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

Patrician High School,
Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan,
Roll number: 64750G

Date of inspection: 10 February 2011
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 Patrician 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, religious education co-ordinator and SPHE teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and teachers of SPHE. 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

Social, personal and health education is considered an important component of the holistic education programme provided in the Patrician High School. A whole-school approach is taken to providing for students’ social and personal development. The SPHE co-ordinator is a member of the care team and there is a good level of ongoing collaboration between relevant staff. This good practice ensures that the SPHE programme retains an in-built flexibility to deal with issues that may arise in the course of the academic year. There is a supportive school climate for the ongoing development of the social, personal and health education programme.

All junior cycle classes are timetabled for one class of SPHE per week in accordance with Circular Letter M11/03. School documentation indicates that the SPHE teachers provide suggestions to the principal regarding the timetabled arrangements for classes to facilitate optimal learning. This is very good practice. In the past SPHE was included in the Transition Year (TY) programme. Given the contribution that the subject could make in supporting the personal and social component of a TY programme, consideration should be given to the re-introduction of a module, even for part of the year. This provision could provide additional opportunities to deliver elements of a senior cycle Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme.

A number of whole-school events support students’ personal and social development. The school is currently participating in a project that supports intercultural education. In addition a number of guest speakers work with senior cycle students in areas relevant to SPHE. To optimise the learning potential of guest presentations and ensure consistent practice it is recommended that a whole-school policy on the use of guest speakers be devised. Further advice is available in Circular Letter 0023/2010 and in the SPHE School Handbook that was produced by the SPHE Post-Primary Support Service.
Provision for senior cycle Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) needs to be reviewed. Some elements typical of a senior cycle RSE programme are delivered as part of Religious Education but in the absence of a coherent programme plan being available, there is an inconsistent approach to programme delivery. Evidence gathered during the evaluation indicates that the complete range of themes, as recommended in Department of Education and Skills guidelines, is not covered in a coherent manner. School management recognises that an appropriate RSE programme as outlined in Circular Letter 0037/2010 must be developed and implemented. It was apparent during the evaluation that there is a very good level of interest among relevant staff to progress this work. It is recommended therefore that senior management identifies and appoints a member of staff to act as RSE co-ordinator and establish a core team of relevant staff to plan, document and deliver a broad and balanced RSE programme to senior cycle students. To support this process it is recommended that training in the use of the recently developed TRUST (Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching) resource for teaching RSE in senior cycle be accessed.

A number of whole-school policies have been developed to support students’ care. Arrangements have been made for the regional development officer (RDO) of the SPHE Support Service to visit the school and to support staff in making the necessary revisions to the school’s RSE policy. This is a necessary step to support the implementation of the RSE programme in the school. It is recommended that the board of management ratifies the updated RSE policy as soon as is feasible.

Teachers are very committed to providing a quality SPHE programme for junior cycle students. However, to build capacity within the school, deployment practices for assigning teachers to SPHE should be reviewed. There are generally nine junior cycle class groups. It has been established practice that the SPHE co-ordinator teaches eight of the groups and a second teacher teaches the remaining group. At the time of the evaluation the co-ordinator was on leave and the eight class groups were re-assigned to two substitute teachers. In the interests of sharing expertise and facilitating collaborative planning practices it is recommended that the core team who routinely teach SPHE within the school be expanded.

Records of attendance at continuing professional development ((CPD) reviewed during the evaluation indicate that there has been a very good level of past engagement with the in-service programme provided by the SPHE Support Service. However, no attendances in recent years were noted and gaps are apparent. Ongoing participation in relevant CPD is necessary to support the implementation of SPHE and RSE programmes that are in keeping with best pedagogic practices. It is recommended that senior management conducts an audit of training needs and, in collaboration with staff, devise an action plan that systematically addresses the areas identified. It is advocated that a copy of the information supplied at each in-service course attended be filed in a subject planning CPD folder. This would ensure that the information is available to each member of the team and can be referred to at subject department meetings.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Evidence gathered during the evaluation indicates that a very committed approach is taken to the co-ordination of junior cycle SPHE. The position of SPHE co-ordinator is voluntary but is not rotated. The co-ordinator’s duties include accessing and developing SPHE resources and drafting lesson plans which are used with all junior classes. This work, which is carried out in a very
efficient manner, has been of huge assistance in supporting work in classrooms. As a next step it 
is recommended that a more collaborative approach to programme planning be adopted to build 
capacity and share the workload. As other core team members gain experience, consideration 
should be given to rotating the role of co-ordinator as an additional means of building capacity 
and of sharing the workload attached to this voluntary position.

