

On the Cusp of the Wellbeing Wave: Challenges in Teaching SPHE According to Initial Teacher Education Students

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Abstract

Over 25 years since the 1999 primary school curriculum was published in Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is preparing for the redeveloped primary school curriculum specifications to be made available to schools for September 2025. This new curriculum is structured into five broad areas, one of which is Wellbeing and encompasses the subject areas of Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE). Despite many educational policy developments in the area of Wellbeing in recent years, challenges remain in terms of the implementation of the more sensitive content of the SPHE curriculum, particularly in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). This study draws on questionnaire data from 354 students undertaking the Bachelor of Education programme in a teacher education college in Ireland, highlighting the SPHE content areas they anticipate as most challenging to teach. The findings underscore the importance of teacher training and ongoing professional support in Wellbeing education throughout a teacher's career.

Keywords: Wellbeing, Challenges, SPHE

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In March 2023, almost 25 years after the publication of the revised primary school curriculum in Ireland, the Department of Education published the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2023).

The framework, developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, in close partnership with schools, education partners, and wider stakeholders, consulting with children, parents, and educators, provides the pathway for the redevelopment of the curriculum for all primary and special schools over the coming years. (NCCA, 2023, p. 2)

In addition to the inclusion of 'being well' as one of seven key competencies that underpin the curriculum, Wellbeing has been established as one of five broad curriculum areas. The subject areas of Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE) sit within this curriculum area. The inclusion of Wellbeing as a curriculum area in the Irish primary school context aligns with policy developments in early childhood and at post-primary level, where Wellbeing is firmly established as one of four key themes and as an area of learning, respectively (NCCA, 2021, 2024b). Wellbeing has become firmly established in educational policy, not only nationally but internationally over the last decade or more. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* has been particularly influential in this regard emphasising children's right to achieve their full potential, alongside research findings showing that pupils with higher levels of wellbeing tend to have better academic outcomes (NCCA, 2021). This, coupled with the fact that schools report a growing trend in pupil wellbeing issues, require schools and teachers to support the wellbeing of children in the school setting (Nohilly & Tynan, 2019a).

This paper reports on questionnaire data from students undertaking a Bachelor of Education programme in a teacher education college in Ireland, focusing on the aspects of SPHE they anticipate as most challenging to teach. To contextualise the study findings, the evolution of Wellbeing in Irish educational policy is traced, and a review of the areas perceived as sensitive to teach in SPHE in both the current and draft curriculum specification is considered.

The Evolution of Wellbeing in Irish Educational Policy

While Wellbeing is a relevantly recent focus in education, the philosophical basis for Wellbeing has a long history. Wellbeing has been written about since the time of Aristotle, who offered perspectives on one of the core dualities in Wellbeing discourse: hedonism and eudaimonia. The hedonic tradition accentuated constructs such as happiness, positive affect and satisfaction with life, or pleasure and feeling good. The eudaimonic tradition highlighted positive psychological functioning and human development, or flourishing and living a good life (Nohilly et al., 2023). In addition, a number of conceptual models of Wellbeing have been developed, which have

influenced the evolution of Wellbeing as an area of learning in jurisdictions outside Ireland, including Scotland, which, in turn, influenced developments in the field of education in Ireland (Nohilly & Tynan, 2019b). Some of the well-recognised conceptual models include (i) Bronfenbrenner's *Bioecological Model of Human Development*, which highlights the various influences on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), (ii) the PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement/Accomplishment) model, developed by Martin Seligman, which is aligned with positive psychology (Seligman, 2018), and (iii) the model in Scotland, commonly represented as the SHANARRI wheel, which comprises eight indicators that should be considered for children's wellbeing: safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible, and included (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, 2014). A systematic literature review completed to support the curriculum specification development for the area of Wellbeing highlighted that Wellbeing is "a complex concept, and one which continues to be developed, interpreted and conceptualised in different ways" (Nohilly et al., 2023, p. 31), noting that there is no ideal conceptual model of Wellbeing in education; however, it identified that relevant models facilitate an understanding of underpinning philosophies and pedagogies, while indicating a focus on Wellbeing in a curriculum. Ireland's Department of Education and Skills (2019) have endorsed Bronfenbrenner's model, which is a model frequently cited in Wellbeing literature.

