An exploratory study of the perceived benefits of SPHE (from a teachers perspective) for Junior Cycle male students and its implications for the Guidance Counselling Service.

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The author hereby declares that this thesis is entirely her own work. No element of the work described in this dissertation has been previously submitted for any degree in University of Limerick, or in any other institution.

Signature: ______________________
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Abstract

A number of research studies have been conducted on the implementation of SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) from different perspectives (Morgan 2000, Geary et al. 2003, Maycock et al. 2007, O’Higgins et al. 2013). However, a gap exists in research in relation to teachers’ perspectives on the perceived benefits of teaching SPHE to male students. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore SPHE teachers’ narratives about what they view as being the perceived benefits of teaching SPHE to male students at Junior Cycle and its implications for the Guidance Counselling Service. This research was carried out with six SPHE teachers in an all male post-primary school using a Thematic Analysis method. This was obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews on a one-to-one basis with participants. As a result, 6 overarching themes emerged from participant interviews. These include: Teacher Training in SPHE, Challenges of transition from primary to post-primary for male adolescents, Identifying the main personal, social and health needs of male adolescents, Key gaps in male students’ knowledge within key areas of the SPHE curriculum, Schools approach to protecting the mental health and wellbeing of male adolescents and Key barriers to SPHE promotion within an all male school. Findings from this study (from teachers’ perspective) indicate that the SPHE curriculum is beneficial for male adolescent development. However, more needs to be done to enhance the existing SPHE curriculum. Additionally, findings from this research study could aid in informing school policy and the Guidance Service when implementing appropriate strategies into the new Junior Cycle Wellbeing Programme, commencing September 2017.
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Currently, in Ireland the Junior Certificate programme is under restructuring. Wellbeing will now become one of the core principles that underpin Junior Cycle education (DES 2015). The four core areas covering the Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme will be Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Physical Education (PE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Guidance Education (NCCA 2016). Formerly, a number of research studies have been carried out on the execution of SPHE from different perspectives (Morgan 2000, Geary et al. 2003, Maycock et al. 2007, O’Higgins et al. 2013). However, to date no research has been conducted in relation to teachers’ perspectives on the perceived benefits of teaching SPHE to male students at Junior Cycle in Post-Primary Education. The aim of this research project is to explore teachers’ narratives about what they view as being the perceived benefits of teaching SPHE to male students at Junior Cycle. This will aid in pinpointing how the themes of the SPHE programme may contribute to promoting the mental health and wellbeing of male students. The goal is that it will inform school policy and the Guidance Service when implementing suitable strategies for the New Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme in post-primary schools.

In 2000, the SPHE programme was created as part of a number of curriculum changes within the Irish education system (Kellagan and McGee 2005). It formed part of the core curriculum for Junior Cycle in post-primary schools in 2003. The programmes main aims were to promote the “physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing of students” (DES 2000, p.4). The rationale for implementing the SPHE programme was that it was seen as relevant to students’ lives and needs (Geary and Mannix-McNamara 2003). Presently, in Ireland the needs of male students are diverse in nature. Many of the mental health issues that young Irish men experience today are complex. This is linked in some way to “a multiplicity of risk factors such as substance misuse and socio-economic disadvantage” (Grace et al. 2014, p.37). Therefore, by promoting positive mental wellbeing, this has the potential to improve quality of life and prevent mental and physical illness (Keyes et al. 2010).

The Literature Review examines Irish policy on the implementation of SPHE in post-primary schooling. Teachers’ attitudes, roles and perceptions towards teaching the SPHE programme
and recent developments in SPHE will be explored. National policy in Ireland states that “all teachers are teachers of Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE)” (DES 2000, p.6). Their job also involves looking after the wellbeing of their students. Therefore, they need to understand the risk and protective factors that are associated with male adolescent development. Thus, the different factors that affect and protect the mental health and wellbeing of teenagers will be discussed. Currently, students are involved in guidance activities at Junior Cycle through SPHE (Hearne et al. 2016). Hence, Guidance at Junior Cycle will be emphasized.

The Methodology involved using a “qualitative study” (Merriam and Tisdell 2016, p.24) design frame. Semi-structured interviews were used to allow for the co-construction of meaning in the interviews with participants. This relates to teacher opinions on the perceived benefits of teaching SPHE to male students at Junior Cycle. A phenomenological approach was undertaken to signify the study of individuals’ perceptions, emotions, and lived experiences (Guest et al. 2013). The experiences of teaching the themes covered under the SPHE programme is a paramount feature of this study. Additionally, the perceptions of participants on how the ten themes of SPHE contribute to promoting the mental health and wellbeing of male students’ are an essential part of this research. This research was carried out in an all male school in a post-primary setting with six SPHE teachers. In the data analysis phase a Thematic Approach within the interpretive qualitative paradigm was undertaken. This followed Braun and Clarkes (2006) 6 step model. The process includes familiarising oneself with the model, coding the data, defining themes and reporting on the findings of themes. Thematic Analysis is deemed suitable because of its “flexibility and potential to offer an affluent and detailed, yet multifaceted version of data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.4). A number of steps were taken to reduce the level of bias in this research project.

Specifically, common themes that emerged from analysing the data were colour coded. As a result, the findings produced six overarching themes with subsequent subthemes. These include: (1) Teacher training in SPHE, (2) Challenges of transition from primary to post-primary for male adolescents, (3) Identifying the main personal, social and health needs of male students, (4) Key gaps in male students’ knowledge within key areas of the SPHE curriculum, (5) Schools approach to protecting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of male adolescents and (6) Key barriers to SPHE promotion within an all male school. Teacher
background information is illustrated in Table 1. The six overarching themes are demonstrated in Table 2.

The themes that emerged from SPHE teacher interviews were discussed in combination with relevant literature. The findings from this research study will highlight that teachers’ view the SPHE curriculum as overall beneficial in terms of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of male students. However, there are gaps in the curriculum that are apparent and need attention in order to ensure the SPHE programme flourishes. This gives rise to a number of questions that are examined further in the Discussion chapter. Research has indicated that the prospective benefits of SPHE are likely to be fully appreciated when it is fully incorporated into a Whole School Approach to student support (Lahiff 2006).

The Conclusion chapter includes the key findings and conclusions within the context of the aims and objectives of this research study. The strengths and limitations of the study are also considered. Additionally, recommendations for future policy, practice and future research have been accentuated. Furthermore, the researchers reflexivity in terms of personal learning involved in the process is highlighted.
2.0 Introduction

The argument put forward in this research project is that while a number of research studies have been undertaken exploring the implementation of SPHE from different perspectives (Morgan 2000, Geary et al. 2003, Maycock et al. 2007, O’ Higgins et al. 2013) a gap exists in research in relation to teachers perspectives on the perceived benefits of teaching SPHE to male students at Junior Cycle in Post-Primary Education. Lahiff (2006 p.4) argues that “the potential benefits of SPHE are likely to be fully realised when it is fully integrated into a Whole School Approach to student support, an approach which is strengthened by a positive school climate.” Specifically, this literature review will be delineated by examining Irish policy on the implementation of SPHE in post-primary schooling. Subsequently, the role of the teacher, their attitudes towards teaching the SPHE programme and recent developments in SPHE will be explored. The Framework for the new Junior Cycle envisages engaging students with learning related to wellbeing through the “school culture and students’ experience of the implementation of related whole-school policies” (DES 2015, p.23). Also through the 400 hours of Wellbeing module of which a percentage will be allocated to SPHE and a percentage to Guidance Counselling. An overview of wellbeing, promoting the mental health and wellbeing of students and health promoting schools will be examined. The adolescent stage of development and risk factors of mental health, substance use, accessing explicit material online and cyber bullying will be investigated. Also, guidance at Junior Cycle will be highlighted.

2.1 Irish Policy on the Implementation of SPHE

In Ireland, the Junior Certificate Cycle in post-primary forms part of a compulsory stage of education which is taken up by students between the ages of 12-15 years. According to the Department of Education and Science (2004) the primary objective of the Junior Cycle is for students to complete “broad, balanced and coherent courses of study in a variety of curricular areas” (p.13). This will give them the ability to proceed successfully to Senior Cycle education. The programme is based on the curricular principles of “breadth and balance, quality, equity, relevance, coherence, continuity and progression” (NCCA 2004, p.3). A report published by the NCCA in 1999 The Junior Cycle Review – Progress Report: Issues
“and Options for Development” highlighted the need for attention to be given to three main areas at Junior Cycle: balancing of subject syllabuses, assessment for learning and the transition from primary to post-primary school (NCCA 2004). Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) was included in the report as part of the new syllabus at Junior Cycle. Prior to this RSE was introduced and subsequently formed one of the Ten SPHE Themes. In April 2000 the Department of Education and Science (DES) approved Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum to support the educational principles that underpin Junior Cycle education. The emergence of the SPHE programme formed part of a number of curriculum changes within the Irish education system (Kellagan and McGee 2005) at the time. The Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) module delivered at Junior Cycle main aims were to “promote the physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing of students” (DES 2000, p.4).

By September 2003, SPHE formed part of the core curriculum for Junior Cycle in post primary schools. The rationale for including SPHE as a subject in the Junior Cycle was not only based on educational outcomes but viewed as relevant to students’ lives and needs (Geary and Mannix-McNamara 2003). Schools were offered a flexible framework in where they could plan the SPHE programme most fitting for the students in their school. The main aims of SPHE are delineated by the Department of Education and Science as:

- To enable students to develop personal and social skills
- To promote self-esteem and self confidence
- To enable students to develop a framework for responsible decision making
- To provide opportunities for reflection and discussion
- To promote physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing (DES 2000, p.5).

The Education Act (1998) stresses that schools should promote the social and personal development of students and provide health education for them. Currently in Irish schools, the curriculum framework for SPHE is divided into ten themes, each of which is revisited in each of the three years of Junior Cycle. These modules explored include Belonging and Integrating, Self-Management, Communication Skills, Physical Health, Friendship, Relationships and Sexuality, Emotional Health, Influences and Decisions, Substance Use and Personal Safety.
2.2 The Role of the Teacher and attitudes towards teaching the SPHE programme

According to National policy in Ireland “all teachers are teachers of Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE)” (DES 2000, p.6). Teachers assigned to SPHE must have an “understanding of and a familiarity with the methodologies associated with education in this area” DES (2000 p.7). Experiential learning methodologies allow learning to take place between the students themselves as well as between student and teacher (DES 2001). This demands a range of skills and a high degree of compassion from teachers. For SPHE teachers, in-service training is offered by the National Support Service for SPHE and usually comprises of 40 hours of in-career professional development (Mannix McNamara et al. 2012). The Junior Cycle Guidelines for Teachers published by the Department of Education and Science in 2001 acted as an aid for the planning and co-ordinating of the SPHE curriculum for teachers. Teachers were highlighted as playing a facilitative role in the classroom. This includes organising student learning and challenging students to take responsibility for their own learning through “designing, planning and structuring the experiential learning elements” (DES 2001, p.27) of the SPHE programme.

Research carried out on pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards teaching SPHE found that after graduation “30.6 per cent of the female cohort indicated that they plan to teach it compared to 19.5 per cent of males” (Mannix-McNamara et al. 2012, p.211). The gendered attitude percentage was higher with females as they had an interest in teaching SPHE. For male teachers their focus seemed to be more about money and job stability. Literature suggests that new strategies are needed for teacher support and professional development that listens to teachers' perspectives and needs (Simovska and Jensen 2008). O’Higgins et al. (2013 p.65) argues that teachers need to make sure they attend all SPHE in-service training in sequence, as far as is practical. They note that they should also identify their specific training needs and seek support in order to meet them.

Conversely, evidence suggests that a number of teachers regard SPHE as less important than actual subjects that are examined (Nic Gabhainn et al. 2007). As a result this reduces teacher’s involvement in teaching the subject (Burtenshaw 2003). Moreover, Geary and Mannix McNamara (2003) highlight that teachers’ do not seem to volunteer to teach SPHE rather the Principal assigns SPHE classes to teachers. Their research stresses that there has been lower implementation of RSE into SPHE in all-boys’ schools.
2.3 Recent Developments in SPHE

In Ireland the Junior Certificate curriculum is currently under reform. The introduction of *The Framework for Junior Cycle* commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills in 2015 will incorporate Wellbeing as one of the core principles that underpins Junior Cycle education. The framework will be rolled out in post-primary schools from September 2017 with 300 hours of timetabled learning in Wellbeing over the three years of Junior Cycle education. This will increase to 400 hours by 2020 as the new Junior Cycle is fully implemented in schools. The four core areas covering the Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme will be Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Physical Education (PE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Guidance Education (NCCA 2016). Each school will be given the flexibility to plan their Wellbeing programme, with emphasis been placed on the needs of the students.

Within the Framework, the Wellbeing module will provide learning opportunities to enhance the physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing and resilience of students (DES 2015). In order to make sure students, teachers and parents have an understanding of the term Wellbeing six indicators will be used to illustrate what is important for young people’s wellbeing. These include being “active, responsible, connected, resilient, respected, and aware” (NCCA 2016, p.37). In addition, it will enable students to build life skills and to develop a strong sense of connectedness to the school and their wider community such as their family and area in which they live.

The SPHE programme will now be taught as a short course under the new Junior Cycle framework. This will build on the current SPHE programme where eventually SPHE will morph into the Wellbeing programme at Junior Cycle. By choosing to include this short course in the school's Wellbeing programme students will have the opportunity and time to learn about themselves, caring for themselves and others and making informed decisions for their health and wellbeing. Student's will engage in learning in the areas including Who am I?, Minding Myself and others, Team Up, and My Mental Health (NCCA 2016).

