An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal & Health Education
REPORT

Coláiste Muire
Crosshaven, County Cork
Roll number: 62200H

Date of inspection: 9 March 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 Coláiste Muire, Crosshaven. 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 examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed the school planning documentation and the teachers’ written preparation which was made available. 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

Coláiste Muire has, according to the documentation made available, provided students with social, personal and health education for over ten years. During this evaluation, the school culture was found to be supportive of the five over-arching aims of the junior cycle SPHE syllabus with a number of school systems, policies, practices and activities clearly supporting such aims. The teachers’ handbook provides a small, yet significant, example of this. It includes, amongst other items, a teacher’s prayer and a teacher’s survival kit, both of which are focused on positive affirmation, flexibility in dealing with people and the power of being human. SPHE is recognised in the school as an aspect of the whole-school approach to student support and care; this is clear from the links and references to SPHE in documentation relating to whole-school guidance and care. All of this is very positive.

SPHE is provided for all junior cycle students. In both first and second year, SPHE is timetabled appropriately for one period a week, and it is provided as a discrete, stand-alone subject. This is positive. For current third-year students, a cross-curricular approach has been adopted in relation to the teaching of SPHE, with the responsibility for the delivery of the SPHE curriculum being shared between the physical education, religion and science departments. It is planned to review this model at the end of May 2010. The risks of adopting a cross-curricular approach to the delivery of the SPHE curriculum should be given serious consideration in this review. These include the danger that elements of the programme might not be addressed or might not be addressed adequately. This is because Physical Education, Religion and Science are subjects which are bound, first and foremost, by their own individual syllabuses. While there is some overlap in content between these three subjects and SPHE, and while these subjects do have the potential to support the ten SPHE themes, it should not be expected that they can provide comprehensively for such themes. As a result, the school’s approach to the timetabling of SPHE
in each of first year and second year is strongly recommended as that to be used in the future timetabling of SPHE in third year. This recommendation finds its basis in Circular M11/03.

In junior cycle, RSE is delivered as a module within the SPHE programme. It is unclear however, due to the cross-curricular approach currently in use in the school, whether RSE is fully accommodated in third year. In senior cycle, RSE is anchored in Religion. It is positive to note that a senior cycle RSE programme has been developed and documented, and that the programme resonates well with the three themes identified in the Relationships and Sexuality Education Interim Guidelines, produced by the Department of Education and Skills. In line with Circular 0027/2008, the school has also developed an RSE policy. As this policy predates the provision, by the Department of Education and Skills, of a set of guidelines and a policy template, this policy is in need of review.

In reviewing the RSE policy, all concerned are directed to the Department’s template, and in particular to the sections of the template entitled “Guidelines for the management and organisation of RSE”, and “Ongoing support, development and review”. Additional resources for such work are also available on the website of the Drumcondra Education Centre at www.ecdrumcondra.ie. It would be important also to include a copy of the junior and senior cycle programmes of work as an appendix to any revised policy.

Much effort has gone into the development of a team of teachers who are both willing to teach, and interested in teaching, SPHE. Currently the team is largely female. Considering that the school is co-educational in nature, management is further encouraged in its efforts to seek to provide for greater gender balance in the make-up of the team. It is good to note that management seeks to ensure that the teacher assigned to a class group for the teaching of SPHE also teaches the group for another subject. As a means of enhancing the good teacher deployment patterns already evident, it is suggested that consideration be given to providing students with continuity in their teachers of SPHE from year to year. The timetabling challenges of implementing such a system are fully acknowledged in making this suggestion.

Some members of the team are very well trained, while others are less so. Overall, it is evident that there is a wealth of experience and knowledge relative to the subject within the team. Some consideration ought to be given to how a more structured sharing of this expertise might be further facilitated. For example, a template might be devised which would be completed by teachers who attend in-service and which could be filed in the subject department plan for colleagues to review. It is important to ensure that all teachers being timetabled to teach SPHE have completed the minimum, two-day, introductory training in advance of taking up the role. The SPHE support service provides this training annually. It is suggested, that at this point, an audit of the current training needs of the individual members of the SPHE team might be completed. This would inform an approach to training that would be both systematic and incremental. Further audits could be completed on an on-going basis, perhaps bi-annually, to coincide with the publication of the support service’s workshop schedules. Currently, these are published on www.sphe.ie in both September and January. It is positive that one teacher has completed senior cycle RSE training.

