An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal & Health Education
REPORT

Castleisland Community College
Castleisland, County Kerry
Roll number: 70520V

Date of inspection: 15 April 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN
SOCIAL, PERSONAL & HEALTH EDUCATION

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Castleisland Community College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), including Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), 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 and teachers and examined students’ work. 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. 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

SPHE is recognised in Castleisland Community College as a very important element of the school’s overall provision for student support and care. The whole-school climate is one that was found to be wholly reflective of the five overarching aims of the junior-cycle SPHE syllabus. There is an obvious emphasis on fostering a sense of well-being, self-fulfilment and self-esteem in students. Emphasis is also placed on the importance of responsible decision-making, reflection and discussion. School policies and practices also clearly reflect the importance given to student support.

A calendar of guidance, pastoral care and personal development events is prepared annually in the school. A notable element of the calendar is the additional provision that is made for the personal development of first year students through the ‘First Year Strategy’, an initiative that is supported by the Kerry Education Service (KES). A similar mapping of the SPHE curriculum calendar, with a possible view to merging the two calendars, is suggested for consideration. The existence of the current calendar indicates that there is very good level collaboration between the key student support personnel.

All junior-cycle students are timetabled for one period of SPHE each week as set down in circular M11/03.

The main responsibility for the provision of RSE to students in Castleisland Community College rests with a guest speaker. It is positive that the school has established a good rapport with the individual charged with this task, and that it is a relationship based on trust. It is understood that the subject matter explored by the guest speaker reflects, to some degree, the themes and topics of the RSE module or programme. This too is positive. However, and whilst acknowledging that guest speakers have the potential to make a valuable contribution to any subject or programme, in
this instance there is a clear need for a rebalancing of the role of guest speaker with that of subject teacher. With this in mind, all concerned are directed to circular 0023/2010, which offers guidelines to schools on best practice in relation to the use of guest speakers. With reference to this circular, it is recommended that the future education received by students in the area of relationships and sexuality, be provided in the main by the relevant class teacher, within the relevant subject classroom, and that it be based on the relevant syllabus and the associated themes and topics.

An RSE policy is being drafted currently. It is recommended that management prioritise the finalisation and ratification of this policy. All concerned are directed to the relevant Department of Education & Skills circulars (0027/2008, M20/96 and M4/95) which will inform this process. The Department’s website also provides a planning template and a sample RSE policy. Other valuable resources, such as the RSE - Interim curriculum and guidelines for post-primary schools, can be accessed on the website of the Drumcondra Education Centre at www.ecdrumcondra.ie. The provision of an appendix to the policy, detailing the content of both junior- and senior-cycle RSE programmes is strongly advised.

In relation to staff deployment, management is very aware of the specific requirements of SPHE. Most significant, for example, is the principal’s recognition of the importance of ensuring teachers’ willingness to teach SPHE. It was observed that in some class groups the SPHE teacher also taught the students for another subject. This is very valuable in terms of getting to know students and therefore is a deployment practice that is further advocated. The size of the current core teaching team is small. With this in mind, management is encouraged in its efforts to expand the core team. Simultaneously, considering the co-educational nature of the school, efforts should be made to achieve a greater gender-balance in the composition of the team. The desirability of providing for continuity of teacher from first year through to third year is a deployment practice that is also suggested to management for consideration.

It is good to note that there has been some engagement with the SPHE Support Service at school level. Consideration ought to be given to providing the whole-staff with some insights into SPHE. This could be done by either the personnel attached to the SPHE Support Service or members of the school’s own SPHE department. While relevant training has been undertaken by some of the members of the SPHE subject department, it is identified as a priority area in relation to the future development of the subject in the school. As a result, the completion, on an ongoing basis, of a staff training needs audit is suggested for consideration. This would help to inform a systematic and incremental approach to teachers’ continuous professional development in the area of SPHE. As part of this audit, it may be worthwhile to review the SPHE Support Service’s workshop schedules. These are published on www.sphe.ie in September and January. In the future deployment of staff to the teaching of SPHE, management is strongly encouraged to seek to ensure that all teachers have completed the required two-day, introductory training in SPHE.

Resourcing of SPHE in the school goes beyond providing monies for the purchase of books and classroom materials. In recent times, for example, management has provided funding for the development of a ‘Contemplation Garden’, which not only supports the delivery of certain aspects of the SPHE syllabus, but also contributes to students’ social, personal and health education, in the broadest sense of the word.

