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

REPORT

St Joseph’s Secondary School
Drogheda, Co. Louth
Roll number: 63840C

Date of inspection: 1 October 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 Joseph’s Secondary 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 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 the SPHE co-ordinator. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Joseph’s Secondary School has a long tradition of providing for the social and personal development of its students. Prior to the introduction of a formal timetabled SPHE lesson, the school provided a weekly pastoral care period. In line with the school’s ethos the care structures continue to make a significant contribution to students’ wellbeing. The care and guidance teams together with the year heads and form tutor structure are important elements of the care system. The recently-developed whole-school pastoral care policy clearly articulates the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in the care programme. This is good practice.

While SPHE is timetabled for one class period per week for all junior-cycle students two issues impact on the effectiveness of programme delivery. SPHE time is combined with a weekly tutor period where teachers must complete form-tutor duties as part of the SPHE lesson. It was evident during the evaluation that this arrangement impacts negatively on the tuition time available for SPHE. The important role of form tutor as a pastoral support for students is acknowledged. However, tutor work should not erode the tuition time for SPHE. Therefore, in order to support high-quality learning in SPHE, it is recommended that form-tutor time be de-coupled from SPHE lessons.

Evidence gathered during the evaluation indicates that there are occasions when SPHE class time may be used to teach other subjects. This issue must be addressed by management. To ensure compliance with Circular Letter M11/03 all designated SPHE time must be used for the sole purpose of providing a taught junior-cycle SPHE curriculum programme. This will ensure that all junior-cycle students have access to SPHE in accordance with the Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools.
The personal development module provided as part of the Transition Year (TY) programme is a valuable support for students’ personal and social development. Appropriate provision is made for senior cycle Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). Very good practice is evident in the deployment of staff to senior cycle RSE. Teachers are assigned in line with their knowledge and expertise. To assist in the facilitation of a high-quality programme, one teacher has availed of training in the use of the recently developed TRUST (Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching) resource for teaching RSE in senior cycle. To build capacity, it is recommended that additional RSE teachers avail of this training.

The arrangements for assigning teachers to teach junior-cycle SPHE should be reviewed. The teaching of SPHE forms part of the duties assigned to the role of form tutor. While this practice helps to establish a rapport with the class group, it is also presenting challenges. There is a very large group of teachers, almost all of whom are assigned to teach SPHE to one class group. This has impacted negatively on the creation of a sense of a subject department for SPHE and on ensuring consistency of programme provision for all junior-cycle students. It was also reported that some tutors may not wish to teach SPHE while at the same time there are other members of staff who are not tutors but have the necessary expertise and would like to teach SPHE. In the context of future deployment the role of form tutor should be de-coupled from the role of SPHE teacher. Therefore, it is recommended that the principal seeks expressions of interest from staff and following consultation establish a core team of SPHE teachers. It was evident during the evaluation that there is sufficient capacity and interest among teachers to establish a highly-skilled core team.

Senior management is supportive of continuing professional development (CPD) as a means of supporting high quality implementation of a SPHE programme. While there has been some level of past engagement with subject-specific CPD it is an area where there is scope for development. It is recommended that senior management carries out a needs analysis among the teachers of SPHE and devises an action plan to facilitate a systematic and incremental approach to CPD among all teachers of SPHE. It should be routine practice that all teachers new to SPHE attend at least the introductory in-service provided by the SPHE Support Service. The good practice of recording attendance at CPD by senior management was noted. A record of CPD attendance at the introductory, continuation and RSE training should be also included in a subject plan. A copy of the information supplied at in-service should be retained in a subject-specific CPD folder. This information can be used to assess ongoing CPD needs and can be referred to at planning meetings as a means of sharing good practice.

A number of whole-school policies that support SPHE need attention. In line with Department guidelines a substance use policy is in place. This policy would benefit from a review to ensure that the information reflects current practices and procedures within the school. Senior management and staff recognise the importance of creating a positive learning environment. As evident in the students’ journal the school has a code of practice for dealing with bullying behaviour. It is planned to schedule a whole-staff CPD on bullying prevention. This is a very worthwhile initiative. Further information on the current in-service schedule on bullying prevention is available from the SPHE Support Service (www.sphe.ie). As a matter of urgency it is recommended that the anti-bullying policy document, which had been mislaid, be re-drafted and updated to reflect the current good practice in the school and to ensure that it complies with the requirements of the Department of Education and Skills. The current model of policy development used in revising recent policies will effectively support this work.

