Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Malahide Community School
Malahide, County Dublin
Roll number: 91325R

Date of inspection: 15 October 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION (SPHE)

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Malahide Community School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Social, Personal and Health Education (including Relationships and Sexuality Education in senior cycle) and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over three days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal, both deputy principals and subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Malahide Community School currently caters for 671 male and 557 female students. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is very well provided for as a curriculum subject and it benefits from strong whole-school support. Each junior-cycle class is timetabled for SPHE in line with the requirements of circular letter M11/03.

The current relationships and sexuality education (RSE) programme in senior cycle is not discrete or stand-alone. Elements of the RSE programme are being delivered in Transition Year (TY) within the Life Skills programme and within Religious Education classes in fifth year while the remainder is delivered by external speakers in sixth year. Evidence gathered during the course of the evaluation indicated that senior students were not aware that any RSE was delivered in fifth year. This may be due to their lack of understanding regarding the full extent of the RSE programme. It is important that all senior-cycle students be made aware from the outset of the different aspects of the RSE programme so as to dispel any misconceptions that they may have in this regard. In addition, it is recommended that all information pertaining to RSE planning should now be included in the SPHE subject department plan so that it is very clear that a distinct RSE programme is being delivered. The school might also find it useful to refer to the TRUST (Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching) resource for teaching RSE in senior cycle.

External speakers include representatives of The Rape Crisis Centre, Accord, The Irish Family Planning Clinic and the Dublin Aids Alliance. Information regarding all such talks is sent to parents in advance, in line with good practice. The school reports that the various agencies conduct appropriate evaluations of their input and that it is informed of any issues that arise. It is recommended that the school conducts its own evaluations by involving students in reviewing the presentations made. Records of the in-school evaluations and any issues that arise should then be
included in the SPHE plan. The school does not yet have its own written policy regarding the use of visiting speakers. This is recommended. The school reports that, in practice, the teacher leaves the room during these external inputs but remains outside on the corridor so that the speakers and the students are within visual and aural range at all times. The school is very aware of the requirements of Circular Letter 0023/2010 Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) & Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE): Best Practice Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools. The board of management is advised to review the current arrangement in order to ensure adequate supervision of the students at all times.

The SPHE department comprises twenty tutors who each deliver SPHE to one class group. In the main, this system is currently working well in this school. Teachers met with during the evaluation were clearly committed and dedicated to this subject. The school is advised to keep the deployment arrangements under constant review in order to ensure that all teachers are consistently motivated and enthusiastic about the subject. Every effort is made to assign teachers to their class groups for the three-year junior cycle and into senior cycle. Most of the current team are experienced teachers of SPHE having taught it for one or two years. This is good.

Management is very supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development. There has been significant engagement with the SPHE support service to enhance the professional competencies of SPHE teachers. Most of the current team of teachers of SPHE have attended the Introductory course and some the Continuation and RSE courses delivered by the SPHE support service. This is very good as it ensures that there is an incremental approach taken to the development of teachers’ skills.

All teachers are timetabled to teach SPHE in rooms which facilitate the inclusion in lessons of active participative strategies such as group work. This supports the use of the learning methodologies advocated in the syllabus for the successful delivery of the subject. Very good efforts have been made by a small number of SPHE teachers to ensure that there are appropriate displays of SPHE materials in their classrooms. These are very useful for maximising the potential of the students’ immediate learning environment to stimulate and retain their interest in issues and topics relevant to the subject. The acquisition of displays for remaining classrooms that are used for the delivery of SPHE lessons is recommended.

There is a co-ordinated approach to the acquisition of SPHE resources in this school. All resources are stored in a room which is accessible to teachers. Many of the resources have been audited and catalogued and this information has been included in the SPHE plan. It is recommended that this information be updated regularly.

The school is clearly committed to the promotion of SPHE in a wide whole-school context. Many systems which support the work of the SPHE teachers are in place. These include the year head and tutor system; weekly care team meetings; a mentoring programme involving TY and first-year students and a friendship week. All of these initiatives are commended.

**Planning and Preparation**

It is very clear that SPHE is a core element of the pastoral care structure in this school. All of the necessary key policies relevant to or supportive of SPHE have been developed. These include the substance use policy and the anti-bullying policy. The RSE policy is currently at draft stage. The school should now progress this policy to ratification following consultation with all the partners in line with Circular Letter 0027/2008.
Co-ordination of the SPHE department is allocated to a teacher as part of the duties attached to a post of responsibility. The co-ordinator, while experienced in teaching the subject, is not currently teaching SPHE. The school should note that this would be the desired practice. The co-ordinator carries out her role conscientiously and is clearly committed to SPHE. Materials have been made available to teachers which support the teaching and learning of SPHE and this is very good. Meetings of the full SPHE team occur at the start of the year and minutes are kept of these meetings. Thereafter, there is much informal contact between teachers within year groups.

Planning documentation was presented on the day of the evaluation and it contained extensive information. However, this should be kept updated and include all relevant planning materials for the SPHE and the RSE programmes. The SPHE programme overview comprises the outline of work suggested by the Department of Education and Skills and the majority of teachers follow this with their class group. All ten modules are covered with all year groups. In order to progress this work, it would be very useful to link each topic to texts, generic resources and assessment modes and to include an estimated timeframe for the completion of each topic. In addition, it is essential that regular reviews of the SPHE programme should be carried out.