SPHE is well resourced in Coláiste Muire. A budget, which takes into account a submission made by the subject department each year, is allocated on an annual basis. This is very positive. Resources are centrally located in an area that can be readily accessed by all relevant teaching staff.
Communication with parents in relation to SPHE and RSE is quite well developed in the school. Parents are kept informed and involved through the provision of both information sessions and relevant seminars or workshops. This is commended. The inclusion of SPHE in the school’s template for reporting to parents, as will be recommended in the assessment section, would further enhance communication.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The members of the SPHE subject department engage in collaborative subject department planning. Management supports this through the provision of time for formal meetings. No evidence of the recording of minutes for such meetings was provided on the day of the inspection. As relevant therefore, this practice should be adopted. A co-ordinator, who oversees the planning work of the department, is in place. It is positive that the relevant training has been completed by the co-ordinator.

The school’s SPHE plan is a work in progress. It was noted that certain parts of this plan read more as a model of good practice, rather than an account of SPHE as it is actually provided for and delivered in the school. This needs to be considered when reviewing and updating the plan. At this point, and as a means of guiding the preparation of a subject plan that is reflective of provision and practice in SPHE in Coláiste Muire, the department is encouraged to complete a SCOT analysis. This would provide a strong basis for the subject plan, by helping the teachers to recognise the school’s strengths in terms of SPHE, while also identifying any challenges, opportunities and threats that may exist. The outcomes of the analysis should inform both the selection of content and the focus of planning for teaching and learning.

Outline programmes of work for each of the three year groups have been agreed and documented. These possess a number of positive features in that they are time-based, identify both modules and topics, and demonstrate good consistency with general syllabus content. As a means of enhancing these outline programmes of work, consideration should be given to the inclusion of relevant learning outcomes. The SPHE syllabus document will provide an excellent reference point for this very valuable addition.

From a review of the three outline programmes of work, it could be concluded that most thought went into the first-year programme, and into when and in what order the various modules and topics would be delivered. In contrast, second and third year programmes list the order of modules and topics as they are presented in the syllabus. While it is acceptable that the teachers decided to follow the sample programme plan as provided in the syllabus, best practice in programme planning is where this is adapted to take account of context factors other than school type and size. In relation to the third-year programme of work, and bearing in mind the school’s cross-curricular approach to SPHE in this year, it was not clear as to which subject department has responsibility for each module. It is recommended that the subject department review, as a priority, the second-year and third-year programmes of work. “Coping with Loss”, a topic from the “Belonging and Integrating” module in first year, is not provided for in the agreed programme of work. This also needs to be addressed as part of any planned programme review. Where guest speakers are utilised to support the delivery of a module or topic, this too should be embedded in the actual outline programmes of work. While the subject plan does make reference to the role of visiting speakers and the basic procedures that apply, a full, stand-alone policy on the use of guest speakers should be prepared. To support this work, all concerned are directed to the SPHE handbook and to the best practice guidelines outlined in Circular Letter 0023/10.
In time, consideration ought to be given to the preparation of more detailed programmes of work. Ideally these would identify, on a topic-by-topic basis, the relevant resources, methodologies, home tasks and assessment modes. In addition, space might also be provided for the documentation of teachers’ individual comment following the delivery of a lesson or module, as this fosters and facilitates the important task of review and evaluation. In advance of this work, individual teachers are encouraged to maintain a comprehensive personal record of work completed. In time, and with a view to preparing a more detailed, agreed programme of work for each of first, second and third years, these individual teacher records might be shared and discussed with fellow colleagues. This approach is suggested as it promotes discussion around teaching and learning in SPHE, while having the added advantage of ensuring that resources are ring fenced for use with a particular year group. This suggested recording, and eventual sharing, could culminate in the development of a document that might be entitled ‘A Guide to Teaching SPHE in Coláiste Muire’.

