Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal & Health Education
REPORT

Christian Brothers College
Sidney Hill, Wellington Road, Cork
Roll number: 62520C

Date of inspection: 2 December 2009
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 Christian Brothers College, Cork. 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 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 and the subject teachers. The board of management of the school 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

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is appropriately provided for all junior cycle students in Christian Brothers College, in accordance with the requirements of circular M11/03. Students are, therefore, timetabled for one period of SPHE per week and SPHE is delivered as a discrete, stand-alone subject.

In junior cycle, Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is delivered in class by the SPHE teacher as part of the school’s SPHE programme, an approach which is consistent with best practice. In senior cycle, aspects of RSE are explored as part of religion lessons but, it would appear, on a rather ad hoc basis. As a result, and with reference to Circular 0027/2008, it is recommended that the provision for RSE in senior cycle be formalised. As a first step in this process, it is recommended that management reviews and updates the school’s RSE policy. All concerned are directed to the website of the Department of Education & Skills where circular 0027/2008, as well as additional circulars, namely M20/96 and M4/95, can be accessed. A template and a sample RSE policy are also available on the website. 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 also advised.

While it was clear that a number of school systems, policies and practices were found to be supportive of students’ social, personal and health education, it is suggested that SPHE, as a subject and a concept, could benefit from greater profiling among the general staff, the parent body, and among students. To this end, several options exist. Some suggested approaches to the
raising of the subject’s profile amongst the general staff include: provision for some whole-staff input from the SPHE Support Service or from the members of the SPHE team; and a staffroom notice-board designed to educate the whole staff in relation to the content and focus of the SPHE curriculum while simultaneously supporting a cross-curricular approach to students’ social, personal and health education. In terms of increasing parents’ knowledge and awareness of SPHE the following strategies might be employed: the issuing of an SPHE-specific information leaflet to parents; provision for input from the SPHE co-ordinator or teachers at all relevant parent meetings; and the inclusion of SPHE on the school report and school website. Finally, in relation to raising the profile of the subject among the students, a number of possibilities also exist including, for example, the provision of an SPHE notice board on one of the corridors. This would support the display of, for example, students’ work, competitions, relevant whole-school activities and photographs.

In recent times the SPHE team has expanded in size to include a greater number of teachers who are drawn from various subject specialisms. This is a positive finding, as such an approach proves beneficial in terms of general staff awareness of SPHE, allowing for a greater sharing of the school’s responsibility to provide students with SPHE, and in relation to greater access to wider expertise and the associated approaches and ideas. It is also very positive to note that the team is composed of both male and female teachers, particularly considering the all-male student population. In relation to staff deployment, best practice is where teachers assigned to a group in first year remain with the class through to the end of third year. This practice is recommended to management for consideration.

Some members of the SPHE team are very highly trained, while other members are entirely new to the subject. It should be noted that it is considered essential that all teachers of SPHE have completed, at the very minimum, the two-day, introductory training. It is recommended, therefore, that a training needs audit be completed, with a view to identifying the support that teachers currently require. These needs may be addressed by the SPHE Support Service’s workshop schedule, which is published twice annually, initially in September and again in January. In fact, it would be best that this schedule would inform the training needs audit. The staff charged with the delivery of the school’s senior cycle RSE programme should also be included as part of this audit and these teachers should be facilitated by management to attend the relevant training. To this end, it should be noted that the SPHE Support Service is currently providing RSE training that includes an introduction to a recently published senior cycle RSE resource entitled TRUST, *Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching Resource.*

Considering what is recognised as the ideal number of students for the delivery of the educational experience associated with SPHE and RSE, class sizes were found to be quite large, often accommodating up to thirty students. In light of this finding, the option of concurrently timetabling SPHE for each year group was shared with management. This approach to timetabling is suggested as it facilitates the deployment of an additional teacher or teachers for the teaching of SPHE, thereby facilitating a reduction in class size. Management’s reaction to this proposal was very positive.

