



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Redeveloping the Primary School Curriculum

Consultation with children on the future of Physical Education and Social, Personal, and Health Education as part of the curriculum area of Wellbeing

Developed in partnership with Hub na nÓg and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

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Introduction

Redeveloping the primary school curriculum

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is currently redeveloping the Primary School Curriculum. The vision and principles for the redeveloped curriculum are laid out in the *Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF)* (Department of Education, 2023).

The Framework sets out five broad curriculum areas:

1. Language
2. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education
3. Wellbeing
4. Arts Education
5. Social and Environmental Education.

Public consultation on the proposals within the PCF took place from February 2020 to March 2022 and data from that consultation was analysed and used to inform the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, published in Spring 2023. In addition to the consultation with education stakeholders, parents and the general public, the NCCA also commissioned a research project to consult children on their views of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. This aspect of the consultation began in March 2020 and was undertaken by Marino Institute of Education. NCCA strives to ensure that its curriculum development processes recognise children's right to a voice in such development since it concerns them and their lives (Article 12, UNCRC).

This report

This report recounts further consultation with children which took place to help shape NCCA's development of the new curriculum specification for Wellbeing with children from Stages 3 and 4 (Third to Sixth Classes) in four primary schools between April and June 2023. The schools were of different types, all members of the NCCA's [Schools Forum](#), and were located in counties Wicklow, Dublin, Cavan and Donegal. As set out in the Framework, the Wellbeing curriculum area with these class stages encompasses Physical Education (PE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE).

Audience and influence

Work is currently underway to develop curriculum specifications for the five curriculum areas outlined above. Each specification will provide the rationale, aims, strands and learning outcomes of the curriculum area. While consultation with children is a strong feature of our work during the consultation phase of curriculum specification development, it is the aim of the NCCA to include children's voices more centrally earlier in our development processes. To achieve this, the NCCA worked in partnership with Hub na nÓg and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) to establish an additional engagement with children during the development of the curriculum specifications that would inform the work of the Council, the Board for Early Childhood and Primary Education, and the Wellbeing Development Group.

To provide a strong, representative and responsive basis for its curriculum development work the NCCA has established Development Groups to undertake specific tasks in curriculum areas or subjects. NCCA has established five Development Groups to support the development of the five-curriculum specifications outlined earlier. A common set of overarching guiding principles (aligned with NCCA’s Strategic Plan 2022 – 2025) (outlined in Table 1 below) underpin the work, with the principle pertaining to child voice holding particular relevance to this document.

Table 1. Principles underpinning the development of advice

Principles	How the principles will be reflected in the work of the Development Groups
Inclusion and diversity	The work of the Development Group will recognise the uniqueness and rights of every child and the importance of supporting all children to reach their potential.
Partnership and collaboration	Members of the Development Group work in a spirit of collaboration and partnership, and with classrooms, schools and the wider education sector to shape curriculum and assessment developments.
Consultation	The Development Group will support consultation processes and take account of the rich diversity of voices, perspectives and views that make up Irish society.
Child/student voice	The work of the Development Group will be underpinned by the rights of children to have their voices heard and included in shaping the curriculum and assessment advice developed.
Research-informed	The Development Group will draw heavily on a wide range of research, national and international, to inform its thinking on curriculum and assessment.
Innovation and responsiveness	The Development Group will explore new ideas and thinking as they build on the strengths of the education system and develop advice that is responsive, while being appropriately innovative and ambitious.
Coherence, continuity and progression	The Development Group will pay attention to coherence within and across sectors to support appropriate continuity and progression for all children in their educational journeys while respecting the distinct nature and identity of each stage and sector.
Learning organisation	The Development Group will support a culture of learning during its work together in support of the enhancement of educational experience for all children.

The National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making

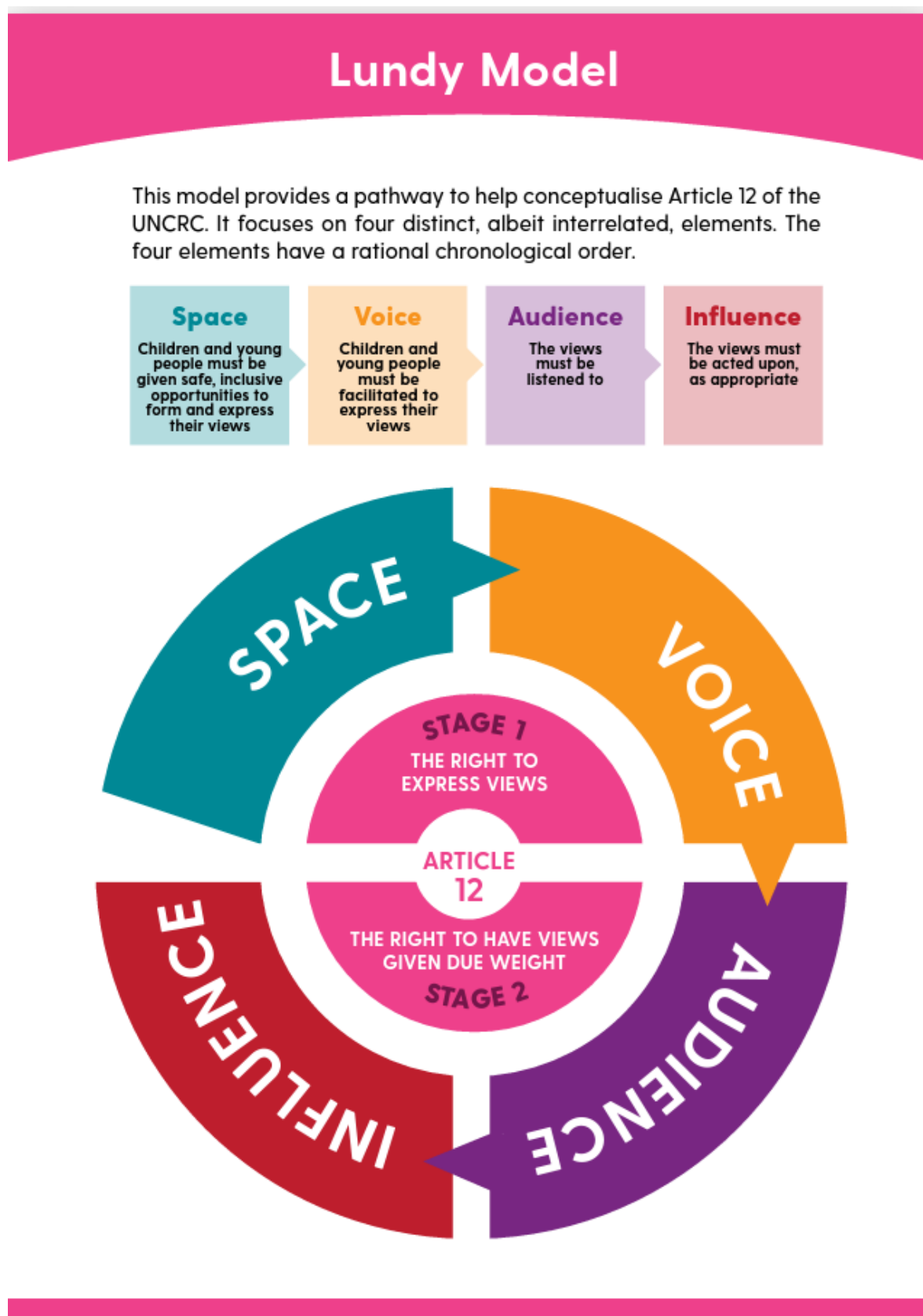
For this consultation, the sessions in schools were designed and facilitated by personnel from Hub na nÓg (<https://hubnanog.ie/>). Their work is guided by [the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making](#). The framework is built around a rights-based model of participation, developed by Professor Laura Lundy, comprising four elements: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence. An explanation of each of these can be seen in Figure 1.

The aim of the model employed is to provide children with the opportunity to express their views in decision-making on matters that concern them and their lives. This means:

- providing them with age-appropriate and accessible information and a suitable location and setting in which they feel safe and free to express their views, opinions and ideas
- facilitating their expression of ideas, using methodologies that are age-appropriate and accessible so they can fully express their views
- making them aware of who will hear and consider their views and taking their views seriously and giving their opinions due weight within decision making processes
- informing them of the scope they have (including the limitations) to influence decision-making and giving the children feedback on what impact their views and opinions have had on decisions taken.

Arising from this approach, the present report is guided by the views of the children in the consultation. It reports what they said in response to a number of key questions. All sessions were conducted in rooms and halls in the participating schools, and a staff member from the school was in attendance at all sessions.

Figure 1. Lundy Model



Methodology

Introduction

This section outlines the methodology employed for the consultation with children on PE and SPHE.

Developing the methodology

The NCCA designed the question areas based on the opportunity for children to influence decision making within the curricular areas of PE and SPHE. Hub na nÓg led on the design of age-appropriate and child friendly methods. The team from DCEDIY and Hub na nÓg follow best practice principles in consulting with young people and are guided by the principles of Lundy's Model and the Participation Framework. At all stages of the design of methods, measures were taken to ensure children had accessible and inclusive opportunities to share their views and opinions on PE and SPHE within the decision making process. Children were provided with age-appropriate information on the reasons for consultation and on the topic. This was particularly important for SPHE.

A range of methods were used to provide the children with varied ways to respond to the key questions posed. Methods included the use of mime and freeze frame, drawing, responding to images, writing within 'body' and 'tree' templates, oral expression and discussion.

Appointing an independent report writer

To ensure the views of the children participating in the consultation were accurately recorded and presented, an independent report writer was commissioned to record the consultation process and to prepare a report describing the children's views, ideas and opinions on PE and SPHE.

Child Safeguarding

As outlined in the [Child Safeguarding Statement](#), NCCA is committed through its engagement with children, to ensuring their safety, welfare and development as a core objective and priority. The independent report writer, the Hub na nÓg facilitators and NCCA staff present at consultations were all Garda vetted in advance of the consultation.

Sampling

As previously mentioned, all the schools in this consultation were members of NCCA's [Schools Forum](#). Due consideration was given to ensure the schools selected were of different types. Factors including: location – urban and rural; ethos – denominational and multidenominational; size – single grade and multigrade; and DEIS status were all considered when inviting schools to participate in the consultation.

As outlined in the [NCCA Strategic Plan 2022 – 2025](#), Inclusion and diversity is one of eight principles underpinning the work of the NCCA, enabling the development of curriculum and assessment that recognises the uniqueness and rights of each child and the importance of

supporting all children to reach their potential. Schools were respectfully asked to be mindful of this principle when inviting children to participate in the consultation.

Piloting the methodology with a Youth Advisory Group

For this consultation a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) was established to help plan and pilot the consultation. Advisory groups provide a way of directly involving a small number of children in advising on the development of a consultation. Working with an advisory group is a particularly valuable way to plan and pilot a consultation with a broader cohort of children. Advisory groups are also a very useful way of ensuring the direct involvement of children and young people in decision-making in situations where it is not possible to involve all children in a school.

The YAG was based in a large urban school with special classes. The children invited to participate represented a broad and diverse range of backgrounds. The pilot took place over two days, the first day focused on PE and the second focused on SPHE.

The methodology was piloted with the YAG and they provided feedback on the consultation topic, how the questions were asked and what they thought about the methods used to ask the questions. The children's input and feedback was used to design the final methodology and format of the consultations. The children's responses to the questions during the pilot were included in the analysis of the report. This emphasises the importance of listening to the voices of the children and including their views, thoughts and ideas on PE and SPHE with the three other schools in the consultation.

On foot of feedback from the YAG, changes were made to the format of the Pilot Days' questions. These changes are set out in the following tables:

Table 1: Changes to questions from PE Pilot Day to subsequent days

Questions asked on PE Pilot Day	Questions asked on all subsequent PE sessions
Q.1. 'What do you do in PE?'	<i>Questions 1, 2 and 3 were asked as on the Pilot Day</i>
Q.2. 'What do you like about PE?'	
Q.3. 'What do you not like about PE?'	
Q.4. 'In an ideal world, what would PE be like?'	Q.4. 'If you were principal for a day, what would you plan to do in PE for that day?'
Q.5. 'How can we make sure that all children can enjoy and learn during PE lessons?'	
<i>Children's feedback indicated some difficulty in interpreting the intent of these two questions; consequently, they were replaced by Question 4 (opposite) for subsequent days.</i>	

Table 2: Changes to questions from SPHE Pilot Day to subsequent days

Questions asked on SPHE Pilot Day	Questions asked on all subsequent SPHE sessions
Q.1. 'What do you learn about in SPHE?'	<i>Q.1. was asked as on the Pilot Day</i>

<p>Q.2. 'What would you like to learn about yourself and living a healthy life?' and 'What would you like to learn about friends, family and other people and how we all belong in the world together?'</p> <p><i>At the outset here, some children - 3rd and 4th class in particular - indicated or said they found these questions confusing. A decision was made to alter the question to 'what would you like to learn about in SPHE?', and this question was also used for the three remaining schools.</i></p>	<p>Q.2. 'What would you like to learn about in SPHE?'</p>
<p>Q.3. 'When you are learning about yourself, friends, family and other people, what would make it easier to share your thoughts and ideas?'</p>	<p>Q.3. 'What would make you feel safe and comfortable when learning in SPHE?'</p>
<p>Q.4. 'If you are the principal of an imaginary school for a day . . .'</p> <p><i>Children were invited to consider both PE and SPHE in responding here. This question was asked only on the SPHE Pilot Day</i></p>	<p><i>Due to time constraints, this question was not asked in sessions in the three remaining schools for SPHE. The piloting of this question informed the changing of the method and the question wording for Q4 of the PE consultation</i></p>

Data analysis

Data from the consultation sessions comprised of the children's oral responses, their drawings and illustrations, and their written remarks on charts and templates used for both PE and SPHE sessions. Their responses and contributions for each question were thematically analysed within each subject and are accordingly presented in this report. Common themes and concerns emerging across PE and SPHE, which may be relevant to the audience for this report, are considered in the report's conclusion.

Introducing the consultation

In each school, Physical Education was the subject of discussion in the first part of the day; the second session was devoted to SPHE. Following an initial overview of the four elements underpinning the consultation, each session was structured around a small number of key questions based on children's thoughts and experiences of the subject being explored. Their responses were received and recorded in writing, and in the content of charts and other verbal and illustrated materials completed and populated by the children during the sessions.

The children were from Third to Sixth Classes. Children engaged in either plenary or group activities on the day. Where possible, distinct class-level groupings (Third/Fourth and Fifth/Sixth) were employed. However, where pupil class numbers were sometimes uneven, this could not be facilitated. To facilitate inclusion, play items were available to any child who wished to use them.

Introductions were made, with orientation and a clear setting out of the purposes of the day:

- advice was provided to the children that their involvement in the session was voluntary, that it was their choice to speak or not, and their right to withdraw at any point. The children were informed that there were no right and no wrong answers and they could choose to express their views and opinions in the way they felt most comfortable, through drawing, writing or speaking or through participation in group activities.
- the children were made aware that their views would be recorded in written form and would be published in a report in due course, but with their words anonymised
- they were informed of the audiences who would read the report, and it was explained that while their views would be taken seriously not everything that they suggest may be possible. Children were informed that they if something was not possible that the reasons why not would be explained to them.
- a copy of Hub na nÓg's Child Protection Statement was displayed during the sessions, and the children were advised that if any child made the team aware of any situation where they were in danger or at risk, the team was obliged to let the responsible authorities know about this. Bearing this in mind, the children were asked not to relate or discuss personal situations in the groups, but that if they had concerns about a personal issue, they should report it privately to a team member during the day.

This report begins with an account of the consultation sessions conducted with the children on Physical Education, followed by an account of sessions on Social, Personal and Health Education. All of the children's responses, comments and contributions are aggregated across the four participating schools.

Consultation on Physical Education

Each session commenced with an icebreaker game. (A variety of games were used across the four schools). Games were selected based on the group dynamic and space available.

Question 1: What do you do in PE?

The first question posed to the children was 'What do you do in PE?' The methodology used here was a request to the children to mime an activity they would experience during a PE lesson. On freezing their action on request, they were asked to name the action and the game, sport or activity it referred to. Children referred to their activities in terms of skills or movements they learned and enjoyed.

Responses listed an extensive array of movement activities across all schools. Allowing for the variety of facilities and equipment in each school, the range of PE experiences mentioned was extensive. In terms of the current Physical Education curriculum, learning was recounted across all six strands – Athletics, Dance, Gymnastics, Games, Outdoor and adventure activities, and Aquatics.

The PE learning most frequently mentioned comprised ballgames: football, basketball, dodgeball, tag rugby and volleyball. Games less frequently mentioned were hockey, netball and rounders. Following ballgames in popularity were athletics, gymnastics and dancing. A mix of contact and non-contact sports were reported. Among the latter games and activities were swimming, badminton, orienteering, table-tennis, skipping, tennis and yoga. Some children included sports they engaged in outside of school, such as in local GAA or soccer clubs, athletics or swimming groups.

Figure 2. A selection of quotes from children in response to question one



Having the children list their PE activities in school and in the community took a strengths based approach to provide children with the opportunity to speak of what they know based on their personal experience and was useful as an introduction, as it served to make the whole group aware of the wide variety of movement activities, they and others engaged in. In addition, it brought the range of such activities into focus for questions the children would be asked subsequently. Later questions expanded further the menu of activities children had engaged in.

Question 2: What do you like about PE?

The methodology employed for this question was to provide the children – divided into two groups – with ‘body-maps’. These were large card templates on each of which was depicted the outline shape of a human figure (see Figure 3 below). Instructions were given on the use of the template, i.e., responses to the ‘likes’ question were to be written inside the body outline, with responses to the subsequent question inquiring about ‘dislikes’ to be written outside the body outline. All the body maps generated by the children can be viewed in Appendices 1-4.

A number of key themes emerged from the children’s responses:

- 1. Enjoyment of the social aspects:** *‘playing with your friends’; ‘working together ... with each other and coaches ...’; ‘the socialising and activities – friendly competition’; ‘PE is a way to bond with others’; ‘being on a team with friends can also build a stronger bond like trust’.*
- 2. Enjoyment of the fun:** *‘it’s for fun not just for winning’; ‘American Football is really exciting’; ‘I only like fun games to play’; ‘I like playing basketball because it’s fun and competitive and I like orienteering because it’s fun and a bit tricky but I enjoy the challenge’; ‘the rush of PE is fun’.*
- 3. Enjoyment of the outdoors:** *‘Going outside’; ‘playing on grass’; ‘fresh air’; ‘being outside’; ‘getting out of the room for exercise’.* A few children also stated that they liked the break from the classroom that the PE lesson provided.
- 4. Having a choice in the activity:** *‘Choosing what activities we want to do in PE’; ‘get a choice from teacher ... not forced’; ‘getting to choose what game we play’.* (It is worth noting at this point that not having choice in PE activities generated far more comments in the ‘dislikes’ question that followed on after this one).
- 5. Awareness of health benefits:** Older children had a notable awareness of the benefits of physical activity, in physical terms, but also socially, and for mental health and psychological wellbeing. Their comments included: *‘PE is good for your health’; ‘Fresh air [as a benefit]’; ‘PE can boost your mental health’; ‘It can build up your happiness’; ‘PE can make you stronger physically and mentally’; ‘PE can get your mind off things’; ‘It kind of wakes you up in the middle of the day’.*

Other responses concerned the place of competition in PE. Only a few children rated competition highly: *‘winning, and attacking and scoring’*, while most others emphasised *‘friendly competition, you don’t have to be the best’*, and *‘I only like fun games to play’*, making no reference to competition at this point.