In practice, teachers adapt this programme to meet the needs of their individual class groups. Some programmes of work for individual class groups were presented during the course of the evaluation and evidence was presented which indicated that some teachers are also systematically tracking all work covered in lessons. This is very good practice and one which should be adopted by all teachers. It is noteworthy that many teachers have developed resources which have been tailored to suit the individual needs of students. It is recommended that all such resources be compiled and added to those already available.

To build on this very good work, there is a need for the rest of the SPHE teachers to interpret the department plan for each of their class groups by developing individual programmes of work. These programmes should specify the intended learning outcome for each topic and this should be linked to methodologies and resources. Consideration should also be given to expanding the list of assessment modes currently outlined in the subject department plan to ensure that all modes of assessment which are being adopted by teachers are recorded. This will ensure that the many good practices noted in the lessons observed are documented.

In the majority of lessons, individual preparation for lessons observed was very good. This was evident through, for example, the provision of handouts and worksheets which were seamlessly integrated into lessons at appropriate stages.

**Teaching and Learning**

Ten lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation. There was a very high standard of teaching and learning in the majority of these lessons. Most teachers engaged in effective individual planning and preparation for their lessons, which included the prior preparation of resource materials. In some lessons, good practice was observed whereby the aims and objectives were shared with the students and documented on the board for their consideration as part of the learning process. This is optimal practice and should be included in all lessons as it provides a focus and structure for the students.

The content and pace in the majority of the lessons observed was appropriate. Lessons were well structured and were characterised by smooth transitions from one stage to the next. Many
opportunities were provided to students to participate actively in lessons. For instance, in a lesson on ‘Friendship’ opportunities were provided to students to process their learning through discussion and analysis. The level of learning was very good as evidenced by the constructive comments made by many members of the class. In another lesson observed, group work was very effectively managed. Students in this class were engaged in a project on drugs. The students had been very well prepared for this task in a previous lesson and each member of the group was given a clearly defined role. Time was allocated towards the end of the lesson by the teacher who checked in with their learning to date.

In another lesson on communication, role play was used. This is a very good strategy for SPHE lessons. However, in this instance, there was an inappropriate level of teacher involvement when feedback was being taken. It is important that the teacher adopt a facilitative role so that adequate opportunities are provided to all students to express their opinions. This should always be borne in mind.

A wide range of teaching methodologies was observed and many of the strategies are in keeping with those recommended for the delivery of SPHE. These included individual reflection, brainstorming, pair work, small group work, questioning, role play, art work, projects and the completion of worksheets. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) was used in one lesson to outline the task for the current lesson and to display students’ contributions from a previous lesson which ensured that this valuable feedback was not lost. Students were afforded many opportunities to use their initiative and they rose very well to these challenges.

Student attendance was consistently monitored. There was a friendly and caring atmosphere in all classes visited and a positive rapport had been developed between teachers and their students. In all cases, instructions were clear and precise. Students’ participation in the classroom activities was closely monitored by the teacher in the majority of lessons and help and assistance were afforded when necessary. Students’ efforts and contributions were well received and appropriately affirmed. In the main, lessons were very well managed and discipline was very good. All discussions remained focussed on the topic-at-hand. However, in a minority of instances, this was not the case. It should be noted that it is important to maintain a mutually respectful atmosphere in SPHE lessons and if necessary, the class contract should be referred to as a reminder of this. This is recommended.

The quality of learning was very good overall. This was evidenced by the quality of the discussions which took place during lessons, written work including project work, feedback from group work activities and the responses to questions.

**ASSESSMENT**

It is evident that the SPHE department has deliberated on the assessment process for SPHE. A range of assessment strategies is used by teachers to determine students’ progress in lessons. These include teachers’ observations of students’ engagement in pair work, group work, class discussions, questioning, completion of worksheets and responses to tasks. A template has been devised in order to support the process of student reflection and self-evaluation. It is noted that this template is not being used consistently by the SPHE teachers. This may well be due to the differing needs of students. However, it is recommended that the evaluation template be reviewed, adapted as necessary and used consistently by all teachers of SPHE.
In the majority of lessons, students were provided with resources by the teacher. This took the form of handouts or worksheets. In some classes, a system is in place for students to store and file personal materials such as these from SPHE lessons in a folder which is stored by the teacher and distributed to students at the beginning of the lesson. This is very good practice and one which should be observed by all SPHE teachers. Communication with parents is maintained through school reports four times per year and annual parent-teacher meetings as appropriate. School reports include comments to affirm students’ engagement in SPHE.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
- SPHE is very well provided for as a curriculum subject.
- The school is clearly committed to the promotion of SPHE in a wide context and many systems which support the work of SPHE teachers are in place.
- There is a co-ordinator allocated to SPHE.
- Many teachers have tailored resources to suit the individual needs of students.
- Preparation for lessons was, in the main, very good.
- A high standard of teaching and learning was observed in the majority of lessons.
- A wide range of very good teaching methodologies was observed.
- There was a friendly and caring atmosphere in all lessons visited.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
- The board of management is advised to review the procedures regarding the supervision of students during presentations made by visiting speakers.
- All information pertaining to the RSE programme should now be documented in the SPHE plan.
- The school should now progress the RSE policy to ratification in line with Circular Letter 0027/2008.
- All teachers should interpret the department plan by developing individual schemes of work.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of SPHE and with the principal and both deputy principals at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management has noted the positive findings and recommendations and will continue to build on these strengths.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection