Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) REPORT

St Fintan’s High School
Sutton, Dublin 13
Roll number: 60370W

Date of inspection: 27 April 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 St Fintan’s High School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in SPHE (including Relationships and Sexuality Education) and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students, examined students’ work and had discussions with the principal. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Management and staff of St Fintan’s High School recognise the contribution that a social, personal and health education programme makes to the holistic education of students. A whole-school approach is evident in providing for the care of students. Established support structures such as the year head and form tutor system, the care team, guidance counsellor and the SPHE team, play an integral role in supporting students’ personal and social needs. It was reported by school management that the SPHE team demonstrates very good flexibility in adapting the programme to cater for particular circumstances that can arise in a school from time to time. This can optimise the support given to students.

SPHE benefits from a good level of provision. All junior-cycle classes are timetabled for one class period of SPHE per week in line with the requirements of the Department of Education and Skills Circular Letter M11/03. Transition Year (TY) is a core component of the senior cycle curriculum in the school. TY students take a six-week personal development module. The inclusion of this module in the TY curriculum is a valuable support for senior-cycle students.

It is evident that the school’s planning and provision for senior-cycle Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is in need of review. No evidence was provided to indicate the manner in which a school-based senior-cycle RSE programme for fifth and sixth year students had been provided in previous years. However, some elements of the senior-cycle RSE are delivered as part of the TY programme and this is good practice. In the current academic year total RSE provision for fifth-year and sixth-year students consisted of a once-off presentation from an external agency. Some topics taught in senior-cycle Religious Education (RE) also complement aspects of the RSE programme. During the evaluation there was a lack of clarity around the extent to which teachers or management liaised with the external agency in planning the content of the presentation. It was...
reported that, at the request of the agency, a teacher was not present with students during the presentation. While some follow-through work for students took place with a teacher of RE, no school-based evaluation of the visit took place. These arrangements do not reflect good practice. Neither are they in keeping with some of the commitments made in the school’s ratified RSE policy.

Best practice in the effective delivery of RSE is where students are exposed to the complete range of themes, recommended as part of a RSE programme, in each year of junior cycle and senior cycle. This facilitates the delivery of a broad and balanced programme and allows for a spiral approach to the learning outcomes for each topic. Furthermore, the active and experiential learning strategies that underpin the RSE resource materials developed in association with the Department are best suited to a classroom environment. It is recommended that senior management and the SPHE team review the provision of RSE to facilitate a more incremental approach to the implementation of a broad RSE programme. It is acknowledged that outside facilitators can play a role in SPHE-related activities. However, that role should be to supplement, support or complement a coherent and balanced programme that has been devised at school level.

To optimise the potential of guest presentations it is recommended that senior management and the SPHE team devise and implement a policy on the use of visiting speakers that is in keeping with the best practice guidelines outlined in Department Circular Letter 0023/2010.

A systematic approach is taken to drafting whole-school policies and relevant partners are consulted. Policies in the areas of substance use, anti-bullying and SPHE/RSE have been ratified by the board of management. Good use has been made of the relevant Department guidelines in the development of these policies. A systematic policy review process is in place. As policies are reviewed particular attention should focus on the effectiveness of implementation of the agreed practices outlined in each policy. The SPHE/RSE policy was ratified in 2009. It is recommended that the policy be amended to clarify how senior-cycle RSE is delivered and provide clearer guidelines regarding the management and organisation of RSE lessons.

Good practice is evident in the deployment of staff to teach SPHE. The team comprises five teachers. A high level of commitment and enthusiasm for the delivery of SPHE and RSE was evident among team members. Senior management is aware of the challenges in teaching SPHE and is conscious of the need to develop a core team that has an appropriate gender balance. In some instances the teachers also teach their SPHE class another subject. This very good practice is encouraged as it helps to establish a rapport with the group. This is especially important in the context where SPHE is only timetabled for one class period per week. Every effort should be made to retain the same teacher with the class for the duration of the junior-cycle SPHE programme.

School management is very supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD). There has been a very good level of past engagement with relevant CPD at both whole-school and subject-department levels. This very good practice has contributed to the development of a positive whole-school climate for SPHE. Minutes of subject meetings indicate that a planned approach is taken to addressing training needs and further priorities have been identified in this regard. To support senior-cycle RSE it is recommended that a number of teachers avail of training in the use of the recently developed TRUST (Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching) resource for teaching RSE in senior cycle. Due to the nature of SPHE training, it is recognised that not all team members can, or may wish to, attend all of the elective courses. Therefore, it is advocated that a copy of the information supplied at each in-service course attended be filed in a subject-specific CPD folder. This would ensure that the information is
available to each member of the team and can be referred to during team meetings as a means of sharing good practice.

Parents are provided with information on the SPHE programme at the induction meeting for incoming first-year students. The parents’ council takes an active role in organising presentations to provide parents with advice and support on aspects relating to the social, personal and health education of teenagers. In addition the guidance counsellor has made presentations to the parents’ council on matters relating to SPHE. These are good practices. Parents are informed about the delivery of the RSE programme at parent-teacher meetings. It is recommended that the effectiveness of this practice be reviewed.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The absence of a subject co-ordinator for SPHE and RSE is presenting significant challenges for management and is impacting negatively on subject department planning. It has been the tradition that the position was part of the duties attached to an assistant-principal post of responsibility. The position has been vacant since the retirement of the last holder in August 2009. The rationale for aligning the role of subject co-ordinator to a post of responsibility should be reviewed. There is very good expertise among the SPHE team. It would be more beneficial to rotate the position among the teaching team in order to build capacity and to enable each teacher to assume a leadership role in the ongoing planning for SPHE and RSE.

Some details regarding the organisation of the SPHE department is documented in the SPHE/RSE policy. However, no detailed subject department plan was in place at the time of the evaluation. It is recommended that one be devised. The subject department plan should be a working document and distinct from the whole-school SPHE/RSE policy. The information documented in the plan should inform planning for the effective delivery of SPHE and RSE. The subject plan should provide specific details such as department organisation, copies of common programme plans, a catalogue of resources available and assessment practices. Copies of minutes and outcomes of routine school-based programme evaluations should be filed to facilitate reflective practice.

The RSE policy provides a programme framework for the delivery of junior-cycle RSE and SPHE. This framework provides a very good balance of the ten modules of the junior-cycle SPHE curriculum framework produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). In the absence of a meeting between the inspector and the subject team it was not possible to establish the extent to which this programme is being followed or has been amended to support a school-based plan.

To support the implementation of high quality junior-cycle SPHE and senior-cycle RSE programmes there is significant need to develop more detailed common programmes of work. This would optimise students’ learning experiences and support teachers in teaching the subject. Due to the spiral nature of the junior-cycle SPHE curriculum, modules are re-visited each year. Therefore clear learning outcomes that facilitate an incremental approach to the development of students’ knowledge, attitudes and skills should be identified for each module of work from first year through to third year. The number of class periods planned for each topic should also be noted. Specific information with regard to suitable teaching, learning and assessment strategies, as well as suggested resource materials, can be incorporated over time. This enhanced approach to collaborative planning will assist with the pace and pitch of lessons and inform on-going
reflective practice. Further information on subject planning is contained in the SPHE Guidelines for Teachers produced by the NCCA.

A similar approach should be used to develop a detailed programme plan for TY personal development and senior-cycle RSE. To support RSE provision it is recommended that the Interim Curriculum and Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools and the associated resource materials available on the Department’s website should be used to inform programme planning. (www.education.gov.ie). The recently-developed TRUST resource for teaching RSE in senior cycle should inform the programme plan. This resource pack consists of a DVD and twenty lesson plans and is available through a training programme for senior-cycle RSE provided by the SPHE Support Service. The NCCA curriculum framework for senior-cycle SPHE would also prove a useful resource in the further development of the TY module.