Younger children often named the PE activities they liked. Some children also referred to play equipment in the school yard or playground. Older children expressed their likes in more detail, as in the ‘health benefits’ quotes above. It should also be considered that while most children were referring to their school PE experiences, a number of children made explicit reference to sporting activities they were involved in in their local communities.

Question 3: What do you not like about PE?

Children in all the participating schools expressed their dislikes about their physical education experiences. The main points of children's dissatisfaction are summarised here, quoting many of their remarks:

- 1. Lack of choice and variety:** (This was the most frequently mentioned reason for dislike). *'Not getting a choice in what sports we play'; 'Want to be able to recommend games'; 'More say in the activities we get to do in PE'; 'We should have votes to do stuff in PE'; 'Same thing every lesson'; 'Always only GAA – we don't do other sports'; 'Sometimes we do the same sport for a month – would be better to try a different sport every week'.*
- 2. Insufficient time:** *'PE needs to be longer the time limit – want a longer time'; 'when you don't have a lot of time to finish the game'; 'It's only once a week'; 'one lesson should be one hour – the time is not that long'.*
- 3. Dislike of activities perceived as unnecessary:** *'I don't like squats, mountain climbers, jumping, and touch your toes - these are a waste of time, they take too long and we don't have enough time then to do activities'; 'I don't like doing warmups – I'd rather do a game'; 'Running laps'; 'Stretching'; 'Learning to walk and run and jump – it's a waste of time – would rather play games and sports'.*
- 4. Dislike of specific activities, games:** *'Don't like yoga because I find it boring and not relaxing how it's supposed to be'; 'I like everything but yoga'; 'Don't like Irish dancing'; 'Don't like soccer as game can get rough and not fair'; 'GAA because people hit you a lot'.*
- 5. Perceptions of unfairness:** *'If playing games, need referee - teacher usually gets it correct'; 'Coaches having favourites'; 'others will always try to ruin it, affects whole class'; 'Don't like when friends get to choose teams ... they pick all the people who are good'; 'Teacher picking teams'.*
- 6. Cheating and not playing by rules:** *'People cheating in PE and they don't say if the ball is out'; 'when people get away with free points or when they cheat'; 'Teacher cheating'; 'People try get you into trouble when they are causing the trouble'; 'I don't like Gaelic because it is quite rough and some people lie in it a lot to win'.*
- 7. Poor losers:** *'When people are not good losers'; 'When people rub it in your face when they win'; 'Trash talking at the end of games'; 'When someone is a sore loser'.*
- 8. Rough play:** *'Everyone shoving into each other'; 'don't like when we're playing football and people hurt each other on purpose'; 'don't like soccer as game can get rough and not fair'; 'people getting angry'; 'Sometimes people get too competitive'; 'People think I'm rough because I'm stronger'; 'there's always fights in football and teacher tells them to stop'; 'Teacher says this is the last time and it never gets fixed and keeps going on'.*
- 9. Physical/sensory issues:** *'Having to wait til PE is over to get a drink'; 'Swimming in cold water'; 'Don't like doing PE in winter when it's zero degrees, and in summer we don't get long PE and it's too warm'; 'Sweating'; 'It's tiring when it gets hot you get really warm'; 'When you fall and everybody looks*

- 1. PE should be enjoyable:** *'In a perfect world, everyone would get along and play fairly'; 'Stop cheating'; 'It makes PE no fun'; 'Make it all about fun, not about winning'; 'Making it easy and simple'; 'No rough play or people getting sad'.*
- 2. Fairness:** *'Make the teams fair'; 'The captains have to pick a girl then a boy, not always boys'.*
- 3. Options and choices:** *'Give everyone a vote and whatever wins, that's the game that day'; 'There would need to be more options and choices for what games or sports they want to play'; 'It is important that we try new things so that you know if you want to try it again'; 'The coaches should listen to everyone and take into consideration all of the students' opinions'.*
- 4. Don't judge people:** *'Don't judge them on how good or bad they are'; 'You won't be good at everything'; 'No giving out like when you miss a goal'; 'Children not giving out to each other if they don't pass'; 'You need to be the fastest [and] strongest in order to be respected in PE – everyone should be given a shot at playing sports'.*
- 5. Include and engage everyone:** *'Don't leave anyone out when choosing teams, no matter how good or bad they are - teach them a skill or two'; 'Make sure everybody has something to do'; 'The rules should be really clearly explained so that everyone knows how to play'; 'Tell them how to play and include them'; 'A lot of people don't like sports at all so we should respect that'; 'If people don't wanna play they can go and play or walk around with some friends . . or help out the coaches'.* One child had written *'no judging by the colours'*. He told the facilitator that people judged him by his skin colour when he moved to Ireland first.

Question 4. If you were principal for a day, what would you plan to do in PE for that day? (Amended)

Please note: Based on feedback from the YAG, this question was asked at the three schools' consultations after the pilot day, and replaced Questions 4 and 5 from the pilot day).

The full question posed to the children was: *Imagine you are principal of an imaginary school for the day. As principal you can decide what happens in PE for that day. Because our school is imaginary you don't have to worry about how much things cost or if they would be possible to do so you can think of anything you would like. In our imaginary school all the children are very different. They come from lots of different countries, they like lots of different things, and some children like and are good at some things and other children like and are good at very different things. If you were the principal of our imaginary school for the day what would you plan for the children to do in PE that day?*

In response to the question, children eagerly embraced the opportunity for "blue sky thinking" to reimagine their school building and its facilities for a broader range of physical education possibilities. They were granted complete creative freedom to envision a school equipped with every conceivable resource to cater to a wide spectrum of physical education possibilities.

A diverse array of responses emerged, reflecting the diverse perspectives of children from different schools. Some focused on listing facilities and equipment, for example, one group introduced the concept of a sensory room as an essential resource. Others proposed activities typically not associated with the PE curriculum, drawing inspiration from local sports centres or holiday experiences.

These proposals were sometimes shaped by individual preferences, for example, some children suggested activities like Irish dancing and horse-riding. Several children were keen to introduce novel physical activities to the curriculum, for example, adventurous pursuits like ziplining and paragliding. Additionally, there was a recognition among some respondents that not all children may feel comfortable with certain physical activities and might require encouragement to explore new and potentially challenging endeavours.

Other suggestions from the children revolved around the duration and structure of physical education (PE) in their ideal school. Many of them expressed a strong desire for longer PE sessions, with some envisioning entire days dedicated to PE. Additionally, several children proposed innovative ideas which included introducing a dedicated PE uniform for PE lessons and inviting sports personalities to impart valuable skills and insights to the children.

Some children put forward the idea of incorporating animals into PE activities, while others suggested creating new rules for PE, such as allowing children to play on the grass. They also advocated for greater inclusivity by proposing that girls and boys play together during PE sessions, recognising that this practice was not always the norm in their current PE classes.

A sample of the responses are outlined in Figure 4.

Figure 4. A selection of responses to question four



Consultation on Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

This section of the report provides an account of the consultation sessions conducted with children in the four schools on Social, Personal and Health Education. All of the children's responses, comments and contributions are aggregated across the four schools.

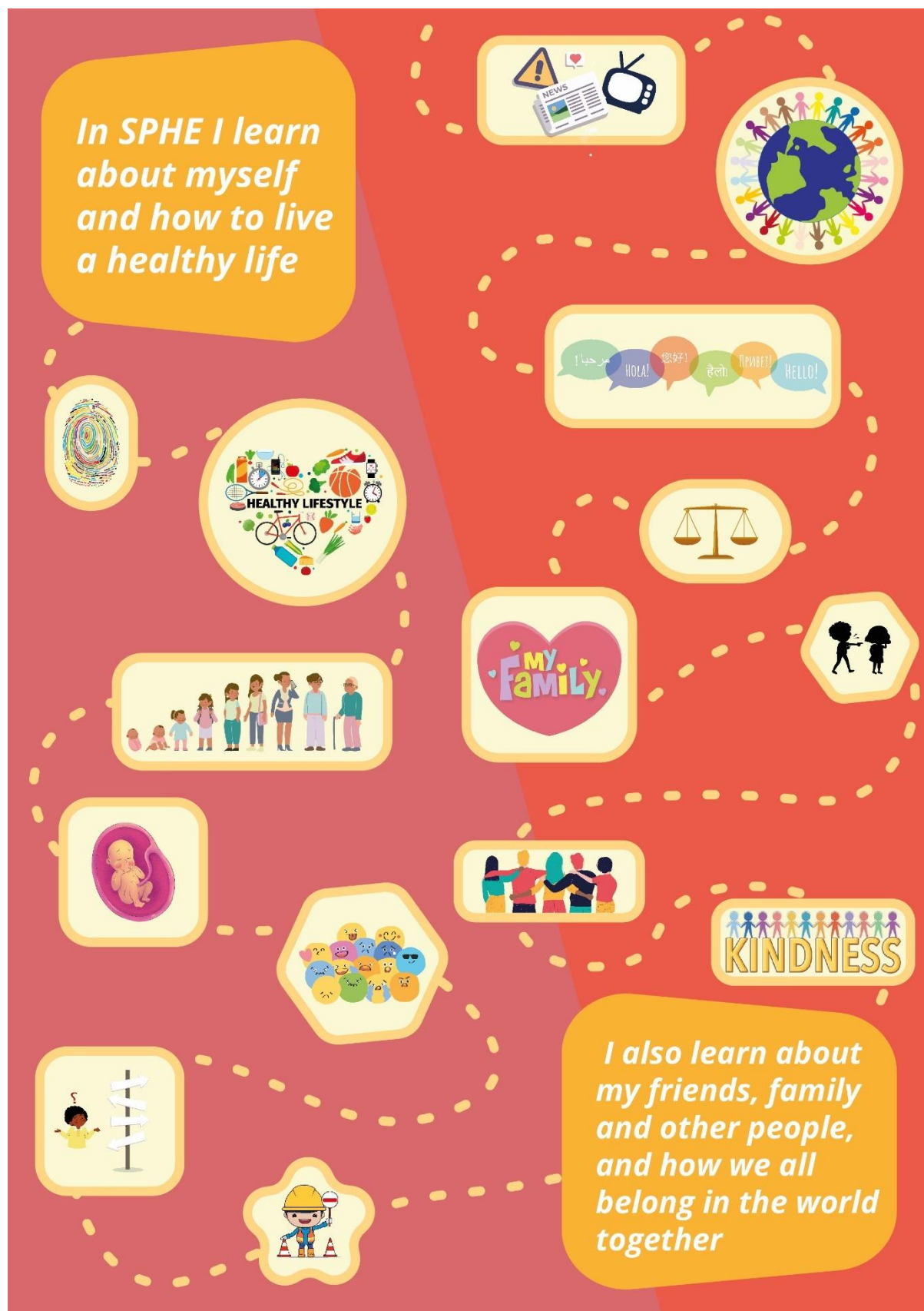
As in the consultation sessions on Physical Education, introductions were made, with orientation and a clear setting out of the purposes of the day. (See details in preceding report on PE consultation). All the sessions commenced with an icebreaker game. (A variety of games was used across the four schools).

Question 1. What do you learn about in SPHE?

The first question then posed to the children was **'What do you learn about in SPHE?'** An infographic (see Figure 1 below) was used to support the methodology here. The purpose of this was to give children appropriate information about the topic so that they could have informed opinions of the range of lessons and topics they may have encountered in their SPHE lessons. This was considered appropriate because of the variety of lessons that SPHE may comprise, and the possibility that children did not always recognise a particular lesson as coming under the SPHE 'banner'. Initial hesitant responses to the facilitator's question 'what does SPHE stand for?' illustrated the latter point, as did one child asking 'what exactly is SPHE?'

The infographic consisted of a number of colourful child-friendly images (15) representing the various strands and associated content of the current SPHE curriculum (1999). On the pilot day, these were unaccompanied by labels or explanations, except for three. At the suggestion of the children, relevant words were added to the images for subsequent consultation days. The pictures were set out randomly as a set of separate images, and the children were asked to choose one each. The facilitator then asked the children to say what they thought their image was about and what kind of learning happens with it. As the number of images exceeded the number of children in some schools, the children were told they could select a different image to their first one chosen, if they wished. Consequently, a few remaining images were commented on by the facilitators once the children had described theirs.

Figure 5: Infographic used in Question one



Examples of the children's remarks on their chosen images are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Children's responses to the infographic

The image represented . . .	Children's comments
Self-identity	<i>Who we are, your age, where you are from. It's who you are. All about you and what you like. If you don't feel confident in yourself, how will you feel confident talking with others.</i>
Taking care of my body	<i>It's important to have a healthy lifestyle. Healthy lifestyle, food, outside exercise.</i>
Growing and changing	<i>People grow up, get older and some people die. Age doesn't matter.</i>
Birth and new life	<i>Next generation. Giving birth to a baby.</i>
Feelings and emotions	<i>Sometimes you're sad and sometimes happy. We're all human and we're all not going to be happy and sad at the same time and you have to respect what people are at the moment. [A child gave examples of where you'd feel different, such as nervous, happy, etc.]</i>
Safety and protection	<i>Keep yourself and your friends out of harm.</i>
Making decisions	<i>It can be hard to make choices. We need to learn if it's a mistake and do a different decision the next time.</i>
Relating to others	<i>Showing kindness to everyone you are around even people you do know and don't know.</i>
Friendship	<i>We don't have to like the same things. It's being kind to others, helping them.</i>
Bullying	<i>Bullying or name calling. Sometimes people are mean to those who are different. [A child gave the example of cyberbullying, and also added physical and verbal bullying].</i>
My family	<i>SPHE is about your friends and family and everyone around you.</i>
Promoting justice, fairness and equality	<i>I think mine is equality and fairness. Making it fair for everyone. About being fair and equal to each other.</i>
Developing citizenship	<i>No matter how different you think someone says things, I think it's all just saying hello, like 'ciao'... it still means the same thing. What you believe different from others. Being part of the community - people have different cultures.</i>
Community and belonging	<i>Everybody is equal - it doesn't matter about their differences - you can be tall or short and it doesn't matter.</i>
Media education	<i>Not believing what you hear or see online. Learning about different forms of media, about being safe on the internet.</i>

In all schools, the children's answers on these images were short, and except in a few instances, with little elaboration. The meanings of a few images were not immediately obvious to the children, although the remarks above show that the key meaning of most was readily identified. One child remarked in later feedback that they *'liked that all the pictures meant something different'*. Another said *'it wasn't just a fake answer cos you actually had to think'*. Most children would never have seen the strands or strand units structure of the SPHE curriculum; therefore, linking them to the context of SPHE lessons was a challenge. It's also necessary to take account of the learning experiences of the children in their SPHE lessons, which will likely have had varied emphases. Nevertheless, this activity alerted the children to the breadth of SPHE content and supported their focus for subsequent questions.

Figure 6: Examples of infographic topic cards used to initiate the children's talk about SPHE on the pilot day



SPHE Pilot day Question 2: 'What would you like to learn about yourself and living a healthy life?' And 'What would you like to learn about friends, family and other people and how we all belong in the world together?'

On the pilot day, this question was posed to the children in two ways: *'What would you like to learn about yourself and living a healthy life?'* And *'What would you like to learn about friends, family and other people and how we all belong in the world together?'* The method used here was to ask the children to think about the questions and write or draw their answers to the first question in the roots section and to the second question in the branches section of a large template representing a tree. (Pictures of the trees populated with responses to these questions may be viewed in Appendices 11 and 12). Additionally, the children were asked *'What helps you feel safe and comfortable to learn in SPHE?'* They were asked to write their responses to the latter question on the trunk of the tree - responses here included *'trusting the teacher'*; *'putting it into easier (sic) ways/words'*; *'not getting them to stand up if they don't want to'*.

Children were then each provided with three coloured stickers which they could place on the tree to indicate the areas or topics of learning they were most interested in. No topic was more obviously favoured than others.

For the methodology on subsequent days, the children were given large card jigsaw pieces on which to write their answers or draw on it/them what they would like to learn in SPHE – existing learning or new topics. They then used three coloured stickers to prioritise their preferred ones. Because Third and Fourth Class children in particular indicated or said they found the questions confusing, a decision was made to alter the question to *'what would you like to learn about in SPHE?'* (The amended question format was also used in the remaining schools.)

Responses to these questions included the following:

- *Learn about different lifestyles, different countries and different ages*
- *Being safe online is important*
- *You don't have to change to fit in*
- *No judgement [on] the way they look, speak, do things. It just makes you mean, doesn't make you look better, just worse*
- *Treating others with respect*
- *To have a treat once in a while – I agree you should not take treats all of the time.*

In response to the different question versions, a number of definite themes emerge from the children's responses. Children noted differences between people and a respect for different cultures. *'I'd like to learn about how everyone's different'*; *'Different lifestyles, how people do different things'*; *'Everybody is different and that's what make us us'*; Equality also appears as a concern, echoing issues of fairness highlighted in the PE sessions. *'Equality for all genders and ages is important'*; *'You don't have to change to fit in – everyone should be equal, friends or family'*.

Bullying was frequently raised as a concern in this and other sessions. *'How you cope with bullying'*; *'How to get someone to stop'*; *'How to fend off bullying, deal with cyber-bullying'*. A desire by some children to develop social skills appears, as do managing emotions, developing confidence, and

making decisions. *'How to be less socially awkward'*; *'How to hold a good conversation while you're nervous or awkward'*; *'I'd like to learn more about emotions and feelings'*; *'How to make decisions carefully'*. Emerging from some of the older children, these latter responses may reflect an early concern with issues of personal development that will soon arise with the onset of adolescence. A number of children referred to the teacher as *'someone who understands and who can be trusted'*, and *'a good teacher understands what a student is going through'*, highlighting the significant role the teacher can play as a guide and mentor. Interpersonal qualities in the teacher matter here.

Question 2: What would you like to learn about in SPHE?

In this, its amended format, this question was asked in the remaining schools after the pilot day. Many of the themes evident on the pilot day were again apparent across the other schools.

1. Socialising and managing friendships: *'I think it's important to have a great bond with our new or old friends. It shows that you care about them . . . but also give them privacy'; 'How to tell someone you're uncomfortable'; 'How to let go of a nasty relationship'.* Some children included family relationships, like getting on with siblings, when expressing a wish for better friendships.

Figure 7. Sample of children's responses



- 2. Understanding and managing emotions:** This was a significant issue for many children. Responses included: *'How to control your emotions'; 'How to be less stubborn – sometimes I don't want to be stubborn'; 'How to not take out your negative emotions on other people'; 'Learn about how to deal with changes like when you are older what happens'; 'I would like to learn more about feelings and emotions because we don't know when people could be going through a bad time and might need help'. 'How a person that seems perfectly fine to you could be struggling really bad'; 'If you don't know the whole story, don't assume things'.*
- 3. Understanding diversity and inclusion:** This theme featured in a number of children's responses. *'More about wellbeing and mental health because there is lots of people who are struggling with mental health and I would like to know how to help them'; 'Learn about other people because they could have issues or a disability'.*
- 4. Bullying:** A concern for others was also evident in remarks on bullying, which again came in for frequent mention. *'I have experienced being bullied and I know how it feels so I would not want it to happen to anyone else'; 'I want to prevent it and [learn] how to help someone being bullied'.*
- 5. Children as global citizens:** The content of SPHE lessons encourages children to expand their views beyond their own lives and to consider the 'wider world'. A significant number of responses indicated that children already have awareness of that wider world and an interest in learning more about it. *'I'd like to learn more about different people and their cultures and be part of a community'; 'I would like to learn about the world, people and places'; 'We should all respect each other's cultures and beliefs, no matter how strange or weird it might look to you, as long as it's not hurting anyone, respect it'; 'There are people in the world not treated right and we need to know and learn about it in order to spread awareness'.*

6. Healthy living and being safe: There were a number of references to a healthy lifestyle. *'How to have a healthy lifestyle'; 'More about mental health and a healthy lifestyle'; 'I would like to learn about [being] healthy because I am not healthy sometimes but my mom always says you need to be healthy'*. A few responses referenced the context of sport *'Sports like Galic (sic) it helps people get better at teamwork and make friends and better choices'; 'Learn to co-operate in games'*. There were many mentions of the need for online safety. *'I would like to be safe on Discord to not talk to strangers'; 'Don't go with anybody you don't know'; '[I would like] to learn about online safety because it can be dangerous'* – at least seven other children made similar comments. Other references to safety included one on awareness of dangers on the farm, as well as road safety.

(Appendix 13 shows examples of children's responses to this question using the 'jigsaw' methodology.)

Question 3. When you are learning about yourself, friends, family and other people, what would make it easier to share your thoughts and ideas?

Please note: This question was asked in this format only on the pilot day. It was subsequently altered to 'What would make you feel safe and comfortable when learning in SPHE?' and was used in the latter format in the remaining three schools.

On the pilot day, the children wrote their responses to the question on the trunk section of the large tree template (see illustrations in Appendices 11 and 12). On subsequent days, the children were asked to talk about this in pairs, to use the small SPHE 'tree' template to note or draw their ideas (see Figure 8 below) and then present their ideas orally in the full group. During the sessions in all schools, the children were told that they could choose an item from the fidget toys box to ease their participation in the groups. This accorded with the suggestion in some of the responses *'If you're feeling stressed, get a fidget toy'; 'Have a teddy bear, or a pet, or a fidget toy'; 'Bringing in something that you like to school'*.

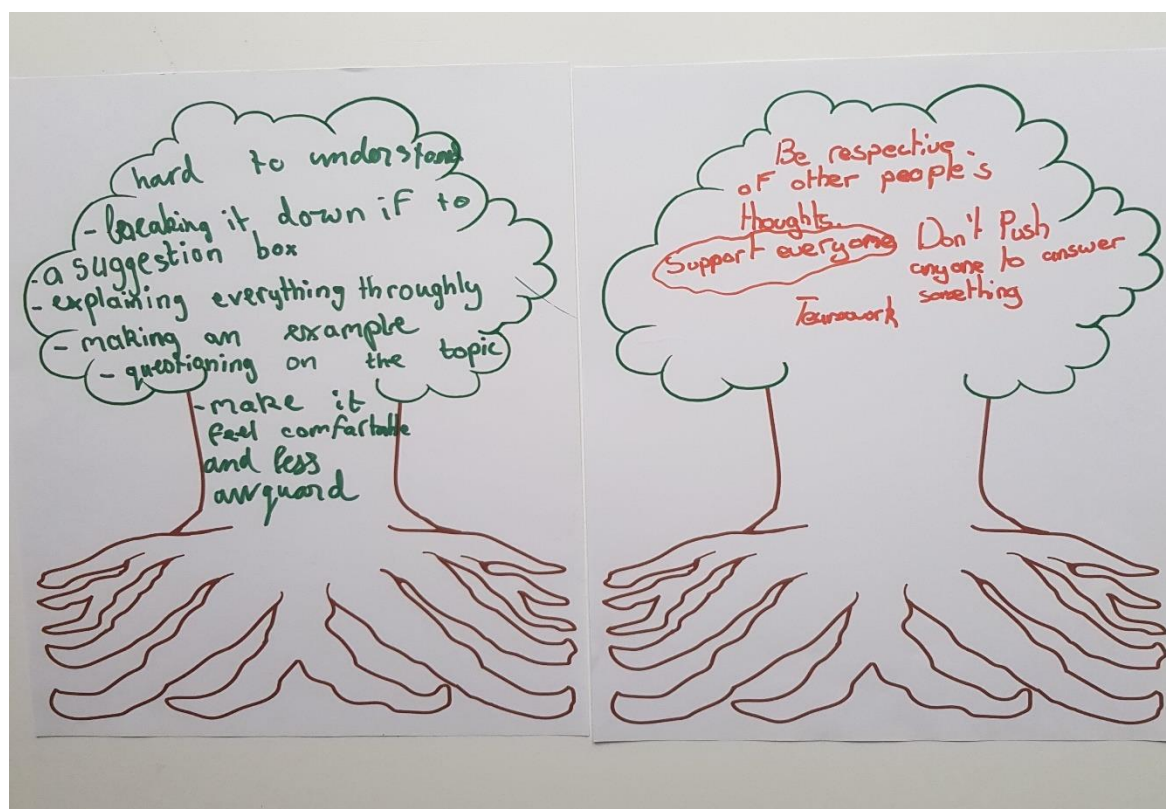
Many responses referred to confidence: *'Telling them that they don't have to do something or say something if you don't want to'; 'Don't stand up in front of others if they are worried about it – they don't have to'; 'Maybe in a smaller group you're more comfortable with'; 'If you don't feel comfortable talking about it, don't'; 'Learn different strategies – stand up for yourself'*.

And for those who would prefer not to speak to a group, there came some suggestions regarding anonymity and confidentiality: *'Writing a note and putting it in a box and the teacher can read it out – what you think of the question, so you don't have to say it out loud if you don't want to'; 'My teacher does that – it doesn't have a name – it's a box where you can write anything down'; 'Talk to a friend, a teacher or an SNA but it's not good to keep it bottled up inside'; 'If you don't feel safe about learning about it, tell a teacher'*.

The importance of the teacher's role was remarked on again here: *'A good teacher is someone who doesn't choose [some] people over other people and makes everyone feel equal, you don't feel like*

you're the one who is not being listened to'; 'Who understands you and doesn't give out, but gives out in situations they have to'; 'Teacher encourages friendship, at lunch time getting someone to sit beside you'.

Figure 8. Examples of children's written responses to Question 3



Some children made suggestions on how the teacher could make things better: 'Breaking it down if it's too hard to understand'; 'Explaining everything thoroughly'; 'Giving an example and letting you write down what you think about it'; 'Don't learn everything at once because it can overwellem (sic) someone'. And some practical suggestions for children themselves: 'Take your time and don't rush'; 'Think about what you are about to say'; 'Listen to everyone and not talk over anyone'; 'Be respectful (sic) of other people's thoughts'; 'Some people only listen to their friends but it is important to listen to everybody'.

Younger children in the groups suggested items such as 'A soft pillow to sit on'; 'fidget toys'; 'wear headphones'; 'food'. A few also suggested 'playing outside' and 'use spaces outside'. (Further illustrations of children's responses to this question can be seen in Appendix 14).

Question 4. If you are the principal of an imaginary school for a day . . .

A final question was posed to the children on the SPHE Pilot Day. A scenario was proposed to the children as follows: **If you are the principal of an imaginary school for a day . . .** The methodology in this instance was a group task with each group nominating a reporter, followed by an open forum where the children could suggest ideas on what they would like to do in their imagined leadership capacity. Their responses ranged across elements of both Wellbeing subjects.

- *In PE make fair teams and someone is there to make sure they don't cheat*
- *Let them choose what they want to play*
- *Teams are important – better than children competing against each other*
- *Make flags for the students as there are lots of different students there*
- *In PE, some religions might not allow them to do PE so we might allow them to do a different activity and the other people have a choice to do PE or join them, do the same with SPHE*
- *Put SPHE and PE together – if there are lots of different kids in the school, two different rows and ask everyone 3 questions and you'll learn about someone and they'll learn about you and if it's a game/challenge its PE too*
- *We made a point of where like if SPHE is a bit stressful for you, you can have a 2 min break ... fresh air or putting your head down*
- *Everyone has different opinions and to make sure everyone can give their opinion*
- *Fair teams and if someone does a foul maybe give them a warning – don't be too strict*
- *Respectful and respect their emotions for when people try to express their emotions [child told facilitator she was referring to SPHE]*
- *People should have a choice to go into groups and do something different as people like to do different things.*

Discussion of the consultation findings

The following summary presents some interpretation of the data by the report writer which is based on the report writers observations from attending the consultations and the analysis of the data.

As the *Primary Curriculum Framework* points out '*Wellbeing supports children's social, emotional and physical development now and into the future*' (p.18). The children in this report provide a great deal of detail on what they learn in both PE and SPHE, referencing many aspects of their '*social, emotional and physical development*'. While the consultation sessions on each subject were conducted separately within the one day in each school, it is clear that there were many commonalities between their learning experiences and indeed their expressed views regarding the two subjects. For example, the 'social' aspects of SPHE, such as co-operating and treating others well, are also prominent in the children's views of PE. The concept of a healthy lifestyle is another feature common to the two subjects.

The following account records a summary of the children's views on the subjects, separately at first, but also noting features of learning common to both, particularly from the wider perspective of Wellbeing. Of interest here too is the extent to which '*Being well*', one of the Framework's seven key competencies, already has foundations in our classrooms.

The children's voices regarding Physical Education

The children named and specified those games, sports and physical activities they engaged in and enjoyed. Overall, children reported that they largely enjoyed PE. In fact, the fun element of their PE activities was one of the most frequently mentioned features. Also noted was friendship, highlighting the significance of the social aspects of activities involving physical movement. Indoor and outdoor learning were referred to, but the outdoor more often, and being in the open air – it may be relevant that these consultation days all took place during fine weather in early summer. Children liked the break from the classroom that PE lessons usually involved, whether in indoor or outdoor settings. They liked having some choice in their activities, but they regretted that that choice was sometimes limited. It was notable too that many children were aware of the health benefits of physical activity, particularly the older children, who cited those benefits in physical terms, but also socially, and for mental health and psychological wellbeing. Opinions around competition in games were divided, some children favouring competitive activities, others preferring co-operative ones, where differences in skills were not being highlighted or assessed.

Children's expressed dislikes concerning Physical Education referred on the one hand to issues they had little or no control over, such as the timing and content of their lessons, as well as organisational issues in the school, and on the other hand, to issues they themselves had a role in, such as behaviour in games, adherence to rules and attitudes towards competition and teamwork. The most common dislike for the children was their lack of choice in the content of their PE lessons. For some, the issue was that they were obliged to participate in sports, games or activities they were not interested in or actually disliked, with, for example, some warm-ups being deemed unnecessary and wasteful of PE time. For others, it was the lack of variety in their PE programme. Lack of equipment or facilities was only rarely cited as a source of dissatisfaction. In the case of aquatics, for instance, children in all four schools had the opportunity to experience

this PE strand, mainly by using local transport arrangements. Other issues outside of the children's control that gave rise to complaint were of a physical and sensory nature – play in hot or very cold weather, physically demanding exercise, and occasional falls and injuries.

Many children voiced frustration at the behaviour of some other children in their PE lessons, especially in games, where they said rules were often flouted, and some of their classmates were over-competitive. Roughness in play was also a significant issue, the complaints most often referring to football. A perceived failure by some teachers and coaches to consistently enforce rules and penalties gave rise to expressions of irritation and disappointment. Claims of unfairness were frequent too in relation to the selection and composition of teams, often in peer-selection but occasionally by teachers or coaches.

When given the opportunity to propose ways in which their PE experiences could be improved, many of the children's ideas dealt with the foregoing sources of dissatisfaction. They wanted PE to be more enjoyable, with rough and unfair play not happening, and a reduced emphasis on competition, where often only the best were rewarded. They asked for greater choice in their lessons – for some that meant having greater variety, for others, it meant having the choice of not participating if they disliked the activity. A number of children proposed a democratic solution, whereby the content of their PE programme would be determined by class votes. An interesting feature of children's suggestions for better PE experiences was the number of children who nominated inclusion and engagement as issues. They said that everyone should be involved in PE, with no-one excluded because they weren't deemed skilful enough, or didn't understand the game's rules or because of their gender or any other issue. However, there weren't any specific references to the inclusion of children with disabilities. It was also remarked that some children just don't like physical activities and need to be involved in alternative ways.

Children's responses and suggestions above could be summarised to a short list: enjoyment, engagement, choice, fairness, non-judgement, and inclusion. As children's voices, they speak for themselves. Taken together, they could constitute a 'code of practice' to be considered when planning PE programmes and activities.

The children's voices on Social, Personal and Health Education

Going by the responses of children in the opening of the sessions on SPHE, only a minority of children knew the full meaning of the SPHE acronym. Since the subject has multiple constituent parts – three strands, comprising up to ten strand units by Fifth and Sixth Class, and multiple topics within the content of those units – it is understandable that children don't have a clear understanding of the subject's structure. In addition, the nature of much of SPHE's content, with its emphasis on the children's personal development as well as their relationships with others and the world, renders any simplifying of its learning challenging. When children talked about SPHE therefore, their statements, descriptions and suggestions were largely informed by their classroom experiences as planned and presented by their teachers. For these reasons too, it was considered necessary in opening the sessions on SPHE, to help the children become aware of, and focus on, the subject's key content through the use of an infographic (this methodology is detailed earlier in the SPHE section of this report).

The images in the infographic and the discussion of the images gave children the appropriate information on the topic of SPHE. The intent of most of the images was clear to the children, with just a handful obliging them to guess or requiring explanation by the facilitators. (The children's comments are detailed earlier in the report.) It wasn't possible to ascertain which elements of the content the children had experienced in their classroom learning, but their comments on the images provided evidence of a good level of understanding of the key learning that SPHE encompasses.

When the children were asked to say what they would like to learn about in SPHE, a number of clear themes emerged. These included awareness of and respect for cultural diversity, reflecting perhaps increasing diversity within their own schools and classrooms. They named equality as something they would like to learn about, and many references were made to different lifestyles, and indeed the differences between themselves and others.

Children's concerns with relationships, friendships and socialisation featured frequently in their responses here, reflecting that growing self-awareness and building social skills are key learnings addressed in SPHE, and increasingly so as children approach adolescence. Integral to personal development, managing emotions also figured as one of the children's concerns at this time. The many references to online safety suggest that the children have been made well aware of potential dangers here, whether through the school's SPHE lessons, at home or awareness-raising notices in public media, or a combination of these. Learning how to deal with bullying, both for self-protection and to protect others, was another item on the learning wish list.

'*What would make you feel safe and comfortable when learning in SPHE?*' was a question posed to the children, amended from an earlier question asking '*what would make it easier to share your thoughts and ideas?*' [in SPHE lessons]. Speaking or presenting to their classmates was commonly mentioned as a challenge, with some children of the view that there should be no pressure or obligation to speak in the class, especially on a sensitive issue. One child suggested that it would be easier to speak if the group was smaller. Children suggested alternatives such as confiding in a trusted person, or writing their view or question and dropping it confidentially in a suggestion box. A number of children suggested bringing comfort items to the class, such as toys from home.

Besides being mentioned as a possible trusted adult in whom one could confide, the class teacher's role in mediating the content of the SPHE curriculum was clear. SPHE's concerns with children's interpersonal and intrapersonal development call on a teacher's significant pedagogical skills. Having their ideas taken seriously and being listened to were ways in which children identified the '*good teacher*', as in '*someone who understands and can be trusted*'. Some suggestions were made too on how lessons could be conducted to make things easier to understand, such as having ideas '*broken down*', or not to have to '*learn everything all at once*'. Alongside these suggestions, children recognised that they themselves were also active contributors to their lessons and, among other things, needed to listen to and respect each other's opinions. This parallels the children's comments regarding the need for all to play fairly and observe rules in PE.

An interesting point to note about the SPHE sessions was what the children did not say; for example, there was no mention of issues from RSE lessons. No child mentioned substance abuse, or anything about personal hygiene. Surprisingly few references were made to education about social media, or the use of mobile phones. References to issues around nutrition or fitness were also few in number.

Children's contributions to this consultation raise questions about agency, of both children and teachers. Children wouldn't be aware of the term 'agency' in the school context and it wasn't raised or explored with them in this consultation. However, their responses and contributions were indirect indicators of the limits of their agency, particularly marked in respect of PE, where their implicit view was that agency was largely the teacher's prerogative. The Framework's emphasis on greater pupil agency in their own learning would likely meet with approval from the children consulted here. There is the potential for a significant gap between what teachers plan and present as classroom experiences and what children subjectively experience. For that reason, the explication of what agency would look like in the classroom needs to take account of children's views and experiences. The nature of comments and responses recorded in consultations such as this one can serve to inform that explication.

Conclusion and next steps

The introduction to the *Primary Curriculum Framework (2023)*, states that education:

enables children to see themselves as individuals, with rights and responsibilities, and as part of social groups, including in the classroom and school, the local community, and national and global contexts (p.5).

This report has presented the views of children on subjects PE and SPHE, which will make up the curriculum area of Wellbeing in the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum. Emerging from the voices of the children in this consultation is evidence of a growing awareness of themselves 'as individuals, with rights and responsibilities, and as part of social groups'.

Wellbeing is stated to be supportive of children's 'social, emotional and physical development now and into the future', with learning in PE and in SPHE offering complementary opportunities for those areas of development. The Framework states that it:

recognises children's experiences in primary and special schools as a time of 'being' and 'becoming' – both celebrating children's current childhood experiences, and looking to their futures and what might be (p.5).

Again, what children are saying about their learning now, and what they hope to learn in the years ahead, gives confidence that their learning for wellbeing – in both PE and SPHE - is nourishing both their being and their becoming.

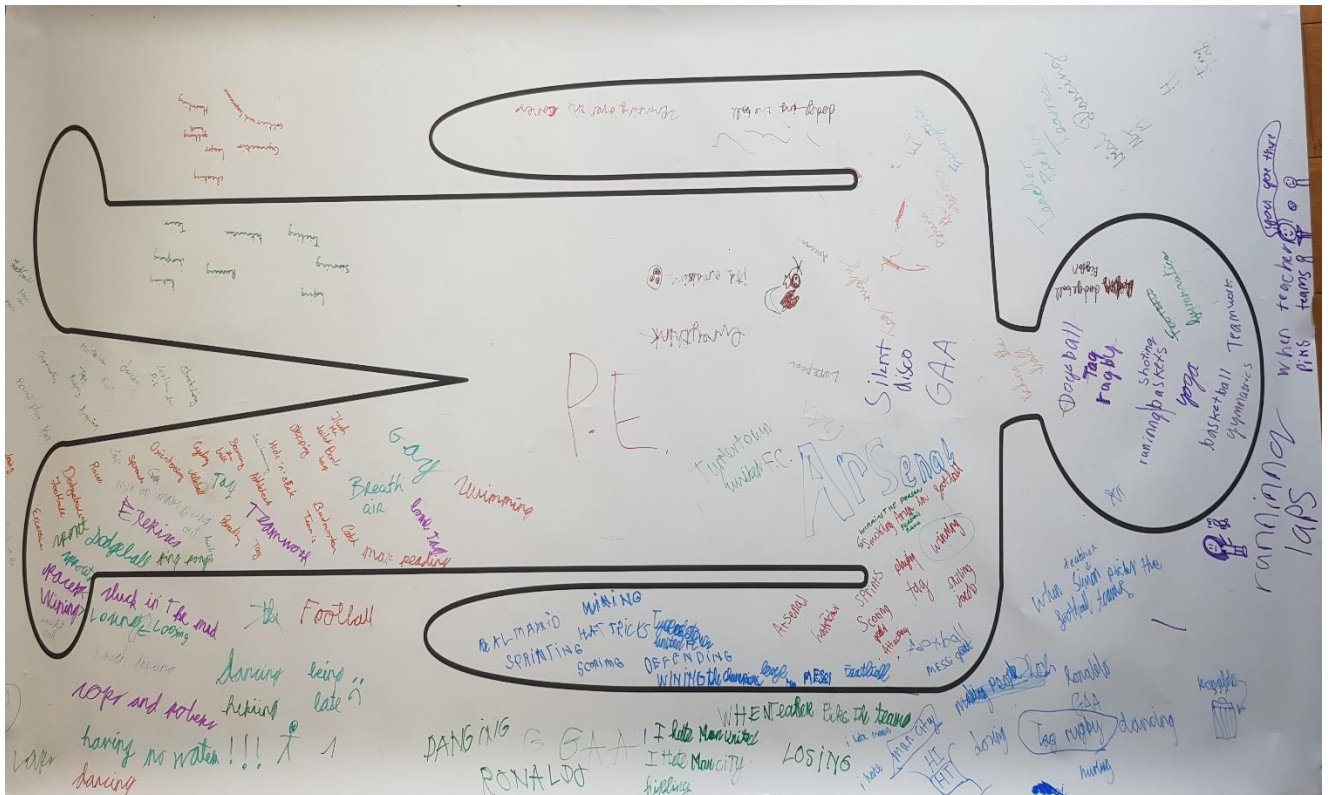
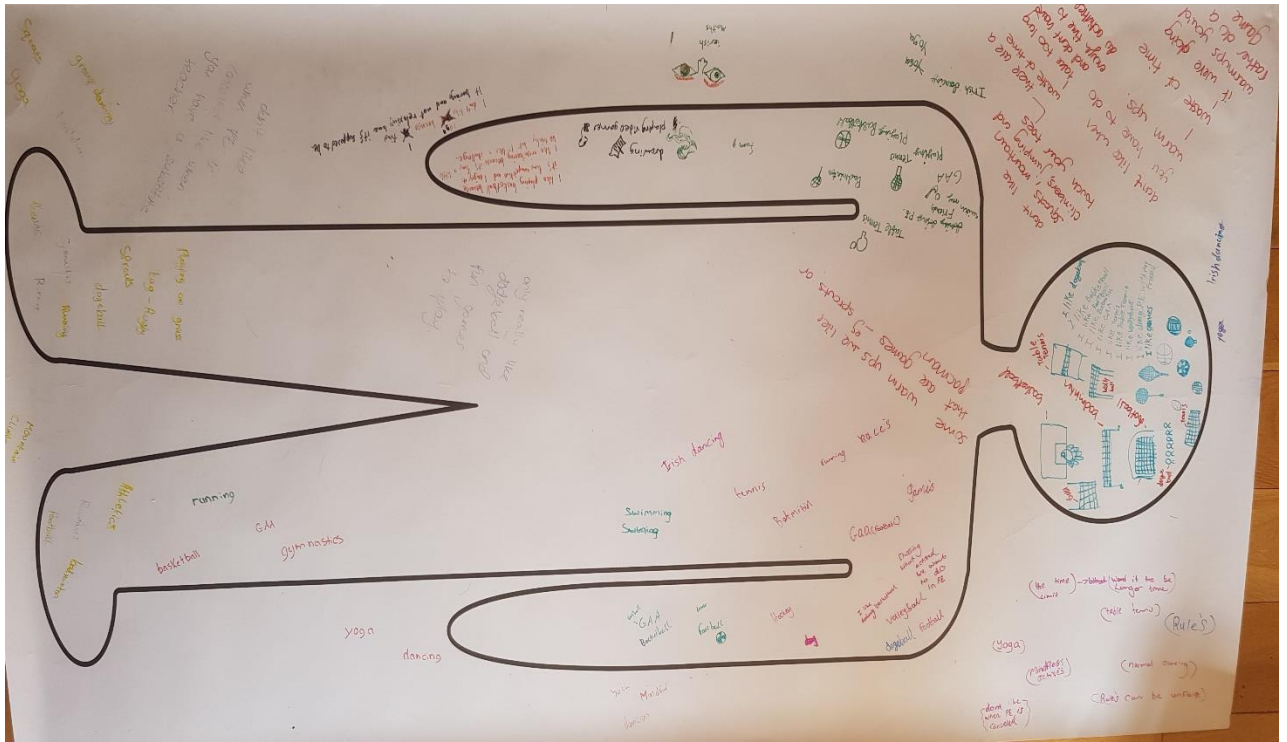
In the coming months, this report will be shared with the Wellbeing Development Group, the Early Childhood and Primary Board and the Council. In doing so, it will form a part of the ongoing deliberations about the future of the primary school curriculum. A child-friendly version of this report will be shared with the children who participated in this consultation and that report will include a section that informs the children of the influence that their voices will have in NCCA's development processes.

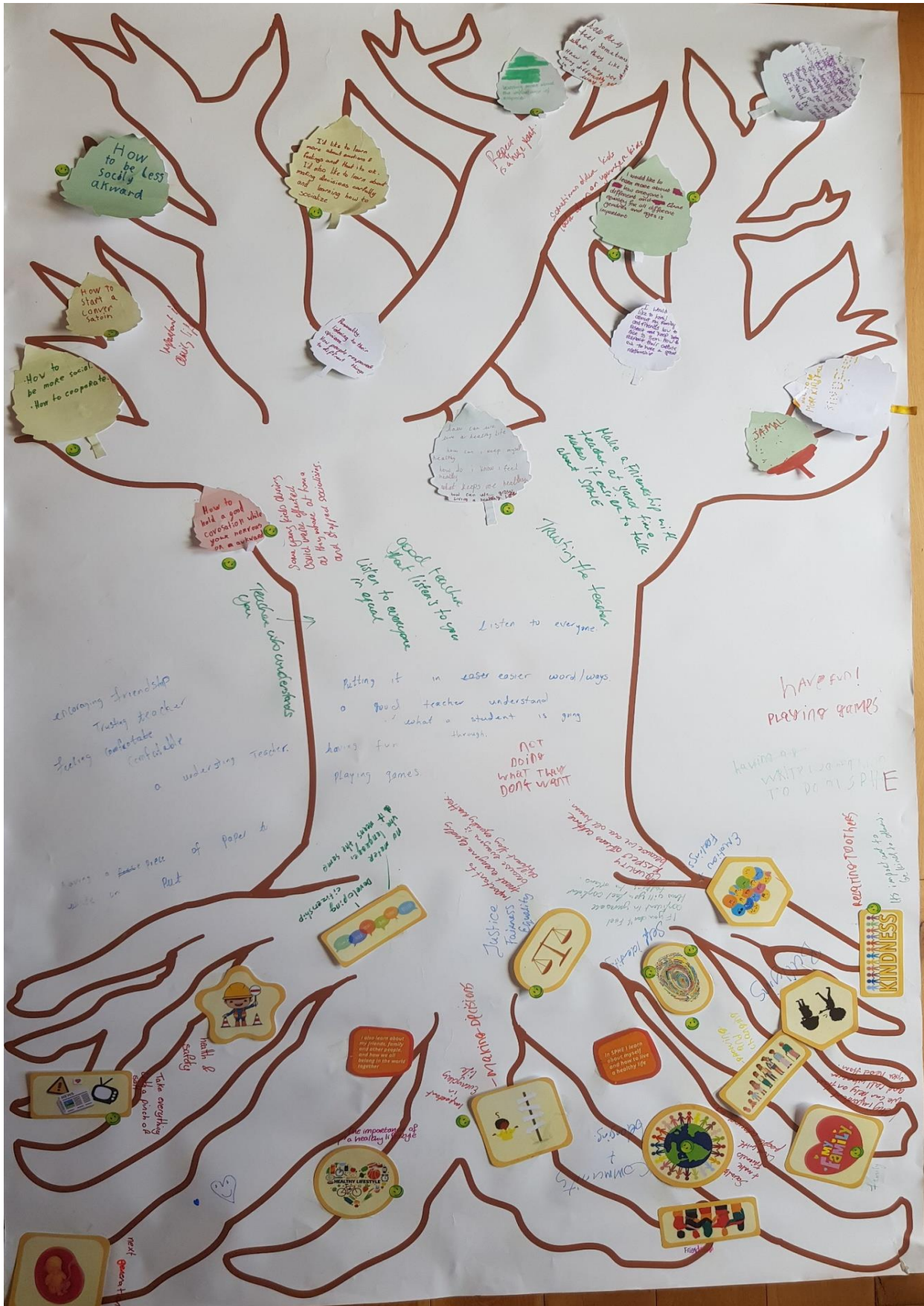
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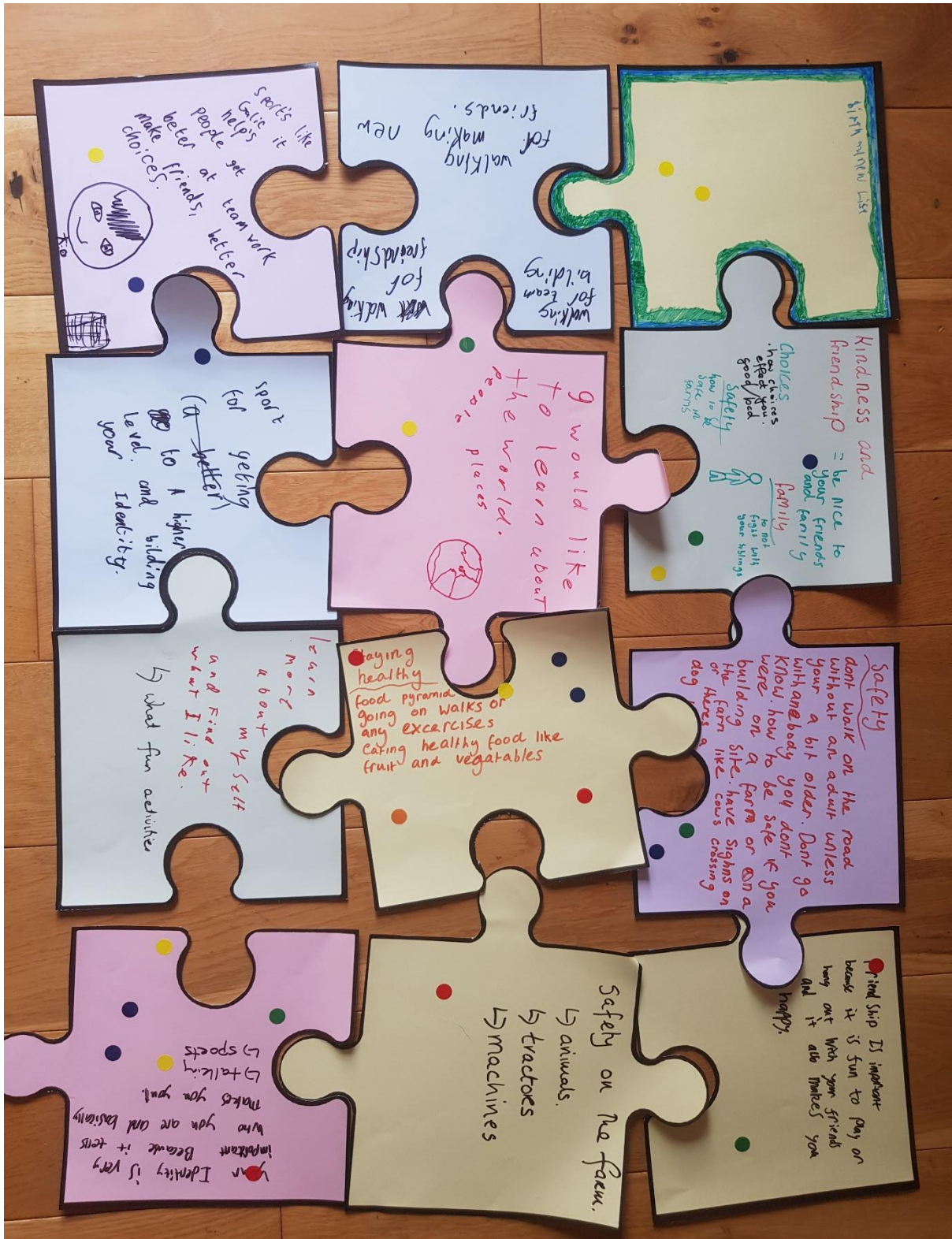
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Consultation with children on the future of Physical Education and Social, Personal, and Health Education as part of the curriculum area of Wellbeing

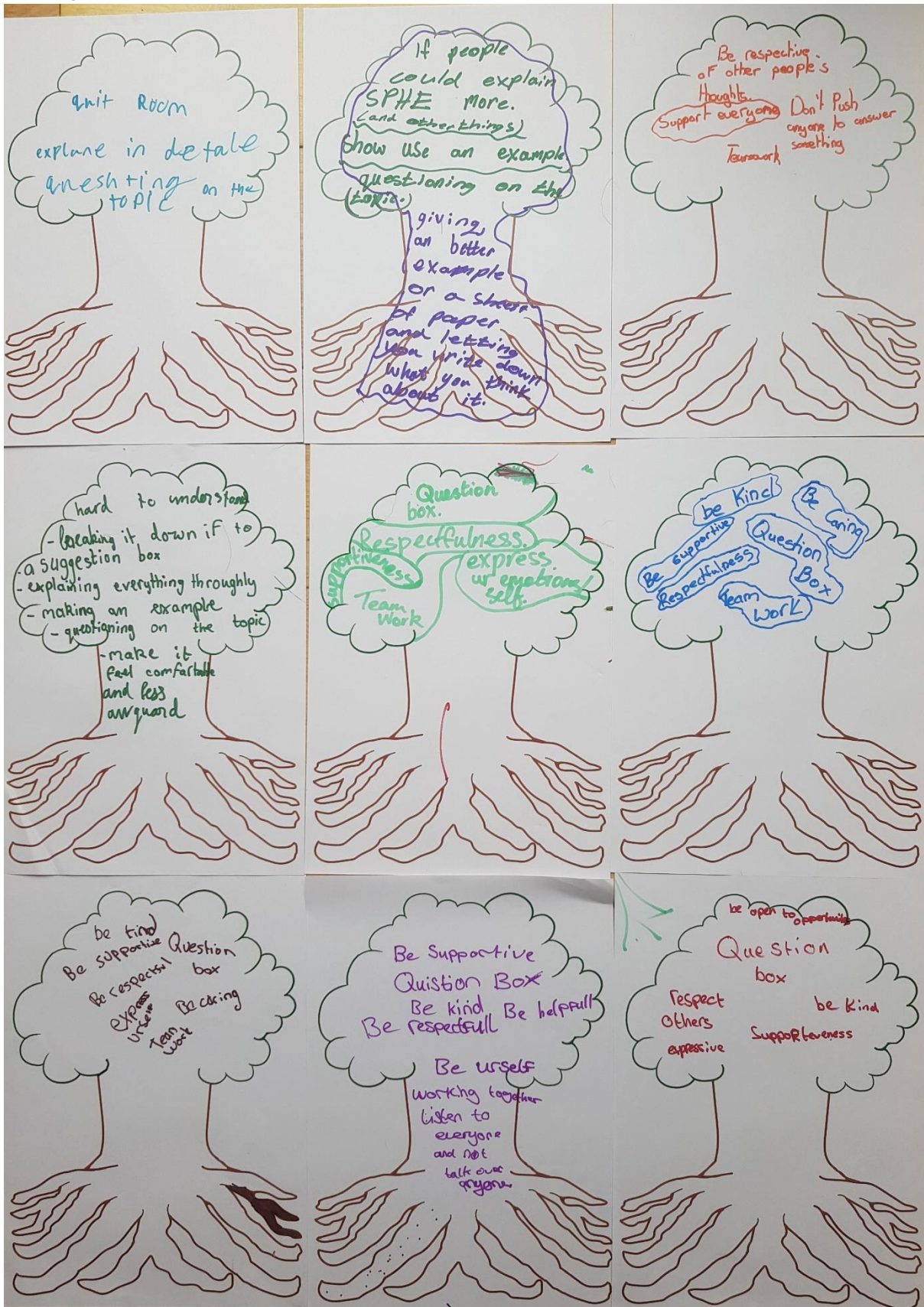


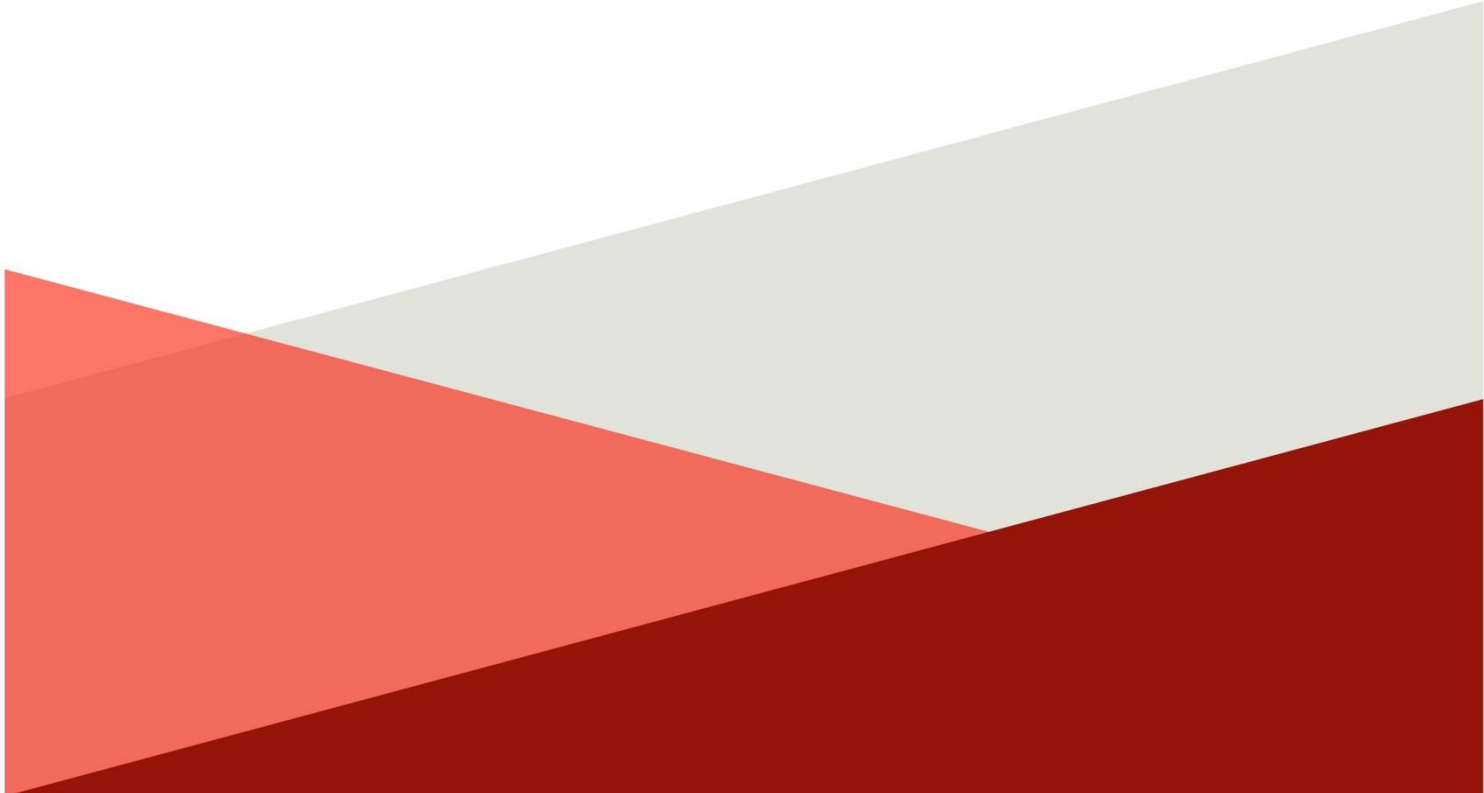


Appendix 13: Example of jigsaw activity on SPHE Question 2: 'What would you like to learn about in SPHE?'



Appendix 14: Responses to SPHE Q.3: 'What would make you feel safe and comfortable when learning in SPHE?'





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