Review and evaluation, as previously mentioned, are key elements of a successful planning process. Accessing both students’ and parents’ voices is recognised as important in any review. It is now suggested that all concerned consider how the voices of parents and students in Coláiste Muire might be included in an annual review of the school’s SPHE programme.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Currently, six class groups are scheduled for discrete SPHE lessons in Coláiste Muire. Three lessons each with a different teacher and a different class group were visited as part of the subject inspection. The quality of teaching and learning observed varied from very good to just satisfactory.

Where the quality of teaching and learning was observed to be very good, it was supported by quality advanced planning and preparation. In this instance, the lesson was purposeful, with each planned activity demonstrating clear and direct relevance to the aims of the module being explored. In addition, the aims and the intended learning outcomes were shared and discussed with students as lessons commenced. As well as informing the class of the plan for the lesson, this approach had the added bonus of motivating students and, thereby, fostering their engagement and participation. Furthermore, a range of appropriate resources had been prepared and collected for use in the delivery of lesson content. Lesson plans were presented in some instances, indicating additional teacher commitment to careful and considered planning for lessons.

Where the quality of teaching and learning was just satisfactory, lesson content was not anchored in clear aims and objectives and this resulted in a growing disinterest amongst students. Simultaneously, and once again because lesson content was not grounded in syllabus aims and outcomes, lesson activities tended to lack relevance. As a result, students were easily distracted and in some cases disengaged from aspects of the lesson. As applicable, teachers are directed to the syllabus, which identifies the aims of each module, together with the desired learning outcomes. This information is a very valuable planning tool, as it can be used to evaluate the relevance and value of any planned activity. As a general recommendation, and as part of lesson introduction, all teachers should reference the module under investigation, as well as the relevant topic.

Overall, a range of methodologies was utilised in the delivery of lesson content, all of which called upon the direct involvement of students. Best practice was where a variety of methodologies was utilised over the course of a lesson. Where this was observed, student voice
and activity predominated. This is a positive finding, as the role of the teacher was balanced more in favour of teacher as facilitator of learning versus teacher as the source of all information and knowledge. This is a very valuable approach in SPHE lessons, where students will often learn as much, if not more, from each other, than they will from the teacher. The further promotion of student voice and activity in lessons is therefore encouraged. On occasions too, it was obvious that in choosing activities for a lesson the teacher sought to provide for students’ preferred learning styles, whether they were visual, auditory or kinaesthetic. This awareness and provision is to be credited.

On occasions, student involvement was limited to the answering of questions or the provision of opinions. In these instances, there was scope for expanding the ways in which student involvement is harnessed in lessons. Where teaching and learning were found to be just satisfactory, chosen activities were found to either fail to challenge students or fail to challenge them sufficiently. This could perhaps be attributed to students’ over-familiarity with a given strategy or approach, for example, group discussion of individual answers. In such instances, teachers are strongly urged to explore the use of the wide range of methodologies suited to the delivery of the SPHE curriculum. This includes, for example: icebreakers; brainstorming; individual, pair and group tasks or activities; artwork; case studies; walking debates and role play. The aim should be to choose a range of methodologies to support maximum student participation in a variety of constructive ways.

It was very obvious, in one lesson, that there was a consciousness around experiential learning, with its four distinct phases of experiencing, processing, generalising and applying. This approach is recommended for greater exploration and application by all SPHE teachers. The revised, Healthy Living and Healthy Times - Teachers Lesson Plans Booklet, which has been produced by the Health Promotion Service of the Health Service Executive (HSE) West, illustrates how this method can be applied effectively in the delivery of SPHE lessons. In addition, teachers should aim to ensure that lesson structure, and all associated activities, allow for the full application of this method and in the order listed. In doing so, it is important to bear in mind that the full realisation of this approach may require more than one lesson.