There are several definitions of Wellbeing that have been developed for use in Irish educational contexts in recent years, and the educational basis for the inclusion of Wellbeing as an area of learning has been well established. Since the turn of the millennium, national policy developments that focus on both children's and young people's outcomes in Ireland have incorporated a strong focus on Wellbeing. These have included the *National Children's Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives* (Government of Ireland, 2000), the *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014), and *The Healthy Ireland Framework 2019-2025* (Department of Health, 2019).

A timeline of the key educational policy developments in Ireland in relation to Wellbeing is presented in Table 1 below. Thereafter, these developments will be explored in greater detail.

TABLE 1*Timeline of Key Educational Policy Developments Related to Wellbeing*

1999	Social, Personal, and Health Education Curriculum
2009	Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework
2013	Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention
2015	Well-Being in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion
2017	Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines
2018	Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice
2021	Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines (Updated)
2023	Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools
2024	Draft Wellbeing Specification for all Primary and Special Schools (For Consultation)
	Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Updated)

Note. Adapted from *A systematic literature review to support the curriculum specification development for the area of wellbeing*, by Nohilly et al., 2023, https://ncca.ie/media/6229/ncca_a-systematic-literature-review-to-support-the-curriculum-specification-development-for-the-area-of-wellbeing.pdf

The following section delves into these key educational policy developments in greater detail.

The opening sentence of the 1999 SPHE curriculum includes reference to Wellbeing: “Social, personal and health education (SPHE) provides particular opportunities to foster the personal development, health and well-being of the individual child, to help him/her to create and maintain supportive relationships and become an active and responsible citizen in society” (Government of Ireland, 1999a, p. 2). While reference to Wellbeing in 1999 was not an explicit feature of the curriculum, the subject area itself, as outlined in the curriculum, supports many elements of the development of children’s emotional, social, and mental wellbeing.

In 2009, Wellbeing was first established as a theme in education through the introduction of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009). In Aistear, children’s learning and development is presented using four inter-related themes, one of which is Wellbeing. Both physical and psychological Wellbeing are included in the conception, and the theme incorporates children’s interactions with their families and communities, along with a focus on exploration, challenge, and investigation in the environment. An updated Aistear framework was published in December 2024, and the theme of Wellbeing remains as one of the four main themes.

A strong focus on Wellbeing in education was evident through the publication of the Wellbeing guidelines for post-primary and primary schools in 2013 and 2015, respectively. However, the particular focus of the guidelines was on mental health as an aspect of Wellbeing, evident in the full titles of both publications. The guidelines at

both levels recommended a whole-school approach to the promotion of Wellbeing, through the use of the Continuum of Support model. This model is based on the World Health Organisation's model for school mental health promotion (Department of Education and Skills et al., 2015), and adopts a three-tiered model as a structure for the promotion of Wellbeing and mental health; support for all, support for some, and support for a few. The SPHE curriculum is the universal, preventative, 'support for all' level of the continuum. It is worth noting that while these Wellbeing guidelines were sent to all schools, they were not accompanied by a Circular or particular instruction.

In 2017, the *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines* were introduced to promote Wellbeing as a whole-school endeavour, providing recommendations for its implementation. These guidelines were updated in 2021 to reflect evolving needs (NCCA, 2021).

In 2018, the main Wellbeing policy endeavour of the Department of Education was published, the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*. In a development from the 2013/5 guidelines, the Department adopted the *Schools for Health* model, detailed in Figure 1 below, to promote whole-school wellbeing, which is also in line with the *Junior Cycle Guidelines*. All schools are required by 2025 to develop and implement a Wellbeing promotion process through the use of the school self-evaluation process (Department of Education, 2022).

FIGURE 1*Four Key Areas of Wellbeing Promotion*

Note. Reprinted from *Wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice, 2018–2023 – Revised October 2019*, by Department of Education and Skills, 2019, <https://assets.gov.ie/24725/07cc07626f6a426eb6eab4c523fb2ee2.pdf#page=null>

In fact, the key areas of Wellbeing promotion as defined in the Wellbeing policy statement have influenced other policy developments in the broader Wellbeing area. For example, the recently updated *Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* incorporates this framework, particularly in relation to the prevention of bullying behaviour (Department of Education, 2024).

