

## SPHE Short Course - Feedback

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<b>Are you contributing views as:</b>	
<b>An organisation</b>	Yes
<b>Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation on the NCCA website?</b>	Yes
<b>Name of organisation</b>	Catholic Education Partnership (CEP)

### Introduction

*“The glory of God is men and women fully alive” – St. Irenaeus*

This simple statement captures the essential reason that Catholics value the education as a holistic endeavour, with the full totality of the person, physical, moral, intellectual, emotional, and social, being brought to flourish. If God’s glory is in the full expression of human life, then human life must be a noble thing. A holistic education seeks the revelation of the full nobility of human life.

The State too values education as a holistic endeavour, recognising in Article 41(1) of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* the “right and duty of parents to provide ... for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical, and social education of their children.” The State gives life to this in the Education Act, 1998, Section 9(d) in mandating schools to “promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school”.

SPHE forms an important part of a child’s holistic education. Any such course, properly conceived, should seek to address the whole human person, particularly given that the stated aim 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.”

The nurturing of a sense of meaning and purpose is also essential to anything pertaining to a person’s capacity to lead a fulfilling and healthy life. The spiritual aspect to the human person will be essential to this.

Taking the above into account, any SPHE curriculum will have to provide for the context of the course within a school’s particular ethos, as this will inform the moral, spiritual, and intellectual world view the curriculum is situated within. Schools exist within a pluralist society, and within themselves contain a plurality of world views. The curriculum, while situated within the ethos of

the school, should encourage dialogue and encounter with that plurality. This is pluralism properly conceived, that seeks engagement with difference, rather than seeking to ignore it or to pretend that an ethical 'view from nowhere' can exist.

For schools with a Catholic ethos, this means that the curriculum will be taught within the context of the Church's teaching and with Gospel values. This is not to be understood as exclusionary. The Roman poet Terence's famous line, *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* ("I am human, I consider nothing that is human alien to me"), applies also to Church teaching, grounded as it is in the full humanity of Jesus Christ. A Catholic school, holding to the fore the essential dignity of all men and women, created as they are in the image and likeness of God, can address questions of human sexuality and gender in all its manifestations in individual human persons.

Within a school having a Catholic ethos, the Church's teaching will be presented with confidence, in accordance with the requirements of the Education Act (Sec. 15), and in line with the moral duty owed to parents/guardians, and in a spirit of respectful encounter and dialogue with other philosophies of life, inside and outside the school.

The course will also need to provide, in a practical way, for the role of parents as the primary educators of their children to be respected. This is a fundamental legal and moral right, protected by the State through Article 42(1) of *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, confirmed also in Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 to the *European Convention on Human Rights*:

"... In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions."

Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 applies to all subjects and not only religious instruction. Sexual education and ethics thus falls within the scope of Article 2 of Protocol No. 1, as confirmed by *Jimenez Alonso and Jimenez Merino v. Spain*; *Dojan and Others v. Germany*; and *Appel-Irrgang and Others v. Germany*.

Finally, any SPHE course must ensure flexibility for the professional judgment of the teacher, in consultation where necessary with the student's parents/guardians, to determine the age and stage appropriateness of its provision. Supports and guidance will be required to make the curriculum accessible to students with special education needs, or to those with barriers to learning. This touches on the need for specialised training and support for teachers engaging with SPHE. Other school supports may be required with respect to issues that may arise for particular students or their families in light of the curriculum. A whole of school approach, supported by the Patrons, Trustees, and the State will be an essential element to achieve the full potential of SPHE.

## Questions posed by NCCA for consideration:

### 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

### **Response:**

CEP supports the aims of the proposed SPHE short course, and recognises the evident engagement with young people that informs it.

However, we believe the aim should include the spiritual dimension of the human person, the particular religious and philosophical world views that inform how individuals judge their lives to be fulfilling and healthy. A holistic approach will require that this important aspect of the human person be explicitly acknowledged.

Students do not develop “*knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values*” from a vacuum – they are informed by their familial and more general cultural and social contexts, including the ethos of their school.

This too touches on the question of meaning and purpose of life. As Nietzsche put it, “He who has a why to live for, can bear almost any how.” Educators accompany and guide students to develop that ‘why’. They do so alongside the student’s family, friends, and culture and this task is much greater than can be encompassed within an SPHE course, but the course should none the less reference it, and the course aim should give explicit acknowledgement of same.

Similarly, the content of the course will play a part in the student’s development of their own sense of who they are. The ancient Greek poet Pindar wrote that our most important duty in life is to become who we are. This is an essential part of any fulfilling and flourishing life. It is important that the course take in questions of meaning and purpose, acknowledging their role in that ‘becoming’.

### **Question 2.**

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.

### **Response:**

The course structure, with four strands and three cross-cutting elements, having an integrated character, is welcome and is a sign of the continuing development of SPHE pedagogy within schools.

The three cross-cutting elements are well judged and are rightfully laid out as an ongoing process of interaction between the three. The thinking on dialogue between contrasting perspectives, values and behaviours is welcome, but fails to recognise the role the school’s ethos necessarily plays as a stepping off point for such dialogue. Every school, of any ethos type, appropriately, in

line with their moral and legal duties, has a fundamental ethical point of view. Catholic schools, rightfully, will seek to propose the Catholic view matters of morals and meaning, but will, in accordance with the Church's thinking, seek to encourage positive encounters and dialogue with the plurality of views within and without the school. The curriculum needs to give guidance to schools on the need to inform the programme with the school's ethos, and to provide sufficient flexibility for them to do so.

The formation of the ethical character of students as they grapple with the topics addressed in the course should be explicitly addressed. The proposal speaks of students developing self-awareness of their values in a manner that seems to be grounded in a Platonic idea of learning by remembering, rather than on the role of the school, in line with their ethos and on behalf of and informed by the students' parents/guardians, in the development of the moral character of the student. A dialogic approach, grounded in the school's ethos, and encouraging encounters with different perspectives and values, seems both to respect the role of education in character formation, while also respecting students' agency in developing their own moral character.

The 'awareness' cross-cutting element rightfully emphasises that we share a common humanity, dignity and rights, and this will be entirely in keeping with the importance within the Catholic ethos of the essential dignity that all persons hold as having been made in the image and likeness of God.

Strand 1.6 reflects the Catholic commitment to respecting the essential dignity of all individuals. However, explicit acknowledgement should be made of the Traveller community in this. While that community is encompassed by "ethnicity", discrimination against that community is one of the more deeply seated prejudices in Irish society, and would benefit from being directly addressed.

Rights are mentioned in both the 'awareness' and 'dialogue' elements, and a rights-based approach is mentioned in one of the strands. CEP are, needless to say, fully in favour of the emphasis on rights, but we note that in the absence of a corresponding sense of the duties we owe others, a rights-based approach can risk an 'I' centred approach to the topics covered in the course. With respect to relationships, sexual relationships, and topics such as pornography, a sense of other persons as fellow-experiencing-subjects-of-life is an essential component of inculcating a moral obligation to treat others as ends rather than means, as subjects, not objects.

With respect to the relevance of the course to 12-15 year olds, the four strands certainly appear to have been informed by student feedback and the NCCA are to be commended for this. The course addresses challenges arising from social media, including cyberbullying, self-management skills, alcohol and addictive substances, sexual orientation, well-being, gender norms and stereotypes, and consent.

Of particular welcome is the emphasis placed on healthy non-sexual relationships. These form the majority of the relationships we have in life and can be healthy or unhealthy, or even harmful, and the course encourages a fuller exploration of this topic beyond a discussion of bullying or abusive behaviour.

The importance, legally and morally, of giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships is rightfully recognised, but this should explicitly be acknowledged as a base-line idea, as an essential but not sufficient condition for appropriate sexual relationships. We acknowledge that this is in part addressed in strand points 3.5 and 3.6 but requires a fuller treatment in choice and decision making.

There are references to what we understand to be elements of CBT in Strands 1.8, 4.2 and 4.3. These are welcome, but it should be appreciated that CBT itself drew its techniques from Stoic philosophy, which itself located those techniques within an ethical framework (itself located within a broader physics and metaphysics). These techniques certainly aid in a fulfilling life, but without an ethical grounding they will not realise their full potential. One common criticism of CBT and more generally resilience based approaches, lies in the emphasis being placed on the individual's response to trauma or injustice. This is worthwhile, but misses the broader challenge of addressing the source of the trauma or injustice. Stoic philosophy placed a strong emphasis on improving the world for others, on justice. Similarly too, schools with a Catholic ethos would be expected to address issues of justice that may arise when discussing this area.

The integrated approach may pose a challenge for schools to properly respect the role of parent/guardians as the primary educators of their children, in that withdrawal of students may become areas of contestation. It would be preferable if the RSE elements could be presented as discrete elements, making withdrawals practicable, as otherwise some parents/guardians may simply seek to opt their children out of the course entirely.

The full potential of the course, will require informed parental engagement that empowers parents/guardians to make informed decisions with respect to their children and to support the learning outcomes through the home.

### **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.*

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

### **Response:**

CEP believes the proposed CBA is suitable, providing as it does for student's to critically reflect on their learning. The respect for student agency in selecting topics is welcome. The inclusions of some form of assessment pays proper respect to the significance of the course.

The assessment and feedback will need to be handled with sensitivity and necessary supports and guidance provided to inform same.

### **Question 4.**

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

## **Response:**

For this SPHE course to be successful it will need to take account of the ethos of schools and how the course will interact and respect that ethos. Similarly, the primacy of parents/guardians as educators requires recognition. Parental involvement will necessarily have to form a key part in the planning of the introduction of the course.

A whole of school approach will be required and integration of the course with the policies of the school, and with other subjects, including in Catholic schools, religious education.

As the NCCA is aware, significant supports in material and professional development for teachers, and in supports to school leadership teams and boards of management, will be required.

Taking a longer view, the aim should be to create a cohort of teachers trained for and with experience in SPHE, and this present proposed course should be seen as something that will be subject to revision once we have a suitable cohort of confident practitioners, representative of the variety of ethos present in schools, available to provide feedback to enhance and improve this course in the future.

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