Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Saint Fintina’s Post Primary School
Longwood, County Meath
Roll number: 71970L

Date of inspection: 1 March 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 Fintina’s Post-Primary School, Longwood. 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 one day 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 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

St Fintina’s Post-Primary School currently caters for 72 male and 78 female students. The school is included in the Department of Education and Skills’ School Support Programme under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan for educational inclusion. The school also participates in the School Completion Programme (SCP), an initiative to improve the levels of successful completion of second-level education among 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. Students in senior cycle are timetabled for Guidance for one period per week. Part of this timetabled allocation is used by the guidance counsellor to deliver a pastoral care programme which includes Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).

The school has adopted a flexible approach to the allocation of teachers to SPHE. There are four members of staff who are experienced in teaching this subject and they are deployed to teach SPHE from time to time. This approach to the deployment of teachers to the subject is good as it means that there is not a dependency on the same personnel for the delivery of this subject. In the current year, a small core team of two teachers delivers the SPHE programme in junior cycle. Both teachers were assigned following consultation with senior management. It is good to note that these teachers are teaching another subject to their SPHE class groups. Every effort is made to ensure that teachers remain with their class groups for the three-year cycle.

Both teachers are timetabled to teach SPHE in rooms which facilitate the inclusion in lessons of active participative strategies such as group work. This is good as it supports the use of the learning methodologies advocated in the syllabus for the successful delivery of the subject. 

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good efforts have been made by the 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.

There is a co-ordinated approach to the acquisition and filing of SPHE resources in this school.
All resources are stored in a room which is accessible to both teachers. The resources have been
catalogued and a list is included in the SPHE plan. Since September 2009, St Fintina’s has taken
part in an initiative developed by County Meath Vocational Education Committee (VEC).
Teachers in designated subject departments in all schools in the scheme have met and shared
resources and expertise across a range of issues. A computer networking system is used to allow
subject departments to store materials electronically so that they are accessible to other schools in
the scheme. This is a very worthwhile initiative and, at the time of the evaluation, SPHE had just
been included in this project.

The school 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. All teachers of SPHE have attended the Introductory, 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.

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 Healthy Eating programme; the breakfast club for
any student wishing to avail of this facility under the SCP; Girls in Action, an initiative designed
to encourage girls to participate in sporting activities and the annual student award ceremonies.
The school also organises an anti-bullying week each year. All of these initiatives are
commended. The school is also a member of the Irish Association of Pastoral Care (ICPCE) and
the principal has attended many of its annual conferences.

**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 currently allocated to a teacher as part of the duties
attached to a post of responsibility. This support by the school for SPHE is good. There is a very
positive attitude to the subject and a spirit of enthusiasm is evident in the SPHE team. School
management facilitates formal meetings of the team once each term. Minutes of all such meetings
are kept and are stored in the planning folder. There is also a high level of informal contact
between both teachers. The guidance counsellor attends many of the SPHE team meetings. This
level of collaboration between both departments is good. Furthermore, as the guidance counsellor
is also responsible for the planning and implementation of the pastoral care programme in senior
cycle, continuity between junior-cycle and senior-cycle provision is facilitated.

In addition to the activities planned and delivered by the SPHE teachers, the junior-cycle SPHE
programme in St Fintina’s includes seminars facilitated by external personnel. The school has a
clearly defined policy regarding the use of external speakers. The material covered by these speakers is agreed with the SPHE teachers and with the principal in advance and information letters are sent out to parents. In all cases, these seminars are formally evaluated by the students. This is in keeping with good practice. The information arising from the students’ evaluations should now be included in the SPHE subject plan and this is recommended.

Planning and co-ordination of SPHE is well executed in this school. It is very apparent that the SPHE department work closely together and that they have adopted a collaborative approach to planning. Teachers follow a common programme of work for each year and all ten modules are covered with each year group. In the department plan, each topic is linked to texts, generic resources and assessment modes and an estimated timeframe for the completion of each topic. In practice, teachers adapt this programme to meet the needs of their individual class groups. No programmes of work for individual class groups were presented during the course of the evaluation. However, evidence was presented which indicated that teachers are systematically tracking all work covered in lessons. In some cases, this information included a record of methodologies being used. It is noteworthy that both teachers have developed resources which have been tailored to suit the individual needs of students.

To build on this very good work, there is a need for 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.

A good approach has been taken to the development and implementation of the RSE programme so that is incorporated as part of the pastoral care programme in senior cycle. It is very progressive of the school to develop this programme. However, the school might also find it useful to refer to the TRUST (Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching) resource for teaching RSE in senior cycle. This resource is available in the school.

Individual preparation for lessons observed was 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**

There was a good standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed. Both teachers engaged in effective individual planning and preparation for their lessons, which included the prior preparation of resource materials. In one lesson, 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 of the lessons observed was appropriate. Lessons were well structured and were characterised by smooth transitions from one stage to the next. Opportunities were provided to students to participate actively in lessons. For instance, in a lesson on ‘Stress Management’ role play was used. Following the activity, opportunities were provided to students to process their learning through discussion and analysis. The level of learning was good as evidenced by
the constructive comments made by some members of the class. 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 and the completion of worksheets. It was noted that references to well-known personalities were used as examples to illustrate and consolidate learning in relation to the themes of the lessons observed. The use of these meaningful examples enhanced student engagement with the topics to very good effect.

Student attendance is consistently monitored. There was a friendly and caring atmosphere in both lessons 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 and help and assistance were afforded when necessary. Students’ efforts and contributions were well received and appropriately affirmed.

ASSessment

It is evident that the SPHE department have 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. In addition, student reflection and self-assessment is also used and a template has been devised to support this process. It is noted that this template is used consistently by the SPHE teachers.

It is good that such a wide variety of assessment modes is being used and that students are required to evaluate their own learning. Currently, the SPHE teachers only require this form of self-assessment from students once per term. Consideration should now be given to more frequent use of this strategy.

A system is in place for students to store and file personal materials from SPHE lessons. This takes the form of a folder which is stored by the teacher and distributed to students at the beginning of the lesson. This is very good practice. Communication with parents is maintained through school reports twice 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:

- There is a supportive school environment for the delivery of SPHE.
- The school is clearly committed to the promotion of SPHE in a wide whole-school context.
- The development of a senior-cycle pastoral care programme is a progressive initiative.
- Planning for SPHE is good and the co-ordination of the subject is well executed.
- Good examples of experiential learning were observed in lessons.
• Lessons were characterised by a positive, affirming approach and a good rapport has been developed between students and teachers.
• SPHE is included in the regular reports to parents.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• The school should progress the RSE policy to ratification in line with Circular Letter 0027/2008.
• Teachers should develop individual programmes of work for each of their class groups.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of SPHE and 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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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 welcomes the report and wishes to thank the inspector for her very positive comments and observations in relation to the teaching and learning in the subject SPHE in the school.

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

Both recommendations outlined in the report are currently being addressed.