There is need to develop and ratify a whole-school RSE policy to support the implementation of the RSE programme. It is recommended that the board of management, through collaboration
with senior management, staff, students and parents make provision for the development of a RSE policy in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Department in Circular Letter 37/10. These guidelines can be downloaded from the education personnel section of the Department’s website at www.education.gov.ie There is also a need for senior management and the SPHE team to devise a policy on the use of visiting speakers that is in keeping with Department Circular Letter 0023/2010.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

School structures that support collaborative subject department planning have not been effective for SPHE. During the evaluation it was evident that there is a blurring of lines between the teaching of SPHE, tutor duties and the care structures in the school. It is recommended that systems and procedures be reviewed to facilitate collaborative planning for SPHE as a curricular subject rather than as an element of the care programme.

In the current academic year the co-ordination of SPHE is part of the duties attached to a special-duties post of responsibility. The post-holder is new to the area of SPHE and displays a high level of interest and enthusiasm for leading the work of a subject team. The co-ordinator is not teaching SPHE. In recognising the significant challenges involved in co-ordinating a subject that one is not teaching this arrangement should be reviewed. Good practice would suggest that the subject co-ordinator should be assigned to teach at least one SPHE class. CPD from the SPHE Support Service should also be accessed by the co-ordinator as soon as is feasible to support the work about to be undertaken. As capacity is built among a core team the practice of aligning the role of subject co-ordinator to a post of responsibility should be re-considered. It is more beneficial to rotate the position among the teaching team in order to build capacity and to enable each teacher to assume a leadership role in the continuing development of the subject.

Teachers work well together and a lot of ongoing informal collaboration takes place. Management facilitates formal planning at the beginning of each academic year. However, due to the fact that all of the SPHE teachers are involved in teaching other subjects, difficulties can emerge that restrict full attendance at meetings. This has impacted negatively on formalised subject planning for SPHE. To overcome this problem it is recommended that management gives consideration to scheduling subject-specific slots for team meetings to avoid such clashes. While it is recognised that all necessary planning cannot be facilitated on a formal basis, some additional planning meetings should be scheduled as part of the calendar of staff meetings to support ongoing planning and review. The newly appointed co-ordinator has initiated the process of keeping records of subject meetings. This is very good practice and will facilitate continuity between meetings and will support planning.

At the time of the evaluation no common programme plan for junior-cycle SPHE was being implemented. Some teachers were working from a previously designed programme plan; others were using an exemplar plan from the SPHE Teacher Guidelines while the work of some classes was based on a text book. This has resulted in there being a significant variation in the quality of programme implementation and presents significant challenges for teachers in facilitating a quality SPHE programme. It is strongly recommended that the SPHE team, on a collaborative basis, develops a coherent and balanced three-year programme of work for junior-cycle SPHE in the school. The school programme should include information on the topics that will be covered in each module on a term-by-term basis for each year group. The specific amount of time allocated to each module should be clarified. Clear learning outcomes should be identified for each module of work in each year to ensure that there is an incremental approach taken to the
development of students’ knowledge, attitudes and skills from first year through to third year. This will allow certain topics to be revisited, thus ensuring that a spiral approach is being adopted to the implementation of the programme whilst also avoiding unnecessary duplication. This enhanced approach to collaborative planning will support teachers by assisting with lesson delivery and inform ongoing reflective practice.

When developing the school programme for SPHE particular attention should focus on the use of appropriate teaching and assessment strategies as well as suitable resources to support students’ learning. Reviewing the effectiveness of particular teaching and learning strategies and resources should be routinely included as an item on the agenda of planning meetings in order to share good practice in facilitating SPHE lessons. To support this work, it is recommended that the school invite the SPHE Support Service to facilitate a school-based CPD input with the co-ordinator and a core team. Contact can be made with the local regional development officer through the SPHE Support Service website at www.sphe.ie

As a starting point all teachers of SPHE in the current year should use the outline programme plan devised by a previous co-ordinator. This plan includes a very good range of themes as it is based on the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework* produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). As teachers work through this plan, particular attention should be paid to recording the planned learning outcomes and noting the teaching strategies and resources used in each lesson that proved particularly effective. This information should then be collated and used to inform the development of the three-year plan.

A range of co-curricular and cross-curricular events support students’ social and personal development during the school year. Very good links have been made with the guidance team to support aspects of the SPHE programme that overlap with Guidance. Some very good cross-curricular links with Science, Biology and Agricultural Science were noted as a means of reinforcing students’ learning. The effectiveness of this practice was praised by the students who met with the inspectors during the evaluation. To optimise student learning in SPHE, all co-curricular and cross-curricular activities should be incorporated into the common three-year programme plan in a manner that ensures that the topics covered before and after these activities supports student learning. Particular attention needs to be given to the integration of the *Positive Youth Educators Programme* (PYE) into the first-year SPHE programme. This programme has the potential to develop student leadership skills and to support peer learning. However, any lesson delivered by students needs to be planned in close collaboration with the first-year SPHE teachers so as to make certain the appropriateness of the content within the overall programme plan for first year.