It seemed logical then that, when the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* was launched in 2023, Wellbeing would be included as an area of learning. In fact, research undertaken with primary school teachers had indicated that they were already dedicating considerable attention to the area of Wellbeing (Nohilly & Tynan, 2019a). The *Primary Curriculum Framework* presented Wellbeing as one of five broad areas of learning, with Wellbeing encompassing PE and SPHE. According to the framework, the aim of Wellbeing is to support children’s social, emotional, and physical development both now and in the future. A key focus of the area is in enabling children to develop positive and healthy relationships with others, which includes acquiring a balanced understanding of human sexuality (NCCA, 2023).

In March 2024, the draft Wellbeing curriculum specification for primary and special schools was published:

At its core, the Wellbeing curriculum serves as a catalyst for lifelong wellbeing by integrating vital life skills such as: self-awareness, personal safety, emotional regulation, resilience, empathy, movement, decision-making, and healthy relationship-building. It establishes a platform for children to develop as engaged citizens who recognise the importance of leading healthy, active, and sustainable lifestyles. (NCCA, 2024b, p. 4)

The specification includes four strands, 18 strand units, outlined in Table 2 below, and a number of learning outcomes. These are presented as an integrated Wellbeing curriculum for stages 1 and 2, taking the child to second class, and thereafter the learning outcomes are presented under the subject areas of PE and SPHE from third to sixth class.

TABLE 2

Strands and Strand Units of the Draft Wellbeing Specification

<i>Movement Education</i>	<i>Emotional and Relational Education</i>	<i>Health Education</i>	<i>Community and Belonging</i>
Movement skills	Identity	Motivation for healthy living	Sense of belonging
Movement concepts	Emotional awareness and expression	Substance use	Family
Movement strategies	Relationships	Human development	Rights and Fairness
Personal relevance	Resilience	Safety	Citizenship
	Decision-making	Media and digital wellbeing	

Note. Reprinted from *Draft wellbeing specification for all primary and special schools - For consultation*, by National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2024b, https://ncca.ie/media/csmh55u0/draft_primary_wellbeing_specification_2024.pdf

SPHE Content Areas Deemed Sensitive

The introduction to the SPHE curriculum in 1999 advises that “as children progress through an SPHE programme, they will encounter a wide range of issues. These will include substance misuse, relationships, sexuality, child abuse prevention, prejudice and discrimination” (Government of Ireland, 1999a, p. 2). Although the SPHE curriculum does not reference “sensitive issues”, the term is commonly associated with certain topics within the curriculum area, particularly in relation to Relationships and Sexuality

Education (RSE). For instance, the option to invite “outside speakers” in schools to address RSE content reinforces the perception of this material as being of a more sensitive nature. In addition to RSE, other potentially sensitive topics covered in SPHE include bereavement, family structures, and bullying. Aside from the NCCA curriculum review of SPHE referenced below, the use of the term “sensitive” in this study is based on the author’s personal experience with the subject area rather than its use in the literature. From the authors’ experience of working with teachers, it is a term that is frequently used by them, particularly in relation to the teaching of RSE.

Following the publication of the 1999 curriculum, a review of the implementation of some of the subject areas, including SPHE, was undertaken. While many successes relating to the implementation of SPHE were identified, one of the core challenges identified in SPHE was the perceived sensitivity of the content of RSE and teachers’ own discomfort with teaching the content to the children (NCCA, 2008). Indeed, the theme of teacher confidence was once again identified as a curriculum implementation issue in research conducted on the implementation of RSE in Irish schools in 2018; “the low confidence of teachers and the lack of availability of comprehensive pre-service and in-career training which are considered to be formidable barriers” (Keating et al., 2018, p. 46). While research in the Irish context in relation to the teaching of other potentially sensitive areas of the curriculum is limited, it would seem likely that teacher confidence may impact on the teaching of areas such as bereavement and family structure.