Group work was the dominant methodology in almost all three classroom settings. In some instances, this was very well managed, while in others, there was scope for improvement. Where group work was well managed, the following characteristics were in evidence: students were provided with clear instructions for assigned tasks; activities were time-bound; students were required to assume roles such as, for example, chairperson or spokesperson; students’ participation and work was closely monitored by the teacher, and teachers provided individual support and guidance as deemed necessary. In addition, feedback was taken in a constructive manner, and students were supported in drawing general conclusions from their discussions and their work. Where feedback was not well managed, the value and relevance of the work covered in a lesson was compromised. It is essential, therefore, that every effort is made to ensure that all activities are processed, as this is a way of ensuring that each student leaves the lesson with some learning, be that in terms of knowledge gained, skills developed, or the fostering or recognition of an attitude or value. With this in mind, consideration should be given to providing students with opportunities to reflect on their own personal learning at appropriate intervals, be that at the end of a lesson, topic or module. In the lessons observed, it was noted that no time was provided for summarising and reviewing learning. It is important to allow for this, particularly in SPHE lessons where students’ contact with the subject is but once weekly. Therefore, teachers are advised to make time for a lesson conclusion and, ideally, provide some insight into the work that is planned for the following lesson. These are helpful practices in guarding against students’ experience of SPHE reducing to a series of unfinished and unrelated events.
In relation to the provision of a classroom environment that is conducive to teaching and learning in SPHE, best practice was observed where the teacher deconstructed the traditional layout. In this instance, room arrangement fluctuated between arranging seats in one large circle and forming breakout groups to support student activity. This is further encouraged. A class contract was obvious in one lesson and the referencing of ground rules was also observed. These are good practices. The display of a class contract is recommended in all classes, as is its use in the management of student participation. Some classrooms displayed relevant material including students’ work. This is also further encouraged. In general, student-teacher rapport was positive, with a healthy level of mutual respect in evidence.

The students’ workbooks which were reviewed as part of the inspection indicated that exercises corresponding with the modules that should have been studied by that time of the year, as set down in the subject department’s agreed programme of work, had not been completed. This is a finding that requires further exploration at school level. If the outcome of this exploration indicates that other materials, for example handouts, are used more than the workbook, then the need for students to purchase a workbook should be reconsidered. If the use of handouts is a significant feature of SPHE lessons, it is recommended that teachers establish a system that supports the collation, filing and storage of these handouts. This would have the added benefit of providing a foundation for portfolio assessment, which is recommended for consideration in the next section.

**ASSESSMENT**

During the evaluation, there was some evidence of the assignment of home tasks but little or no evidence of the use of other approaches to assessment. As a result, it is recommended that the members of the SPHE subject department develop an SPHE-specific, assessment toolkit. The starting point for this work should be the outcomes that are offered at the end of each module in the syllabus. A varied approach is important, and several options exist in addition to home tasks, for example, assessment of classroom activities, 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. With a view to progressing this further, all concerned are directed to the Guidelines for Teachers, which provide a model on which the subject department’s work in relation to portfolio assessment could be based. It sets out, for example, the need to agree the criteria to be applied in relation to items for inclusion, as well as a formal recognition system for all items submitted. In time, students’ portfolios could also be used to inform formal feedback provided to parents.

It should be noted also that very 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 elaborated upon in the Guidelines for Teachers, which also provide some very accessible examples of AfL at work in the SPHE classroom. Teachers are encouraged to research this approach to teaching, learning and assessment.

Finally, the inclusion of SPHE on the school’s report template is also recommended. 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.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School culture is clearly supportive of the five over-arching aims of the junior cycle SPHE syllabus
- Overall, good teacher deployment patterns are evident in relation to SPHE.
- While some teachers are more experienced and more trained than others, clearly there is a wealth of experience and knowledge relative to SPHE amongst the members of the teaching team.
- SPHE is well resourced in Coláiste Muire.
- Communication with parents in relation to SPHE and RSE is quite well developed in the school.
- Some very good teaching practice was observed, and in such instances there was clear evidence of student engagement and learning.

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

- SPHE should be time-tabled as a discrete, stand-alone subject, and for one period each week for each class group in the junior cycle.
- Ongoing audits of the individual training needs of the SPHE teachers ought to be completed.
- The subject plan requires review, so that it reflects SPHE as it is specifically provided for and delivered in the school.
- The programmes of work for SPHE require review. This review should seek to ensure that all modules are included in each programme, and that context factors, over and above school type and size, are considered in the sequencing of programme content.
- It is recommended that all teachers of SPHE refer to module aims and learning outcomes at lesson planning stage, structure lessons around the theory of experiential learning, explore the use of a range of methodologies in lessons and consider the use of non-traditional classroom layouts.
- It is recommended that the members of the SPHE subject department develop an assessment toolkit.

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.