Collaborative formal subject department planning for SPHE is at an early stage of development. 
Subject meetings are facilitated as part of the calendar of staff meetings and it was reported that 
many additional meetings take place on an informal basis. Records of only one SPHE meeting 
which was held at the start of this academic year were available during the evaluation. It is 
recommended that records from all SPHE meetings are centrally stored to facilitate continuity and 
able to team members to document and review progress. The subject department planning folder 
which was available referred to the academic year 2006/2007 and provided limited information. It 
is recommended that an updated subject plan for SPHE be developed by the team. The headings 
already included in the existing plan could be used as prompts to evaluate current practices 
anually and foster a culture of self-evaluation. The SPHE team could identify two to three issues 
arising from each review and devise a series of actions to support their implementation.

There is a need to further develop the junior cycle SPHE programme plan. The plan currently 
being followed is based primarily on the SPHE exemplar programme plan for a single-sex school 
contained in the SPHE Guidelines for Teachers produced by the National Council for 
Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). While this document is a useful first step, it needs to be 
adapted to each school’s context to take account of all the good work that is underway. The 
absence of agreed school-based learning outcomes for each topic is leading to duplication of 
content from first year to third year and is inhibiting a spiral approach to students’ learning. 
Therefore, it is recommended that a programme of work be developed further by the SPHE team. 
In the case of each year group, clear learning outcomes should be identified for each topic that 
will be covered on a term-by-term basis. The learning outcomes should demonstrate an 
appropriate balance of knowledge, attitudes and skills that students should acquire and facilitate a 
spiral approach to learning. Whole-school activities and guest speakers should be incorporated 
into the programme plan to ensure that the SPHE lessons either side of these activities make clear 
links and allow for follow-up work to optimise students’ learning.

Student feedback gathered during the evaluation indicates that planning for the SPHE modules of 
self-management, communication and emotional health should be re-examined. In determining 
the learning outcomes for inclusion in the programme plan it is recommended that the 
implementation of these modules be closely reviewed as part of the process. The advice of the 
visiting RDO from the SPHE Support Service should be sought in this regard.

As a first step in enhancing the programme plan it is recommended that all current teachers of 
SPHE use their own plans as working documents. The key learning outcomes for each lesson 
together with the resources, teaching and assessment strategies that proved particularly effective 
in facilitating experiential learning should be recorded. This information should be used to inform 
the three-year programme plan as recommended.

There is no RSE programme plan for senior cycle. It is recommended that this plan be developed 
as a matter of priority.

A very good range of additional resources is available to support learning in SPHE. The subject 
co-ordinator makes deliberate efforts to access a wide range of materials, all of which are 
systematically filed for ease of shared access. Very good guidance is provided by the co-ordinator
regarding the use of age-appropriate resources in lessons. These are very good practices. It would prove useful to include a catalogue of available resources in the updated subject department planning folder. A DVD of lessons plans based on digital presentations has been compiled by the co-ordinator. Some of these presentations facilitate very good levels of experiential learning. To foster a more collaborative approach to lesson planning it is recommended that these presentations be collaboratively reviewed and that all teachers of SPHE be involved in the development of shared resources for lessons.

Some good quality individual teacher planning was noted during the evaluation. Very good practice was noted in instances where teachers were building up an additional bank of resources to support their yearly plan.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

All of the lessons observed were in line with the common programme plan. At all times teaching and learning took place in a caring and supportive atmosphere. A high level of mutual respect and a positive student-teacher rapport was evident. It was clear that all teachers are very committed to teaching the subject.

All lessons observed had a clear focus. Teachers shared the learning intention or purpose of the lessons with students from the outset. This is good practice. In planning lessons however care needs to be taken to ensure that the learning intentions chosen incorporate an appropriate balance between knowledge acquisition, skills development and the development of positive attitudes. It is further recommended that these outcomes should be revisited during the closing stage of lessons as a means of assessing and affirming students’ progress.

The appropriateness of resources used in lessons needs further careful consideration. In all classrooms visited the lesson content and structure were over-reliant on a pre-prepared digital presentation. The presentations observed focused heavily on the acquisition of knowledge, some of which could have been more closely aligned to the Junior Cycle Curriculum Framework. This approach resulted in there being an over-reliance on teacher-led activity with limited opportunities for experiential learning. There were occasions when group work or the use of visual images, case studies or role play would have been more appropriate. At other times there was scope to adjust the pace or pitch of the content used in the presentation. The teaching and assessment strategies chosen for lessons should be carefully aligned to the intended learning intentions. While it is acknowledged that ICT, including digital presentations can be a very useful resource in lessons, it is recommended that teachers review how it can be used in a manner that optimises student engagement and facilitates experiential learning.