Educational outcomes are in general determined by objective tests and academic records, but subjective and multidimensional perspectives of wellbeing are equally informative in assessing the degree to which schools are serving their purpose to prepare students for adulthood (Kern et al. 2014). Research suggests that schools are ideal institutions to expand
their focus beyond academic learning to also include the promotion of wellbeing (Peterson 2006). This viewpoint is supported by Weare (2010) who found that it is now widely accepted that schools play a critical role in fostering the wellbeing of young people. Furthermore, directly assessing subjective wellbeing across multiple domains offers the potential for schools to more systematically understand and promote wellbeing (Kern et al., 2014).

2.4 An Overview of Wellbeing

In Ireland, according to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA 2009, p.1) wellbeing within a school context is defined as children being “confident, happy and healthy”. In addition, it is seen as directly contributing to their physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing and resilience (DES 2015). Cohen (2006) states that in relation to wellbeing and education, we cannot teach children to be happy. However, (O’Brien 2008) on researching wellbeing in post-primary schooling suggests that “what we teach, how we teach and how students are organised” (p.20) are all very significant for student wellbeing development. Mac Donald (2013) emphasises that organisational skills are fundamental for achieving higher grades, independence, flexibility and creating an enthusiasm to learn. Furthermore, Morrison and Kirby (2010) write that it is not just the absence of risks and problems that influence young people’s psychological wellbeing but also the presence of positive factors in their lives to promote positive development. Some positive factors include relationships with family, peers and teachers. Some risk factors they may be exposed to include bullying, self-esteem issues, peer pressure and drink and drug misuse. Grace et al.’s (2014) study of Engaging Young Men Project emphasizes that “many of the mental health issues that young Irish men experience today are multifaceted in nature” (p.37). Their study also highlights that this is linked in some way to a multiplicity of risk factors such as substance misuse and socio-economic disadvantage.

2.5 Promoting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Students

Positive mental wellbeing has received attention worldwide and has emerged as an important protective factor against mental health issues (Gargiulo and Stokes 2009). Some other positive protective factors promoted within schools in Ireland include ensuring a “sense of belonging and connectedness to school, having protocols and support systems in place for students and families if mental health issues arise as well as developing positive teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships” (DES 2013, p.10). By incorporating these
protective factors into school policy, this gives students the capacity to “achieve and maintain optimal psychological functioning and wellbeing” (World Health Organisation 2007, p.5). Subsequently, the basis for implementing mental health promotion stems from the fact that symptoms of lifelong mental illness typically develop prior to age 25 years (Call et al. 2002). In the Irish context it has been found that adolescents exhibit high levels of psychological distress but supports are often unavailable or inaccessible to them Illback et al. (2010). Research has shown that any unmet wellbeing and mental health needs at the adolescent stage of development point to emerging and more severe mental health difficulties in adulthood (McDougall 2011). Dooley and Fitzgerald (2012) reported that the emergence of wellbeing and mental health difficulties was coupled with a significant decrease in self-esteem, optimism and positive coping strategies. By promoting positive mental wellbeing, this has the potential to improve quality of life and prevent mental and physical illness (Keyes et al. 2010).

In addition, research shows that some of the most common problems which challenge student’s wellbeing are family dysfunction or other family problems, impulse control, behavioural problems, bullying and stress/anxiety/depression (Ainley et al. 2006). Clarke and Barry (2010) emphasise that programmes which adopt a Whole School Approach are particularly likely to lead to positive mental health, social and educational outcomes. Under the new Framework for Junior Cycle students will engage with learning related to wellbeing through the school culture and students’ experience of the implementation of related whole-school policies. Policies on promoting wellbeing amongst students will include Anti-Bullying, Health Promotion, Substance Use, Child Protection policies, Student Support Teams and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) (DES 2015). Morgan’s (2000) survey on the implementation of RSE by primary and post-primary teachers reported that a congested curriculum acted as an obstacle on the effective implementation of RSE. Additionally, Maycock et al.’s (2007) research found that 71% of teachers were uncomfortable with teaching Religious and Sexual Education to students.

2.6 Health Promoting Schools

According to Lahiff (2006) a well-implemented SPHE programme has the ability to “provide a framework that can make the school environment more health promoting and supportive of those at risk and experiencing difficulties” (p.5). Clift et al. (2005) claim that many European countries have adopted the concept of Health Promoting Schools (HPS) and implemented
school policies relating to education and health. A Health Promoting School (HPS) is an international approach that needs to recognize the influence of the school environment as a health promoting environment (Naidoo and Wills 2016). Furthermore, Naidoo and Wills (2016) highlight that a Whole School Approach to health promotion should be one which involves “viewing health promotion in the context of the ethos, organization, management structure, relationships, physical environment and taught curriculum of the school” (p.224). Currently, health promotion at Junior Cycle is taught through SPHE under the Physical Health module allowing students to explore healthy eating, taking care of their bodies and rest and exercise (Chambers et al. 2008). However, health promoting schools in Ireland has had slight if any influence on the development of SPHE and it is not present in the curriculum (Geary and Mannix McNamara 2003).

2.7 The Adolescent Stage of Development

Adolescence is an important time of change physically, emotionally and socially for young people. Dooley and Fitzgerald (2012) found that “the number one health issue for young people is their mental health” (p.8) which is closely linked to wellbeing (Rees at al. 2010). During this time people are likely to engage in behaviours that place them at risk in terms of their health and wellbeing (Romer 2010). McEvoy and Richardson (2004) found that males are likely to suppress emotions in relation to mental health which in turn contributes to higher risky behaviour. Such risky behaviour includes substance abuse, alcohol misuse and violence (Dooley and Fitzgerald 2012). Research has highlighted that positive mental characteristics developed through positive education have been linked to less risky behaviour (Nidich et al. 2011).

Adolescent’s wellbeing is affected by factors in their community, home, peers, and wider society (Spotlight 2012). Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1917-2005) ecological systems theory (See Appendix A) stresses the importance of the developing person in their surrounding environment (Salkind 2004). Research on Bronfenbrenner’s nested model of development has proven to be beneficial in providing an insight into all the factors that play a role in the growth and development of individuals (Christensen 2010). In addition, Eric Erikson’s (1902-1994) Stage Theory highlights that during the adolescent stage of development there are many stressors, challenges and transitions in which adolescents go through. Some stressors include pressure related to school absenteeism, alcohol, drugs, self harm, eating disorders, sexual identity exploration, racism and poverty (Corey et al. 2010). Furthermore,
challenges include transitions in education, new relationships with peers, experimentation (with drink or drugs), renegotiating relationships and authority in the home to name but a few (Christie and Viner 2005). According to Buckley et al. (2009) adolescent’s at this stage of development are trying to develop their sense of identity in many different aspects of their lives such as personal, social, educational and relational. Conversely, confusion about role choices for young people is “inevitable and leads to a pivotal transition Erikson called the identity crisis” (Boyd and Bee 2012, p.306). It has been argued that schools provide a lot of information about sex roles, with particular emphasis placed on student’s prospects for the future (Durkin 1995). Furthermore, research suggests that parents “organise children’s environments, appearance and activities with gender in mind” (Durkin 1995, p.190). Furthermore, he notes that peer activities are organised around gender specific preferences.

Though there is evidence of how to positively promote the mental health and wellbeing of students Kinnumen et al. (2010) argue that there is a significant lack in understanding of factors which should be considered in order to promote the wellbeing and mental health of adolescents. This viewpoint mirrors Swords at al. (2011) research as they confer that there are many unanswered questions of factors which individually or in combination influence adolescent wellbeing and mental health.

2.8 Substance Use

Irish school-based ‘Substance Use’ prevention is at present provided within the remit of the SPHE programme. In 1994 the Department of Education and Science (DES) (currently Skills) launched a Substance Abuse Prevention Programme (SAPP) ‘On My Own Two Feet’ in post-primary schools. The programme was designed to enable students to look after their health and aid them in making cognisant and informed decisions about the use of drugs both legal and illegal. The areas addressed under the SAPP are explored in five books: Identity and Self Esteem, Understanding Influences, Assertive Communication, Feelings and Decision-Making. The SAPP gives schools the autonomy to adapt the use of these materials to the existing social, personal and health education programmes and to adapt them to the needs of their students. Research conducted on the SAPP programme concluded that “successful programmes alter attitudes and beliefs more easily than actual behaviour” (DES 1994, p.2). Additionally, it has been found that adolescents that have a good level of assertiveness skills and high levels of self esteem were less likely to drink, smoke or use illegal substances (DES 1994).
Research conducted in Ireland in relation to teacher perspectives on their role in delivering the ‘Substance Use’ component of the SPHE module have highlighted the need for a shift in the unconnected delivery of module toward that of “Shared Responsibility” (Van Hout et al. 2012, p.337). This mirrors that of Fletcher et al.’s (2010) claim that the module on drug and alcohol education needs to be integrated fully within the national curriculum and addressed in other subjects such as Geography, Art and Science. Van Hout et al. (2012) argue that there is need for enhanced information, training, and support for all teachers in schools is essential for the positive execution of the module. The importance of the student-teacher relationship is highlighted as also being vital in school based health promotion initiatives (Frey et al. 2011, Perra et al. 2012). According to Budnick and Tirri (2014) a positive relationship between adolescent students and teachers is one of the greatest influential aspects and contributors to positive youth development.

Recent international surveys on substance misuse were carried out across thirty countries. Findings from the survey bring to light the fact that Irish schoolchildren are amongst the highest cocaine and cannabis users in the European Union. The latest survey also illustrates that the usage of illegal drugs is 1.5 times more likely among males compared with females (Global Drug Survey 2014). Teenagers between the ages of fifteen-sixteen are highlighted among the most regular users of the drugs in the 30 countries surveyed. In 2015, The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug addiction reported that the highest level of ‘legal high’ usage (defined as new substances that imitate the effects of illicit drugs) were also by young people from Ireland (9%) (EMCDD 2015).

2.9 Mental Health and Substance Use

Teachers are in a vital position to identify and support students with mental health concerns (Johnson et al. 2011). They are well positioned to recognize issues concerning students’ social and emotional wellbeing and can play a valued role in the help-seeking process (Graham et al. 2011, Johnson et al. 2011). According to Barry (2009) mental health promotion programmes in schools when implemented effectively, can create long-term emotional, social and academic benefits for young people. The National Bureau of Economic Research (2017) reports that there is a definite connection between mental poor health and the use of addictive substances. As stated previous Substance Use in one of the ten core themes taught in the SPHE curriculum that highlights the misuse of drugs. Mazzer and Rickwood (2015) research on the teacher's role in supporting the mental health of students
found that teachers acknowledge that supporting mental health is an important element of their job and recognize the positive impact they can have on young people's mental health. However, “they perceive a skill deficit and feel inadequately prepared to effectively address all the mental health needs of their students” (Mazzer and Rickwood 2015, p.39).

2.10 Adolescent Exposure to Explicit Material through Internet Access

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) at post-primary level seeks to provide opportunities for young people to learn about relationships and sexuality in ways that will allow them to think and act in a moral, caring and responsible way (DES 1998, p.6). Adolescents go through a number of physical, emotional, cognitive, social, spiritual, and sexual changes. One of the developmental tasks that adolescents face is “dealing with dramatic physiological changes and the emergence of sexual urges” (Sˇevcˇ´ıkova´ and Daneback 2014, p.676). As a result they are considered “one of the most susceptible audiences to sexually explicit content” (Owens et al. 2012, p.101). Initially, access to explicit material was gained through the watching the tv or magazines. In today’s society, using the internet has become a normal part of adolescent’s everyday lives. It provides them with free access to information about sex and sexual websites that they purposely seek out (Wolak et al. 2007). This includes using the internet to access pornographic websites described as “illicit internet sites portraying sexual behaviors and practices” (Tsitsika et al. 2009, p. 546). In 2005, Malamuth and Huppin’s study focused on identifying a link between sexually explicit material and its relationship to sexual aggression. They found that that a male adolescent who “possesses certain combinations of risk factors determines how likely he is to be sexually aggressive following pornography exposure” (2005 p.316).

2.11 Cyber bullying

Within the Social Personal Health Education curriculum, the concept of bullying is explored under the theme ‘Belonging and Integrating’ at Junior Cycle. According to Olweus (1993 p.9) a student is being bullied when “he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students”. The term cyber bullying is a new strain of bullying and is defined as the use of electronic information and communication devices such as e-mail, instant messaging, text messages, mobile phones that aim to make threats against, embarrass or target another person (Slonje and Smith 2008). In 2011, O’Neill et al. reported that the levels of bullying in Ireland were a little above the European average (23% vs. 19%) but lower for cyber bullying (4% vs. 6%). Conversely, recent reports have shown
that the percentage for cyberbullying has now increased from 4% to 13% and occurs most commonly on social networks (Pollak and Humphreys 2015). According to Dinh and O’Neill (2011, p.1) the bullying of others is more widespread “among 15-16 year olds (24%) and among boys (19%)”. Furthermore, their study also highlighted that girls (32%) are more likely than boys (19%) to say they were very upset about being bullied online (p.5). Sigurdson et al. 2014 highlight that victims of bullying are more likely to report poorer health and lower wellbeing (Rigby 2000).

Schools are required to have in place an anti-bullying policy for its students. Some evidence suggests that guidance counsellors, because of their education, may respond to bullying in distinctive ways as compared with other adults in the school environment (i.e. teachers and administrators) (Power-Elliott and Harris 2012). However, very little research exists on the role of guidance counsellors in bullying intervention and prevention (Bradshaw et al. 2007). O’Neill et al. (2011) argue that given that a small number turn to teachers in seeking support in cases of cyber bullying. They stress that updated school policies, continuing professional development for teachers and new resources to support the implementation of the personal safety aspects of the Social Personal Health Education curriculum are needed.

