (a secondary school health education specialist) has provided PLD and on-going support for other teachers in the Kāhui Ako. The school has had several teachers attend a whole-day session on RSE, and makes use of the on-going opportunities for across school connections and collaboration. HPS has done work recently to strengthen connections to the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://insideout.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Creating-rainbow-inclusive-school-policies-and-procedures.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wellbeingatschool.org.nz/>

parent and whānau community, including around the two-yearly health education consultation. They have found that some misunderstandings about health education and RSE exist within the community, and have worked alongside parents and whānau to dispel misunderstandings, and to better seek and act on their feedback to inform health education. This included face-to-face meetings, held both in the morning and then evening, regular communication home in email newsletters, and working into school events where parents attend. All-in-all, the school aims to provide a welcoming environment that reflects and celebrates the diversity that exists within the school community. The school connects with a range of PLD providers and expert agencies around RSE issues, to support teacher practice in the classroom. Other community connections central to HPS are social workers, specialist health and community services, and the local School Community Officer from the Police.

### **Curriculum, teaching and learning**

*“I do think that good things take time. Like, if we’re going to do this well, we need to be prepared to take our time with it... we want it to be really nice and robust and we do value it, so putting time into it is important” (B, School 3).*

After the release of the RSE guide and support materials<sup>4</sup>, staff at HPS embarked on a process of reviewing RSE across the school. The teachers started from the position that RSE is holistic and situated within a strengths-based, wellbeing approach; and needs to begin at level 1 of the curriculum. Teachers worked collaboratively and took time to implement changes – recognising that RSE was, for some staff, outside their comfort zone. Using Family Planning’s *Navigating the Journey*<sup>5</sup> as a starting point, teachers explored progression of learning across curriculum levels 1-4, and discussed how best to enact a responsive RSE across the school year that connected to parent and whānau feedback around health education. Teachers explored the wide range of pedagogical practices that they found effective with the learners at HPS, including the following: open discussions, question box, normalising the language and conversations, inclusive language, upholding mana, responsive to arising learning needs, using picture books. Although, after this development work, some teachers were still more confident than others with RSE, the teaching staff were committed to working together to enact RSE that meets diverse ākongā needs.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://hpe.tki.org.nz/planning-and-teaching-resources/resource-collections/relationships-and-sexuality-education-guidelines-resource-collection/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/media/303623/fp\\_a-guide-for-yr1-10-resources\\_navigating-the-journey\\_2018.pdf](https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/media/303623/fp_a-guide-for-yr1-10-resources_navigating-the-journey_2018.pdf)

### 4.3 Questions to explore as the basis for recommendations leading to effective RSE practice

<p><b>Vignette/case study</b>  Hauora Primary School (HPS) is a state school in a main centre of New Zealand, with around 600 students from Years 1-8. They are part of a Kāhui Ako with other nearby schools.</p>	<p><b>Questions to explore as the basis for recommendations leading to effective RSE practice</b></p>
<p><b>Ethos and environment: school leadership, policies, and culture</b>  <i>"It's the school culture that diversity is seen as normal and is celebrated" (B, School 2).</i></p> <p>HPS prides itself of being supportive of diversity, and providing a positive, safe, and inclusive environment both inside and outside of classroom spaces. Teachers and staff are role models within the school, and pastoral support systems are well established. Recent work has been led by school leadership to review the school's policies, and this has resulted in updated anti-bullying, school uniform, and child protection policies, including with a focus on Rainbow students, as guided by InsideOUT's 'Creating Rainbow-Inclusive School Policies and Procedures' and the Ministry of Education's RSE guide. New teachers are made familiar with the policies and associated procedures when being inducted into the school, with an annual refresher staff meeting, to ensure they understand RSE and wellbeing policies and practices. One recent change is that staff at HPS are trying, where possible, to organise aspects of school life by ways other than gender. The school is supportive of wellbeing and wellbeing-related learning, drawing on a range of data to support a school focus on wellbeing, such as NZCER's wellbeing@school tools, other wellbeing data, student voice, achievement, and progression data. Finally, a student wellbeing group works on 1-2 student-led projects per year, and adds their voice to matters relating to health and wellbeing.</p>	<p><b>Ethos and environment: school leadership, policies, and culture</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (How) has your school updated your policies and procedures in ways which align with the messages in the RSE guide and/or support work towards the NELP?</li> <li>• What evidence do you have that these policies and procedures have been implemented in accordance with the school's stated documentation, and that the policies and procedures are 'working'? <i>In other words, what evidence do you have that your school is safe and inclusive for all?</i> What procedures are in place for non-compliance with policy?</li> <li>• How confident are you that all teachers are supportive of the RSE programme and deliver consistent messages through their teaching and in their interactions with students and other staff, and with whānau? What is your evidence for this?</li> <li>• How do all teachers model inclusive practice in ways related to RSE?</li> <li>• What changes might be needed, who will work on these, and what external support is needed to develop leader and teacher practice is needed?</li> <li>• What wellbeing, progression, and achievement data does your school collect, and how can you use this to inform whole school approaches to the promotion of student wellbeing?</li> <li>• To what extent does your school value RSE in the curriculum and as part of a whole school approach to the promotion of student wellbeing, and give the subject matter status alongside other learning? What is your evidence for this?</li> <li>• What are the procedures expected of all leaders and teachers in your school for supporting students in distress, or in situations where a teacher/leader knows or suspects a student is being abused or is in a risky situation impacting their health and wellbeing? How confident are you that all teachers and leaders know what to do (and what not to do) in these situations? What is your evidence for this?</li> <li>• How does the school enable student led action (or whole school approach actions that actively involve students in the process)?</li> </ul>

