Draft specification
for Junior Cycle SPHE

NCCA consultation

Draft specification for Junior Cycle SPHE - NCCA consultation

The NCCA is currently updating the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum and as part of that work an updated junior cycle SPHE short course is now available for consultation. A key part of the consultation is feedback from individuals and groups who are interested in this area of young people's education.

The consultation will remain open until Friday, October 14th 2022.
You can send us your feedback by using this template and sending it to
SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie

Before completing the template please read the draft junior cycle SPHE short course at this link:
https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/consultations/.

Extracts from this are provided below.

Date Protection Statement

The NCCA is committed to protecting your privacy and does not collect any personal information about you through this survey, other than information that you provide by your own consent. Any personal information you volunteer to the NCCA will be respected in accordance with the highest standards of security and confidentiality in accordance with GDPR (2016) and the Data Protection Acts (1998 - 2018). NCCA, as a public body operating under the Open Data and Public Service Information Directive (2021), is required to publish publicly funded research. Further information on the NCCA's Data Protection Policy can be found here.
Any data from this will be further anonymized and aggregated and only made available after the final report is completed. Where a respondent selects 'yes' to the question *Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation*, respondents are consenting to having their name / organisation's name published with the list of written submission on www.ncca.ie

SPHE Short Course - Feedback

Name:	Email address:
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Are you contributing views as:	
An organisation	Yes
Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation on the NCCA website?	Yes
Name of organisation	Belong To

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

The outlined aim is very welcome. However, Belong To does not consider it to be sufficiently comprehensive in encompassing the purpose of Junior Cycle SPHE. For the delivery of the new SPHE curriculum to be effective, we recommend that this aim be underpinned by a number of goals, so as to provide clarity for students, parents, and teachers as to the purpose of SPHE class.

These goals are intended to underpin the aim of Junior Cycle SPHE, and shape the manner in which the Learning Outcomes are achieved and delivered. We recommend that these goals be fully integrated throughout all elements of the Strands and Learning Outcomes.

Recommended Goals:
It is recommended that the following goals be included in the curriculum:
- Appreciation and respect for diverse experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, and persons living with a disability.
- Provision of evidence-based, objective, and inclusive information.
- Promotion of consent, and prevention of bullying, abuse, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence.
- Positive and inclusive sexuality and sexual health.

Appreciate and respect diverse experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, and persons living with a disability.
- It is welcome that understanding of diverse experiences is included in some Strands, for example under Learning Outcome 1.6.
- However, it is necessary for this appreciation, respect, and sensitivity to be threaded through each Strand, and be integral to how each Learning Outcome is taught.
- In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 28 and 29, the right to education should include "the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms," and "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society."

Provision of evidence-based, objective, and inclusive information.
- The brevity and progressive nature of the new SPHE-RSE curriculum is very welcome, and marks a substantial step forward in how the topics covered by this short course are to be taught.
- However, it remains the case that a significant proportion of teachers who are scheduled for SPHE classes do not have specific training on areas covered by SPHE, or the curriculum itself.
- In light of this, and owing to the nature of areas covered by SPHE, particularly the RSE Strand, it is vital that the provision of objective, inclusive, and evidence-based information is a core element of the new curriculum.
- Within this goal, we recommend that teachers be advised to follow resources and supporting materials produced or endorsed by the NCCA and the Department of Education.

Promotion of consent, and prevention of bullying, abuse, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence.
- It is welcome that consent is both defined in the draft curriculum, and named within Learning Outcome 3.7, and that anti-bullying and healthy relationships are named under Learning Outcomes in Strands 3 and 4.
- However, it would be beneficial for the promotion of consent, and prevention of bullying, abusive, and violence to be threaded through the Learning Outcomes of all Strands.

- A recent survey by Active* Consent found that 29% of female, 10% of male, and 18% of non-binary third-level students reported "non-consensual penetration by incapacitation, force or threat of force" during their college years.[1]
- Published in 2019, the *School Climate Survey* revealed that a significant proportion of second-level LGBTQ+ students had experienced bullying behaviours in school; 86% felt deliberately excluded by peers, 74% were the focus of rumours or lies, 77% had been verbally harassed, and 38% had been physically harassed. Significantly, 43% of LGBTQ+ students had been sexually harassed in school.[2]
- The above figures show the need for bullying, abuse, and violence to be tackled on a holistic basis, given their prevalence to the lives of young people in Ireland today.
- Additionally, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has highlighted the need for these areas to be addressed through education:
  "Education must also be aimed at ensuring that ... no child leaves school without being equipped to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life. Basic skills should include ... the ability to make well-balanced decisions; to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner; and to develop a healthy lifestyle [and] good social relationships."[3]

Positive and inclusive sexuality and sexual health.
- The return of RSE to sit within the SPHE curriculum is a very positive development, and it is welcome that Strand 3 is dedicated to RSE, and that RSE is a mandatory component of the curriculum.
- The inclusion of mandatory RSE within the Junior Cycle SPHE framework brings Ireland fully in line with a number of international human rights standards, including:
  o meeting the recommendation of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education that comprehensive sex education be mandatory, available to all

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[1] L Burke et al, The Active* Consent / Union Of Students In Ireland Sexual Experiences Survey 2020: Sexual Violence And Harassment Experiences In A National Survey Of Higher Education Institutions (NUIG and USI 2020). Available at: https://www.consenthub.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Sexual-Experiences-Survey-2020.pdf
[2] Belong To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University. (2019). The 2019 Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To Youth Services. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Key-Findings-School-Climate-Survey-2019-1-1.pdf
[3] UNCRC, "General Comment No.1 (2001) Article 29(1): The Aims of Education" CRC/GC/2001/1 paragraph 2
https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsiQql8gX5Zxh0cQqSRzx6Ze%2f9ZHeLGwBpr0TgNk7n2KwvLTyUpYZrr02J%2f7DotFSXAJUShXkO3j7y04tA46d54m4kcgEa%2b5RtfThvOH2pDQf

without discrimination from the early stages of life, and that this education should take a holistic, scientific, and pluralistic perspective.[4]

- o meeting obligations under Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that State Parties "recognise the right of the child to the highest attainable standard of health," including sexual health and mental health.

- o meeting the recommendation from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stresses that sexual health education should be "based on scientific evidence and human rights standards", with "attention... given to gender equality, sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights, responsible parenthood and sexual behaviour and violence prevention, as well as to preventing early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections."[5]

- o responding to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's specific concern at the "lack of access to sexual and reproductive health education" for young people in Ireland, and meeting Committee's resulting recommendation that sexual and reproductive health education be included as a mandatory part of the school curriculum.[6]

- However, conversations around sexuality and sexual health are likely to arise under Learning Outcomes beyond Strand 3, for example in relation to alcohol use under Strand 2, and emotional wellbeing under Strand 4.

- As such, we recommend that positive and inclusive sexuality and sexual health be a key goal of the entire Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum, rather than for the RSE Strand alone.

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[4] UN General Assembly, "Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education: Sexual Education" A/65/162
https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/UNSR_Sexual_Education_2010.pdf accessed 21 September 2022.
[5] UNCRC, "General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child During Adolescence" CRC/C/GC/20 Para 61
https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsqIk irKQZLK2M58RF%2f5F0vH%2bg0BeHNYSXl2ulaeIW9Y1nEBWXdUgC9p%2fn2WzRfn3f2OKbL TV6FLd00z6ETEBFgBqtoQYQXmaXbNvVxfHrK5F
[6] UNCRC 'Concluding Observations: Ireland' (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4

The course is structured around four Strands and three cross-cutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the Learning Outcomes provide *clarity* on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the Learning Outcomes to be *relevant* to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

The Learning Outcomes under each of the four Strands in the curriculum are relevant to the lives, interests and needs of Junior Cycle students. It is welcome that the Strands cover a broad range of themes and topics. It is welcome that the draft curriculum specifically names a 'spiral' approach, which reflects how Learning Outcomes are to be considered overlapping and interconnected to ensure comprehensive delivery. However, clarity is required within each Strand to ensure that Learning Outcomes are achieved in an inclusive, evidence-based manner.

We recommend that topics covered under each Strand be taught through the lens of the four goals outlined above:
- Appreciation and respect for diverse experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, persons living with a disability, and disadvantaged communities.
- Provision of evidence-based, objective, and inclusive information.
- Promotion of consent, and prevention of bullying, abuse, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence.
- Positive and inclusive sexuality and sexual health.

Cross-cutting elements

Awareness

Inclusion of Sexual Orientation
The inclusion of gender and social norms under things that influence our sense of self is welcome. It would be useful to also include 'sexual orientation' within this list, as this has become increasingly relevant to the lives of 12-15 year olds.

Published in 2018, the LGBT Ireland Report found that age 12 is the most common age at which LGBTI+ people first realised their LGBTI+ identity.[7] However, the most common age of 'coming out', or telling others about one's LGBTI+ identity, was 16. The report further found that respondents aged 14-25 realised their LGBTI+ identity, and 'came out' to others, at a significantly younger age than older cohorts. As such, both gender identity and sexual orientation are key elements of understanding one's own sense of self, thoughts, emotions, and behaviour within the Junior Cycle age-range. It is important that understanding of LGBTQ+ identities is embedded within the cross-cutting element of 'Awareness' for both students and educators.

A Trauma-Informed Approach

It is also vital that awareness be integrated into the way teachers understand and deliver the SPHE curriculum, primarily by adopting a trauma-informed approach. A key priority for LGBTQ+ youth who took part in Belong To's focus group on the draft SPHE-RSE curriculum the adoption of a trauma-informed approach. Young people felt that some topics taught within SPHE were "detached" from their lived experience, or considered something that would not be relevant to Junior Cycle students until later in their teenage years. This primarily related to conversations around consent, sexual violence, abusive relationships, drug use, and LGBTQ+ identities.

Published in 2019, the RCNI 'Storm and Stress' report found that 80% of adolescents had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the previous 12 months.[8] While 20% of all adolescents had experienced serious sexual harassment, this figure stood at 68% among LGBT+ youth. In addition, Belong To's *School Climate Report*, also published in 2019, found that 43% of LGBTQ+ second-level students had experienced sexual harassment in school.[9] As such, teachers undertaking SPHE classes must be supported in taking a trauma-informed approach, to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of all students.

Dialogue

Dialogue is vital in ensuring students' meaningful participation in the SPHE curriculum, and the development of respect for the identities and experiences of others. It is welcome that the draft curriculum names a presumption of a diversity of backgrounds, identities, cultures, and experiences as aiding respectful dialogue. The suggested goals outlined above, particularly

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[7]

[8] https://www.rcni.ie/wp-content/uploads/RCNI-Storm-and-Stress-FINAL.pdf
[9] Belong To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University. (2019). The 2019 Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To Youth Services. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Key-Findings-School-Climate-Survey-2019-1-1.pdf

'appreciation and respect for diverse experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, persons living with a disability, and disadvantaged communities' and 'Provision of evidence-based, objective, and inclusive information', will aid in the conduct of respectful dialogue.

The use of "critical and participative pedagogies in SPHE" as outlined in the Rationale of the draft curriculum is essential to effective dialogue. However, this participation must be enabled by the creation of a safe and supportive environment by the class teacher, where students feel comfortable asking questions and speaking openly. The Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights maintains that "States parties should provide a safe and supportive environment for adolescents that ensures the opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their health, [and] to acquire appropriate information."[10] Adoption of this approach is in line with the updated *Looking at Our School 2022* quality framework for post-primary schools, which adopts the Lundy model of child participation for student participation.[11] As noted by the quality framework document, one of the four aspects of the Lundy model is that children/students be given "safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view".

The creation of a safe, supportive, and respectful classroom is particularly important for LGBTQ+ students, 73% of whom feel unsafe at school, and one third of whom feel that their classmates are not accepting of LGBTQ+ identities.[12] This point was also stressed by LGBTQ+ youth who participated in Belong To's focus group on the draft SPHE-RSE curriculum. Some young people mentioned high rates of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia within their school, among both staff and students, and therefore felt neither safe nor comfortable asking questions and discussing their experiences in SPHE class. Many young people recalled distressing incidents of their identity and rights being 'debated' in the classroom, including teacher-led discussions on marriage equality, adoption by LGBTQ+ couples, and the participation of trans athletes in sport.

While it is important for students to be active participants in their learning journey, and to partake in open and critical dialogue, this should not come at the expense of the dignity of students with

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[10] UN Committee on Economic Social, and Cultural Rights, "General Comment No. 14: The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health (Art. 12)" E/C.12/2000/4
https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4538838d0.pdf
[11] Department of Education. (2022). 'Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools'. Department of Education: Dublin. Available at:
https://assets.gov.ie/232730/4afcbe10-7c78-4b49-a36d-e0349a9f8fb7.pdf
[12] Belong To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University. (2019). The 2019 Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To Youth Services. Available at:
https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Key-Findings-School-Climate-Survey-2019-1-1.pdf

diverse identities. To support teachers in gaining a deeper understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences, and to establish which 'debates' are not appropriate for the classroom, it is recommended that all teachers timetabled for SPHE classes undertake Belong To's elearning module 'Creating Inclusive Schools and Youth Services'[13] alongside the use of resources on LGBTQ+ inclusion developed by the NCCA and the Department of Education.

Reflection and action

It is welcome that the new curriculum specifically names SPHE as a "praxis", and a key element to reflection and action. In addition to "enabling students to consider how the learning can inform their choices, behaviour, and relationships", we recommend that the process of reflection and action place an emphasis on harm-reduction, and the promotion of help-seeking behaviours.

Harm reduction has been defined as "...the philosophical and practical development of strategies so that the outcomes of drug use are as safe as is situationally possible. It involves the provision of factual information, resources, education, skills and the development of attitude change, in order, that the consequences of drug use for the users, the community and the culture have minimal negative impact."[14] Although the concept of harm reduction originated as an approach to tackling the harms of drug use, it is now commonly applied to other behaviours which may have negative consequences, including sexual activity. In the context of SPHE and RSE, providing rights-based education goes hand-in-hand with a harm reduction approach. Students should be given all necessary information and supports to empower them to keep themselves safe, to understand the contexts in which their decisions are made, and to make the choices that are safe for them. In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and young people have the right to "acquire life skills, to obtain adequate and age-appropriate information, and to make appropriate health behaviour choices."[15]

LGBTQ+ youth who participated in Belong To's focus group on the draft SPHE curriculum voiced overwhelmingly that conversations related to addiction, alcohol consumption, smoking, drug use, and sexual activity were primarily taught from an abstentionist perspective. Young people

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[13] Available at; www.belongto.org/e-learning-course/
[14] Watson, M. (1991) 'Harm Reduction - Why do it?' *International Journal on Drug Policy* Vol. 2 (5), pp. I3-15.
[15] UNCRC, "General Comment No. 4 (2003) Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child" CRC/GC/2003/4
https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsiQql8g X5Zxh0cQqSRzx6ZfAICbDzm5DUreYo1tlYOkZcPE%2bQh98dgWJaknr%2bF7jm8Gj6iAJrcNX5Si7IU8 Iv0aykfsQrKYbxtZATWk0oeej

reported that many teachers appeared to be under the impression that these topics were not relevant to Junior Cycle students, and would be developed on further at Senior Cycle when "necessary" and "appropriate". However, young people who participated in the focus group discussed how they or their peers had engaged in so-called "unhealthy" or "risky" behaviours, and felt embarrassed and ashamed by the way in which these themes were approached by their teachers. This led to a large proportion of young people disengaging from SPHE class, as the teaching was considered irrelevant and patronising. A number of young people noted that the "just say no" perspective taken by many teachers in SPHE class discouraged other students from seeking support around difficulties such as cannabis dependence, and safe alcohol consumption.