2.12 Guidance at Junior Cycle Level

Essentially, Guidance in schools comprises of “…personal and social, educational and career guidance delivered within a whole school context” DES (2016a p.7). Hence, a Guidance Counsellor’s role is multi-faceted. Their work includes advice giving, counselling, assessments, advocacy, teaching decision-making, career management skills and mentoring (IGC 2008). According to Blaber and Glazebrook (2007), mentoring describes a range of programmes and relationships which aspire to build up the skills of a young person with help from someone who has greater experience and knowledge. At present “guidance activities are introduced to students at Junior Cycle through SPHE” (Hearne et al. 2016, p.25). The DES (2000) stated that in order for the SPHE programme at Junior Cycle to run effectively there should be planned communication and co-operation between those teaching SPHE and the guidance personnel. Nevertheless, research on the value of SPHE provision in schools suggests that SPHE is regarded as valuable and helpful but that it suffers from timetabling pressures and that the module has a lack of status (as it is a not examined) in comparison to examination subjects. As a result insufficient time is given to the subject (Nic Gabhainn et al.
2007). Gleeson and Ó Donnabháin (2009) study also found SPHE to be one of the subjects that suffers from low status in the Irish post-primary system.

Subsequently, the NCCA (2017) states that guidance-related learning plays an integral role in the new Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines and is fundamental to supporting a school’s Wellbeing Programme. Wellbeing hours will be included in guidance provision under the New Framework for Junior Cycle. Therefore, the Guidance Counsellor will play an integral role in the planning and implementation of the Wellbeing module. Fundamentally, guidance activities will include facilitating students to set and achieve goals, to develop study skills and study plans, to recognise the opportunities for learning beyond school and to make informed decisions on choice of subjects (NCCA 2017).

In a recent case study examining guidance as a Whole School Approach Hearne et al. (2016 p.38) found that more needs to be done within the whole area of guidance as “there is limited provision” at Junior Cycle level. Furthermore, their research highlighted that guidance classes and one-to-ones would be more beneficial if it spanned across all year groups from first year to sixth year (Hearne et al. 2016). Current research done on a case school signifies that a successful Whole School Approach to guidance counselling requires the commitment of school management, the Guidance Counsellor and school staff (Hearne et al. 2016). Their research highlighted that the successful operation of initiatives mainly the Whole School Guidance Programme and the Student Support Teams (SST) structure provide a “framework for staff to work collaboratively in the provision of whole school initiatives relevant to guidance counselling” (Hearne et al. 2016, p.112). The Whole School Guidance Plan is also recognized as an intervention that addresses the emotional health and wellbeing of young people (NEPS 2013). Currently, the NCGE (2017) has devised a Whole School Guidance Framework aimed at supporting schools in the planning and implementation of a Whole School Approach to guidance. It also highlights the need for schools to meet the requirements of The Education Act (1998) which states that schools should provide students with “access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices” (section 9c) (DES 2003, p.1).
2.13 Conclusion

The DES (2000) highlighted that teachers and the guidance personnel need to work together in order to ensure the effective running of the SPHE programme. It has been argued that in order to appreciate the benefits of SPHE that a Whole School Approach to student support needs to be taken. The new Framework for Junior Cycle education stresses the importance of using a Whole School Approach by taking into account the culture of the school, relationships, policy and planning and the curriculum when implementing the new Wellbeing programme (NCCA 2017). In addition, there should be enhanced support for teachers/Guidance Counsellors such as in-service training and continued professional development. Currently, at Junior Cycle level Guidance is emphasized as supporting “learning about wellbeing and learning for wellbeing” (NCCA 2017, p.46). Significantly, the Guidance Counsellor will play a central role in the planning and implementation of the Wellbeing module at Junior Cycle level. The Guidance Counsellor is also responsible for the wellbeing of all its students. As there are many risk factors associated with growing up as an adolescent in today’s society such as bullying, drink and drug misuse, their role is as vital as ever. Creating a positive school climate that is health promoting and promoting positive mental health and wellbeing amongst male students is essential. This may result in them becoming involved in less risk taking and developing mental health issues when they get older.
CHAPTER 3
Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore SPHE teachers’ narratives about what they view as being the perceived benefits of teaching SPHE to male students at Junior Cycle. Subsequently, this will aid in pinpointing how the themes of the SPHE programme may contribute to promoting the mental health and wellbeing of male students. This was obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews on a one-to-one basis with participants. This contributed to providing the researcher with rich information gained through their experiential lens. The researcher explored this topic as they feel the voice of teachers has not been heard in relation to how effective the SPHE programme has actually been for young male development. The goal is that it will inform school policy and the Guidance Service when implementing appropriate strategies into the New Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme in post-primary schools. The methodology will address the paradigm that the research is grounded in: study design, qualitative method, phenomenology, role of researcher, recruitment of research participants, data collection, the interview, data analysis, rigor, validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical considerations will be examined.

Phenomenological research studies in educational settings generally embody lived experience, perception, and feelings of participants about a phenomenon (Yüksel and Yıldırım 2015). Phenomena include anything that human beings live/ experience (Somekh and Lewin 2011).

3.1 Study Design

A qualitative (interpretive) study also known as a “qualitative study” (Merriam and Tisdell 2016, p.24) design frame was used for the purpose of this research project. The justification for choosing this type of study design is that the researcher aspired to co-construct meaning in the interviews with participants on the perceived benefits of SPHE to male students at Junior Cycle. This was obtained by using a semi-structured interview technique with SPHE teachers on a one-to-one basis. To achieve this, the researcher observed participant perceptions, feelings, ideas and thoughts (Oakley 2000) in each interview. This mirrors Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2011) views who claim that interpretivist researchers ascertain reality through participant’s views, experiences and their own background. Cohen and
Manion (1994) highlights that interpretivist researchers understand “the world of human experience” (p.36) and meaning is “constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty 1998, p.42). The researcher is currently a teacher of SPHE to first year male students and therefore able to relate to teacher experiences of teaching SPHE to male students at Junior Cycle.

3.2 Qualitative Research

Although the strengths of quantitative methods were considered when establishing the methodology, in order to “explore the inner experiences of participants” (Corbin and Strauss 2015, p.5) qualitative research was deemed more suitable for this research project. Additionally, contrary to the quantitative researchers who detach themselves from the participants, qualitative researchers are participatory (Lodico et al. 2010; Merriam 2009; Moustakas 1994). Essentially, the researcher was interested in hearing the narratives from teachers by using research “that uses data that do not indicate ordinal values” (Nkwi et al. 2001, p.1). Cohen et al. (2011 p.227) argue that whilst quantitative research tells us about correlations, how much and ‘what’, qualitative research highlights the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the study. In addition, Gunzenhauser and Gerstl-Pepin (2006) state that qualitative methodologies are very different to the objective quantitative methodologies that require rigidity of data. For the purpose of this research the ‘how’ and ‘why’ pertains to how beneficial teachers feel the overall SPHE programme has contributed to male adolescent development and why they think some themes may have been more beneficial than others.

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) qualitative research is a method for the “subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p.1278). This allows the researcher to connect with research participants and see the world from their perspectives (Corbin and Strauss 2015). As a result, Locke et al. (2013) highlight that as the researcher is involved in the experience with participants this can give rise to a variety of ethical, strategic and personal issues into the qualitative research project. However, qualitative research differs from quantitative research as it allows for flexibility throughout the research process (Ohman 2005). Therefore, it is deemed more suitable for this research project. As well, within qualitative research Guest et al. (2013) emphasizes that “participant observation is much more inductive and flexible compared to its quantitative cousin, direct observation” (p.5). As
a result, it requires the researcher to change and acclimatize the research process in accordance with emerging results (Ohman 2005).

3.3 The Phenomenological Approach

A phenomenological approach was undertaken in this research project. Currently, the term phenomenology is used “to denote the study of individuals’ perceptions, feelings, and lived experiences” (Guest et al. 2013, p.11). This requires gathering ‘deep’ information and insights through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, chats and participant observation and representing it from the perspective of the research participants (Lester 1999). The inductive method allows for the researcher to work back and forth between the themes and the database until a wide-ranging set of themes is established (Creswell 2014). Osborne (1990) claims that phenomenological research is one qualitative research method that has a close similarity with counselling practice as it stays closer to the human experience. The researcher aimed to provide in-depth findings through informal discussions with participants (Collis and Hussey 2003). This was based on their experiences of teaching the themes covered under the SPHE programme that they feel contribute to promoting the mental health and wellbeing of their male student population. Creswell (2007) argues that a phenomenological framework requires a relatively homogenous group of participants.

3.4 The Role of the Researcher

Prior to collecting data a component of the phenomenological approach includes that of the researcher practising Epoche (Merriam 2009). This is a technique where the researcher describes their own experiences in order to heighten their awareness to their underlying feelings about the research topic. By doing so Moustakas (1994) stresses that the researcher should surrender any biases and view the topic with a fresh eye. Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2003) state that the researcher "facilitates the flow of communication, identifies cues, and the participant sets respondents at ease" (p.419) in qualitative research. To achieve this McDowell (1992) highlights that the researcher must explain their own position in relation to the research participants and research setting. According to Savin -Baden and Howell-Major (2013) positionality “…reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study” (p.71). The researcher conducted their Guidance Counselling practice placement in the school where the research was carried out yet was positioned as a researcher when conducting interviews with participants. Furthermore, the researcher was responsible
for teaching SPHE to first year classes thus is familiar with the SPHE curriculum. Therefore, in order to reduce to possibility of bias within this research study the researcher chose to interview SPHE teachers. Furthermore, the researcher followed the Interview Schedule by asking the same set of questions to each participant through the interview process.

3.5 Recruitment of Research Participants

Giorgi (2009) contends that the selection of participants is the initial step in the data gathering process. The individuals selected for this research project were teachers teaching SPHE to Junior Cycle male students in a post-primary school. Teachers have an insight into the perceived benefits of SPHE as they observe how male students engage and learn from the themes explored within the curriculum. In this study the term ‘participant’ will be used in order to emphasise the co-operative and voluntary nature of the research, where participants are fully informed on the nature of the research (Osborne 1990). To gain access to participants, the researcher approached the school principal (gatekeeper) to identify the current and former teachers of SPHE and asked for permission to interview six teachers. If more than six teachers were interested in partaking in this study the researcher would recruit participants by “random sampling” (Thomas 2013, p.135). Once approval was granted (See Appendix B for Principal Subject Information Sheet and Appendix C for Principal Consent Form), the researcher approached teachers to partake in the semi-structured interviews that were audio digitally recorded.

The researcher was cognisant of developing a relationship with the research participants (McLeod 2009). (Lester 1999) states that the establishment of a good level of rapport and empathy is critical to gaining depth of information. The semi-structured interviews took place within the school in a private room and at the convenience of those six participants being interviewed. When interviewing participants Morrow (2005) believes the fewer questions a researcher asks the more chance the participant will explore in deeper meaning. Furthermore, Osborne (1990) suggests that if a respondent runs out of steam they can be prompted by the researcher.
3.6 Data Collection

Creswell (2007) suggests in-depth interviews as the primary means of collecting information for a phenomenological study. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006) the idea of a phenomenological interview is to describe the meaning of a phenomenon that several individuals share. Gubrium and Holstein (2003) highlight that interviewing is one of the key ways qualitative researchers generate and collect data for their research studies. As this research examines teachers’ narratives about the perceived benefits of SPHE to male students at Junior Cycle, study-specific questions were used in the interview. These were used instead of employing pre-established questionnaires or survey instruments (Gubrium and Holstein 2003).

Data collection for this qualitative study was in the form of semi-structured interviews “where the researcher has a guide or aided-memoir to prompt the course of questioning” (Mills and Birks 2014, p.37). According to Thomas (2013) the semi-structured (qualitative) interviews are of utmost value as far as interviewing goes as it combines the structure of a list of issues to be covered together with the freedom to follow up points as necessary. Additionally, an interview schedule was used that acts as “a reminder of what is intended to be covered” (Thomas 2013, p.198).

The rationale for choosing interviews is mainly because of its adaptability as the “interviewer can probe responses and investigate feelings which a questionnaire can never do” (Bell and Waters 2014, p.178). This allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of teacher's perceptions and “interpret their experiences” (Merriam and Tisdell 2016, p.24) about the benefits of SPHE to male students. Furthermore, according to Bell and Waters (2014) semi structured interviews are “easily recorded, summarised and analysed” (p.181). Although interviews can be “time-consuming” (Bell and Waters 2014, p.178) by following a semi-structured interview the researcher may include open-ended questions which allow the respondent’s to reply in whatever way they wish. The open-ended questions in the interviews (See Appendix D for Interview schedule) were standardized where all participants in the study were asked the same basic questions in the same order (Patton 1980). An advantage of a semi-structured interview technique is that is allows the participant to express their views in their own terms (Cohen 2006). A disadvantage of using this method is that it is difficult to generalise the findings (WHO 2004). Furthermore, Silverman (1998) argues that in qualitative research there is an over dependence on interviewing as a method of data creation.
as it is an analysis of how people “see things” and not “do things” (p.105). However, as the researcher wanted to co-construct meaning, interviews as a method of data collection were considered more suitable for this research study.

3.7 The Interview

Prior to semi-structured interviews taking place a pilot interview was conducted in order to “test out research techniques” (Thomas 2013, p.173). The researcher met with each participant individually and provided him or her with an information sheet (See Appendix E) on details about the research topic. As each interview was audio digitally recorded participants interested in taking part were distributed with a voluntary consent form (See Appendix F). In relation to the transcription procedures Osborne (1990) states that it is in the interest of the phenomenological researcher to listen and transcribe the interviews themselves.

3.8 Data Analysis

Morrow (2005) believes that “in the data analysis phase immersion in the data is essential” (p.256). In the data analysis phase of this research project the researcher chose a Thematic Approach within the interpretive qualitative paradigm. The researcher selected Thematic Analysis because of its “flexibility and potential to offer an affluent and detailed, yet multifaceted version of data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.4). According to Guest et al. (2012) the primary aim of Thematic Analysis is to move past including overt notes or phrases and “focus on identifying and describing both explicit and implicit ideas within the data, that is themes” (p.10). Sandelowski and Leeman (2012) define a theme as a logical integration of the distinct pieces of data that constitute the findings. Essentially, it captures something important about data in relation to the research question, and symbolizes some level of response pattern or meaning within the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). Usher and Jackson (2014) explain that “excerpts of participant’s narratives will support themes” (p.193) which were adapted from the interviews with participants. Subsequently, codes are characteristically developed to represent the identified themes (Guest et al. 2012). Boyatzis (1998) claims that a “good code” (p.1) is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon.