<p><b>Community connections</b>  <i>"We feed off the face-to-face communication... You know just seeing the people respond and just having the communication and conversation evolve naturally" (A, school 1).</i></p> <p>HPS is part of a Kāhui Ako with local schools. They have a focus on wellbeing as one achievement challenge. The across school teacher lead (a secondary school health education specialist) has provided PLD and on-going support for other teachers in the Kāhui Ako. The school has had several teachers attend a whole-day session on RSE, and makes use of the on-going opportunities for across school connections and collaboration. HPS has done work recently to strengthen connections to the parent and whānau community, including around the two-yearly health education consultation. They have found that some misunderstandings about health education and RSE exist within the community, and have worked alongside parents and whānau to dispel misunderstandings, and to better seek and act on their feedback to inform health education. This included face-to-face meetings, held both in the morning and then evening, regular communication home in email newsletters, and working into school events where parents attend. All-in-all, the school aims to provide a welcoming environment that reflects and celebrates the diversity that exists within the school community. The school connects with a range of PLD providers and expert agencies around RSE issues, to support teacher practice in the classroom. Other community connections central to HPS are social workers, specialist health and community services, and the local School Community Officer from the Police.</p>	<p><b>Community connections</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (How) do you, or could you, work with other schools to support teacher practice in RSE?</li> <li>• To what extent (and how) does your engagement with parents and whānau resonate with Hauora Primary School's vision for RSE? How are consistent messages acknowledged and promoted and how are inconsistencies managed and responded to?</li> <li>• What is your understanding of the Education and Training Act (2020) requirements for community consultation and are your processes consistent with this? If not, what needs to change?</li> <li>• What barriers and enablers do you face in conducting meaningful community consultation (for health education and RSE within)? What new actions / approaches for community engagement could you try?</li> <li>• What connections do you have to other community members that could support RSE in your school, or what new connections might be useful in this regard?</li> <li>• [In relation to policy and procedures above] how do you respond to/deal with parents and community members whose views do not support education RSE related policy and your school's approach to RSE?</li> <li>• How does your school notify parents about the provision of the RSE programme each year, and why this approach?</li> <li>• What are the expected procedures for students whose parents wish them to be withdrawn from specific sexuality education lessons?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Curriculum, teaching and learning</b>  <i>"I do think that good things take time. Like, if we're going to do this well, we need to be prepared to take our time with it... we want it to be really nice and robust and we do value it, so putting time into it is important" (B, School 3).</i></p> <p>After the release of the RSE guide and support materials, staff at HPS embarked on a process of reviewing RSE across the school. The teachers started from the position that RSE is holistic and situated within a strengths-based, wellbeing approach; and needs to begin at level 1 of the curriculum. Teachers worked collaboratively and took time to implement changes – recognising that RSE was, for some staff, outside their comfort zone. Using Family Planning's Navigating the Journey as a starting point, teachers explored progression of learning across curriculum levels 1-4, and discussed how best to enact a responsive RSE across the school year that connected to parent and whānau feedback around health education. Teachers explored the wide range of pedagogical practices that they found effective with the learners at HPS, including the</p>	<p><b>Curriculum, teaching and learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (How) do teachers in your school collaborate to support each other in relation to RSE? What new collaborations could be forged to support less confident teachers?</li> <li>• What pedagogical and RSE content knowledge tools do your teachers have in their toolboxes for teaching RSE? How can effective practice be shared across teaching teams, and the ongoing development of new knowledge and skills supported?</li> <li>• How are other essentials like literacy and digital fluency included and how are key competencies developed through RSE?</li> <li>• What PLD is needed for teachers? What is your evidence that this is the PLD needed? How can time be made for this, and who might be able to provide the PLD? What processes exist to ensure PLD is being implemented in practice?</li> </ul>

<p>following: open discussions, question box, normalising the language and conversations, inclusive language, upholding mana, responsive to arising learning needs, using picture books. Although, after this development work, some teachers were still more confident than others with RSE, the teaching staff were committed to working together to enact RSE that meets diverse ākongā needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How is evidence of student learning collected and how are assessment judgements made about learning progress and level of achievement for all students?</li><li>• How are teachers who lack confidence teaching RSE, or who hold personal values and beliefs inconsistent with RSE teaching, being supported to develop professionally and be compliant with education policy?</li><li>• How do you ensure that any cultural perspectives included in the teaching programme are reflective of the (cultural) world views of the community and at the same time that the messaging inherent in this knowledge is consistent with education policy?</li></ul>
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For further case studies of effective practice in RSE with accompanying questions to interrogate practice see: <https://hpe.tki.org.nz/planning-and-teaching-resources/resource-collections/relationships-and-sexuality-education-guidelines-resource-collection/school-case-studies/>

#### 4.4 Closing comments

In their introduction to the RSE guide, the Ministry of Education state their vision for RSE, which includes the following statement:

*“Relationships and sexuality education cannot be left to chance in schools. When this education begins from early childhood and builds consistently, year after year, it prepares young people for navigating a range of relationships throughout their childhood, teen years, and adult life.”* (Ministry of Education, 2020a, p. 7).

The idea of the learning that is too important to leave to chance is also reflected in *Te Mātaiaho: The Refreshed New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2022c) where ‘learning that matters’ is articulated within a progressions approach across a child’s years of schooling.

This small study has provided a glimpse into the landscape of RSE in New Zealand primary schools, from the perspectives of both school leaders and teachers. One limitation of phase one of the study was the low response rate of schools, most notably teacher respondents. However, phase two of the study enabled an exploration of issues in some depth. The findings of this study connect to other research and evaluation in New Zealand schools (for example Dixon et al., 2022b; ERO, 2018) which shows that RSE in practice is inconsistent, and that schools and teachers are grappling with a wide range of issues. These issues include teacher knowledge, confidence and capability, leadership of RSE, connections to the parent and whānau community, and the need to make time for planning, PLD, and teaching RSE.

While issues with RSE may be evident, the researchers drew upon appreciative inquiry to consider not only the challenging aspects in the RSE space, but the positive aspects as well, through the communication of findings and the production of a vignette and accompanying questions for a range of people working within RSE. This small study, then, offers all schools a range of practical strategies to (re)design a whole school approach to RSE.

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## 6. Appendices

### Appendix 1 Survey questions

#### *Principal/senior leader survey*

In what region of Aotearoa are you located?  
(Options for NZ regions)

What is your role in your school?

- Principal
- Senior leader
- Other

Are you aware that the Ministry of Education published up-dated guidance for relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in 2020?

- Yes
- No (go to question 6)

Have you used the 2020 RSE guide to help you to implement RSE in classrooms and as part of a whole-school approach to promoting student wellbeing in your school?

- Yes
- No (go to question 6)

How have you used the 2020 RSE guide?

- Open text here

How confident are you that you understand the community consultation requirements for health education?

- Likert scale (not confident at all, not very confident, neutral, somewhat confident, very confident)

In what ways have you consulted with your community?

How confident are you in relation to enacting a whole-school approach to promoting student wellbeing in connection to relationships, sexuality and gender identity?

- Likert scale (not confident at all, not very confident, neutral, somewhat confident, very confident)

What are some actions you have taken in recent years in your school to promote student wellbeing in connection to relationships, sexuality and gender identity?