The group felt that a harm-reduction approach, similar to that adopted by many youth work services, was vital to ensuring that students are equipped with the knowledge needed to keep themselves and their peers safe. We recommend that this include how to keep yourself safe in relation to alcohol consumption, sexual activity, and substance use, and also practical advice on how to remove oneself from these situations if faced with peer pressure. A harm-reduction approach is already prominent in Strand 3, for example Learning Outcome 3.8 "explain the importance of safer sexual activity with reference to methods of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs)", and Learning Outcome 3.9 as relates to the influence of digital media, including pornography. This approach is welcome, and should be embedded in all Strands.

Under 'reflation and action', we recommend that help-seeking behaviour and disclosure of abuse or bullying be encouraged among all students. However, a safe and supportive environment, both in the classroom and school-wide, is crucial in enabling help-seeking behaviour. As mentioned previously, 73% of LGBTQ+ students have reported feeling unsafe at second-level school. Despite high rates of verbal harassment (77%), peer exclusion (86%), physical harassment (38%), and sexual harassment (43%) experienced by LGBTQ+ students during school time, only 40% of LGBTQ+ young people reported incidents of bullying to school staff, and less than half of LGBTQ+ youth reported this behaviour to a family member.[16] In addition, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience mental health challenges; 93% of LGBTQ+ young people struggled with anxiety, stress, or depression during the Covid-19 pandemic compared with 53% of the general youth population.[17]

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[16] Belong To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University. (2019). The 2019 Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To Youth Services. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Key-Findings-School-Climate-Survey-2019-1-1.pdf
[17] Belong To Youth Services. (2021). LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later. Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-

Through our work with LGBTQ+ youth, we know that feelings of exclusion, neglecting the importance of mental health difficulties relative to other LGBTQ+ peers, not being 'out' as LGBTQ+, or an unaccepting home or school environment may prevent LGBTQ+ young people from seeking help in relation to harassment, bullying, problematic substance use, and mental health challenges. Additional actions, such as establishing an LGBTQ+ club, informing students of the school's anti-bullying policy and procedures, and developing a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ youth, are required to ensure that LGBTQ+ students feel able to seek help and support.

In terms of understanding and enacting the SPHE curriculum as a "praxis", it is important that reflection and action are adopted in relation to the curriculum itself, and the school environment. We recommend that students be encouraged to give feedback on how the curriculum has been taught, what they have learned, and their experience of learning from it by means of a process independent of their Classroom-Based Assessment. This may take the form of an anonymous survey, with students given the option of putting their name forward for further discussion through a focus group. Adoption of this approach is in line with the updated *Looking at Our School 2022* quality framework for post-primary schools, which adopts the Lundy model of child participation for student participation.[18] As noted by the quality framework document, one of the four aspects of the Lundy model is that children/students be "facilitated to express their view", and that "the view must be acted on as appropriate". It would also be worthwhile for the NCCA to conduct a review of students' experience of the new curriculum 3-5 years following its implementation, to ensure that the Learning Outcomes have been achieved and fully understood by both students and staff.

We recommend that the framing of SPHE as a "praxis" also be applied to the whole-school community, incorporating Anti-Bullying Policies and Procedures, wellbeing initiatives, and school culture and ethos. LGBTQ+ young people who joined the Belong To focus group named their frustration at discussing mental health and wellbeing in SPHE class, only to be ignored or dismissed by teachers or school management when voicing the stress and pressure they were under on account of a substantial workload and competing deadlines for different subjects. As part of the roll-out of the new SPHE curriculum, we recommend that schools be encouraged and supported to set up a Wellbeing Committee comprising both staff and students, providing a

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content/uploads/2021/06/LGBTI-Life-in-Lockdown-1-Year-Later_BeLonG-To-Youth-Services.pdf; Young Social Innovators (2020). Covid-19 Youth 'Check In' Survey 2020. Young Social Innovators: Dublin. Available at: https://mailchi.mp/youngsocialinnovators.ie/ysi-checkin-report

[18] Department of Education. (2022). 'Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools'. Department of Education: Dublin. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/232730/4afcbe10-7c78-4b49-a36d-e0349a9f8fb7.pdf

platform for meaningful engagement and concrete solutions to school factors that negatively impact students' mental health. We recommend that all school staff be encouraged to undertake training in inclusion and diversity, so as to promote a more positive, welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ students, young people living with disabilities, and youth from other minority groups. These interventions are supported by research; the *School Climate* Survey found that a higher level of staff support for LGBTQ+ students in second-level schools increased LGBTQ+ students' feelings of acceptance by the wider student body by 45%, increased LGBTQ+ students' feelings of belonging in school by 34%, and reduced the likelihood of LGBTQ+ students missing school days on account of feeling unsafe by 20%.[19]

Finally, the experiences of diverse and minority communities, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, persons living with a disability, and disadvantaged communities, should be integrated to class teaching and resources in subjects other than SPHE. Representation of minority identities across the school curriculum supports the broader inclusion and understanding outcomes of the SPHE curriculum and helps to bring these learnings beyond the SPHE space and into students' everyday lives. Regarding LGBTQ+ young people, integration of LGBTQ+ identities across school subjects has been found to positively impact LGBTQ+ students' school experience. The 2019 *School Climate Survey* found that including LGBTQ+ identities and experiences across the school curriculum increased LGBTQ+ students' feeling of acceptance by their peers by 26%, their feeling of belonging in school by 20%, and reduced their likelihood of missing school days on account of feeling unsafe by 9%.[20]

Strands

Strand 1

1.1 explore the physical, social, and emotional changes that happen during adolescence
- We recommend that Learning Outcome include information on reproductive health, which can be returned to under Strand 3 as part of the 'spiral' approach.

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[19] Belong To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University. (2019). The 2019 Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To Youth Services. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Key-Findings-School-Climate-Survey-2019-1-1.pdf
[20] Belong To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University. (2019). The 2019 Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To Youth Services. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Key-Findings-School-Climate-Survey-2019-1-1.pdf

1.2 reflect on their personal strengths and values and how they bring these into relationships
- No comments under this Learning Outcome, it is welcome, and we encourage its retention.

1.3 explore how life experiences can impact on self-esteem and identify ways to nurture a positive sense of self-worth
- The recommended inclusion of the goal 'Appreciation and respect for diverse experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, and persons living with a disability', is particularly relevant to this Learning Outcome.

1.4 appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum
- This is an important and welcome inclusion, and we encourage its retention.

1.5 reflect on gender equity and how gender stereotypes impact on expectations, behaviour and relationships
- Consider expanding this Learning Outcome to include the words 'including friendships, family, and romantic/sexual relationships'.