The TY module plan is underdeveloped and does not reflect the very good work done by the teachers concerned. This programme plan should be further developed to include a set of overarching aims for the module, learning outcomes for each area of study and information on suitable teaching and assessment strategies. A broad and balanced RSE programme is taught as a module within the Religious Education Programme to students in fifth and sixth year. Additional information regarding intended learning outcomes, suitable resources and teaching strategies should now be included.

It is acknowledged by management and staff that the range of shared resources available for SPHE is unsatisfactory. Senior management is supportive of providing additional resources but teachers need to adopt a proactive approach in addressing resource issues. It is recommended that the SPHE team led by the co-ordinator carry out an audit of resources. Senior management and the SPHE co-ordinator should then devise an action plan to address proactively the shortfalls
identified. The newly acquired resources should be centrally stored and remain the property of the school in the event of staff turnover.

Some very good ongoing planning practice was evident in the work of individual teachers. In some cases teachers are supporting their class work by developing their own planning folder that includes information on lesson delivery and the resources to be used. This information should be used to inform the development of the collaborative programme of work as outlined above.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Four junior-cycle SPHE lessons and one TY personal development lesson were observed during the evaluation. All lessons took place in a secure and supportive atmosphere. It was clear that positive relationships exist between the students and their teachers. Where student-led activities such as group work, pair work or individual reflections took place, these were well managed by the teachers and produced good learning outcomes. In one classroom visited the provision of a dedicated space to display key words relevant to SPHE served to create a sense of shared student ownership in the learning process. The wider use of this very good practice should be considered.

All lessons were purposeful and had a clear focus. However, in almost all of the lessons observed there was scope to adjust the pace or pitch of the content covered to a level more commensurate with students’ experiences and stage in the programme. For example, the content of some of the lessons observed would have been more appropriate to students at an earlier stage in the junior-cycle programme. On other occasions lesson content and structure was over-reliant on the class textbook which in turn seemed to impede the incremental nature of learning in SPHE. This difficulty highlights the need for the SPHE team to develop and implement a coherent three-year programme plan that facilitates a spiral approach to the acquisition of student knowledge and the development of skills and attitudes.

The personal contribution and commitment that the teachers made to teach their classes was much in evidence throughout all of the lessons observed. Lessons began by making links with previously taught material. This is good practice. In a number of lessons the advance preparation and effective use of a number of well-chosen resources served to stimulate students’ interest and support learning in a manner that was in keeping with the rationale underpinning the junior-cycle curriculum framework. In a lesson on Goal Setting very good use was made of two case studies that challenged the students to apply the knowledge learned in a previous lesson. Students, in completing a task assigned, had to apply what was an abstract concept to a concrete situation. This strategy supported effective experiential learning as it involved students in the four key stages of experiencing, processing, generalising and applying their learning. Information and communications technology (ICT) was effectively used in another lesson to provide visual images and relevant quotations that effectively clarified higher-order concepts and enhanced students’ understanding. Handouts containing true/false statements and word searches were also integrated into other lessons. Teachers should consider compiling a shared folder of such resources to support collaborative planning.

Some lessons began by sharing the learning objectives with students. This strategy proved very effective in focusing students’ attention and in ensuring that students understood the relevance of the content being studied. One particularly good example of this assessment for learning (AfL) strategy occurred in a lesson dealing with Study Skills. In keeping with the rationale underpinning SPHE, the learning objectives chosen illustrated a very good balance between knowledge acquisition, student reflection and skills development. During the lesson the objectives were re-
visited to consolidate students' learning and to facilitate opportunities for student reflection and self-evaluation. This is indicative of very good practice. It is recommended that learning objectives that demonstrate an appropriate balance between knowledge acquisition and skills development be shared with students at the start of all lessons. This practice should assist with the pace and pitch of lessons and inform the choice of teaching strategies deployed.

Questioning strategies were well used in all lessons to stimulate student interest and to support learning. On occasion students were provided with opportunities to develop skills and confidence in group-work and pair-work activity. These strategies enabled students to actively engage with the topic and to discuss the issues with their peers. They also provide opportunities for quieter students to develop social skills. In other lessons observed there was an over-reliance on teacher-led activity. Active experiential learning is a key principle underpinning the teaching and learning of SPHE. Therefore, it is recommended that all teachers be mindful of incorporating strategies that allow for an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-led activity. The active engagement of teachers with subject-specific CPD will facilitate this adjustment.

Students who met with the inspectors during the evaluation recognise the value of SPHE as a means of supporting their learning in a broad range of areas such as alcohol and drugs, healthy lifestyles and communication skills. Students indicated a willingness to participate in lessons and to respond appropriately to lesson content. A review of students’ copybooks indicated that they are making good progress this year. However, evidence of the quality of student learning from SPHE lessons in previous years varied significantly in the classes visited. There is no agreed system for the storage and filing of student work from SPHE. Therefore, in most instances the work covered referred to this year only. Where students did retain copybooks from first year through to third year it was noted that in some instances they were using the same copybooks for SPHE and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). It is recommended that this practice be discontinued.