The draft Wellbeing specification published for consultation in 2024 alongside other curriculum specifications was one that received considerable media attention. The media attention related to the “sensitive” areas included in the specification; for example, The Irish Times ran headlines including: “Sex education to be taught at earlier age under new primary school curriculum” (O’Brien, 2024) and “Taoiseach backs inclusion of transgender identity in primary school curriculum” (McGarry et al., 2023). While these headlines may not fully represent the content of the Wellbeing specification, content areas likely to require sensitive and appropriate handling by classroom teachers are certainly featured across the specification. An overview of SPHE outlined in the specification details its focus on RSE, helping children to establish and sustain healthy and supportive relationships with themselves and others. The concept of consent in relationships is also explicitly stated as a curriculum focus in addition to the integral component of child protection within the curriculum, which supports children to recognise healthy, unhealthy, and harmful patterns in relationships. Bullying behaviour is specifically named, and a review of the learning outcomes indicates that substance use, diversity of family structures, and exploration of grief are included in the content at various class levels or stages (NCCA, 2024b).

The Current Study

Given the association of the SPHE curriculum with the teaching of potentially sensitive content, the author sought to explore the perspectives of student teachers pursuing an undergraduate degree in primary education on teaching the SPHE curriculum. Specifically, the study aimed to identify any perceived challenges that student teachers might face in teaching the curriculum areas.

In line with the aim of the study and to gather the perspectives of undergraduate student teachers, a short questionnaire was administered to students completing the Bachelor of Education degree in a teacher education college in Ireland. The participating students commenced their four-year programme in 2020, and the questionnaire was administered at the start of the second year of the programme, in Autumn 2021, as the students begin studying SPHE in the second year of their course. The questionnaire was administered ahead of the student's engagement with the module. The rationale for administering the questionnaire ahead of the teaching of the content was so that students' responses would not be influenced by any perspectives the lecturers might offer on the potentially sensitive nature of the content or otherwise. Ethical approval to undertake the study was received from the teacher education college where the researcher is working and the students are studying. The questionnaire was administered at the end of a lecture, which the students attended in three large groups, by a member of staff who was not involved in the teaching of SPHE and was not teaching the student cohort at the time.

Out of a total of 464 eligible students, 354 completed the questionnaire. Hard-copies of the information sheet, the consent form, and the questionnaire itself were distributed to the students. In total, there were seven questions for the students to answer and the students were advised that the questionnaire would take them approximately five but no longer than 10 minutes to complete. A copy of the questionnaire is included in the Appendix. Both close- and open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire, and the questions were developed by the researcher based on her experience of teaching SPHE at undergraduate level, combined with policy developments in the area outlined above and the content of the SPHE curriculum. Examples of the open-ended questions include: "As a teacher, what topics do you think will be the most challenging to teach in SPHE?"; "Have you any concerns about teaching SPHE?".

Following the data collection, a research assistant was available to the researcher to organise and collate the questionnaire data. The responses to each of the questions were entered into Microsoft Excel. Thereafter, data were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), outlined in Table 3 below. Each open-ended question was analysed individually using the six-step framework. The author read through the responses to each of the questions a number of times to become familiar with the data and began to generate initial codes. The

codes then supported the definition and development of themes. Four main themes emerged from the study that largely reflect the questions asked to the students; SPHE topics explored by students while in primary school, SPHE topics explored with students by an outside speaker, potentially challenging topics to teach in SPHE and concerns about teaching SPHE.

TABLE 3

Braun and Clarke's (2006) Framework for Thematic Analysis

Step 1: Become familiar with the data	Step 4: Review themes
Step 2: Generate initial codes	Step 5: Define themes
Step 3: Search for themes	Step 6: Write-up

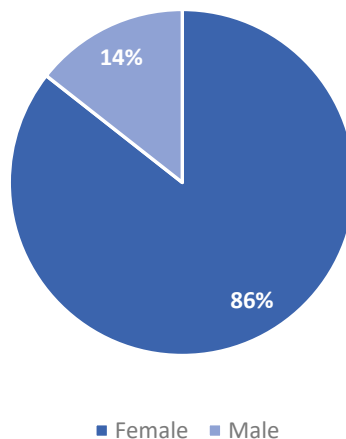
The relevant findings are now presented below.