What are some key issues that your school is grappling with in RSE and/or supporting ākonga with relationships, sexuality and gender-related issues, and what support or actions do you think are needed to help resolve these?

Is there anything else you want to tell us?

As a second phase of this research, we would like to conduct a group interview in three schools. This interview will be approximately 90 minutes long and will involve discussion, workshopping materials and an arts-based activity (mind-map). In this focus group/hui, we would like to include one principal or senior leader, and three teachers (one who teaches junior, middle and senior students). If you are interested in receiving information about being involved in this part of our research, please contact principal investigator Tracy Clelland at [tracy.clelland@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tracy.clelland@canterbury.ac.nz)

### ***Teacher survey***

In what region of Aotearoa are you located?  
(Options for NZ regions)

What age group do you generally teach?

- Junior primary (Years 1-3)
- Middle primary (Years 4-6)
- Senior primary (Years 7-8)

What is your role in your school?

- Teacher
- Syndicate leader or leader of learning (e.g. TIC health education)
- Kahui ako within or across school teacher
- Other

Are you aware that the Ministry of Education published up-dated guidance for relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in 2020?

- Yes
- No (go to question 7)

Have you used the 2020 RSE guide to help you to implement RSE in classrooms or as part of a whole-school approach to promoting student wellbeing in your school?

- Yes
- No (go to question 7)

How have you used the 2020 RSE guide?

What do you think is important for children to learn about in RSE?

Do you use external providers to support RSE in your school?

- Yes
- No (go to question 10)

Who do you use and how do you use them to support RSE in your school?

How confident do you feel to plan RSE that is responsive to identified learning needs of your ākonga?

- Likert scale (not confident at all, not very confident, neutral, somewhat confident, very confident)

How confident do you feel to integrate Mātauranga Māori and other cultural perspectives into RSE?

- Likert scale (not confident at all, not very confident, neutral, somewhat confident, very confident)

How confident do you feel to teach RSE?

- Likert scale (not confident at all, not very confident, neutral, somewhat confident, very confident)

How confident are you that you understand the community consultation requirements for health education?

- Likert scale (not confident at all, not very confident, neutral, somewhat confident, very confident)

In what ways have you consulted with your community?

What are some barriers to effective practice in RSE in your school and how are they hindering effective practice for you?

What are some enablers to effective practice in RSE in your school and how are they supporting effective practice for you?

What are some key issues that you are grappling with in RSE, and what support or actions do you think are needed to help resolve these?

Is there anything else you want to tell us?

As a second phase of this research, we would like to conduct a group interview in three schools. This interview will be approximately 90 minutes long and will involve discussion, workshopping materials and an arts-based activity (mind-map). In this focus group/hui, we would like to include one principal or senior leader, and three teachers (one who teaches junior, middle and senior students). If you are interested in receiving information about being involved in this part of our research, please contact principal investigator Tracy Clelland at [tracy.clelland@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tracy.clelland@canterbury.ac.nz)

## **Appendix 2 Hui guide**

Welcome, introductions and reminders

### *Discussion about RSE in your school*

- How is RSE taught in your school across the different levels?
- What do you take into consideration for planning for learning experiences in RSE?
- What resources do you use to support your planning and teaching? Where do you access these from?
- How has your school used the 2020 RSE guide to help you to implement RSE in classrooms?
- How has your school used the 2020 RSE guide to help you as part of a whole-school approach to promoting student wellbeing in your school?
- How do you use external providers to support RSE in your school? What benefits and risks do you see in this area?
- How do you integrate Mātauranga Māori and other cultural perspectives into RSE?
- Can you tell us about how you undertake the community consultation for health education?
- How well do you feel supported by whānau and other members of the school community in terms of RSE?
- What are some key issues that you are grappling with in RSE, and what support or actions do you think are needed to help resolve these?

### *Workshopping material from the MoE RSE guide*

- Extracts from the RSE guide on different pieces of card, with accompanying questions for group discussion:
  1. Key learning tables (pp. 30-33). What do we cover in our RSE programmes? What gaps exist in our programmes? How well do the ideas in the tables connect to our learners' needs?
  2. WSA diagram (p. 16) and table of school ethos/environment, curriculum and partnerships (p. 17). What are our strengths in these areas? What might we want to further develop?
  3. Extracts on RSE for Pacific, Māori, LGBTQI+, disabled ākonga (pp. 35-38). What do we already do well? What ideas does this material spark for us?