For the purpose of this research project the researcher analysed the data by following a 6 step model outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, within their model in order to conduct
Thematic Analysis data needs to be transcribed into written form (Braun and Clarke 2006). The researcher transcribed each interview themselves that Riessman (1993) states is an excellent way to start familiarising yourself with the data. Consequently, the researcher “read the data then re-read the data” (Rice and Ezzy 1999, p.258). The researcher then coded the data, colour coded the data, put the codes into broad categories and from there broke the categories down into a number of themes. A summary of Braun and Clarke’s 6 step approach is highlighted as follows: (1) familiarising with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) producing the report (adapted from Braun and Clarke 2006, p.35) (See Appendix G).

Fundamentally, Braun and Clarke (2006) note that “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p.6). Thematic Analysis also interprets various facets of the research topic (Boyatzis 1998). In this research project ‘Themes’ were unified in an edited synthesis of the researcher’s understanding (Wertz 2005). It is hoped that that ‘Themes’ that arise from the interviews may inform School policy and the Guidance Service when introducing the Wellbeing programme into post-primary schools.

3.9 Demonstrating rigor through a process of Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006 p.97) state that a “rigorous thematic approach can produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions”. The researcher took a number of steps to maintain rigor throughout this research project. During the interview stage the researcher firstly tried to honour the Interview Schedule and interview six participants by following the same set of questions. Next, the researcher took notes after each of the interviews and then analysed the data in accordance with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model by reading the data and then re-reading the data a number of times. In addition, the researcher met with their supervisor who took a sample of two transcripts. He read both transcripts in preparation for the subsequent chapter that includes coding categories and themes. He also gave feedback in order to ensure that there would not be bias in the findings. Subsequently, the researcher met with two participants of the study and to view the raw data (transcription notes) of their interviews. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) member checks are “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p.314) in a study. The researchers asked participants if the themes or categories made sense, whether they were developed with adequate evidence and whether the overall account was realistic and accurate.
(Creswell and Miller 2000). This allowed the researcher to include participants’ comments into the final narrative.

3.10 Validity

In essence, the validity of an instrument means “is it measuring what it is supposed to measure?” Sharf (2010 p.13). As this is vague in relation to research Sapford and Jupp (2006) propose that validity means “the design of research to provide credible conclusions” (p.1). They argue that what has to be established is whether the data ‘do measures what the author claims and that interpretations do follow from them (Bell and Waters 2014, p.121). Choudhuri et al. (2004) contend that part of establishing trustworthiness or validity in qualitative research is to make clear the process involved. Also, the most crucial method of validating results is to present the arguments in a clear and convincing manner (Osborne 1990). The researcher provided sufficient information on the research context, processes and participants to ensure the reader is informed and can make their own judgements (Morrow 2005). Furthermore, it is essential in the presentation of the research “not to imply that the findings can be generalised to other populations or settings” (Morrow 2005, p.252).

3.11 Reliability

In relation to reliability Osborne (1990) states that the best the researcher can do is to “argue a particular interpretation as persuasively as possible, supported by references to data, and leave the final judgement to the reader” (p.87). As a phenomenological method was used it will be based on notion that one’s point of view is perspective and relative rather than measurable or controlled.

3.12 Reflexivity

Qualitative work requires reflection on the part of researchers, both before and during the research process, as a way of providing context and understanding for readers. According to Patton (2002) reflexivity provides the researcher with an opportunity to understand how their experiences influence the research process. Willig (2008) names personal and epistemological reflexivity as requirements of good quality research. He states that personal reflexivity involves reflecting upon ways in which our “own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments and wider aims in life have shaped the research” (p.10). This involves thinking about how the research process may have affected and possibly changed
the researcher. Epistemological reflexivity on the other hand requires us to engage with questions such as: How has the research question defined and limited what can be found? How has the design of the study and the method of analysis constructed the data and findings? How could the research question have been investigated differently? To what extent would this have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? (Hayton 2009, p.81). For the purpose of this research study the researcher kept a research diary throughout the research process. Somekh and Lewin (2011) note that keeping a diary allows the researcher to gather “miscellaneous entries” (p.44) that aid in documenting the progression of perceptions and insights across the different stages of the research. This was done by using “interval-contingent” (Thomas 2013, p.200), a process whereby the researcher reports on their experience at regular intervals. This allowed the researcher to gain “insights into phenomena that were not obvious when the research journey began” (Somekh and Lewin 2011, p.46).

3.13 Ethical Issues Evident

Ethics are “standards of behaviour developed by a group of people to which members of that group should behave” (Sharf 2010, p.16). The ethical issues that occur in research are the same as those that happen in the context of guidance, counselling and educational practice (Cohen et al. 2011). The National Centre for Guidance in Education highlight that the main ethical principles that underpin practitioner research are “respect for the rights and dignity of the person, competence, responsibility and integrity” (NCGE 2008, p.2). This lines up with the ethical principles that McLeod (2010) claims as fundamental to ethical principles in research (i) Nonmaleficence (ii) Beneficence (iii) Autonomy (iv) Fidelity and (v) Justice. As the researcher is a practicing Guidance Counsellor they must follow the Institute of Guidance Counsellors Professional Code of Ethics as a guide to best practice. The main ethical standards that Guidance Counsellors are obliged to uphold are respect for the rights of the client, have a professional responsibility to act in a trusting manner and adopt a systematic approach to resolving ethical dilemmas and seek to promote honesty in their practice (IGC 2012).

As this research project involved interviewing teachers of SPHE it is important to understand the ethical dimensions of the interview which “involve interpersonal interaction and produce information about the human condition” (Cohen et al. 2000, p.292). In this research project, the information produced gave an insight into what teachers perceive to be most beneficial
from teaching the SPHE curriculum to Junior Cycle students. Furthermore, according to Baker and Gerler (2004) “confidentiality is a key ethical principal for counsellors” (p.73) and a way of “protecting participants rights to privacy” (Cohen et al. 2000, p.62). Confidentiality means that the privacy of individuals will be “protected in that the data they provide will be handled and reported in such a way that they cannot be associated with them personally” (Mertens 2010, p.342).

In addition, it is the imperative the participants were “fully aware of the purpose of the research and that they understood their rights” (Bell and Waters 2014, p.178). This involved explaining fully what the research was about, why the teachers were being interviewed, what was involved in the interview process and what will be done with the information obtained. This research project was based on obtaining “informed consent” (Bell and Waters 2014, p.178) from teachers, done on a “voluntarism” basis which entails applying the principle of informed consent and thus ensuring that participants freely chose to take part or not (Cohen et al. 2000, p.51). There are many other ethical issues that a researcher should be aware of at this stage from for example “Will informed consent be obtained in writing or orally?” to “Has care been taken to prevent any harmful effects on of the research to the participants?” (Cohen et al. 2000, p.292). According to Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1992) the researcher is obliged to protect the anonymity of research participants. Pseudonyms were used for anonymity and the preservation of confidentiality. Subsequently, the researcher recognised the importance of keeping adequate records and was mindful of relevant legislation (e.g. Data Protection Act, Freedom of Information) (IGC 2012) of its participants. It is vital that participants data is “stored in locked units to which only qualified users have access” Coaley (2010 p.237). The researcher received full approval from the University of Limerick’s Ethics Committee to conduct research in this area (Ethics Research Number: 2017 04 04 EHS).

3.14 Conclusion

This section focuses on the methodological approach that the researcher carried out within this research project. It involves using qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews with participants. In order to gain in-depth narratives about the perceptions and feelings of teachers’ experiences of teaching SPHE to Junior Cycle male students a phenomenological approach was undertaken. In order to analyse data accumulated from interviews, Thematic Analysis was used. The researcher sought out common themes that
arose from the interviews with participants in order to interpret various aspects of the research topic.
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

CHAPTER 4
4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings of the research project demarcated by following Braun and Clarkes (2006) Thematic Analysis method. As a result, six overarching themes and a number of subthemes emerged from analysing the data. The aim of this research project was to explore teachers' narratives about SPHE as it contributes to the mental health and wellbeing of male students at Junior Cycle. Additionally, the researcher wanted to explore teacher perceptions in relation to the perceived benefits of teaching SPHE to males students and how it contributes to male adolescent development. The researcher wanted to co-construct meaning from SPHE teacher interviews that will inform the Guidance Service with regard policy and practice when incorporating Wellbeing into the new Junior Cycle curriculum.

The chapter is delineated into several sections. Firstly, teacher profiles were developed to introduce participants who shared their experiences and aided this research project. A background and summary of participant experiences (using pseudonyms) in teaching SPHE is included (Please see Table 1). The second section represents the predominant findings of the project using colour coded themes that emerged from participant interviews. This was done in order to make it more lucid for the reader to follow and is presented in Table 2. Essentially, six overarching themes emerged from the research principally: (1) Teacher training in SPHE, (2) Challenges of transition from primary to post-primary education, (3) Identifying the main personal, social and health needs of male students, (4) Key gaps in male students’ knowledge within key areas of the SPHE curriculum, (5) Schools approach to protecting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of male adolescents and (6) Key barriers to SPHE promotion within an all male school. Consequently, subthemes that emerged from the major themes are highlighted in themes two to six. Finally, excerpts from SPHE teacher narratives are also included and are highlighted in more detail throughout this chapter under each theme.

4.1 Background

The participants of this study comprised of four female and two male SPHE teachers ranging from late twenties to mid-fifties. On average, participants had at least five years of
experience in teaching SPHE at Junior Cycle. One participant reported having one year’s experience teaching the curriculum, one had four years experience, two had five years experience and two had ten years experience. All six participants had experience teaching in an all boys’ school. One had experience teaching the PSHE (SPHE equivalent) curriculum in the United Kingdom and two teachers had previous experience in teaching in an all girls’ school.

The following table highlights a synopsis of participant profiles:

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym:</th>
<th>Belinda</th>
<th>Peter</th>
<th>Joe</th>
<th>Ella</th>
<th>Anne</th>
<th>Tanya</th>
</tr>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>No. of years worked in another school:</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.2 Study Findings

Six overarching themes emerged from the research data. Each theme was colour coded and a summary of each theme is illustrated in Table 2 below:

### Table 2

- Teacher Training in SPHE
- Challenges of transition from primary to post-primary for male adolescents
- Identifying the main personal, social and health needs of male adolescents
- Key gaps in male students’ knowledge within key areas of the SPHE curriculum
- Schools approach to protecting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of male adolescents
- Key barriers to SPHE promotion within an all male school
In addition, subthemes that emerged analysing the data are presented and examined under colour coded themes two to six.

4.3 Theme 1

Teacher Training in SPHE

In response to earlier questions from the interview schedule in background to teacher training, the level of training received by teachers is quite diverse. Some experienced SPHE training in their Higher Diploma, some attended two day training courses whilst others had no training at all in the curriculum.

Belinda: “When I was doing my Dip. ah, we had an option to take on an extra subject as part of our overall qualification so my core subjects are Religion and History. Then the option was there so I took on to do the module of SPHE”.

Anne: “I did a two day training course for it”.

Peter: “None”.

Subsequently, resources are an issue for teachers teaching SPHE. It was reported that resources were adequate some using books, workbooks, you-tube clips and videos. However, it was highlighted that more needs to be done as a whole in the area of SPHE. Moreover, Belinda emphasized the need for uniformity on the level of communication in regards resources and information that is available to teachers teaching SPHE.

Belinda: “As time has gone on I find that there isn’t the same level of communication of various resources that are out there”.

This raises key questions about consistency of training within schools for the SPHE component. These will be elaborated further on in the discussion chapter of this research project.
4.4 Theme 2

Challenges of transition from primary to post-primary for male adolescents

This theme expresses the consensus by SPHE teachers interviewed that challenges exist for male adolescents whilst transitioning from primary to post-primary education. These challenges are broken down into subthemes and explained under the following headings:

**Subthemes:**
- Belonging and Integrating
- Self-Management
- Friendships

**Subtheme 1**

4.4.1 Belonging and Integrating

Teacher responses were unanimous to questioning about if the theme “Belonging and Integrating” really helps first year students. Notably settling into school, discussing change, the ability to cope with change and recognising the feelings associated with change for male students were prominent features associated with transition that were highlighted by participants in this study.

_Ella:_ “I think that chapter needs to be done in first year to allow them to explore change and the feelings that they are going to be feeling”.

_Joe:_ “It gets them to think about the transition, about the difficulties they face and that they are not weird in any way shape or form that they experience these difficulties”.

Conversely, two teachers described the need for more to be done within the whole area of Belonging and Integrating.
Belinda: “....based on kind of what the level of interests are in 2017 I feel sometimes they can be a little sedate, ya know”..... “there could be a lot more encapsulated in the whole subject area, ya know”.

Peter: “It could be a little bit more”.... “...maybe look at teambuilding exercises and am, ya know, outings for the kids early on in the year”.

Subtheme 2

4.4.2 Self-Management

When questioning participants about how the theme “Self-Management” has facilitated male students planning, preparation and teamwork skills a number expressed their opinion that organisational skills was the main challenge that male students experience whilst making the transition from primary to post-primary schooling.

Belinda: “...up to twelve whilst in primary school essentially everything has been done for them.......it is a gender traditional feel in Ireland still that guys don’t do everything for themselves....”.

Peter: “But in general boys are not very well organised if you compare them to their female counterparts”.

Ella: “...with boys ya know, Organisational skills can be a really big issue. It has actually been proven that they are, ya know”.

Subtheme 3

4.4.3 Friendships

When queried about the benefits of exploring “Friendships” as a theme within SPHE the bulk of teachers stated that it was beneficial as it aids male students understanding of the types of friendships that exist inside and outside of school. More notably, teachers stressed that making new friends and breaking away from old friends was a normal part of male adolescent development.