A number of whole-school events are organised in areas such as mental health, healthy eating, study skills and personal safety. These activities support the social personal and health education of the students. To optimise student learning, all co-curricular and cross-curricular activities should be incorporated into the programme plan in a manner that ensures that the topics covered before and after these activities supports student learning. A number of visiting speakers support the facilitation of these activities. Therefore the recommended revised procedures in relation to visiting speakers, as outlined earlier in the report should be adopted in all cases.

There is good shared access to the limited range of SPHE resources available in the school. The principal displays a willingness to support the continued upgrading of these resources. It is recommended that the SPHE team carries out an audit of existing resources to identify gaps. An action plan should then be devised to redress the shortfalls identified.

No individual teacher’s planning documentation was made available during the evaluation. However it was evident from the lessons observed that teachers prepare thoroughly for their lessons and that very good quality planning for individual lessons is taking place. This information should be used to inform the development of the collaborative programme plans as recommended earlier.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A range of junior-cycle SPHE lessons and one TY personal development lesson were observed during the evaluation. In all of the lessons the teacher displayed a high level of competence in a range of teaching strategies and activities that supported the experiential learning cycle. This very good practice supports the rationale underpinning the implementation of the SPHE curriculum framework. The advance preparation or selection of additional resources served to stimulate students’ interest and support their active engagement with the lesson content.

All lessons had a clear focus and were, in most instances, pitched to a level that supported and built on students’ previous learning. Key learning outcomes were shared with the students from the outset. This effectively set the scene and assisted in the development of a logical lesson structure. Towards the end of each lesson the learning outcomes were re-visited and students were asked to outline what they had learned from the lesson. This practice encouraged students to reflect on their learning and offered teachers an opportunity to affirm progress and provide clarifications where needed. This is very good practice.
Teachers made very good use of ‘ice breaker’ activities. One particularly good example occurred where students were beginning a personal development module. Students, working in pairs, had to introduce themselves and report to the rest of the class on what they had learnt about their classmate. A very good focus was placed on ensuring students understood the ground rules being established to ensure that students listened to each other and respected the opinions of others. The exercise effectively clarified the ground rules and set appropriate student boundaries for subsequent lessons.

Experiential learning that involved students in the four key stages of experiencing, processing, generalising and applying their learning was a key strategy used the lessons observed. This was achieved through the very good use of group discussion, worksheet exercises, walking debates and peer-group activities. During some discussions questioning techniques were skilfully used by the teacher to encourage the development of the higher-order thinking skills of analysis, reflection and critical appraisal of information. This is very good practice.

Students were provided with opportunities to develop skills and confidence in group-work. This enabled students to reflect on the material being taught and to discuss the issues with their peers. Best practice in the use of group-work occurred where the planned exercise was appropriately pitched so that students had adequate background knowledge to complete the task and where sufficient time was devoted to the plenary session to clarify information and to support learning.

Interaction with and observation of class activities indicated that students enjoy SPHE lessons. Students’ responses to questions indicated that in most instances they had a good understanding of the lesson topic being discussed. However, observation of students’ written work and textbooks indicated that there is scope to extend the range of written activities undertaken. In some instances an over-reliance on text-book activities was evident. In other cases the volume of written work evident did not demonstrate a level of progression that was commensurate with the students’ stage in the junior cycle. This may be due to the fact that there is no agreed system of folders for the systematic storage of information from lessons.

The aims of SPHE highlight the need for students to be provided with opportunities for review and reflection. Therefore it is recommended that students be provided with additional opportunities to complete written activities to build up a bank of work that they can reflect on throughout their SPHE programme. They could be provided with additional worksheets, quizzes, case studies or personal-reflection activities to enable them to grapple with the topics under discussion, challenge their own ideas and reflect on their learning. It is essential that the activities selected be linked to the learning outcomes and assessment strategies planned for the lesson.