Communication with parents in relation to SPHE and related activities is well developed. Parental involvement is facilitated through the provision of timely information in relation to the school’s SPHE and RSE programmes.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

It is clear that the members of the SPHE subject department have a good working relationship. The SPHE department is facilitated in its efforts to plan collaboratively through the provision by management of time for formal subject department meetings. It is commendable that records of these meetings are being maintained. In addition to this, the SPHE teachers meet informally on a very regular basis. This, which is indicative of the teachers desire to provide the best possible teaching and learning experience for students, is highly praised.

An SPHE co-ordinator has been appointed, and this individual demonstrates a strong belief in the value of SPHE, both as a subject and a whole-school concept. As a result, the co-ordinator works tirelessly, with the support of both management and staff, in seeking to provide opportunities and experiences that will support the holistic development of students in Castleisland Community College.

Outline programmes of work have been prepared for each of first, second and third years. These possess a number of positive features. All ten modules and the associated topics are provided for in each programme, module aims and learning outcomes are identified, and some suitable resources for the teaching of each module are included. The first-year programme is the most well developed, in that it is time-based, identifying work to be covered on a month-to-month and week-by-week basis. The application of this approach to the remaining programmes of work is recommended. Teachers are encouraged to build upon the identification in plans of detail relating to resources, methodologies, homework and assessment, as well as teacher reflection and comment.

The subject department is well placed at this stage to begin working towards the development of a shared resource file for each programme of work. This has many benefits, not least that it reduces the likelihood of an overlap in the use of resources from one year to the next. Teachers currently maintain records of work covered, a practice which will very much support the development of such resource files.

A very impressive collection of catalogued resources for the teaching of SPHE, including books, videos and props, has been developed in the school by the members of the SPHE subject department.

A range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities seen to support the five overarching aims of the SPHE syllabus are organised in the school. It is suggested that such activities be embedded in the SPHE programmes of work, as this has the potential to influence when and where certain modules or topics might be explored in class.

Planning for individual lessons was of a high quality and, therefore, must effective. In some instances, lesson plans had been prepared to inform lesson delivery. This level of planning is highly commended. A large number and range of resources were prepared for use in the delivery of lesson content. Teacher files indicated a similar high degree of planning for past lessons.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning in lessons observed was good or very good.

Lessons observed were consistent with both the syllabus and the relevant agreed programme of work. The majority of lessons commenced with a quick recap of work covered in the previous lesson. This is good practice in all lessons, but particularly in SPHE where students’ contact with the subject is but once weekly. Lessons were purposeful, with the lesson intention being openly shared with students. Best practice was where intended learning outcomes, which resonated with those identified in the relevant module of the syllabus, were also shared with students. This practice is encouraged in all lessons.

All lessons commenced in a way that caught students’ attention, while also capturing their imaginations in relation to what was about to unfold. In a lesson where smoking was explored, students were clearly bemused at the introduction of a cigarette, which was then used to prompt discussion around students’ everyday knowledge of cigarettes and smoking.

Teacher instruction was clear and accurate, with teachers demonstrating a willingness to model what it was that was required of students, thereby helping to reduce students’ levels of inhibition. A good example of this was seen in a lesson that focused on feelings, where students were required to choose a colour that represented how they were feeling. As a means of boosting students’ confidence to participate on this level, the teacher completed the activity first. This also served as a good example of a well-chosen icebreaker. The use of icebreakers, which are recognised as a very valuable SPHE strategy, is further encouraged.

In some lessons, the methodologies employed sought to provide for greater student participation and, more significantly, on a range of levels. At various times, students were required to listen, to look and examine or to become actively involved in the completion of a task or activity. This is praised and encouraged. A good pre- or post-lesson self-evaluation tool for teachers is to ask what it is that the lesson requires, or required, of students and for what percentage of the lesson were students actively involved. As part of this process, it is worth bearing in mind that the greater the student involvement, the more likely it is that learning will take place.

There was tendency in other lessons to maintain a more traditional approach to teaching and learning, one that saw facts which were presented to, or shared with, students being used to invoke a low level of student-led comment and discussion. In such instances teacher input tended to predominate. As applicable therefore, it is important that teachers remind themselves that the role of the SPHE teacher differs somewhat from the role of other subject teachers, in that the SPHE teacher facilitates rather than directs learning. In fact, one of the most important recognitions for any teacher of SPHE is that, given the appropriate opportunities, students can learn as much from each other as from their teacher.