Peter: “the guys don’t actually realise what a real friend is, a true friend, an acquaintance”.
Tanya: “But I think in first year it is a good theme because I think a lot of them feel they are the only one that hasn’t a friend so I think letting them know that everyone is out there kind of feeling am, you know that their transitioning..”.

Additionally, differing from the opinions of other teachers, one teacher highlighted that friendships can be a challenge in an all male school. 

Belinda: “...my experience of them in the class is that when you investigate it too much there’s kind of a consideration of oh that could be perceives as ‘gay’ or ‘too friendly’ or that could be perceived as being ‘bullying’ so it’s kind of like polar opposites as ya know...”.

This raises the question on the need for making the SPHE curriculum more practical for male students. This will be addressed in the subsequent chapter.

4.5 Theme 3

**Identifying the main personal, social and health needs of male adolescents**

In general, participant perceptions when questioned in relation to the benefits of identifying the principal personal, social and health needs of male students were similar. These were expressed under three main themes explored within SPHE and are considered as follows:

Subthemes:
- Emotional Health
- Communication Skills
- Physical Health
Subtheme 1

4.5.1 Personal: Emotional Health

In response to teacher questions about their experience with male students in talking about their feelings, opinion differed. One female teacher conveyed the fact that it takes a lot of encouragement to get some boys to talk and express their feelings. Two female teachers emphasised the need to make the classroom environment more engaging for students that would in turn get them to express emotions and some felt those who are ok emotionally will open up however those that are not ok tend to keep their feelings to themselves.

Belinda: “…it has to be done in kind of like a fun sensitive way but with clear boundaries”. “…..once a month one of the classes is oriented around some type of a game so for example emotional health and discussion around feelings”.

Peter: “Am, I generally find with kids in the situation who are ok are good to discuss their emotions. The kids that are not ok are not good at expressing their emotions and there lies the problem....”

In opposition, one female teacher whose background was principally teaching in an all girls’ school disclosed her surprise at how easily boys express feelings but similar to Belinda highlighted the need for establishing clear boundaries with boys.

Anne: “…I’m pleasantly surprised by my experience here so far as I do feel that they open up quite a lot and I wouldn’t have really expected it”. “…..you kind of have to have specific ground rules what they will feel free to talk about things”.

Subtheme 2

4.5.2 Social: Communication Skills

Teacher responses to questioning pinpointing the main social needs of male students involved boys fitting in at school and being able to communicate with each other. This entails being liked by both peers and teachers.

Joe: “…..to have a few friends, to be liked by teachers, I know that’s very important for them, that they feel liked”.
Belinda: “I suppose the whole social area of fitting in....”.

Two female teachers zoned in on the fact that boys are not as good as communicating with each other both inside and outside of the classroom. One teacher stressed that getting them involved in social activities within school is a must in order to enhance their communication skills.

Ella: “.....they need to do a lot of activities where they are communicating with each other”........“...social activities in the school, it would be very important that they get involved with that”.

Anne: “...they need to develop am, I would say better communication with their peers”. “....when it actually comes to getting to know somebody they don’t have the skills to speak to people on a one to one basis”.

Furthermore, in contrast to the majority of teachers one male teacher stressed the fact that social media has a major impact on the social needs of male students.

Peter: “They feel that when you look at social media everybody is doing something all the time that is fun”..........“So there is a constant that you need to be current and happy all the time”.

However, teachers also highlighted the benefits to exploring the “Communication Skills” theme with male students. The benefits ranged from learning to assert oneself in the case of experiencing bullying by their peers to using eye contact and body language to communicate effectively.

Subtheme 3

4.5.3 Health: Physical Health

Concerns were raised by several teachers when questioned on how “Physical Health” contributes to the general health and wellbeing of male students. The challenge of keeping fit and healthy was noted by the majority of teachers. The school itself has a massive reputation for Sport and some teachers expressed concern that vending machines were a prime contributor of promoting unhealthy eating for boys within the school environment.

Joe: “We have vending machines that sell rubbish food and we try and encourage the boys as best we can not to buy it”.

39
Ella: “....the vending machines, I would be an advocate for getting rid of them and bringing in like a healthy vending machine with a breakfast option.......”.

Peter: “...again pressures that theirs foods, vending machines”.

Concurrently, some teachers highlighted that if boys are into sport they generally tend to understand the importance of a balanced diet and exercise. However, it was reported by two female teachers that they would worry about the boys that were not into sport as they wouldn’t have the same level of knowledge about the benefits of a balanced diet.

Anne: “I often hear the coaches talking to the boys about nutrition and training and food.........and the other boys are left out”.

Belinda: “I suppose the one thing I would be a tiny bit concerned about is in a male perspective in school if you’re not involved in sport...”.

This raises questions to whether more can be done by the school and SPHE teachers to cater to the primary emerging needs of their male students. These will be discussed in further detail in the Discussion section.

4.6 Theme 4

Key gaps in male students’ knowledge within key areas of the SPHE curriculum

Critically, a key theme that emerged from this research project was teachers’ perceptions about gaps that exist in students’ knowledge and understanding within certain areas of the SPHE curriculum. Key gaps in knowledge were found within the themes of “Relationships and Sexuality”, “Substance Abuse” and “Personal Safety” as identified by SPHE teachers. Three salient subthemes are discussed in more detail below:

- Relationships and Sexuality
- Substance Abuse
- Personal Safety

Subthemes:
Subtheme 1

4.6.1 Relationships and Sexuality

Teacher responses to questioning on the benefits of teaching the theme “Relationships and Sexuality” to male students include generating awareness and discussions about the topic to getting them to reflect on what changes they are experiencing as an adolescent. Conversely, a key issue that emerged from SPHE teacher interviews was the irrefutable fact that male students lack knowledge and understanding in the area of “Relationships and Sexuality”. Belinda expressed the fact that the theme itself is not touched on enough in the curriculum. This is mostly due to the fact that some teachers feel it maybe an area teachers’ do not feel comfortable discussing with their male students.

_Ella:_ “I could see teachers avoiding that section. This could be due to embarrassment on their part or maybe not wanting to be asked questions.....”.

_Tanya:_ “.....I would say they probably felt especially being me as a woman ya know even when you mention the sexuality thing, their kind of embarrassed. I think that’s the theme that they are most uncomfortable with”.

Additionally, Peter expressed concern that because in first year some students are still not developed that the topic they find can be a bit awkward to discuss.

On the other hand, a female teacher raised concerns about the lack of honesty that been told to male students and how a lot of situations are overlooked in the book and barely done by SPHE teachers. As a result of these issues she highlighted that:

_Belinda:_ “I would have grave concerns around the Relationships and Sexuality because I do feel the links are not made about Knowing Me, Knowing You”.

Belinda felt strongly about the fact that male students do not seem to understand that Relationships especially at Junior Cycle do not just mean romantic relationships but include all the people that students interact with overtime. Moreover, she stated that:

_Belinda:_ “.....there is kind of a gap in the amount of information that can be given to them ......there is no involvement of focus on their own am sexual health outside STI’s”.

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However, contrary to Belinda’s views Joe and Anne did highlight that there was a cross-curricular dimension to teaching about Relationships and Sexuality.

Joe: “And we talk about all the different types of sexuality ya know gay, lesbian, heterosexual and we work closely with the Science Department when we are doing that”.

Anne: “I think this ties in a lot with what they might be doing in Science”.

Subtheme 2

4.6.2 Substance Abuse

When questioned about the areas of “Substance Abuse” that male students are most interested in learning about the majority of participants’ highlighted drink as a main drug of choice used by male adolescents. Furthermore, some teachers did emphasize the fact that when male students are involved in recreational drinking it often stems from what is going on in their home environments and what they are exposed to from a young age. Therefore, what affects their decision to drink can be associated with the main influences in their lives that have been highlighted by participants as being mainly their peer group and family members.

Peter: “Again, there are kids in the school we’ll say because of their circumstances at home they are exposed to things on a regular basis”.

Ella: “Alcohol is seen from a very very young age and ya know it depends on the home life as well, whether there is a lot of drink and drugs in the home life this can have a huge impact”.

An alarming fact that teachers raised about alcohol in relation to Substance Abuse was that some male students did not view alcohol as a drug.

Anne: “Drinking I suppose is huge and a lot of them don’t see alcohol as a drug and a lot of them drink outside of school”.

Belinda: “…there is a lot of them engaged in drinking and in one way they feel it doesn’t have any impact on their lives”.
Additionally, Anne and Belinda felt that peer pressure and pressure within society pushes male students to dabble in drinking alcohol.

Anne: “But their kind of jumping on the bandwagon and ya know encouraged through friends and things”.

Belinda: “I feel well that there can be a lack of understanding of how much pressure young people are under to engage in this type of behaviour”.

He also stressed his concern on how hard drugs are being discussed more and more. He stated that this type of exposure can be linked to circumstances at home.

In contrast to the majority of teachers, Peter emphasised that male students are interested in learning about weed:

Peter: “....their always interested in learning about weed because of the recreational connotations to it. And the harmlessness that they perceive to be attached to this drug”.

He also stressed his concern on how hard drugs are being discussed more and more. He stated that this type of exposure can be linked to circumstances at home.

Subtheme 3

4.6.3 Personal Safety

Teacher responses to the benefits of teaching the theme “Personal Safety” to students included road safety, getting themselves out of difficult situations to being careful on the internet. Teacher perceptions on the main personal safety issues that male students experience included being careful whilst on the internet to protect against cyber bullying. It also included being able to make informed decisions about being safe in day to day scenarios.

Anne: “.....ya know they need to be careful online”.

Belinda: “You know and again the Personal Safety everybody thinks ya know the cyber safety”.

However, one female teacher drew attention to the fact that the school in itself provides a safe haven for some male students. She also expressed opinion that females find Personal Safety easier to take on board than their male counterparts.
Ella: “As much as some students hate school it’s a safe place”.

Peter: “…there’s some confusion because they are not being told about their own personal safety so that is a good issue to be discussing”.

This brings up questions about the male/ female teacher involvement in teaching specific elements of the SPHE programme to male students. It also raises the question about if the school needs to develop a more shared responsibility to teaching the curriculum. This will aid in helping male students fill in the gaps in their knowledge. These will be addressed in the following chapter.

Subsequently, although the questioning on the theme “Influences and Decisions” has not been discussed it is embedded throughout participant interviews. Participants in this study stressed that the main influences in male students’ lives include family, friends and sporting heroes.

4.7 Theme 5

Schools approach to protecting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of male adolescents

In response to the question on how the school positively promotes the mental health and wellbeing of its male students teacher reactions were similar. Collectively, SPHE teachers felt that a lot is done within and outside the school to safeguard the wellbeing of its male students. Mainly, having access to student support networks within school, positive teacher – student relationships and initiatives the school are involved in emerged as the main subthemes from participant interviews:
Subtheme 1

4.7.1 Student Support Networks

The Guidance Counsellor and Chaplain were recognised by SPHE teachers as essential support networks that aid in protecting the mental health and wellbeing of male students.

*Anne:* “We have a Chaplain and the boys have an excellent relationship with her. Ya know we have the Guidance Counsellor, we have the SPHE teachers.....”

*Peter:* “We have a Chaplain and a Guidance Counsellor who is a Psychotherapist as well who will listen to these people and talk to them”.

Subtheme 2

4.7.2 Student – Teacher Relationships

Additionally, positive student - teacher relationships were also highlighted as fundamental to looking after the mental health and wellbeing of male students.

*Ella:* “It’s a strange place we say because there’s a great relationship between students and the teachers here”.

Furthermore, one male teacher highlighted that:

*Joe:* “....we create a caring climate, by enlarge the teachers treat the boys with the utmost respect”.

Subtheme 3

4.7.3 School Initiatives

The majority of teachers discussed initiatives both internally and externally that the school are involved in. Two female teachers highlighted the use of a ‘Tabhair Aire’ board in the staff room meaning “Take Care” whereby the name of a student is highlighted and teachers know to keep a watchful eye on them. Furthermore, the ‘Anti-Bullying Week’ was mentioned and one female teacher emphasised that:

*Ella:* “We promote sport here massively for physical mental health and wellbeing”.

45
The school has a massive reputation for sport and in this study it was found that sporting heroes (seen as role models) play a huge role in influencing male students.

*Tanya:* "...we discussed the topic around the time of Axel Foley's death.....". "Ya they all had somebody that they looked up to or they all had a sports star".

Subsequently, although the school is involved in the Play it Forward Initiative (promoting kindness) another female teacher in particular felt that the school again could do more in the area of promoting the mental health and wellbeing of its male students.

*Belinda:* “But I do feel we could do more as well maybe something like the Amber Flag or something”.

This elevates the question on ‘who’ within the school needs to be involved in protecting and promoting the mental health and wellbeing of male students and ‘how’ this can be achieved. This will be discussed in more detail in the Discussion chapter.

### 4.8 Theme 6

**Key barriers to SPHE promotion within an all male school**

An additional key theme that emerged from the data analysis phase was teacher attitudes in relation to barriers that affect the promotion SPHE further within the school. Primarily, time allocation, status and assessment were the main constraints noted by participants:
Subtheme 1

4.8.1 Time allocation to a SPHE class

When responding to the question about meeting the main aims of the SPHE curriculum one male and one female teacher expressed concern that they are limited to what they can achieve within a SPHE class.

Anne: “...with one class a week...”. “...I think teachers are limited in what they can do ya know”.

Peter: “But what I would say is that forty minutes a week is not going to do that”.

Subtheme 2

4.8.2 Status of SPHE

The status placed on SPHE was another major barrier that teachers felt hindered its level of promotion within school.

Joe: “....SPHE is really a bit of a Cinderella subject. There’s no getting away from that you know.”

Belinda: “Sometimes in SPHE it can be considered a bit of a doss class”.