All of the key SPHE resources have been sourced and these, which are centrally located, are easily accessed by all SPHE teachers. It is suggested, however, that the school library, which is accessible to students and teachers alike, may not be the best location for this material. Management and staff are therefore encouraged to seek out alternative storage possibilities. In terms of expanding the selection of resources currently available to staff, an action which is encouraged, the SPHE Support Service is well placed to advise in relation to resources that are deemed particularly relevant to the teaching of the various modules and topics to boys. The
school is well resourced in terms of information and communication technologies (ICT), with such technology being put to good use in some of the lessons observed as part of the subject inspection.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

All of the normal structures designed to support teachers in the task of subject-department planning were found to be in place. For example, the SPHE subject department is provided by management with time to meet formally as a teaching team, and a co-ordinator is in place, whose role is to support and oversee the work associated with subject department planning.

Up to this year, due to the fact that a very small number of teachers were involved in teaching SPHE, with only one teacher being assigned to deliver SPHE to each of first, second or third-year groups, programme planning was, in the main, carried out on an individual basis. In light of the recent change in the school’s approach to the deployment of staff for the teaching of SPHE, it is considered opportune to introduce a change to this practice. It is envisaged that as an alternative, the members of the subject department would plan each programme of work for each year group collaboratively. This would significantly enhance the outcomes of the planning process, namely the SPHE programmes of work, as it would facilitate greater access to a range of ideas relating to the structure of the SPHE programme in the school. In addition, and even more significantly, it would also allow for a valuable sharing of methodologies, resources, and approaches to assessment among the teaching team.

An outline programme of work has been agreed for each of the three years of junior cycle. This is positive. It is recommended that the SPHE teachers look at developing a one- to two-page document intended to identify, for each year, when each module and their related topics will be delivered. At a minimum, this document should identify the modules and topics to be covered on a term-by-term basis. It should also make reference to the intended aims and outcomes for each module, as identified in the syllabus. This would provide a very good outline programme of work and would prove very valuable to all teachers in the initial stages of planning and preparing for lessons. This document should also make reference to any whole-school events or activities deemed to support the five overarching aims of the junior cycle SPHE syllabus.

In time, the members of the SPHE department should look at developing a more detailed programme of work. It is envisaged that this would provide information relating to suitable methodologies, valuable resources, and approaches to assessment for each of the topics under exploration. In preparation for such a task, it is suggested that each teacher begins to maintain a comprehensive record of work covered. Ideally, this record would support the documentation of the following: term; week number; topic; methodologies; resources; assessment; and each teacher’s evaluation or comment on the lesson following delivery. Such a record would prove invaluable to the teaching team as it sets about developing a more detailed, agreed programme of work for each of first, second and third years. To begin, teachers of each year group could meet to agree a programme of work, followed by a general meeting of the entire team to ensure that there is no overlap in the different year group programmes, particularly in relation to resource selection and use. The co-ordinator could also play a role in relation to this. This would essentially culminate in the production of a document that could effectively be titled, *A Guide to Teaching SPHE in Christian Brothers College, Cork.* It was very clear that teachers are well placed to undertake this task, and their enthusiasm in relation to implementing the outlined suggestions was duly noted.
Overall, teachers’ individual planning for lessons was of a high quality. Lesson plans were prepared for a number of lessons and, taken as a whole, a large range and number of resources had been prepared and collected for use in the delivery of lesson content. Both of these findings indicated that, in general, teachers prepare thoroughly for lessons. Commendably, in the majority of lessons, planning was informed by both the SPHE syllabus and the associated teacher guidelines. These two publications are extremely important resources, particularly at lesson planning and preparation stage and particularly for teachers who are new to the subject. As relevant, the more inexperienced teachers are strongly encouraged to evaluate any planned lesson activity against the stated aims and learning outcomes for each topic under exploration. This approach helps to ensure that all planned activities are meaningful and relevant.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning in SPHE in Christian Brothers College was generally very good.

The majority of lessons commenced with a review of work previously covered, facilitated in the main by the questioning of students. As applicable this approach is further encouraged, as it helps to create continuity for students in a subject where class contact time is relatively limited. In most lessons, the plan for the lesson was openly shared with students, albeit at varying levels of detail. Best practice was where reference was made to the module and topic under exploration, as well as to the lesson’s intended learning outcomes. This approach is advocated for inclusion in all lessons and should be informed by the syllabus. Overall, lessons were purposeful and relevant, demonstrated structure, and were appropriately paced with a realistic amount of work planned for and delivered in the available time.