1.6 discuss experiences/situations of bias, inequality or exclusion based on race/ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation and devise ways to create more inclusive environments

- The listed characteristics are an important inclusion, and we encourage their retention.
- We recommend including gender expression as a separate, additional element under the named characteristics.
- We recommend also including disabilities.
- We recommend explicitly naming members of the Traveller community, in addition to race/ethnicity, in line with the Equal Status Acts.
- In line with the cross-cutting element "reflection and action" outlined above, engagement with this Learning Outcome might include students discussing how welcoming their school is for Traveller, racial, and ethnic minority students, and LGBTQ+ young people, and practical actions for inclusion. Regarding LGBTQ+ students, this may include setting up an LGBTQ+ club or introducing a gender-neutral uniform option. Including such actions brings the new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum closer in line with the updated *Looking at Our School 2022* quality framework for post-primary schools, which encourages

students to be given space to express their view, with their view acted on as appropriate, in line with the Lundy model of child participation.[21]

1.7 communicate in a respectful and effective manner, including demonstrating the capacity to understand the perspectives of, and empathize with others
-   This Learning Outcome could be strengthened by including the different ways in which neurodivergent people communicate and express empathy in teaching resources.

1.8 demonstrate self-management skills, including setting personal goals, delaying gratification, and self-regulation of thoughts, emotions and impulses
-   This Learning Outcome could be strengthened by including the different ways in which neurodivergent people engage in self-management and self-regulation behaviours.
-   As the behaviours covered under this Learning Outcome evolve with age, these should be revisited through the 'spiral' approach.

Strand 2

2.1 evaluate what being healthy might look like for an adolescent, including how food, physical activity, sleep/rest and hygiene contribute to health and wellbeing
-   The phrasing of this Learning Outcome would benefit from consultation with Bodywhys. It is important to convey the necessary message behind the objectives without potentially reinforcing a binary view of 'healthy/good' vs. 'unhealthy/bad' which can be triggering for those experiencing disordered eating and other disordered behaviours. Attaching values to food at this developmental stage can be particularly dangerous and so caution is advised.
-   Through the expanded 'awareness' cross-cutting theme outlined previously, this Learning Outcome requires awareness of students' limitations to make decisions about their nutrition and exercise depending on their age, disability, and socioeconomic circumstances.

2.2 investigate how unhealthy products (cigarettes, e-cigarettes, alcohol, and snack and diet foods) are marketed and advertised to appeal to young people
-   The phrasing of this Learning Outcome would benefit from consultation with Bodywhys. It is important to convey the necessary message behind the objectives without potentially reinforcing a binary view of 'healthy/good' vs. 'unhealthy/bad' which can be triggering for

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[21] Department of Education. (2022). 'Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools'. Department of Education: Dublin. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/232730/4afcbe10-7c78-4b49-a36d-e0349a9f8fb7.pdf

those experiencing disordered eating and other disordered behaviours. Attaching values to food at this developmental stage can be particularly dangerous and so caution is advised.
- It is important for critical consumption of media to be included as an element of the supporting teaching and resource materials for this Learning Outcome.

2.3 analyse the supports and challenges for young people when it comes to making healthy choices about smoking, drinking alcohol and other addictive substances/behaviours, and discuss how the challenges can be overcome in real-life situations
- Through the expanded 'awareness' cross-cutting theme outlined previously, this Learning Outcome requires awareness of the differing contexts within which students make choices around use of cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol depending on their identity, disability, and socioeconomic circumstances.

2.4 demonstrate skills and strategies to help make informed choices that support health and wellbeing and apply them in real-life situations that may be stressful and/or involve difficult peer situations
- No comments under this Learning Outcome, it is welcome, and we encourage its retention.

2.5 discuss the physical, social and legal consequences of their own or others' use of addictive substances
- As per Learning Outcome 2.3, it is recommended that this Learning Outcome read 'substances/behaviours'.
- Through the expanded 'awareness' cross-cutting theme outlined previously, this Learning Outcome requires a harm-reduction approach, and sensitivity to the differing contexts within which students may have encountered addictive substances or behaviours, depending on their family and socioeconomic circumstances.

2.6 consider scenarios where, for example, using alcohol, nicotine, drugs, food and screens might be used to cope with unpleasant feelings or stress and discuss possible healthy ways of coping
- The phrasing of this Learning Outcome would benefit from consultation with Bodywhys. It is important to convey the necessary message behind the objectives without potentially reinforcing a binary view of 'healthy/good' vs. 'unhealthy/bad' which can be triggering for those experiencing disordered eating and other disordered behaviours. Attaching values to food at this developmental stage can be particularly dangerous and so caution is advised.

2.7 assess the benefits and difficulties associated with their online world
- This Learning Outcome could be strengthened by making specific reference to concrete examples of such benefits and difficulties, such as cyberbullying, harmful content online, connecting with friends, and digital literacy.

2.8 discuss how to share personal information, images, opinions and emotions in a safe, responsible and respectful manner online and face-to-face
- Similarly, to the phrasing of 'healthy' behaviours, the phrasing of this Learning Outcome regarding 'responsibility' would benefit from consultation with Women's Aid, the National Women's Council, and rape crisis organisations.

- Both this Learning Objective and related teaching materials must ensure a non-judgemental approach, which acknowledges the reality that many victims of online sexual harassment/abuse through intimate images have shared that image initially with someone they believed to be trustworthy.
- Recent research by Women's Aid highlights the magnitude of the issues of victim blaming and stigma. It is vital that students who may be impacted by image-based sexual abuse, online targeted harassment, and cyberbullying are not deterred from seeking support should they feel that they have not behaved in a 'responsible' way.
- We recommend that resources also refer to relevant legislation, including the incoming *Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill*, which will provide additional protections to those who experience bullying and abuse online.

2.9 examine the risks and consequences of sharing sexual imagery online and explore why young people do this
- See recommendations under Learning Outcome 2.8.
- We recommend that the phrasing of this Learning Outcome be reconsidered in relation to 'consequences', to avoid victim-blaming and the risk of deterring students from reporting instances of image-based sexual abuse.
- We recommend that teaching materials related to this Learning Outcome explore the legal context of these behaviours, including reference to the *Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020*, also known as 'Coco's Law', which covers online abuse, cyberbullying, and image-based sexual abuse.

2.10 demonstrate how to access appropriate and trustworthy information about health.
- We recommend that this Learning Outcome be rephrased to mention both physical and mental health.

<u>Strand 3</u>

Recommended inclusion – reproductive healthcare and accessing termination of pregnancy services
- It is recommended that an additional Learning Outcome be included to cover reproductive healthcare and access to termination of pregnancy services.
- We recommend that student and staff resources explicitly name the HSE My Options website and helpline as the source for reliable and unbiased information on the options available to pregnant people.
- We recommend that teaching materials cover where and how to access information on termination of pregnancy (GP, HSE My Options, and family planning centres).

- Teaching materials should also explicitly address the existence of 'rogue crisis pregnancy agencies'; unregulated crisis pregnancy services which present as unbiased but may provide unreliable or anti-abortion information.[22]
- Resources for teachers should make clear that information provided to students must be objective and evidence-based and that a school's ethos or patronage cannot be a barrier to accessing same.

3.1 explore human sexuality - what it means, how it is expressed, what healthy sexual expression might look like and the difference between sexuality and sexual activity
- We recommend that the content of this Learning Outcome closely align with that of Learning Outcomes 2.8 and 2.9.
- Teaching materials related to this Learning Outcome should acknowledge and discuss the existence of asexual identities, defined as people who feel little or no sexual attraction.

3.2 discuss the values, behaviours and skills that help to make, maintain and end relationships respectfully (friends, family and romantic/intimate relationships)
- The inclusion of friends and family relationships is very welcome here, and its retention is strongly encouraged.

3.3 identify signs of healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships
- As per Learning Outcome 3.2, it is recommended that this Learning Outcome be expanded to specifically name friends, family, and romantic/intimate relationships.
- LGBTQ+ young people who spoke to Belong To as part of this submission highlighted how abusive behaviours within friendships is rarely discussed in detail, beyond the context of bullying. Young people also stressed the need for SPHE to include teaching on abusive family relationships, as this can be hidden to those outside the family unit and may not be well understood by those experiencing the abuse.
- The inclusion of family relationships is particularly important for LGBTQ+ young people, 56% of whom reported that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, they were not fully accepted in their home environment,[23] and over half of whom described their home environment as "not good".[24]

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22 www.thejournal.ie/unregulated-crisis-pregnancy-services-in-ireland-5650166-Jan2022/
23 Belong To Youth Services. (2021). LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later. Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. Available at: www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LGBTI-Life-in-Lockdown-1-Year-Later_BeLonG-To-Youth-Services.pdf
24 Belong To Youth Services. (2020). LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. Available at : www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/LGBTI-Life-in-Lockdown-Key-Findings.pdf

3.4 examine relationship difficulties experienced by young people in friendships, family relationships, and romantic/intimate relationships
- No comments under this Learning Outcome, it is welcome, and we encourage its retention.

3.5 explore the pressures to become sexually intimate and discuss ways to show respect for people's choices
- This Learning Outcome would be strengthened by specifically naming "the importance of consent", so that discussions of consent are not limited to Learning Outcome 3.7.
- As per Learning Outcome 3.1, we recommend that teaching materials related to this Learning Outcome acknowledge and discuss the existence of asexual identities, defined as people who feel little or no sexual attraction.

3.6 communicate in an effective manner that can support responsible decision-making about relationships and sexual health that are age and developmentally appropriate
- Similarly, to the phrasing of 'healthy' behaviours, the phrasing of this Learning Outcome regarding 'responsibility' would benefit from consultation with Women's Aid, the National Women's Council, and rape crisis organisations, and may be better phrased as "safe decision-making".

3.7 appreciate the importance of giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships, from the perspective of building caring interpersonal relationships and from a legal perspective
- This Learning Outcome would be strengthened with specific reference to the 'OMFG' (ongoing, mutual, and freely given) model of consent.
- To normalise the concept of consent in sexual relationships, it is important for other Strands to acknowledge that consent is a cross-cutting approach that applies to situations other than sexual/intimate relationships, including friendships and family relationships.
- Upon devising teaching materials for this Learning Outcome, engagement with the Active* Consent project at the University of Galway is encouraged.

3.8 explain the importance of safer sexual activity with reference to methods of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Teaching materials related to this Learning Outcome must be LGBTQ+ inclusive, to ensure that LGBTQ+ young people are provided with reliable and evidence-based information and are not reliant on seeking information related to their sexual health online.
- LGBTQ+ youth who joined Belong To's focus group on the draft SPHE curriculum voiced their frustration of the absence of sexual health education in their schools or, where it was provided, a focus on preventing pregnancy rather than a holistic approach to sexual health.

- Research conducted by Belong To in 2021 found that, during the year prior, only 51% of sexually active LGBTQ+ youth aged 18 and over used protection when engaging in sexual activity, and 76% did not access a sexual health check-up.[25]
- This research demonstrates the need for comprehensive and inclusive sexual health education from a young age, including information on how and where to avail of free or low-cost sexual health check-ups.

3.9 investigate the influence of digital media (in particular, the influence of pornography) on young people's understanding, expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression
- This Learning Outcome is an important and welcome inclusion.
- The inclusion of this Learning Outcome meets a recent recommendation by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, that States take a holistic approach to addressing the risks posed by digital media, including pornography.[26]
- Gendered expectations and stereotypes, and the expectations faced by LGBTQ+ people, should be specifically addressed as part of the teaching resources for this Learning Outcome.
- It is vital that teachers are well resourced and provided with training on this nuanced area.

3.10 demonstrate how to access appropriate and trustworthy advice, support or services related to relationships and sexual health.
- No comments under this Learning Outcome, it is welcome, and we encourage its retention.

Strand 4

4.1 discuss the fluid nature of emotional wellbeing and ways to protect and nurture it
- Awareness of minority identities and experiences is particularly important for this Learning Outcome.

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[25] Belong To Youth Services. (2021). LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later. Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. Available at: www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LGBTI-Life-in-Lockdown-1-Year-Later_BeLonG-To-Youth-Services.pdf
[26] UNCRC, "General Comment No. 25 (2021) on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment" CRC/C/GC/25 https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsqIkirKQ ZLK2M58RF%2f5F0vEG%2bcAAx34gC78FwvnmZXGFUl9nJBDpKR1dfKekJxW2w7O%2b3nRpHZVn UfEOn49xuIgBmsRD7nyWwxR%2fYnIpnMdh

- LGBTQ+ students experience high rates of harassment and exclusion at second level: 73% feel unsafe at school, 77% experience verbal harassment, 86% experience peer exclusion, 38% experience physical harassment, and 43% experience sexual harassment.[27]
- In addition, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience mental health challenges; 93% of LGBTQ+ young people struggled with anxiety, stress, or depression during the Covid-19 pandemic compared with 53% of the general youth population.[28]
- Research by Belong To shows that LGBTQ+ inclusion in the curriculum, high levels of staff support for LGBTQ+ students, and proactive intervention by staff who overhear homophobic remarks, all increase the rates of acceptance and belonging felt by LGBTQ+ students.[29]
- As such, we recommend that conversations around emotional wellbeing do not focus solely on what the student as an individual can do to protect and nurture their emotional wellbeing. Class discussions could explore what can be done on a collective, school, or community level to create more nurturing environments in which the emotional wellbeing of others is also protected. This approach brings the new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum closer in line with the updated *Looking at Our School 2022* quality framework for post-primary schools, which names "Centrality of students' wellbeing" as one of the ten key principles underpinning the framework.[30]

4.2. recognise the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviour and how these impact on how we respond to different situations
- This Learning Outcome could be strengthened by including the different ways in which neurodivergent people communicate and express empathy in teaching resources.

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[27] Belong To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University. (2019). The 2019 Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To Youth Services. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Key-Findings-School-Climate-Survey-2019-1-1.pdf

[28] Belong To Youth Services. (2021). LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later. Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LGBTI-Life-in-Lockdown-1-Year-Later_BeLonG-To-Youth-Services.pdf; Young Social Innovators (2020). Covid-19 Youth 'Check In' Survey 2020. Young Social Innovators: Dublin. Available at: https://mailchi.mp/youngsocialinnovators.ie/ysi-checkin-report

[29] Belong To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University. (2019). The 2019 Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To Youth Services. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Key-Findings-School-Climate-Survey-2019-1-1.pdf

[30] Department of Education. (2022). 'Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools'. Department of Education: Dublin. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/232730/4afcbe10-7c78-4b49-a36d-e0349a9f8fb7.pdf

4.3 consider the impact of stress and be able to draw upon a variety of techniques to help self-regulate emotions and deal with the day-to-day stresses of life

- Connected to previous recommendations under the cross-cutting theme of 'Reflection and Action', it would be useful for this Learning Outcome to explore the causes of stress for students in the class, and to discuss whether there is anything the school could do to reduce the level of stress experienced by students.