Two female teachers compared the status of SPHE to a different country as well as its status within an all girls’ school that they had worked in previous for seventeen years.

Ella: “....but I know that in the U.K it was actually treated better than it was here”.

Anne: “And we did have a strong SPHE department. And we got an SPHE inspection so there was a lot of school support around it and we got a very good report in the inspection so it was seen at the time part of the whole ethos of the school. SPHE was valued”.

Subtheme 3

4.8.3 Assessment and SPHE

Responding to whether SPHE would of greater benefit to male students if it were to be assessed, the bulk of teachers felt that it would not.
Peter: “There is a misconception out there that once you start assessing it it’s taken seriously”.

Tanya: “No definitely not because I know with R.E. and that I think it puts a lot of pressure on them to am, ya know perform”.

Surprisingly, one female teacher felt that the Personal Safety component should be assessed similar to doing the driver theory test whereby:

Ella: “...they should have to do an exam where they actually say ya know I would be actually able to survive outside school”.

In contrast to this view another female teacher felt that boys that are studious tend to view SPHE as a waste of a class and:

Anne: “...that maybe they would pay more heed to it or invest in it a little bit more” if it were assessed.

This raises key questions about the status placed on the SPHE curriculum in the school or within the Education system as a whole. This will be explored further in the next chapter.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has presented perceptions from six SPHE teachers about their experience in teaching the SPHE curriculum at Junior Cycle to male students. The findings section highlights the six key themes and various subthemes that emerged from analysing participants’ data. These emergent themes and subthemes are critical in gaining a greater insight into how beneficial several themes are. The data highlights challenges that male adolescents face. It also emphasises key areas needed for further development within schools to promote and maintain the mental health and wellbeing of its male students. These issues will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.
DISCUSSION

CHAPTER 5
5.0 Introduction

The current study set out to explore the perceived benefits of SPHE (from a teachers’ perspective) for Junior Cycle male students and its implications for the Guidance Counselling Service. The discussion section will address the three research questions underpinning the research project:

1. To examine the perceived benefits of teaching SPHE to male students from a teacher’s perspective within a post-primary context.

2. To explore the perceptions that exists amongst teachers on the effectiveness of SPHE to male adolescent development.

3. To make recommendations that will inform the Guidance Service with regard policy and practice when incorporating Wellbeing into the Junior Cycle curriculum.

The findings suggest that the overall attitudes of teachers teaching the SPHE module are that the ten themes are all in their own right beneficial to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of male students. Nevertheless, the general consensus is that more needs to be done to enhance the existing SPHE curriculum. This chapter will discuss the key findings in relation to the current literature available. Teacher narratives were used in order to highlight the perceived benefits of teaching the SPHE curriculum at Junior Cycle. Key barriers that affect improving how it is taught were also noted by SPHE teachers. As a result six central themes emerged and subsequent subthemes that will be addressed as follows:

- The level of teacher training in the area of SPHE in this study was diverse.
- Challenges are apparent in the transition from primary to post-primary education.
- Recognition of the personal, social and health needs of male students.
- Gaps in male students’ knowledge within key areas of the SPHE curriculum.
- School’s approach to protecting the mental health and wellbeing of male adolescents.
- Key barriers to SPHE promotion within an all male school.
5.1 Teacher Training in SPHE

The level of teacher training experienced by participants of this study varied. Although in-service training is offered by the National Support Service (Mannix McNamara et al. 2012), it has become apparent that not all teachers experience such training. Peter for example stressed that he received no training in the SPHE curriculum. However, he did not indicate if that was down to the fact that he did not avail of this training or if the school had informed him of the in-service training that he could partake in it. Differing from Peter, Anne emphasised that in her previous school that all teachers were made aware and encouraged to attend in-service training for the SPHE component. It has been highlighted that teachers should place greater emphasis on attending SPHE in-service training in sequence and state their specific needs in terms of training (O’Higgins et al. 2013) when doing so. However, research has shown that teachers view SPHE as less important than actual subjects that are examined (Nic Gabhainn et al. 2007). This therefore reduces their involvement in teaching the subject (Burtenshaw (2003). As a result they may not wish to avail of such training. Additionally, Belinda stressed the fact that she has spent time enhancing her own Continuous Professional Development (CPD). She also highlighted that there is a lack of resources available as well as how the information is shared out amongst SPHE teachers. According to the DES (2001) teachers should be involved in “designing, planning and structuring the experiential learning elements” (p.27) of the SPHE curriculum. Furthermore, teachers should also possess an understanding and be familiar with the various methodologies used to teach the SPHE curriculum (DES 2000). Therefore, they should possess a wide range of skills. However, emerging from participant interviews in this study it is evident that not all teachers are receiving the same level of training in this area as in other subjects. This poses major problems in making the SPHE curriculum more cohesive.

5.2 Challenges are apparent in the transition from primary to post-primary education

The results of this study indicate that the subthemes of Belonging and Integrating, Self-Management and negotiating Friendships were key challenges male students experience when making the transition from primary to post-primary education. This correlates to Christie and Viner’s (2005) study that emphasizes transition in education as one of the challenges associated with adolescence. Emerging from participant interviews Joe stated that a perceived benefit of teaching the “Belonging and Integrating” component of SPHE is that it ignites students thinking about transition. In order to make male students feel like they fit in
at school Belinda felt that the curriculum at present needs updating. Conversely, Peter suggested teambuilding exercises and getting students involved in outings early on in first year. Current literature suggests that it is the responsibility of schools in Ireland to promote positive factors to ensure a “sense of belonging and connectedness to school” (DES 2013 p.10). What the researcher found in this study was that it is the overall opinion of SPHE teachers’ i.e Belinda and Ella that more needs to be done in order to make it more practical for male students to aid in their developing “life skills” further.

The fact that boys find it harder to manage themselves was a noticeable feature of this research study. Research suggests that the way students are organised is very important in terms of wellbeing development (O’Brien 2008). However, what emerged from participant interviews is that the majority of SPHE teachers felt that boys find self-management a major issue that they struggle with. Research indicates that organisational skills are fundamental for higher grades, independence, flexibility and creating an enthusiasm to learn (Mac Donald 2013). The Wellbeing programme for Junior Cycle currently being rolled out in post-primary schools intends to make students more “responsible” (NCCA 2016, p.37) whilst in school. This in turn will aid in building their life skills for the future. Anne highlighted that first years more so struggle with timetable issues, managing lockers and drawing up study plans. Therefore, introducing this type of practical element will surely benefit male students in managing themselves better.

A further challenge associated with transition is relationships with peers (Christie and Viner 2005). Studies have proven that adolescent’s wellbeing is influenced by many factors including peers (Spotlight 2012). The majority of participants in this research project emphasised that the “Friendships” theme was beneficial as it creates an understanding of the types of friendships that exist to being a normal part of transition. However, Belinda stressed that if probed about friendships boys can perceive this “as being gay” or a “type of bullying”. Thus, care and sensitivity needs to be taken by SPHE teachers when discussing certain themes. Blaber and Glazebrook (2007) believe that adolescents can benefit from mentoring in terms of programmes and building relationships as a key to improving relationships with peers. A Guidance Counsellors role involves mentoring students (IGC 2008). This could prove beneficial in overcoming such issues as the New Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme will include Guidance Education as a core area (NCCA 2016).
5.3 Recognition of the personal, social and health needs of male adolescents

Findings of this research study indicate the subthemes of Emotional Health, Communication Skills and Personal Safety as core needs that were highlighted by the majority of participants. Hence, they are beneficial themes that aid in their development. Peter and Ella’s opinions converged in stating that boys that are generally feeling ok are good to express and talk about feelings in the theme “Emotional Health”. They also reiterated those that are generally not feeling ok are less likely to express their emotions. This corroborates with McEvoy and Richardson (2004) who suggest that males are likely to hold back on expressing their emotions. Ainley et al. (2006) claim that emotional issues such as stress, anxiety and depression challenge student’s wellbeing. Additionally, research carried out in Ireland has found that teenagers demonstrate high levels of stress yet supports are not available to them (Illback et al. 2010). Conversely, there was divergence amongst one participant (Anne) in relation to her surprise on how boys were willing to open up and discuss their feelings as she “hadn’t expected them to do so”. At the same time, Belinda’s opinion differed as she felt that boys do tend to open up. However, she felt that they need time, ground rules and a little coaxing. She also suggested the need to introduce “games” whilst Ella recommended using “activities” in the classroom when speaking about emotional health issues. These suggestions are beneficial in highlighting the need to make the curriculum more participatory for students.

Socially, it was the general consensus of participants that boys need to learn to communicate more effectively with each other. Anne highlighted that one of the benefits of exploring the “Communication Skills” theme is that it helps male students to learn to assert themselves as well as communicate effectively. Literature suggests that adolescents that have a good level of assertiveness skills are less likely to drink, smoke or use illegal drugs (DES 1994). However, there was divergence where Peter felt that social media has an impact on how boys behave socially. He stressed that there is social pressure for boys to remain “current and happy all the time”.

Subsequently, under the subtheme “Physical Health” all teachers at some point in the interview schedule noted that the school has a huge reputation for sport. However, three participants (i.e Peter, Joe and Ella) emphasised that the school’s vending machine is a contributor to promoting unhealthy habits amongst male students. Surprisingly, Chambers et al. (2008) reiterates that exploring health promotion within SPHE allows students to
understand the importance of eating healthily. They also state that it informs them about looking after their bodies as well as exercising. Nevertheless, this study found that vending machines that serve unhealthy food are available within the school. To overcome this, Lahiff (2006) suggests that a well-implemented SPHE programme has the ability to “provide a framework that can make the school environment more health promoting” (p.5). Another important issue highlighted by Ella and Belinda in this study was the divide between those involved in sport (as they had nutritional information given to them by coaches) whereas the boys that were not into sport basically lacked knowledge on healthy eating habits. Therefore, as stressed by Naidoo and Wills (2016) a Whole School Approach should be taken by schools to promote healthy eating. They stress that this should take into account the ethos, management structure, organization, physical environment and taught curriculum of the school.

5.4 Gaps in male students’ knowledge within key areas of the SPHE curriculum

One of the most significant findings in this study is how participants felt that male students lacked knowledge within significant themes discussed within the SPHE curriculum. The subthemes Relationships and Sexuality, Substance Abuse and Personal Safety were the predominant themes highlighted by participants. Within the “Relationships and Sexuality” subtheme, Ella and Tanya felt that female teachers may feel uncomfortable teaching about Relationships and Sexuality to male students. Interestingly, previous research findings highlights that 71% of teachers felt uncomfortable teaching Religious and Sexual Education (RSE) to students (Maycock et al. 2007). Yet contrary to this, extensive literature has proven that the female ratio of teaching SPHE is higher for females then males (Mannix-McNamara et al. 2012). Their study found that women have more interest in teaching the subject than their male colleagues. In contrast to Ella and Tanya, there was convergence amongst Anne and Joe in highlighting that there is a cross curricular element (taught in conjunction with Science) with this theme. Conversely, there was divergence where Belinda felt strongly that certain strands discussed under the “Relationships and Sexuality” theme are barely covered and skimmed over by SPHE teachers. Nonetheless, it has been found that there has been lower implementation of RSE into SPHE in all-boys’ schools (Geary and Mannix McNamara 2003).

In Ireland, according to The Global Drug Survey (2014) males are 1.5 times more likely to use illegal drugs compared to girls. In this study the bulk of teachers recognised that male
students’ number one drug of choice was drinking alcohol. Alarmingly, Anne and Belinda both agreed that a lot of male students did not view alcohol as being a drug or having any effect on their lives. However, Corey et al. (2010) emphasises that the pressure to drink alcohol is often linked with the adolescent stage of development. Furthermore, as stressed by Ella and Peter home influences can have an effect on whether boys dabble in substance misuse. Christensen (2010) states that by understanding adolescents nested model of development (microsystem), this provides an insight into the factors that play a role in their development. In other words if alcohol is consumed in the home environment then adolescents are likely to mirror what they see at home. Additionally, Anne felt that a lot of boys are influenced by their peers and “jump on the bandwagon” so to speak when doing so.

Where there was divergence, Peter expressed that weed and harder drugs as a topic that boys want to explore. He also felt that this could be down to their influences at home and what they are exposed to. Research has shown that Irish schoolchildren are amongst the highest cocaine and cannabis users in the European Union (Global Drug Survey 2014). Additionally, recent reports indicate that there is an unambiguous connection between poor mental health and the use of addictive substances (The National Bureau of Economic Research 2017). To effectively make this theme more engaging for students the drugs and alcohol module needs to be incorporated fully into the national curriculum and like the “Relationships and Sexuality” module (as recognised by Anne and Joe) addressed in other subjects (Fletcher et al. 2010). Moreover, Van Hout et al. (2012) argue that in Ireland there needs to be “Shared Responsibility” (p.337) amongst teachers when teaching the “Substance Use” component of the SPHE module. They stressed the need for adequate teacher training and providing them with enhanced information about the subject.

Subsequently, the findings of this study emphasise the issue of “Personal Safety” as an additional area where the majority of participants felt that male students lack knowledge. Anne and Belinda’s perceptions converged in that they both highlighted the need for male students to be careful whilst online. Pollak and Humphreys (2015) recent report draws attention to the fact that the percentage for cyber bullying has now increased from 4% to 13% and occurs most commonly on social network sites. Additionally, this type of bullying is more prevalent among 15-16 year olds (24%) and among boys (19%) (Dinh and O’Neill 2011). The researcher is aware that cyber bullying is only listed under the Anti-Bullying policy in this school. Yet, as O’Neill et al. (2011) emphasise there is need to update school policies and the continual professional development of teachers. Moreover, they stress the
need to invest in new resources to support the implementation of the personal safety aspects of the Social Personal Health Education curriculum.

5.5 School's approach to protecting the mental health and wellbeing of male adolescents

There was convergence in the findings of this study as to how teachers felt that the school positively promotes the mental health and wellbeing of its students. The presence of Student Support Networks, Student-Teacher relationships and being involved School Initiatives were highlighted by participants as contributing to protecting the mental health and wellbeing of male students. Interestingly, under the subtheme Student Support Networks Peter, Anne and Belinda emphasised the Guidance Counsellor and Chaplain as vital support networks that aid in protecting male students mental health and wellbeing. Since 2000, the DES (2000) has stressed that teachers and the guidance personnel need to work together in order to ensure the effective running of the SPHE programme. However, even though guidance activities are introduced at Junior Cycle level through SPHE it has been argued that its provision has been limited (Hearne et. al 2016) and more needs to be done in consolidating it to become a Whole School Approach. Currently, the DES (2015) has stated that under the new Framework for Junior Cycle the Guidance Counsellor will carry on playing an exclusive role in contributing to the promotion of students’ wellbeing. They also accentuate that they will play a central role in the planning and implementation of the Wellbeing module. Yet, it will remain to be seen how valuable their role proves to be in contributing to its effective implementation. Interestingly, emerging from participant interviews Belinda, Peter, Tanya and Anne stressed that at Junior Cycle students knowledge of the role of the Guidance Counsellor is limited enough. There was convergence in that Belinda and Ella felt students associated guidance with career guidance. However, the Guidance Counsellor in this particular school teaches SPHE to first year students in order to get to know them. But as Anne explained they can often get confused as they think “this is just the SPHE teacher”. It was suggested by Belinda and Peter that introducing presentations and an assembly whereby the Guidance Counsellor would discuss their role to first year students would be of great benefit to students understanding such role.

Morrison and Kirby (2010) argue that the presence of positive factors for students such as positive relationships with teachers’ aid in influencing young people’s psychological wellbeing. This concurs to the DES (2013 p.10) report on highlighting that positive “student-teacher relationships” as positive factors that aid in protecting the mental health and
wellbeing of students. The findings of this study highlight that the majority of teachers felt that a positive student-teacher relationship existed in the school. Ella felt strongly that there is a “great relationship” between students and teachers within the school. She felt like Anne that this maybe to do with the fact that the whole ethos of the school is built around “Respect”. One of the greatest influential aspects and contributors to positive youth development is the positive relationship between adolescent students and teachers (Budnick and Tirri 2014). The relationship is also essential for health promoting school initiatives (Frey et al. 2011, Perra et al. 2012). However, studies have shown that teachers feel they lack skills and feel that they are not prepared enough to effectively tackle all the mental health needs of their students (Mazzer and Rickwood 2015).

Literature suggests that schools are ideal organizations to expand their focus the promotion of wellbeing of its students (Peterson 2006). Essentially, the school is involved in many initiatives both inside and outside school to promote the mental health and wellbeing of its male students as found in this study. Anne mentioned major initiatives such as ‘Play it Forward’ (a Limerick initiative promoting kindness) and “Anti-Bullying Week” as ways the school promotes positive mental health and wellbeing. Contrary to Anne, on the one hand Ella emphasised the schools massive reputation for sport as being an essential contributor to promoting the physical mental health and wellbeing of students. On the other hand Tanya stressed that the majority of boys viewed sporting heroes as major influences in their lives. She mentioned that the class had “discussed the topic around the time of Axel Foley’s death” as a lot of boys played rugby in the school. Conversely, there as was divergence as Belinda felt that the school could do more in terms of promoting the mental health and wellbeing of male students. Primarily, she suggested that the “Amber Flag” initiative would be beneficial as it promotes positive mental health within schools, clubs and organisations. Barry (2009) stresses that when mental health promotion programmes in schools are implemented effectively this in turn can create long-term emotional, social and academic benefits for young people. Similarly, Clarke and Barry (2010) accentuate that programmes which adopt a Whole School Approach are particularly likely to lead to positive mental health, social and educational outcomes. Therefore, as schools play a vital role in fostering the wellbeing of young people (Weare 2010), under the new Framework for Junior Cycle one of the areas students will engage in is My Mental Health (NCCA 2016).
5.6 Key barriers to SPHE promotion within an all male school

A key finding in this study highlights three reasons as to why participants felt the current aims of the SPHE curriculum have not entirely been met. Mainly, time allocation to the subject, status of the subject and the fact that there is no assessment within the curriculum were emphasised as key barriers that affect promoting the curriculum further. In relation to the time allocation subtheme, Anne and Peter felt strongly that with one forty minute period each week not much could be achieved in terms of meeting all the aims of the SPHE curriculum. Nic Gabhainn et al.’s (2007) research identified SPHE as suffering from timetabling pressures. They highlighted that this results in insufficient time being allocated to the subject. A possible explanation for this is that it is not an examinable subject, therefore maybe not viewed as important as other subjects within the school. However, under the new Framework for Junior Cycle education currently being rolled out in schools since September 2017 extra timetabled hours (300 increasing to 400 by 2020) will be allocated to the Wellbeing programme. SPHE is included in this as it is one of the four core areas that will be covered (NCCA 2016). Interestingly, each school will be given the flexibility to plan their own Wellbeing programme.

The status subtheme placed on SPHE was another significant finding in this research study. Joe viewed SPHE as a “bit of a cinderella subject” and felt strongly that its status will not change. This converged with Belinda’s view who felt that sometimes it can be considered as a “doss class”. Nic Gabhainn et al.’s (2007) research also highlighted that SPHE does lack status in schools therefore suffers in comparison to examinable subjects. This mirrors Gleeson and Ó Donnabháin’s (2009) research who found SPHE subject that endures low status within the Irish Post-Primary Education system. Literature suggests that the potential benefits of SPHE are only likely to be fully realised when it is “fully integrated into a whole-school approach to student support, an approach which is strengthened by a positive school climate” (Lahiff 2006, p.4). However, disparate to Joe and Belinda’s views Anne and Ella compared the status of SPHE to different schools that they had taught the curriculum in. Anne for example made comparisons to her previous school (all girls) that she worked in for seventeen years. She emphasised that it had “a strong SPHE department” and that it fit in with the ethos of the school where “SPHE was valued”. Most importantly she highlighted that the school received a “very good report” on a SPHE inspection. Similarly, Ella made the comparison with her previous school in England where SPHE is equivalent to their PSHE curriculum. She commented that SPHE (PSHE) in the United Kingdom “was actually
treated better than it was here” in Ireland. Therefore, it could be argued that it depends on the ethos of the school and whether they place great emphasis and value on the SPHE curriculum. Yet again, as stated previous seeing the complete benefits of SPHE curriculum involves using a Whole School Approach. The Framework for the new Junior Cycle foresees engaging students with learning related to wellbeing through the “school culture and students’ experience on the implementation of related whole school policies (DES 2015, p.23). Particularly, Guidance is also a whole school activity. Each school should develop collaboratively a school Guidance Plan as a means of supporting the needs of its students (NCGE 2012). Additionally, the new Framework for Junior Cycle education stresses the importance of using a Whole School Approach when implementing the new Wellbeing programme into post-primary schools (NCCA 2017).

Following on from this, the whole area of assessment within SPHE emerged as a subtheme in this study. Tanya, Joe and Peter’s opinions converged as they felt that it would not be a greater benefit to students if it were assessed. Belinda also felt that “life skills are about experiencing them”. However, there was divergence as Anne felt boys that are studious find it a waste of a class. She stated that if it were to be assessed “that maybe they would pay more heed to it or invest in it a little bit more” in the subject. Ella also accentuated that if a test was introduced then this would contribute to enhancing students life skills “similar to the driver theory test”. One of the main roles of a Guidance Counsellor includes assessing for aptitudes (IGC 2008) and therefore can make a positive contribution with their involvement in implementing the new Wellbeing programme. Basically, if greater emphasis is placed on upping the status of SPHE within schools then this can have huge repercussions for protecting all aspects of students’ development.

5.7 Conclusion

Apparent from teacher perceptions on the benefits of teaching the SPHE curriculum to male students, the results of this research project indicate that the themes explored within the SPHE curriculum are beneficial. This is so as it aids in developing students awareness on the many risk factors associated with the adolescent stage of development. It also highlights the protective factors that safeguard their mental health and wellbeing. Literature has revealed that any unmet wellbeing and mental health needs during adolescence can cause emerging and more severe mental health difficulties in adulthood (McDougall 2011). Since 2000, the
DES (2000) highlighted that in order for the SPHE programme at Junior Cycle to run effectively there should be planned communication and collaboration between those teaching SPHE and the guidance personnel. The findings from this research study signify that in order for this to be achieved teacher training in SPHE is significant and may need to become compulsory. Additionally, resources used within the curriculum need to be enhanced in order to aid in making the challenges of transition from primary to post-primary run smoother for male students. This will assist in filling the gaps in male students’ knowledge within key themes of the programme. Furthermore, the programme may need to be made more participatory in order to develop the life skills of male students that in turn will help them when progressing from post-primary to higher education or entry into the workforce. As well, if greater emphasis is placed on making it more participatory than this will aid in overcoming the main personal, social and health needs of male students. Additionally, emerging from participant interviews it became evident that the school has in place a number of positive initiatives that support and protect the mental health and well being of its students. There is also an excellent student-teacher relationship built up, yet more could be done in terms of the school’s involvement in initiatives. However, although the general consensus amongst participants was that the SPHE programme is valuable, the status placed on SPHE within the school also may hinder its promotion. As a result, insufficient time is given to the subject (Nic Gabhainn et al. 2007).

The NCCA (2017) highlights that under the new Framework for Junior Cycle education a Whole School Approach is essential in taking into account the culture of the school, relationships, policy and planning and the curriculum when implementing the new Wellbeing programme into post-primary schools. Within the new Framework for Junior Cycle the Guidance Counsellor will carry on playing a distinctive role in contributing to the promotion of students’ wellbeing (DES 2015). They will also play a vital role in implementing the Wellbeing programme (NCCA 2017). As the SPHE programme introduces students to guidance associated activities (Hearne et. al 2016) the findings from this study may prove beneficial to the Guidance Service when implementing such programme.
CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 6
6.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings and conclusions within the context of the aims and objectives of this research study. Firstly, an overview of the main findings of the study will be highlighted. The strengths and limitations of the study will be considered. Recommendations for future policy, practice and future research will be emphasized. Finally, the researchers reflexivity in terms of personal learning involved in the process will be explored.

6.1 Overview of Findings

This study had the following objective: To explore the perceived benefits of SPHE (from a teachers’ perspective) for Junior Cycle male students and its implications for the Guidance Counselling Service. The methodology involved using a qualitative (interpretive) study design frame (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The researcher aspired to co-construct meaning through informal discussions with participants (Collis and Hussey 2003). This was based on teachers’ experiences of teaching the ten themes covered in the SPHE programme. The goal was to gain insight into how they felt SPHE curriculum was beneficial in terms of contributing to promoting the mental health and wellbeing of male students. Therefore, a phenomenological approach was undertaken to signify perceptions, feelings, and lived experiences of the participants in this study. It is hoped knowledge gained from this research will influence the Guidance Counselling Service when implementing the new Wellbeing Programme into Post-Primary Education.

The findings highlighted that overall the SPHE curriculum is beneficial in terms of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of male students. However, it was stressed by participants in this study that more could be done to enhance the whole curriculum. The level of teacher training was a significant theme that emerged in this research study. Training differed amongst participants as they stressed the need for more training. They also emphasized the need for enhancement of resources within the entire curriculum. The challenges that male students face in transitioning from primary to post-primary education was also a notable feature of this study. SPHE teachers emphasized how beneficial the themes “Belonging and Integrating”, “Self-Management” and “Friendships” were in aiding in
the move to post-primary. Also, they highlighted the areas that need improvement. Participant perceptions when questioned in relation to the benefits of identifying the principal personal, social and health needs of male students were similar. Mainly, the subthemes “Emotional Health”, “Communication Skills” and “Physical Health” emerged as the predominant needs linked to male students. Critically, major gaps were highlighted by SPHE teachers in male students’ knowledge on key themes within the curriculum. Principally, these were highlighted by SPHE teachers under the subthemes of “Relationships and Sexuality”, “Substance Abuse” and “Personal Safety”. Subsequently, positive factors within and outside the school are contributors to safeguarding the wellbeing of male students. In this study, Student Support Teams, Student-Teacher Relationships and the Initiatives in which the school is involved in were the most important subthemes emphasized by SPHE teachers. However, key barriers for promoting SPHE further within the school became apparent. The issues of time allocation to the subject (one forty minute class per week) were emphasised. In addition, the status of the subject within the school and the fact that it is not assessed were highlighted as major obstacles hindering its promotion further.

6.2 Strengths of Study

Several research studies have been undertaken exploring the implementation of SPHE from different viewpoints (Morgan 2000, Geary et al. 2003, Maycock et al. 2007, O’Higgins et al. 2013). Nevertheless, a fundamental strength of this study was that the researcher found a gap that exits in relation to teachers’ perspectives on the perceived benefits of teaching SPHE to male students at Junior Cycle in post-primary education. Therefore, the process of carrying out the research proved beneficial in terms of the data that emerged from the semi-structured interviews with SPHE teachers. The researcher chose a Thematic Approach within the interpretive qualitative paradigm when analysing the data in this research project. To achieve this, the methodology of this study closely followed Braun and Clarke (2006) 6 step model. This aided in offering a flexible and thorough, “yet multifaceted version of data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.4) from participant interviews. The strength of the qualitative research method allowed for the subjective interpretation of the data collected from SPHE teacher interviews. The data collected made it possible for the researcher to code and identify themes and patterns (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). In this study six main themes emerged and subthemes ensued. Essentially, the strengths of the findings in this research study highlighted that many themes within the SPHE curriculum that are beneficial to male students’ mental health and wellbeing. It also pinpointed specific areas within the curriculum that need added
improvements. It is hoped that the findings from this research study will inform the Guidance Service with regard policy and practice when incorporating Wellbeing into the Junior Cycle curriculum.