An interesting and very effective strategy employed in one lesson observed was ‘thumbs up/down’. Students were issued with red/green, thumb-flash cards, and these were used cleverly to provide a visual representation of students’ levels of agreement or disagreement with a set of statements that the teacher read out to students. This is commended as a strategy for whole-class involvement in an exercise that might otherwise have suited the more outspoken students in the class.
Experiential learning, with its four distinct phases of experiencing, processing, generalising and applying, needs greater application in lessons. In the absence of training in this methodology, and as applicable, teachers are referred to the revised *Healthy Living* and *Healthy Times*, produced by the Health Promotion Service of the Health Service Executive (HSE) West. These publications, but in particular the *Teachers Lesson Plans Booklet*, illustrate how this method can be very effectively and very easily applied in the delivery of SPHE lessons.

Classroom activities were carefully explained and well managed. They were time-bound, with constant reminders being provided to students of remaining time. Student participation in tasks was also closely monitored, with advice and assistance being provided as deemed necessary. Some very good processing of student activity was observed, including the organisation and management of student feedback.

Ground rules were referenced in each lesson and displayed in each classroom, being used very cleverly in some instances to maintain a classroom atmosphere built on mutual respect. Teacher-student relations were very positive. Student input was appropriately affirmed. In one lesson, the classroom furniture had been rearranged to provide space for chairs to be arranged in a large circle. This facilitated the quick and easy formation of break-out groups and the equally efficient return to a larger group for a whole-class processing of an activity. A further advantage of this room arrangement is the scope it provides for activities that require student movement. This, or some similar arrangement, is recommended for use in all SPHE lessons.

It should be noted that provision needs to be made in every lesson for a summary. Without such provision, SPHE lessons become nothing more than a series of unrelated events. Summaries also help to ensure that students leave every lesson with some little nugget of learning, be that in terms of knowledge gained, the development of a skill, or the recognition of a personal attitude or value.

**ASSESSMENT**

There is evidence of some thought and action in relation to the assessment of students’ learning in SPHE, but it is an area that is in need of further development.

The department is encouraged to look at developing an assessment toolkit. The starting point for this work should be the outcomes that are offered at the end of each module and as outlined in the syllabus. While there was a clear consciousness in the majority of lessons in relation to both outcomes and aims, what remains is for teachers to look further at how these intended learning outcomes could be comprehensively assessed and evaluated.

In relation to the development of an assessment toolkit, a number of options exist. These include, for example, classroom activities, home tasks, self-assessment, peer-assessment and portfolio assessment. The SPHE *Guidelines for Teachers*, as well as the *SPHE Handbook*, deal with assessment quite extensively, and templates are provided for reproduction and use with students. Teachers are strongly encouraged to look at portfolio assessment. Where not already practised, and as a precursor to the introduction of portfolio assessment, teachers are encouraged to introduce the concept of the SPHE student folder or file.

Best practice is where planning for assessment is incorporated into lesson planning and into lesson structure and delivery. This reflects the assessment model that is moving from *assessment of learning* to *assessment for learning* (AFL). This is also discussed in the *Guidelines for*
Teachers, and some very accessible examples of AfL at work in the SPHE classroom are also provided here. Teachers are encouraged to research this approach to teaching, learning and assessment.

The inclusion of SPHE on the school’s report template is commended. Teachers are advised to look at preparing a bank of suitable comments that might be used when describing students’ progress and achievement in SPHE. The five key aims of SPHE, as detailed on page four of the syllabus, might provide a good reference point for the focus and wording of these comments.

As part of the annual parent-teacher meetings, parents should be facilitated and encouraged to visit their son or daughter’s SPHE teacher.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- SPHE is recognised in Castleisland Community College as a very important element of the school’s overall provision for student support and care.
- SPHE is timetabled in accordance with best practice, as set down in circular M11/03.
- SPHE is well resourced in the school.
- The members of the SPHE subject department have a good working relationship.
- Planning for lessons was of a high quality.
- The quality of teaching and learning in lessons observed was good or very good.
- Teacher-student relations were very positive.

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

- Arrangements should be made to rebalance the role of guest speaker with that of subject teacher in RSE.
- The core team of SPHE teachers should be expanded, and in so doing, management should ensure that all teachers of SPHE have undergone relevant training.
- The department should actively consider developing an assessment toolkit.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation, when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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