Results

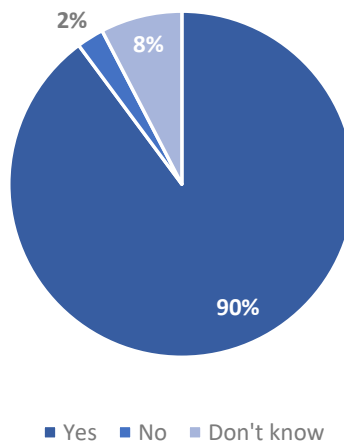
The participants were asked to identify their gender. As highlighted in Figure 2 below, 86% ($n = 303$) of the participants identified as female, 14% ($n = 51$) identified as male, and no participants identified as other.

FIGURE 2

Participants' Gender



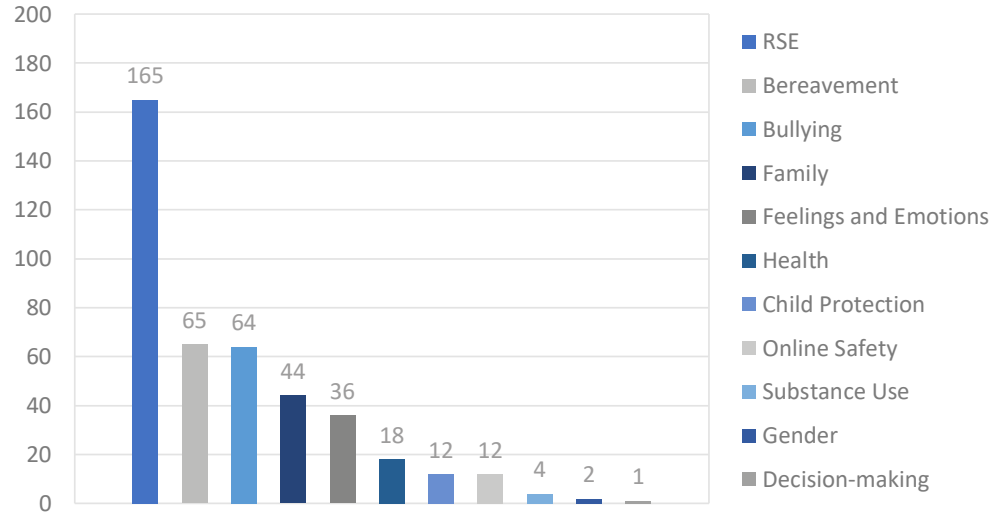
Participants were asked if they had explored the subject of SPHE when they were in primary school. The majority of them (90%; $n = 318$) replied "Yes", 2% ($n = 9$) replied "No", and 8% ($n = 27$) indicated that they did not know (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3*Participants' Experience of SPHE as a Pupil in Primary School*

One of the open-ended questions asked participants to reflect on what they felt would be the most challenging aspects of SPHE to teach. In many of the responses, participants indicated more than one area of the curriculum that would be difficult to teach. Following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework for thematic analysis, the responses were grouped into the following themes: RSE, Bereavement, Bullying, Family, Feelings and Emotions, Health, Child Protection and Stay Safe, Online Safety, Substance Use, Gender, Decision-making. These themes relate to many of the broad themes in SPHE embedded across many of the 10 strand units. RSE was noted in 165 responses, while Bereavement was noted in 65 responses and Bullying in 64 responses. The topic of Family emerged in 44 responses, followed by Feelings and Emotions with 36 responses. Many of the responses in relation to Feelings and Emotions noted mental health as the challenging concept. Health was noted in 18 responses, with topics ranging from body image and obesity to healthy eating. Child Protection and the associated Stay Safe programme were noted in 12 responses as was online safety. Substance Use was noted in four responses, Gender was noted in two responses and Decision-making was noted in one response. The summary of the responses is detailed in Figure 4 below.

FIGURE 4

Participants' Perceptions of the Most Challenging Areas of SPHE to Teach, Based on Theme Frequency



Sample responses corresponding to each of the themes presented in Figure 4 as provided by the participants are provided in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4

Samples of Participants' Responses Related to the Most Challenging Areas of SPHE to Teach

Theme	Sample responses
RSE	<p><i>Explaining how babies are made.</i></p> <p><i>I think sexuality and relationships will be a difficulty concept to teach in school as it's often a topic that people don't talk about openly.</i></p> <p><i>The Bird and Bee's talk and bodily changes.</i></p> <p><i>The Talk.</i></p>
Bereavement	<i>Dealing with bereavements, grief, awkward questions!</i>
Bullying	<i>I think Bullying will be the most difficult to teach as it may remind students of difficult times</i>
Family	<p><i>The Family; so many different types and backgrounds.</i></p> <p><i>Discussing families when families are now so diverse.</i></p> <p><i>Possibly certain relationships such as relationships within the family as some children may have a difficult or complicated family life.</i></p> <p><i>It could be more difficult to teach about family life/different families because there are such diverse families and I don't want to forget certain families.</i></p>
Feelings and Emotions	<i>Relationships and dealing with emotions. I know some students will be unfamiliar with different emotions e.g. depression.</i>
Health	<i>Not being the healthiest person; food, exercise, etc. Setting a good example-healthy lunches.</i>
Child Protection	<i>Stay Safe programme. How to teach it in an understanding manner.</i>
Online Safety	<i>I think online safety will be challenging to teach as it is a relatively new area and because technology is so prevalent in children's lives.</i>
Substance Use	<i>The seriousness and effects of decision to take drugs or drink alcohol.</i>
Gender	<i>Gender (or lack of).</i>
Decision-making	<i>Making Decisions will be hard for me as I am bad at making decision.</i>

The final question in the questionnaire asked participants if they had any concerns about teaching SPHE. Braun and Clarke's framework was applied once more to analyse the responses. These included concerns related to delving too much into pupils' personal lives (student comfort levels), the status of the subject, approaching the teaching of SPHE, personal implications, classroom management and teaching SPHE. A sample of participants' responses are listed in Table 5 below.

TABLE 5*Samples of Participants' Responses Related to Concerns about Teaching SPHE*

Theme	Sample responses
Student Comfort Levels	<i>I don't want them to be afraid of growing up and I want them to be comfortable. I hope that I will have the ability to create a safe and comfortable atmosphere in the class where students can feel comfortable to talk about and explore a wide range of topics.</i>
Status of the subject	<i>Students not taking the subject seriously. Students not respecting the topics.</i>
Approaching the teaching of SPHE	<i>Only that I'm not sure how to approach it as it is completely different to approaching subjects like English etc. and since I didn't have it much myself.</i> <i>What if a child asks a question that I don't expect or know the answer to.</i> <i>Issues concerning pupils personally e.g. death, drug issues, abuse.</i> <i>How to teach a topic without upsetting students e.g. dealing with death or scaring them when teaching about staying safe.</i> <i>I am conscious not to cross the line and delve too much into pupils' personal lives.</i>
Personal Implications	<i>Balancing my personal beliefs with what the school wants you to teach.</i> <i>Yes, different parents feel certain topics shouldn't be taught or spoken about and I'd worry that parents would act unkindly or aggressively towards me and give out to me about the curriculum.</i> <i>Using incorrect terms that might cause offence or confusion/ giving wrong info/advice.</i>
Classroom Management and Teaching SPHE	<i>Keeping the class under control, they may see it as a doss.</i>

Discussion

The findings of the questionnaire completed by undergraduate Bachelor of Education students illustrates that, from their perspective, SPHE is a delicate area to teach and there are a number of topics of a particularly sensitive nature, relevant to children's lives today. This is evident through the themes of perceived challenging topics to teach in SPHE and concerns about teaching SPHE. Notably, themes such as RSE, Bereavement, Bullying, and Family were frequently identified as the most sensitive areas to teach, even before participants' engagement with the content of the SPHE modules. Topics such as Feelings and Emotions and Health were also noted as challenging areas but by fewer participants.

In relation to health-related topics, participants identified healthy eating, being able to 'talk about' your feelings, and mental health as areas that are likely to present challenges in teaching. In naming mental health, it is interesting to consider whether students believed mental health should be addressed directly with children, focusing on strategies for maintaining mental wellbeing, or approached through general discussion on health and emotions. While mental health is not specifically addressed in the 1999 curriculum, the 2024 draft curriculum specification proposes an integrated approach, incorporating mental health within the strand unit of "Resilience" of the "Emotional and Relational Education" strand and the strand units of "Motivation for Healthy Living" and "Media and Digital Wellbeing" of the "Health Education" strand. It is clear from reviewing the learning outcomes that there is no specific mention of practices such as mindfulness or gratitude but rather on pupils developing strategies to deal with a range of emotions and know how and where to seek support, if necessary. A systematic literature review completed for the development of the Wellbeing specification (Nohilly et al., 2023) found that while there are potential benefits to mindfulness for children, it is not being implemented in classrooms currently in the way it is intended, therefore raising questions over its appropriateness as a strategy. The inclusion of Wellbeing as a broad curriculum area may have unintended consequences of bringing programmes that are not based on curriculum and practices, such as mindfulness and gratitude, into the classroom when the curriculum should be the focal point for instruction. Furthermore, findings of a research study completed with Irish primary school teachers by Nohilly and Tynan (2019a) highlight that mental health as a component or subset of Wellbeing is the area teachers feel least qualified to address, but the curriculum, when implemented, supports overall wellbeing, inclusive of mental health.

Out of the 354 participants, 44 noted the topic of Family as a potentially challenging topic to teach. In the 1999 SPHE curriculum, there is a strand unit titled "Myself and My Family", explored with pupils at all class levels. This strand unit encourages pupils to appreciate and respect the diversity of homes and families. In the draft Wellbeing specification, the relevant learning outcome is more specific in terms of recognising and naming the diversity of family types. The specification states that "[d]iversity of family structures refers to the range of ways families are formed and structured such as mother- and father-headed families, co-parenting families, one-parent families, same-sex parent families, extended families, step families, adoptive families, foster families, and more" (NCCA, 2024b, p. 28). Indeed, a report on the review of RSE in primary and post-primary schools completed by the NCCA in 2019 highlighted that a number of areas of learning should be included in a revised curriculum in an age- and developmentally appropriate manner including a focus on all family types. Furthermore, the report emphasised that in the primary context all children need to be able to see themselves and their families represented in the curriculum (NCCA, 2019). Many responses highlighted that the most challenging areas of SPHE to teach

were those related to family life. The sample responses provided above summarise the issues identified by student teachers, revealing their awareness of the diversity and sensitivity surrounding family life, including not only the structure of families but also the dynamics within family relationships. Indeed, the SPHE teacher guidelines acknowledge the personal nature of this strand unit in recommending that “the privacy of the child, the family and the teacher should be respected at all times” (Government of Ireland, 1999b, p. 14). The ethos of the school and the overall school approach to exploring and celebrating the diversity of family life is also expected to influence a young teacher in terms of confidence and competence in approaching this topic with a class.

After RSE, Bereavement was reported as a challenging topic to teach by students. Among the concerns raised by students was the potential distress caused to pupils in addressing the topic, as illustrated in the quote: *“How to teach a topic without upsetting students e.g. dealing with death or scaring them when teaching about staying safe”*. Statistics from the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network indicate that approximately 28% of Irish nine-year-olds have lost a grandparent and 2% a parent (Jordan, 2016). Given that many teachers and school staff do not feel adequately equipped to support grieving students (DeMuth et al., 2020), it is unsurprising that participants consider that bereavement education will be a challenging topic to address. Of course, bereavement education includes death but also separation and divorce, and teachers may indeed be supporting a child as they come to terms with changes in the family dynamic while preparing to teach about the topic.