4.4 discuss ways to support themselves in challenging times and where/how to seek support, if needed

- Student and staff resources accompanying this Learning Outcome could include a comprehensive list of available support services, compiled by the NCCA and made directly available to students.
- We recommend that this list include a breakdown of free support services, such as the HSE 50808 text line; specialised support services, such as Belong To's supports for LGBTQ+ youth; sources of information on youth mental health, such as SpunOut and Jigsaw; and the process of referral to CAMHs.

4.5 explore the potential impact of substance use on mental health

- See recommendations under Learning Outcomes 2.2 - 2.6 regarding the adoption of a harm-reduction approach and awareness of students' personal circumstances.

4.6 examine different kinds of abusive and bullying behaviour that can occur in online and face-to-face interactions

- A definition of bullying, as distinct from other abusive or harassing behaviours, should be included earlier in the SPHE course.
- We recommend that this Learning Outcome be closely related to other Learning Outcomes that cover the areas of relationships and abuse, such as Learning Outcomes 1.3, 1.7, 3.2, and 3.3.

4.7 explain why noticing and responding to abusive or bullying behaviour is important and discuss appropriate responses (why, how, where and when to report)

- As per recommendations under Learning Outcome 4.6, we recommend that this be integrated to earlier Strands so that bullying is addressed in each year of Junior Cycle.
- This Learning Outcome is a good opportunity for teachers to engage with students on the effectiveness of the school's anti-bullying policy, and to understand whether students are aware of the procedures and protections in place should they wish to report bullying. Including such actions brings the new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum closer in line with the updated *Looking at Our School 2022* quality framework for post-primary schools, which

encourages students to be given space to express their view, with their view acted on as appropriate, in line with the Lundy model of child participation.[31]
- A review of the whole-school approach is particularly important for LGBTQ+ students, 45% of whom have reported that second-level school staff did not intervene when homophobic remarks were made in their presence.[32]
- Similarly, 60% of LGBTQ+ students did not report instances of LGBTQ+ bullying to school staff. Among those who did report bullying, 60% felt that intervention by school staff was ineffective.[33]

4.8 identify actions young people can take, without putting themselves at risk, in situations where they are aware of incidents of abusive behaviour or bullying happening
- Similarly to recommendations under Learning Outcome 4.8, we recommend that teachers be encouraged to put these recommendations into practice in collaboration with students.

4.9 demonstrate how to access appropriate and trustworthy information and services aimed at supporting young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health.
- See recommendations under Learning Outcome 4.4.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

[31] Department of Education. (2022). 'Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools'. Department of Education: Dublin. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/232730/4afcbe10-7c78-4b49-a36d-e0349a9f8fb7.pdf

[32] Belong To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University. (2019). The 2019 Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To Youth Services. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Key-Findings-School-Climate-Survey-2019-1-1.pdf

[33] Belong To Youth Services and the Teachers College, Columbia University. (2019). The 2019 Irish School Climate Survey: Key Findings. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To Youth Services. Available at: https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Key-Findings-School-Climate-Survey-2019-1-1.pdf

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

The inclusion of CBA for the updated SPHE inclusion is a welcome development. This is an important opportunity for students to reflect on their learnings, and to share their reflections with peers. It also highlights that SPHE should be considered of equal importance with other Junior Cycle subjects. It is further welcome that the curriculum clearly states that the SPHE CBA "is not about setting tasks in order to accumulate a record of marks". Young people who joined Belong To's focus group on the new SPHE curriculum were wary of the inclusion of "grading" for SPHE, as they were concerned that this would place additional stress and pressure on top of existing workloads.

The diversity of CBA formats, including digital, written texts, posters, audio-visual or multi-modal, is a very positive development. If feasible, we recommend that the SPHE class group be offered the opportunity to vote on whether the CBA is completed in Second or Third Year, keeping in mind the number of CBAs ongoing in other subjects as part of the new Junior Cycle structure.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

The draft Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum is comprehensive, well thought through, and ambitious in the breadth of areas to be covered in 100 hours.
However, as highlighted by teachers who partook in the NCCA's previous consultation on the draft Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum, access to Initial Teacher education and professional development or CPD courses for those teaching SPHE is vital to the successful implementation of the curriculum.[34] The "importance of quality teaching", "schools as learning organisations", and "responsibility of schools for the quality of education they provide" are three of the key principles underpinning the updated *Looking at Our School 2022* quality framework for post-primary

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[34] National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2022). SPHE Background Paper: Consultation Report. NCCA: Dublin. Available at: ncca.ie/media/5363/sphe-background-paper-consultation-report_en.pdf

schools.[35] As such, we recommend that investment in comprehensive SPHE training be made a priority by the Department of Education, to ensure that schools and teachers are facilitated to ensure that the new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum is taught in a manner that reaches the Department's quality framework standard.

LGBTQ+ youth who engaged in Belong To's focus group also raised this as an issue. Young people noted teachers' reliance on textbooks, which were sometimes outdated, and their hesitancy to answer questions on topics that delved deeper into areas covered at a surface-level in textbooks. LGBTQ+ young people felt a great deal of sympathy for well-meaning teachers who were well intentioned, but poorly equipped to teach the SPHE curriculum in full.

Appendix: Belong To focus group with LGBTQ+ young people on the draft Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum

Introduction

In advance of Belong To's submission to the NCCA on the draft revised curriculum for Junior Cycle SPHE and RSE, it was decided that a focus group should be conducted with the young people engaged in Belong To's youth groups.

In early August 2022, two focus groups were conducted with a total of 30 young people. The focus groups took place during the regular youth group hours, with IndividualiTy, a group for young people who are trans, non-binary, or questioning their gender identity, and Ladybirds, a group for lesbian, gay, bisexual women and non-binary young people. The focus groups were supported by Youth Workers and Volunteers, and facilitated by Belong To's Communications and Policy Officer.

So as to allow an open, non-guided discussion on the draft curriculum, it was suggested that a discussion within the groups framed by the four strands of the draft curriculum would work best. The young people agreed with this approach.

The four strands under the new Junior Cycle SPHE-RSE curriculum are 'Understanding myself and others', 'Making healthy choices', 'Relationships and sexuality', and 'Emotional

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[35] Department of Education. (2022). 'Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools'. Department of Education: Dublin. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/232730/4afcbe10-7c78-4b49-a36d-e0349a9f8fb7.pdf

wellbeing'. The Communications and Policy Officer read the learning objectives of each strand aloud, and a group conversation followed each strand, with notes taken on a whiteboard that the group could add to or amend. At the end of each of the four discussions, the Officer read the key points aloud to the group, and these key takeaways were either agreed or adjusted.

The feedback from young people is arranged by strand below, and thematically arranged in accordance with their key recommendations for each strand.

General Feedback

Standardisation
- Young people felt that, although the curriculum is very strong, what is actually taught in class can vary greatly between schools on account of individual teachers' preferences, time management, bias, and/or level of knowledge.
- Young people felt that there were too many topics in Strand 1 alone to be covered effectively over the course of a three-year period, and were not confident that the new Junior Cycle curriculum could be covered in 100 hours of teaching time.
- It was suggested that the Board of Management or school principal should set term 'deadlines' for the class teacher or students, so as to ensure that the curriculum is being covered efficiently, and to avoid topics being missed.
- Young people highlighted the need for all teachers scheduled to take SPHE classes to be trained in the curriculum, so as to ensure that the curriculum is taught correctly and in full.
- Finally, the group felt it would be helpful for all school staff, particularly Special Needs Assistances, to be provided with training opportunities relating to LGBTQ+ identities, wellbeing, and diversity and inclusion.

Student Feedback
- The focus group felt it would be helpful to have a feedback mechanism for students on a local (school) and more formal (NCCA/Department of Education/academic research) level as to their experience of being taught the new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

Consent and Boundaries
- Young people in the focus group welcomed the inclusion of consent under RSE, but felt it important for consent to be threaded through all Strands and Learning Outcomes as a core 'pillar' of the SPHE curriculum.
- To ensure that students' understanding of consent goes beyond a 'surface level', and to normalise integrating consent-based thinking to everyday life, the group felt it was important to teach consent in different ways.
- One example given was, in a situation where a friend group are joking together, a student should feel like they can withdraw their consent to being joked about by telling someone that they feel uncomfortable about the comment they have made, if the joking goes 'too far' and causes offence. If the person continues to make the same

jokes or comments, young people felt this should be seen as a breach of the student's consent to partake in joking. The group felt that framing consent in this way may act as a good introduction to conversations around consent in the context of sexual or intimate relationships.

- Consent and boundaries were considered to be closely linked by young people. The group stressed the need for students to be taught what healthy boundaries look like, how to draw appropriate boundaries with friends and family, and how to respond if those boundaries are overstepped.
- Finally, the group felt it would be beneficial for the SPHE curriculum to include teaching on knowing your personal limits – not only in the context of sexual activity, smoking, and drug and alcohol consumption – but also in terms of socialising and friendships.
- Young people expressed that it was important for schools to reinforce that boundaries and limits differ from person to person, and can be shaped by neurodivergence.

Misinformation and Digital Literacy
- Young people felt that many teachers have the perception that much of the information taught in SPHE, and RSE in particular, was already 'out there' on the internet, and that a majority of students have likely already availed of this information.
- As such, young people were concerned that teachers feel this education is not as "necessary" as it might have been in the pre-internet age.
- However, young people expressed serious concerns about the level of unsafe and misleading information that can be found online relating to sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, dieting, wellness, and other wellbeing-related topics.
- Young people also noted some topics, such as menopause, were not covered in detail throughout either the SPHE/RSE or science curriculums at Senior Cycle. This leaves young people at a high risk of being exposed to misinformation later in life.

Method of teaching
- Some young people shared their own experiences of how RSE had been taught in their school, including students being asked to "vote on what topics the class would cover in sex-ed". Young people noted that students of minority identities, including LGBTQ+ students, are less likely to learn information relevant to them through this process.
- Young people firmly expressed that LGBTQ+ students should not be singled out during teaching of LGBTQ+ topics, used as an example, or expected to educate staff or other students on their identity and experiences.
- Young people also stressed the distinction between inviting students to co-develop LGBTQ+ clubs, and input on teaching and curriculum, and being *expected* to share their personal experiences for the benefit of others.
- The group felt it would be helpful to set up a mechanism for teachers to deal with questions they may find difficult through the provision of additional resources made available to students through an online.

- Finally, while young people were not entirely opposed to assessment for SPHE, they felt it was important to ensure that this assessment wouldn't be graded, and wouldn't place excessive additional pressure on Junior Cycle students.

Educating at Primary Level
- Young people felt that the curriculum should be revised regularly to ensure that it is fit for purpose, and factually correct. One young person noted that in 2017, their SPHE book still said that same-gender marriage had not been legalised.
- Young people were also concerned that, through social media, traditional media, friends, and other sources, students may learn certain behaviours or acquire misinformation before being taught it in school. One young person gave the example of encountering online misinformation about drug use at age 13, but the topic of drug use not being covered in school until Senior Cycle.
- As a result, young people strongly recommended that the revised Junior Cycle SPHE-RSE curriculum be accompanied by greatly enhanced SPHE-RSE at Primary level. The group stressed the need for age-appropriate conversations around sexuality, sexual activity, families, and relationships before reaching secondary school.
- Young people were very aware of the concerns parents may have about extending RSE to younger age groups at primary level. However, the group discussed how concepts such as sexual orientation, families, relationships, and consent could be discussed in an "age-appropriate" way – for example, some families having two mums or two dads, or 'good touch'/'bad touch' conversations in relation to abuse and personal safety – which can then be built upon as the child ages.
- The group acknowledged that parents have primary responsibility for teaching their children about topics covered in SPHE and RSE. However, young people felt that parents often did not want to discuss such subjects, or lacked the knowledge needed to answer their children's questions.
- To address this, young people recommended that a broader programme should be introduced by the Government, for example through community and family resource centres, to support parents. The group felt this had the dual benefit of educating parents, and taking some pressure off schools to be the sole source of guidance for young people.

Strand 1: Understanding myself and others

Changes in Adolescence
- Young people highlighted the need for teaching about changes during puberty to be inclusive of trans and non-binary young people.
- The group felt it would be beneficial for all students to learn about the changes that happen during both male and female adolescence, regardless of whether the school is single-sex, to foster empathy and understanding among peers.

Rights-based
- Young people should be informed of the specific rights they have under international and Irish law, how they can be realised, and where to go for advice or support as to rights being upheld e.g. the Ombudsman for Children. Young people noted that this is often referenced in class, but not developed upon.
- The group stressed that this should be taught in detail, beyond handing a poster with a list of rights on the wall.
- Young people felt this education needed to start at primary level.

LGBTQ+ clubs / Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs)
- The setting up of a space to support LGBTQ+ students, such as an LGBTQ+ club or GSA (Gender and Sexuality Alliance), was seen by young people as a "controversial" topic to broach with some teachers.
- Young people noted that some schools only allow students at Senior Cycle to join LGBTQ+ clubs, which leaves Junior Cycle LGBTQ+ students without necessary supports, and with a sense that their identity is not valid owing to their age.
- Young people felt that their peers became more "closed-minded" in the transition from primary to secondary school, owing to clearer social groupings in larger classes and year groups.
- As such, a comprehensive SPHE programme that covers all gender identities and sexual orientations, taught in a positive rather than shame-based manner, was considered important for Junior Cycle SPHE-RSE to be fully effective.

Safe spaces
- The focus groups felt it was important for the classroom to be established as a safe space before students were invited to talk about sensitive and potentially triggering topics relating to LGBTQ+ identities, wellbeing, mental health, sexual health, substance use, and discrimination.
- For a space to be safe, young people felt it should be free from casual racism, LGBTQphobia, or other discrimination. This includes teachers proactively calling out offensive remarks and/or instances of bullying.

Strand 2: Making healthy choices

Hygiene
- The group felt it would be helpful for teaching on hygine to explore tips for those struggling with mental health, for example using wet-wipes if feeling too unwell to shower.

Drugs and Alcohol
- The group were strong in expressing the need for all teachers and schools to adopt a rights-based, harm-reduction approach to the consumption of drugs and alcohol.

- Many young people felt that education around drug and alcohol use currently relied on abstinence, judgement. and stigma, which had deterred some young people from seeking information and support.
- Young people also drew attention to the need for teachers to take a trauma-informed approach to teaching about drugs and alcohol, as school staff may be unaware of misuse of drugs and alcohol in students' home environments.
- Finally, the group felt that teachers needed to be empowered to provide objective, evidence-based information on drugs, alcohol, smoking, and sexual activity.
- Young people were aware that some Boards of Management and school leadership are "afraid of criticism" by parents for taking this approach, and felt that schools needed strong backing by the Department of Education to enable comprehensive, evidence-based education on these areas.

Strand 3: Relationships and sexuality

LGBTQ+ Inclusive
- The topic most frequently highlighted and returned to by the group was the need for RSE to be inclusive of people who are not heterosexual (straight) and/or cisgender.
- Young people who attended girls' single-sex schools noted that what little sex education they had received primarily focused on contraception for the purpose of preventing pregnancy, rather than safe sex and preventing the transmission of STIs.
- Young people said that, before joining Belong To, they were largely unaware of where and how to access contraceptives for free or at a low cost.
- Many young people who attend mixed schools reported the class being split into girls and boys for the purpose of RSE.
- The focus group felt it was important for all areas of sexual health, reproductive health, contraception, and sexual activity, including puberty, menstruation, menopause, contraception, LGBTQ+ inclusive safer sex practices, reproductive health, and abortion, to be taught to all students, regardless of the gender make-up of the class.
- Young people felt this was important for two reasons. First, as there may be a queer student in the class who is not out, but who nonetheless should receive comprehensive sex education. Second, as it was considered important to dispel myths or misconceptions around periods and LGBTQ+ sexual activity among students who have not had these experiences.

Stigma and Shame
- In relation to RSE, the group considered it very important that questions be invited by teachers, and that teachers are willing to respond and engage.
- Young people felt that teachers needed both the training, and some encouragement, to stop "ignoring difficult questions" asked by their students.
- A refusal to answer "difficult" questions at primary and secondary level was thought by young people to attach stigma and shame to curiosity around sexual health, sexual activity, and sexuality.

- Young people noted the societal and cultural climate that both their parents and their teachers had been raised in, and how many in those generations feel embarrassment and/or shame when discussing sexuality.
- Together, the experiences and perceptions of parents, along with some stigma attached to asking questions in school, was thought to discourage some young people from asking questions about sexual health and sexuality at home.
- Young people stressed that this situation highlighted the necessity of providing this information in schools, to ensure the curriculum is taught to students in full, and to provide teachers with the knowledge and support needed to comprehensively teach these topics.
- Young people also highlighted the need for sex to be taught as something that is natural, that should be pleasurable, and that should be engaged in without coercion or abuse.

Safer Sex
- In the experiences of young people who took part in the focus group, classroom discussions around contraception and STIs were generally limited to listing off the various forms.
- The focus group felt it would be worthwhile to spend more time discussing available contraceptives in-depth, including reference to allergies, and alternatives if a person is unable to use condoms or the contraceptive pill.
- Additionally, the group felt that teachers should inform students of where to access condoms and dental dams for free or at a low cost, and how someone goes about accessing the morning after pill.
- Young people felt teaching on STIs was far too focused on "scare tactics" to "shock" students into safe sex practices, but in turn stigmatising those who may have contracted an STI, and deterring them from seeking medical care.
- Of the young people who attended the focus group, not one had been taught about the details of STI testing. Many young people reported feeling shame or stigma should they need to ask friends or family members for this information.
- The group stressed the need for students to be informed, in school, about what is involved during an STI text, where tests can be accessed, the low-cost or free options available, how often a sexually active person should be tested, whether those under 18 require parental consent to have an STI test.
- Similarly, following the liberalisation of termination of pregnancy regulations in Ireland, young people highlighted the need for the options available to pregnant people to be taught openly in class. The group felt this should include what the law on termination of pregnancy actually is, where to find reliable and objective information about abortion, whether termination of pregnancy services are free, and the rights of those under the age of 18 to seek a termination.
- Connected to the above, the group were clear on the fact that promotion of contraception and safer sex should not include the criticism or stigmatising of one-parent families, or people who become parents at a younger age.

Positive Sexuality
- In tandem with the provision of information on STIs and safer sexual practices, young people stressed the need for sexuality and sexual activity to be considered in a positive light.
- Together, the group decided that classroom-based discussions about sexual activity should frame sex as:
    o Something that everyone doesn't necessarily need or want to do.
    o Something that is 'normal' to want and engage in.
    o Something that is not shameful.
    o Something that should be pleasurable, if you are a person who wants to have sex.
    o Something that should not be uncomfortable, painful, or upsetting, including information on where to seek support if this is the case.
    o Something that requires ongoing, mutual, and freely-given (OMFG) consent.
- The group discussed the nuance of 'normalising' sexual activity and pleasure, particularly for female students, while also acknowledging the valid existence of people who feel little or no sexual attraction (asexual people), and respecting the religious and/or cultural values of students who may choose to abstain from sex until marriage.
- Young people felt that diversity or cultural awareness training for teachers would be helpful here, to avoid inadvertently stigmatising some students.
- The group also felt it would be beneficial for all secondary school teachers to receive training from the Active* Consent project at the University of Galway.

Time and Resourcing
- As noted previously, young people were concerned that the new Junior Cycle curriculum is too broad to be covered in 100 hours contact time over three years.
- Additionally, the group expressed concern that Learning Outcomes under Strand 3: RSE, would be the first to be dropped should teachers fall behind in the curriculum.

Strand 4: Emotional wellbeing

Bullying
- Young people who took part in the focus group highlighted that 'classic' bullying usually portrayed in media generally focuses on physical harassment and abuse. However, the group felt that, in their experience, relational bullying was much more common.
- The group described relational bullying as exclusion, spreading gossip or rumours, being set up or made feel embarrassed, and 'gaslighting' within friend groups. Young people felt this was more difficult to report to school staff, and more difficult for staff to detect and address.

Abusive Relationships
- The focus group took issue with the fact that 'abuse' in relationships is usually restricted to discussions around romantic or intimate relationships.
- Young people felt it was important to teach students that both family relationships and friendships could also be abusive, and felt that bullying and abuse within the family home, at the hands of both parents and siblings, was more common than people would expect.
- The group felt this should be raised in school, as abuse within families can be difficult to identify and address, and abuse within friendships can be disregarded as bullying.
- The importance of involving the entire school community, including Guidance Counsellors, Wellbeing Coordinators, the Chaplain, and/or the Home School Community Liaison was noted in terms of abuse or bullying within the family was highlighted by young people. The group also felt that schools should be willing to connect students and their families with relevant external supports, such as youth services and family resource centres.

School Environment
- Almost all young people involved in the focus group voiced their frustration at having wellness and wellbeing classes in school, while continuing to face stress as a result of a high workload and competing deadlines that teachers and school staff were unwilling to address.
- The group felt that SPHE lessons on wellbeing should be part of the whole school approach to teaching, learning, and assessment.

Resilience, Self-Worth and Self-Esteem
- Young people felt that 'resilience' was an important but difficult topic. While the group acknowledged the need to develop an amount of resilience, they once again felt frustrated that focusing too much on 'resilience' can dismiss factors that make life more challenging for some than others, such as experiencing bullying, being LGBTQ+, socioeconomic status, family circumstances, or living with a disability.
- The group came to the conclusion that lessons on resilience should acknowledge barriers, discrimination, and inequalities within society while empowering students to tackle, challenge, and change society, and sharing how to look after yourself during this time.
- Similarly, young people felt that class discussions around self-confidence should acknowledge that confidence can fluctuate over time depending on a student's personal circumstances.
- The group felt that the current curriculum focuses on 'being confident' as something that you are or are not, but that it is better understood as something you can work towards.
- Related to confidence, young people felt that teachers' understanding of self-esteem needed to be more nuanced, and address forms of meaning and fulfilment beyond academic achievement and being socially 'popular'.
- The group concluded that a focus on healthy self-image may be more beneficial than self-esteem or confidence, which can be viewed as unattainable, or carry negative connotations.

Thank you for taking the time to share your views with us. Please email this document to SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie before Friday, October 14th 2022