It is important to acknowledge that a number of teachers demonstrated a high level of competence and skill. Training will support the more inexperienced staff members in acquiring the confidence and ability to reach the same level.

It is interesting to note that neither ice-breakers nor energisers were utilised in the lessons observed, and is a finding that is possibly linked to the large class sizes observed and teachers’ possible unease with managing a large group without the support of the traditional classroom layout. In terms of setting the scene, and in relation to both managing and motivating students, these strategies are considered a valuable tool in the SPHE classroom. As a result, their incorporation is advocated for consideration.

In the main, lessons were planned and delivered in a way which maximised student participation in lesson content. This is a very positive finding. More often than not, such strategies were based on pair or group work. With a view to keeping motivation and interest levels high among the students, teachers are encouraged to vary the types of active learning strategies utilised in SPHE lessons. The *SPHE Handbook* and the *Guidelines for Teachers* provide a list of alternative strategies.

Activities were, generally speaking, very well managed. Clear instructions were issued to students and students understood what was required of them. Activities were time-bound, and students were made aware of this. Students were required to take responsibility for the assigned task and were asked to assume roles such as, for example, chairperson or spokesperson. Students’ participation and work was monitored closely by the teacher, with support and guidance being offered and provided as required. The latter provided ample opportunity for teachers to provide
for the educational needs of individual students through differentiation of instruction and task. This is highly praised. When and where activities were well organised, students participated in an enthusiastic and interested fashion. As required, teachers are directed to the *Guidelines for Teachers* for further guidance about using group work.

In a number of lessons excellent provision was made for students’ varied learning styles, be they visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. As applicable, a good self-evaluation tool for teachers is to ask oneself how a lesson provides for each of these identified learning styles.

The experiential method, which is recognised as a highly appropriate method for use in SPHE lessons, while well provided for in one lesson, was not evident in the majority of lessons. Teachers are encouraged to explore the four phases of this teaching method, namely experiencing, processing, generalising and applying. The revised *Healthy Living – 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 very effectively and very easily applied in the delivery of SPHE lessons. In addition, teachers are encouraged to seek 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. Every effort should be made by teachers therefore, to ensure that students leave each lesson with some little nugget of learning, which might be manifested for example in students gaining knowledge, acquiring a skill or perhaps recognising in themselves an attitude or value. If this is not provided for students, experience of SPHE can become nothing more than a series of unrelated events.

On occasions, teacher input tended to predominate, and very often this occurred even when students were well placed to contribute to lesson content. As lessons commenced, for example, some teachers tended to tell students what they had explored in the last lesson rather than asking the students for their own input and insight. Likewise, there was also a tendency, particularly in the summary of lesson content, for teachers to tell students what they might have learnt from a particular activity or exercise rather than asking students for their own interpretation or understanding of what was garnered from the activity or lesson. To this end, 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, on occasions, students can learn as much from each other as from their teacher.

Question-and-answer sessions were, generally speaking, well utilised to develop lesson content. Students were given sufficient time to answer and students’ answers were also affirmed. On occasions, it was found that it would have been better to involve more students in question–and-answer sessions and that teachers could have built on students’ understanding by the use of more open questions and by encouraging students to explain and justify their thinking. As alluded to previously, the use of questioning at the lesson outset and at the conclusion of lessons could be further improved, in order to ascertain the level of students’ understanding and learning. In some lessons students’ answers to questions showed an ability to respond well, together with a clear understanding of the topics being explored.

On the whole, classroom environment, which is determined largely by room arrangement, didn’t fully support the creation of a participatory learning environment. Where possible, teachers are encouraged to ‘deconstruct’ the traditional classroom layout during SPHE lessons. Classroom atmosphere was generally positive and where this was the case relations between students and their teacher were based on respectful interactions. Occasionally it was found that students were
not so good at listening to the teacher or to each other. The ground rules, which should be agreed and drawn up by students at the start of the year, would provide a good basis for challenging and addressing inappropriate student behaviour, such as talking out of turn and inattentiveness. Ground rules should be openly displayed and, as required, referred to over the course of lessons.

It is suggested that the decision to introduce an SPHE textbook be kept under review. This suggestion stems mainly from the fact that this resource is possibly under utilised.

**ASSESSMENT**

The assessment of students’ progress and achievement in SPHE in Christian Brothers College is an area that is in need of further exploration and work. It should be stated, however, that this is not an unusual finding in the context of SPHE, due in the main to the fact that SPHE is not an examination subject. Nevertheless, it is a finding that needs to be addressed.

Classroom observation was cited as one of the key modes of assessment utilised by teachers in determining students’ progress and achievement in SPHE. While the value of this approach is acknowledged, its role in terms of providing clear evidence of student achievement with regard to the learning outcomes identified in the syllabus is questionable. The department is encouraged therefore to look at developing an assessment tool-kit. 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.

A number of options exist, 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. It is good to note that with this end in sight, teachers are already encouraging students to maintain a file of the work undertaken during SPHE lessons. With a view to progressing this further, all concerned are directed to the Guidelines for Teachers, which provide a model on which the 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 submitted items. In time, students’ portfolios could be used to inform feedback provided to parents.

While there was some evidence in planning documentation of the use of lesson review exercises and module reflection exercises, there was little concrete evidence of such practice in students’ folders. As applicable therefore, this practice is further encouraged, as it too would inform teachers’ judgements in relation to students’ learning in SPHE. Teachers are encouraged to use a variety of approaches to such activities, as students tend to tire of review and reflection exercises when the approach to it becomes predictable and repetitive. Such exercises should seek to provide opportunities for students to reflect, not just on the knowledge garnered, but also on the skills or attitudes that may have been fostered and developed. End-of-module or end-of-topic, as opposed to end-of-lesson exercises, might be best placed to provide for all three. In addition, these exercises could be used to get feedback from students in relation to what went well and what did not go so well in each lesson. The outcomes of this can be used to inform future lesson planning and delivery. To this end, templates are provided in both the Guidelines for Teachers, as well as in the SPHE Handbook. Teachers are strongly encouraged to file summaries of students’ evaluations.
As mentioned previously, the inclusion of SPHE on the school’s report template is strongly advocated. The SPHE department will require management’s support in order to implement this recommendation. 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 department’s exploration of assessment, some consideration could also be given to how the school might reward or acknowledge students’ completion of each year’s study. A school certificate, for example, might be developed.

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 discussed in the Guidelines for Teachers, which also provides some very accessible examples of AfL at work in the SPHE classroom. Teachers are encouraged to research this approach to teaching, learning and assessment.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- SPHE is appropriately provided for all junior cycle students in accordance with the requirements of circular M11/03.
- A number of school systems, policies and practices where found to be supportive of student’s social, personal and health education.
- A percentage of the SPHE teachers are very highly trained.
- All of the normal structures designed to support teachers in the task of subject-department planning where found to be in place.
- An outline programme of work has been agreed for each year group.
- Overall, teachers’ individual planning for lessons was of a high quality.
- The quality of teaching and learning in SPHE in Christian Brothers College was generally very good.
- In the main, lessons were planned and delivered in a way which maximised student participation in lesson content.
- In a number of lessons excellent provision was made for students’ varied learning styles, be they visual, auditory and kinaesthetic.
- Classroom atmosphere was generally positive.
- Planning documentation indicates the use of lesson review exercises and module reflection exercises.

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

- It is recommended that the provision for RSE in senior cycle be formalised. To begin this process, management needs to provide for a review of the school’s RSE policy.
- SPHE, as a subject and a concept, could benefit from greater profiling, amongst the general staff, the parent body, and amongst the students.
- Management is encouraged in its efforts to seek to ensure that teachers assigned to a group in first year remain with the class through to the end of third year.
- It is recommended that a training needs audit be completed, with a view to identifying the individual support required by members of the teaching team.
• It is recommended that teachers consider adopting a more collaborative approach to planning, including the further development of the outline programme of work and the development of more detailed programmes of work.

• The assessment of students’ progress and achievement in SPHE in Christian Brothers College is an area that is in need of further exploration and work.

Post-evaluation meetings were 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 is pleased with the recognition the inspector gives to the work currently being undertaken in the SPHE Department. The SPHE syllabus in CBC is also reflected in our well developed pastoral care support systems and on a whole staff level through staff development days.

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

Teacher resources have been relocated away from the library in line with the recommendations. Management have been very receptive to the suggestion of modifying the school report to include comments which would be appropriate to SPHE. The staff training needs audit has been completed and training is being facilitated by management.