Participants considered bullying as sensitive a topic as bereavement education. As the BÍ Cineálta Anti-Bullying Procedures (Department of Education, 2024) highlight, experience of bullying behaviour can have a determinantal effect on the experience of education and educational outcomes, in addition to the impact on self-confidence and self-esteem and mental health difficulties. It is likely that among the over 350 student teachers who completed the questionnaire, some have personally experienced bullying or have witnessed bullying behaviour. This first-hand experience, of course, would raise awareness and sensitivity to the challenges of teaching about bullying behaviour. In addition, national statistics based on the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study also highlight the prevalence of bullying behaviour in Irish primary schools, revealing that 30% of school-aged children in Ireland report having been bullied (Költő et al., 2018). Student teachers did consider this topic challenging to teach and understandably so, given its complex nature.

Similar to the literature presented earlier, the topic identified by almost 50% of the students as the most challenging to teach was RSE. It is possible that these students’ own experience of exploring RSE at school level has influenced their response as have societal attitudes in terms of discomfort and reluctance to talk about sexuality and related issues. Of course, many student teachers regularly engage with social

media, and their perspectives are likely formed by this engagement, be it consciously or unconsciously. While the student teachers completing the questionnaire had no experience of the exploration of RSE within their teacher education programme, a study completed on teacher professional learning and development and RSE in the Irish context found that student teachers who had engaged with SPHE as part of their teacher education programme did not feel adequately prepared to teach this content, with 61% of the students who participated in the survey indicating that the amount of input they had received in relation to RSE was “not enough” (Maunsell et al., 2021). Among the recommendations of the study was the need for system-wide, research-informed, and systematically reviewed teacher professional learning and development standards for RSE provision in initial teacher education. The *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* were last published in 2020 (Teaching Council, 2020) and placed a particular focus on *Inclusive Education, Global Citizenship Education, and Professional Relationships* as core elements of teacher education programmes. In the next iteration of Céim standards, it is imperative that Wellbeing education, incorporating a focus on preparing student teachers to teach the perceived sensitive areas with competence and confidence, inclusive of, but not limited to, RSE is a key priority in a time of competing demands in relation to educational change.

Conclusion

This study, undertaken with 354 students beginning the second year of their Bachelor of Education programme in a teacher education college in Ireland, clearly demonstrates their awareness that the teaching of SPHE requires a sensitive and mature approach, and that they are very mindful of the challenges involved, particularly in creating the right classroom climate, using appropriate language, responding to the children effectively, and establishing boundaries to ensure that they do not delve too deeply into a pupil’s personal life. These concerns reflect a level of maturity ahead of undertaking the content of the curriculum area itself.

At the time of writing, these student teachers have navigated their way through their initial teacher education course and are establishing their identity as primary school teachers at an exciting time of curriculum change. The inclusion of Wellbeing as an area of learning in primary education is a welcome development, aligning with both the Aistear framework in the early years and the Junior Cycle curriculum at post-primary level. However, there is a learning curve ahead not only for newly qualified teachers but for all primary school teachers in terms of teaching the new Wellbeing specification. This new approach requires a shift from thinking of PE and SPHE as two distinct subject areas at stages 1 and 2 (infants to second class) to teaching these areas in an integrated manner. From third to sixth class, the focus returns to PE and SPHE as distinct areas.

Across the proposed 18 strand units of the new curriculum specification, there is a lot of

SPHE content to explore with pupils, all equally important regardless of the perceived sensitivity of its content. No doubt, the challenges anticipated by student teachers will emerge in the teaching of content across the various class levels, but unanticipated challenges will also present in the lives of pupils, both within and outside of school. It is important that teachers have access to adequate supports, both professionally and personally, to sustain and support them in delivering a Wellbeing curriculum to all pupils, whilst nurturing teacher confidence and competence in the area. Future research could explore the perspectives of student teachers after they have received instruction on SPHE as part of their undergraduate programme. Examining their views both before and after instruction could provide insights into the potential influence of the instruction itself.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Q1. Please select your gender.

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other

Q2. Did you explore the subject area of SPHE when you were a pupil in primary school?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

Q3. If you answered Yes to Q2, what topics did you explore in SPHE?

Q4. Were any elements of SPHE taught to you by an outside speaker?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

Q5. If you answered Yes to Q4, what topics were taught to you by an outside speaker?

Q6. As a teacher, what topics do you think will be the most challenging to teach in SPHE?

Q7. Have you any concerns about teaching SPHE?