Some very good ice breaker activities were noted. In one lesson students took part in a short relaxation activity. It was obvious that this routine practice created an atmosphere conducive to learning in SPHE. In some instances students were challenged with a series of re-call questions which provided effective continuity with previous lessons. This is very good practice in the context of SPHE where lessons are delivered once a week. In two lessons students were asked to complete an initial survey on the topic of the lesson. This strategy proved effective in getting students to think about the topic. However, to optimise students’ learning when using this strategy, it is recommended that the subsequent lesson content is closely aligned to the questions posed in the survey and that students get the opportunity to re-visit their answers towards the end of the lesson to reflect on their progress.
The learning environment in some classrooms was greatly enhanced by the provision of a dedicated space to display SPHE material. Group and individual project and artwork created a stimulating learning environment. The wider use of this very good practice is encouraged. In almost all instances learning was well managed. However when carrying out lesson activities, it is not advisable to allow students to engage in any learning activity unless under the supervision of a teacher.

Evidence gathered during the evaluation indicates that students enjoy and recognise the value of SPHE as a means of supporting their social and personal development in a wide range of areas. In all lessons observed there was an agreed system for students’ folders. This is very good practice. In some instances students had a very good range of activities systematically filed in their folders. However, on occasion the volume of work presented was not commensurate with the stage that students were at in the programme. The aims of SPHE highlight the need for students to be provided with opportunities for review and reflection. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers in planning lessons be mindful that students need to be provided with regular opportunities to complete written activities. Worksheets, quizzes, case studies or personal-reflection activities could be used to enable students to reflect on or to apply their understanding of topics under discussion.

In the sample of students’ work reviewed the work stored in folders referred to this year only. Due to the integrated and holistic nature of SPHE, students need to reflect on work covered in previous years. It is recommended that the same folders be retained by students to store and file information from their SPHE class from first year to third year. This will allow the students build up a body of work over the years, to which they can refer, and facilitates the safe storage of personal information.

**Assessment**

Some very good formative and summative assessment practices were noted in the lessons observed and in students’ folders. Questioning strategies together with teacher monitoring of activities assessed individual students’ levels of learning and provided affirmation and feedback. Best practice in the use of questioning was noted in instances where students were given adequate time to answer the questions asked, without teacher intervention. Some very good practice in assigning students an occasional home task was also noted. This is a very effective means of linking lessons and facilitating students to reflect on and apply learning. Some very good summative assessment practice was evident. A variety of group and individual tasks were noted in some students’ coursework. The SPHE co-ordinator also organises competitions as an end-of-module assessment strategy. The resulting students’ work is displayed in the school foyer. This is a commendable means of promoting SPHE and health-related issues among the wider school community.

There is scope to extend and standardise the range of assessment strategies used in SPHE. As a means of building on existing practice, it is recommended that the SPHE teachers develop an agreed assessment policy. Particular attention should be given to strategies to enhance the quality of feedback provided to students on their progress in SPHE. Information and support on assessment is available in the Guidelines for Teachers (pp 59-68). In this context, the team should consider the use of school reports as an additional means of providing feedback to parents and students on their progress in SPHE.
Some good practice was noted in teachers’ record keeping. It is recommended that all teachers keep a record of the work covered in SPHE lessons to support programme planning and assist in smooth transitions in the event of staff changeover. The end-of-module review forms should also be used regularly to allow students to provide feedback on the work covered and to assess their learning. The information obtained will prove useful in informing ongoing programme development.

The SPHE co-ordinator provides an outline of the SPHE at the parents’ information evening for parents of first-year students and letters are issued prior to the commencement of the junior cycle RSE module. This is indicative of very good practice.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A whole-school approach is taken to providing for students’ social and personal development.
- There is a good level of collaboration between relevant staff to ensure that the SPHE programme retains an in-built flexibility to deal with issues that may arise in the course of the academic year.
- Teachers are very committed to providing a quality SPHE programme for junior cycle students.
- A very committed approach is taken to the co-ordination of SPHE.
- Some very good quality individual teacher planning was noted during the evaluation.
- At all times teaching and learning took place in a caring and supportive atmosphere.
- There is an agreed system for students’ folders and in some instances a very good range of student activities was evident.
- Some very good formative and summative assessment practices were noted in the lessons observed and in students’ folders.
- The competitions organised in SPHE are a commendable means of promoting health related issues among the wider school community.

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

- Senior management should identify and appoint a senior cycle RSE co-ordinator and establish a core team of relevant staff to plan, document and deliver a broad and balanced RSE programme to senior cycle students.
- The core teaching team for SPHE should be expanded and an appropriate CPD action plan should be devised and implemented.
- Collaborative subject planning practices should be enhanced and the team should further develop the common school-based programme plan for junior cycle SPHE.
- The use of digital presentations in lessons should be reviewed so as to maximise student engagement in the learning process.
A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and the teachers of SPHE at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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