Due to the integrated and holistic nature of the SPHE programme, students need to reflect on work covered in previous years. Therefore, it is recommended that an agreed system of folders that enables students to store and file information from their SPHE class from first year through to third year be introduced. This good practice allows the students to build up a body of work over the years, to which they can refer, and facilitates the safe storage of personal information.

**Assessment**

In all of the lessons observed questioning strategies together with teacher monitoring of class activities served to assess individual levels of learning and was used to provide affirmation and feedback on the tasks assigned. This is good practice. The aims of SPHE highlight the need for students to be provided with opportunities for regular review and reflection. One particularly effective strategy to support this practice was evident in a lesson where students, as a routine part of the lesson, recorded the learning objective in their copybook and had an opportunity to reflect on their progress. This is very good practice.

A review of a random selection of student textbook and copybooks indicated that there is scope to provide students with additional opportunities to record activities from class or to engage in personal-reflection or group activities. This will support students to grapple with the topics under discussion, challenge their own ideas and reflect on their learning. Therefore, it is recommended that students be provided with further opportunities to complete written activities from either the students’ textbook or other resources. This would build up a bank of work that students could
reflect on throughout their SPHE programme. It is essential that the activities selected be linked to the learning outcomes and assessment strategies planned for the lesson.

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning in SPHE. To enhance practice the SPHE team needs to review and collectively agree a range of assessment tools that would be used in SPHE lessons to monitor progress and to provide feedback to students and parents. In this context particular attention should be given to discussing the potential of a personal reflection log as an assessment strategy for the TY module. It is important that any assessment modes agreed are fully compatible with the aims and objectives of the SPHE syllabus and implemented consistently among the SPHE team. Further information is available in the Guidelines for Teachers (pp 59-68) and the SPHE Teachers Handbook available from the SPHE Support Service.

Some good record-keeping practice is evident among teachers. However, all teachers should keep a record of the work completed in SPHE to inform planning. This practice would also ensure effective and efficient continuity and progress with classes in the event of staff changeover.

The school operates the good practice of providing feedback to parents on students’ progress in SPHE at parent-teacher meetings. In the context of developing an assessment policy for SPHE, the team should consider the use of school reports as an additional means of providing feedback to parents and students.

To support programme planning the SPHE team should use the end-of-module review forms to allow students to provide feedback on the work covered and to assess their learning. A mechanism that would allow parental feedback to inform the cycle of review and evaluation could also be considered.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The care structures in the school make a significant contribution to supporting students’ social and personal development.
- The personal development module provided as part of the Transition Year (TY) programme is a valuable support for students’ personal and social development.
- Appropriate provision is made for senior cycle Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) with very good deployment practices evident.
- Staff members work well together and a lot of ongoing informal collaboration takes place among SPHE teachers.
- Very good links have been made with the guidance team to support aspects of the SPHE programme that overlap with Guidance.
- Some very good ongoing planning practice was evident in the work of individual teachers.
- All lessons took place in a secure and supportive atmosphere. It was clear that positive relationships exist between the students and their teachers.
- The personal contribution and commitment that the teachers made to teach their classes was much in evidence throughout all of the lessons observed.
- In a number of lessons the advance preparation and effective use of a number of well-chosen resources served to stimulate students’ interest and support learning.
- Students who met with the inspectors during the evaluation recognise the value of SPHE as means of supporting their learning in a broad range of areas.
• In lessons observed students indicated a willingness to participate and responded appropriately to lesson content.
• Questioning strategies together with teacher monitoring of class activities served to assess individual levels of learning and to provide affirmation and feedback on the tasks assigned.

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

• All timetabled provision for SPHE should be used solely for the purposes of facilitating a broad SPHE programme indicative of the Junior Cycle Curriculum Framework.
• Senior management following consultation with staff should establish a core team of SPHE teachers to work in close collaboration with the SPHE co-ordinator. A systematic and incremental CPD programme should be implemented to support the work of this team.
• A RSE policy should be developed in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Department in Circular Letter 37/10.
• A three-year programme of work for junior-cycle SPHE that demonstrates a coherent, incremental and balanced approach to students’ learning should be implemented by all teachers of SPHE. All co-curricular and cross-curricular activities should be integrated into the programme plan.
• The SPHE team led by the co-ordinator should carry out an audit of resources and devise an action plan that proactively addresses the shortfalls identified.
• In all lessons learning objectives should be shared with students from the outset and be used to devise strategies that allow for an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-led activities.
• Students should be provided with further opportunities to complete written activities as part of SPHE lessons. An agreed system of folders that enables students to store and file information from first year through to third year should be introduced.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and SPHE co-ordinator at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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