Due to the integrated and holistic nature of the SPHE programme, students need to reflect back on work covered in previous years. Therefore it is recommended that an agreed system of folders that enables students to file and store information from their SPHE class from first year to third year be introduced. This good practice allows the students build up a body of work over the years, to which they can refer, and facilitates the safe storage of personal information.

A secure and affirming learning atmosphere permeated all of the lessons observed. Planned learning activities were well managed and deliberate efforts were made to change the classroom layout to support active learning. It was clear that positive relationships exist with a very good rapport evident between students and their teacher.

Students are assigned base classrooms. The SPHE team should consider how the classroom walls could be used to generate a dedicated space to display SPHE material. Colourful wall displays of
relevant posters, class goals or agreed rules for SPHE would serve to create a stimulating learning environment.

**ASSESSMENT**

Good levels of assessment and monitoring of students’ progress during lessons was noted. Questioning strategies together with teacher monitoring of activities served to assess individual levels of learning and to provide affirmation and feedback on the tasks assigned. This is good practice. However, the cross-section of student’s written work reviewed provided little evidence of teacher checking or the provision of constructive feedback on students’ written work. The process of monitoring students’ work needs to be reviewed and standardised across all class groups. Students need to be provided with opportunities to complete a wider range of activities that allows for the provision of constructive feedback and teacher monitoring. This is significant in SPHE where particular emphasis is placed on students’ self-awareness and self-esteem. It is recommended that the SPHE team devises an assessment policy to agree a range of assessment tools and record-keeping procedures that could be used with all class groups. It is important that these assessment modes are fully compatible with the aims and objectives of the SPHE syllabus. Information and support on assessment is available in the NCCA *Guidelines for Teachers* (pp 59-68).

The school reports to parents on students’ progress in SPHE at parent-teacher meetings and through school reports. This is very good practice. The development of an assessment policy will ultimately provide a more robust evidence base for reporting to parents.

Some good practice was noted in programme evaluation. It was reported that students complete an evaluation of the TY module and that students provide oral evaluations of the SPHE programme in lessons. However no evidence was provided during the evaluation to elucidate how the outcomes of these evaluations inform on-going planning. To enhance practice it is recommended that procedures to inform on-going programme planning become more formalised. Students and teachers could be requested to complete end-of-topic review forms. The templates provided in the SPHE *School Handbook* that was produced by the SPHE Post-Primary Support Service could prove useful. It is essential that a school-based evaluation of all guest-speaker presentations be carried out in line with Department Circular Letter 0023/2010. A mechanism whereby parents can inform programme review could also be considered. Outcomes of all programme reviews should be documented and used to inform on-going programme planning.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Management and staff recognise the contribution that a social, personal and health education programme makes to the holistic education of students.
- Appropriate timetabled provision is made for SPHE.
- A systematic approach is taken to the drafting of whole-school policies relating to SPHE and a very good level of consultation informs this process.
• A high level of commitment and enthusiasm for the delivery of SPHE and RSE was evident among the SPHE core team.
• A very good level of past engagement with relevant CPD at both whole-school and subject-department levels is evident.
• The parents' council takes an active role in organising presentations to provide parents with advice and support on the social, personal and health education of teenagers.
• In all of the lessons observed the teachers displayed a high level of competence in a range of teaching strategies and activities that supported the experiential learning cycle.
• Good levels of in-class assessment and monitoring of students’ progress were noted.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

• Planning and provision for senior cycle RSE should be reviewed.
• A policy on the use of visiting speakers that is in keeping with Department Circular Letter 0023/2010 should be agreed and consistently implemented.
• The formal structures that support the co-ordination of SPHE should be re-examined.
• A subject department plan and detailed programme plans for SPHE and RSE should be developed.
• Students should be provided with additional opportunities to complete written activities. An agreed system of folders that enables students to file and store this information should be introduced.
• An assessment policy should be devised for SPHE.

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

Published December 2010