6.3 Limitations of Study

A limitation of this study was that six SPHE teachers participated in semi-structured interviews in this research project. Therefore, this highlighted only a small variety to the study (Cohen et al. 2013). A broader sample of SPHE teachers could have brandished significant results. Also, this study highlighted the narratives of teachers teaching the SPHE curriculum in a post-primary setting. It must be stated that the results may not reflect all SPHE teachers’ perceptions. Subsequently, another limitation of this study was that the researcher was responsible for teaching SPHE to first year classes. Therefore, in order to reduce the possibility of bias the researcher chose to interview SPHE teachers. Furthermore, the researcher maintained rigor by following the Interview Schedule and by asking the same set questions to each participant through the interview process. The Interview Schedule acted as “a reminder of what is intended to be covered” (Thomas 2013, p.198). A further limitation of this study was that it focused on the perceived benefits of teaching the SPHE curriculum to male students only. As female students were not taken into account, the benefits and challenges could reflect differing results if a study were to consider both genders. In addition, the emerging needs were specific to male students. The Guidance Counsellor is responsible for attending to the individual needs of each individual student both male and female in post-primary education.

6.4 Recommendations

Emerging from the findings of this research study are various recommendations with regard policy, practice and future research. These are highlighted as follows:

6.4.1 For Policy:

- There is a major need for post-primary schools to implement a consistent level of teacher training for teaching the SPHE curriculum. If there were uniformity in training, this will result in teachers feeling more competent and confident in teaching the curriculum at Junior Cycle level.

- Enhancing the resources for SPHE teachers teaching the curriculum is a further stipulation needed in post-primary schools. By doing so, this may improve teachers’
enthusiasm in teaching the programme. Also, as Peter emphasised in his interview ‘students love real facts and real information’ so therefore improving resources may improve students’ interest in the programme. Furthermore, it will aid in filling in the gaps in students’ knowledge within certain themes taught in SPHE.

- As a top priority, schools need to make the SPHE curriculum more participatory for its students. Belinda in her interview suggested introducing journaling, mindfulness, self-reflection, voluntary work as well as consolidating a community element for students to become involved in. Ella stressed the need to bring in more guest speakers and hold demonstrations (i.e highlighting the levels of sugars in certain foods). This would have a greater impact on student learning and understanding within certain themes. As a result, students will develop their life skills further when progressing onto further education or the world of work. The role of the Guidance Counsellor includes “facilitating the educational and career/ life choices” (IGC 2008, p.8) of its students.

- There needs to be a continuing Whole School Approach within schools in protecting and promoting the mental health and wellbeing of its students. The Whole School Guidance Plan is recognized as an intervention that addresses the emotional health and wellbeing of young people (NEPS 2013). The involvement of the Guidance Counsellor within the Student Support Team is vital as they are responsible for the personal and social needs of each individual student.

6.4.2 For Practice:

- A Guidance Counsellor’s role involves liaising with staff and outside agencies. As highlighted in this study, continual participation in Initiatives within and outside of school is essential. This should be considered by schools as ways to effectively implement the new Wellbeing Programme at Junior Cycle level.

- The role of the Guidance Counsellor includes helping individuals “adapt to and manage change and transition” (IGC 2008, p.8). The challenge that students face when transitioning from primary to post-primary was evident in this study. The Guidance Counsellor plays a significant role in supporting and listening to students issues. By introducing effective strategies this will aid in making the transition from primary to post-primary somewhat easier for students.

- Significant emphasis should be placed on continuing to build positive student-teacher relationships. The Guidance Counsellors non-judgemental, empathetic and congruent
persona should contribute to building up a greater rapport with students. As a result, students will freely use the service and the Guidance Counsellor will be able to pinpoint each individual student's needs and act in accordance with best practice.

6.4.3 For Future Research:

- An additional study exploring SPHE teachers’ perceptions on teaching SPHE in an all girls’ school would prove beneficial. This would be beneficial in terms of identifying specific needs and gaps in knowledge. It would also highlight what is needed to promote and protect the mental health and wellbeing of female students.
- A further study examining teacher perceptions on teaching the new Wellbeing Programme would be of utmost importance in the future.

6.5 Reflexivity in Relation to Personal Learning

McLeod (1999 p.8) emphasises “practitioner research is research carried out by practitioners for the purpose of advancing their own practice”. The findings of this research study have been valuable in heightening the researcher’s awareness and understanding of identifying the SPHE themes that protect the mental health and wellbeing of male students. It has also offered an insight into areas within the curriculum that need improving. Willig (2008) states that personal reflexivity involves reflecting upon ways in which our “own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments and wider aims in life have shaped the research” (p.10). This entails thinking about how the research process may have affected and possibly changed the researcher. At present, the researcher is a practising Guidance Counsellor and teaches SPHE at Junior Cycle level. The findings of this research study have aided in identifying the key gaps that exist in making the SPHE curriculum more successful. Moreover, it has facilitated the researcher in becoming more mindful as a practising Guidance Counsellor of the challenges that students face throughout their post-primary education. A Guidance Counsellor’s role includes catering to the individual needs of each individual student. Therefore, the personal learning gained from this research experience will aid the researcher in implementing the new Wellbeing Programme at Junior Cycle level.

6.6 Conclusion

Fundamentally, this study has highlighted that the SPHE curriculum has proven beneficial in terms of protecting the mental health and wellbeing of male students. However, specific upgrades are needed to augment the SPHE curriculum in the future. Mainly, consistency in
the level of teacher training, making the programme more participatory and a continued Whole School Approach are required to ensure its effectiveness. This may aid in upping the status of the programme as a whole. Recommendations have been highlighted in terms of future policy, practice and research for the SPHE programme as well as within the Guidance Counselling Service. Currently, SPHE is one of the four core areas covering the Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme. Additionally, at Junior Cycle level, Guidance is emphasized as supporting “learning about wellbeing and learning for wellbeing” (NCCA 2017, p.46). It is also recognised that guidance counsellors are one of the main pillars for developing the Wellbeing Programme in schools (NCCA 2017). Therefore, continual interaction and whole school involvement will only improve the effectiveness of the programme in the future. Overall, the personal learning gained from this research experience will contribute to the effective implementation of the new Wellbeing Programme at Junior Cycle level.
Reference List


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World Health Organisation (2007) *Child and Adolescent Mental Health Policy and Plans*, [online], available:  


UIRE BRONFENBRENNER’S (1917-2005): ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM’S THEORY

Adapted from Rhodes, M. (2013) *Theories of child development*
APPENDIX B
Dear Principal,

I am currently a student on the Masters in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education at the University of Limerick under the supervision of Tom Geary and Dr. Lucy Hearne. As part of my studies it is a requirement to complete a research project on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research, I aim to explore the perceived benefits of SPHE from a teacher’s perspective for male students at Junior Cycle. The aim of my research is to explore SPHE teachers’ narratives about contributing to the mental health and well-being of its male students. In order to gather this information I would like to conduct interviews with SPHE teachers/ key participants of Junior Cycle students. Therefore, I would like your permission to access ten SPHE teachers/key participants to take part in this research study. Interviews will be audio digital recorded and will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. The interviews will be held in a private location in the school building at the convenience of teacher availability.
All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after analysis according to UL guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis. The results of the research will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. The school’s name and the name of individual participants will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved.

If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or contact me or my supervisor:

**Researcher:**
Elizabeth Doyle
UL email address: 9947477@studentmail.ul.ie

**Supervisor:**
Tom Geary
UL email address: tom.geary@ul.ie
Phone Number: (085) 7786610

Thank you for considering this request.

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Code number: 2017_04_04). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

**Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee**
EHS Faculty Office
University of Limerick
Tel No: (061) 234101
Email: ehs@staffmail.ul.ie
APPENDIX C
Principal Consent Form

Date: 1st May 2017

EHS Rec No: 2017_04_04 EHS

Research Title: An exploratory study of the perceived benefits of SPHE (from a teacher’s perspective) for Junior Cycle male students and its implications for the Guidance Counselling Service.

I have read the project Information Sheet and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the school will not be revealed in the reporting of this research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of participants and respect their contribution are:

1. Participation is entirely voluntary.

2. Participants are free to withdraw at any time prior to the data analysis stage and any contribution made will be subsequently destroyed.

3. The interviews will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the research and the supervisor. Excerpts from the interviews may be part of the final research dissertation but under no circumstances will names or any identifying characteristics be included in the report.

I hereby give my consent for Elizabeth Doyle to carry out this research in the school.

Signature: ________________________________
Printed Name: ______________________________________
Signature of Researcher: ______________________________
Date: ______________________________________________

Thank you for considering this request.
APPENDIX D
Interview Schedule
Length of Interview: Approximately 60 minutes to complete

Date: 12\(^{th}\) May 2017

EHS Rec No: 2017_04_04 EHS

Introduction Questions:

- How many years have you been teaching SPHE to Junior Cycle students?
- What groups have you taught in that time?
- How did you get involved in teaching SPHE?
- What do you feel was your personal motivation for teaching SPHE?
- What pre-service training have you attended for training in SPHE?
- Do you feel you got adequate training in SPHE?
- How did your school assist in preparing you to teach SPHE?

Questions on the ten main themes explored in SPHE at Junior Cycle:

- From your perspective, do you think that the theme “Belonging and Integrating” really helps first year students?
• How has the theme “Self-management” facilitated male students planning, preparation and teamwork skills?
• In your opinion, in what ways have the theme “Communication skills” contributed to developing listening and self-expression skills of students?
• How beneficial has “Physical Health” been in emphasising the importance of a balanced diet and its implications for general health and well-being for male students?
• What are the benefits of exploring “Friendships” as a theme in SPHE?
• What do you perceive as the benefit of the “Relationships and Sexuality” theme to male adolescent development?
• What is your experience of male students talking about their feelings in the theme “Emotional health”.
• How has the theme “Influences and decisions” aided in heightening male students awareness of key influences in their lives?
• From your perspective, what areas of “Substance Abuse” are male students most interested in learning about and why?
• What do you think have been the benefits of teaching students about their own “Personal Safety”?
• From your experience, do you feel that some themes are more beneficial than others for male adolescent students?

Concluding Questions:

• The main aims of SPHE are: to enable students to develop skills for self-fulfilment and living in communities, to promote self-esteem and self-confidence, to enable students to develop a framework for responsible decision-making, to provide opportunities for reflection and discussion and to promote physical, mental and emotional health and well-being. Do you think the current programme meets these aims?
• What parts of SPHE do you feel students enjoy the most?
• What part of the SPHE curriculum do you think students enjoy the least?
• What do you think are the main social and personal and health needs of male students?
• The methodology of teaching SPHE involves experiential and group work learning. In your view, is the methodology a benefit to students?
• In what ways have you integrated experiential and group work into your teaching of SPHE to male students?
• SPHE is not an assessed subject. Would it be of greater benefit to male students if it were assessed? Why?
• In September 2017 the New Framework for Junior Cycle will be implemented in post-primary schools. Well-being will become a core principle that will underpin Junior Cycle education. How beneficial do you think well-being will be to male students?
• How do you feel the school positively promotes the mental health and well-being of male students?
• In your experience who do students approach in the school if they have issues or problems?
• In your opinion, what do you think is students’ understanding of the role of the Guidance Counsellor at Junior Cycle within the school?
• From your experience, do you think there is a Whole School approach toward protecting the personal and social needs of male students?
Subject Information Letter (Volunteer Participant)

EHSREC no: 2017_04_04 EHS

Date: 2nd May 2017

Research title: An exploratory study of the perceived benefits of SPHE (from a teacher’s perspective) for Junior Cycle male students and its implications for the Guidance Counselling Service.

Dear Teacher/Key informant,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education at the University of Limerick under the supervision on Tom Geary and Dr. Lucy Hearne. As part of my studies I have to complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research, I aim to explore the perceived benefits of SPHE from a teacher’s perspective for male students at Junior Cycle. The aim of my research is to explore SPHE teachers'/key informant’s narratives about contributing to the mental health and well-being of its male students. In order to gather information on the topic I would appreciate if you would agree to
participate in a face-to-face audio-taped interview. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes and be held in a confidential location agreeable to you.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after the analysis process. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that your name will not be used in the reporting of the research. If you have any queries or require further any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

**Researcher:**
Elizabeth Doyle
UL email address: 9947477@studentmail.ul.ie

**Supervisor:**
Tom Geary
UL email address: tom.geary@ul.ie
Phone Number: (085) 7786610

**Principal Investigator:**
Dr. Lucy Hearne
Email: lucy.hearne@ul.ie
Phone Number: 202931

Thank you for considering this request.
Elizabeth Doyle.

Research Ethics Committee (Code number: 2017_04_04). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

**Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee**

EHS Faculty Office

University of Limerick

Tel No: (061) 234101

Email: ehs@staffmail.ul.ie
Consent Form (Volunteer Participant)

EHS REC no: 2017_04_04 EHS

Research title: An exploratory study of the perceived benefits of SPHE (from a teacher’s perspective) for Junior Cycle male students and its implications for the Guidance Counselling Service.

• I understand what this research project is about, and what the results will be used for.

• I am fully aware of the procedures and of the risks and the benefits of the study.

• I am fully aware that the recording of the interview and the data generated from it will be kept confidential.

• I am aware that my identity will remain anonymous.

• I know that my participation in the research study is voluntary and I can withdraw my involvement at any time prior to the data analysis stage.

I hereby agree to take part in this study:

Signature: ___________________________________________

Printed name: _______________________________________

Signature of Researcher: _____________________________

Date: _____________________________________________

Thank you for considering this request.
APPENDIX G
Table 1: Phases of Thematic Analysis Phase Description of the process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarising yourself with your data:</td>
<td>Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and rereading the data, noting down initial ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes:</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes:</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing themes:</td>
<td>Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic „map” of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Defining and naming themes:</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Producing the report:</td>
<td>The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling, extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Braun and Clarke 2006, p.35)