Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal & Health Education
REPORT

North Presentation Secondary School
Farranree, Cork
Roll number: 626211

Date of inspection: 11 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 North Presentation Secondary School, Cork. 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 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

North Presentation Secondary School demonstrates a strong tradition of providing for the affective education of its student cohort. The school, for example, provided a health education programme long before schools were required to do so. It is also clear that a large number of school systems, policies and practices where found to be supportive of student’s social, personal and health education, in the broadest sense of the word. This includes, for example, the school’s support centre, which focuses on building positive relationships with students in order to help them better partake in formal education. In addition to normal operations, the support centre also runs a number of targeted support programmes. For example, an induction programme which operates in the school each September for first-year class groups, and a ‘Copping On’ programme with third students, which is designed to enhance students understanding of the criminal justice system. Many of the themes explored as part of both these programmes are directly related to a number of the themes of the SPHE programme.

Timetabled provision for SPHE is in line with the requirements of Circular M11/03. Junior-cycle students are therefore timetabled for one period of SPHE per week, and SPHE is delivered as a discrete, stand-alone subject. In line with the aforementioned tradition, current Transition Year (TY) students, as well as a percentage of senior-cycle students, namely those who opt not to undertake the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), are also provided with a Social & Health module. This additional provision is praised.

In junior cycle, RSE is generally delivered in class by the SPHE teachers, as part of the school’s SPHE programme. There were some indications that teachers work in relation to the delivery of the junior-cycle RSE module is periodically supported by the inclusion of input from guest speakers. This practice should be acknowledged in the junior-cycle programme of work. As a
matter of urgency, the school’s provision for RSE in senior cycle needs to be formalised, in line with the requirements of circular 0027/2008. As a first step in this process, it is recommended that management prioritise the development of an 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. The website also plays host to a planning template and a sample RSE policy. 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 strongly advised. As part of the development of this appendix, discussions around when and where the content will be delivered, as well as who will be responsible for the delivery of the programme, will need to be held. The detail surrounding the outcomes of this discussion should be included in the aforementioned appendix.

Class sizes, which in general range from fifteen to twenty students, are most conducive to the delivery of the SPHE programme. Deployment of staff for the teaching of SPHE benefits from the stated practice that, when and where feasible, efforts are made to ensure continuity of teachers from first year through to third year. In addition, management also seeks to ensure that the teacher assigned to a class group to deliver SPHE, also teaches the class for another subject. This is praised for the value it has in promoting well-informed teacher-student relations, an excellent basis for the delivery of SPHE. While a relatively stable, core team of SPHE teachers exists in the school, there is also an openness to having new staff members join this team. This is positive. Management highlighted that teachers are always consulted prior to being assigned to teach SPHE, another positive deployment practice evident in North Presentation Secondary School.

Only three to four of the eight teachers engaged in the teaching of SPHE have availed of formal training. This needs to be addressed as a priority, and in the short-term. Any teacher assigned to teach SPHE should, at a very minimum, have completed the two-day introductory training, which is provided on an annual and on-going basis by the SPHE Support Service. In addition to this training, the Support Service offers a comprehensive range of other very valuable workshops. It is recommended that an audit of the subject department’s training needs be completed and that the outcomes of the audit be utilised to inform a systematic and incremental approach to training. These needs may be addressed by the 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 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.

Resources for use in the teaching of SPHE have been sourced and collated. These are centrally located and therefore easily accessed by all SPHE teachers. In terms of expanding the collection of resources currently available to staff, an action which is encouraged, the Support Service is well placed to advise in relation to valuable resources. It was also obvious that a number of the teachers have developed their own personal resource collection. Consideration might be given to how other members of the department might be made aware of such resources and how access to these personal collections might be facilitated. North Presentation Secondary School is well resourced in relation to information communication technologies (ICTs), and it was good to see this technology being utilised in a number of the lessons observed as part of the subject inspection.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

In stark contrast to the finding in the previous section, whereby social, personal and health education, as a general concept, was found to be fully embraced and provided for in the school, the findings in relation to planning and preparation strongly suggest that the SPHE programme is not given the recognition it merits. The findings that will follow suggest a lack of understanding relative to the potential the programme has in relation to contributing to overall student care and support in the school. This is also evident in the school’s pastoral care policy, which documents aspects of school practice and organisation that combine to form the school’s student care structure and which, it should be said, are many and varied. However, it does not make any specific reference to SPHE. Perhaps, this offers a starting point for the rethinking that it appears is needed in the school relative to SPHE and its potential to contribute to school systems which are intended to support students.

None of the normal structures designed to support teachers in the task of subject-department planning were found to be in place. A subject co-ordinator, for example, has not been appointed. This is a significant drawback in relation to planning and preparation in SPHE, where teachers are very often in need of guidance, direction or support, and where the fostering of a collegial, cooperative and team approach to planning is essential to optimal implementation and delivery of the programme. The absence of a co-ordinator is also noted as very poor practice in instances where, and as is the case in this school, a significant percentage of the teachers have not accessed, or have not been facilitated in accessing, the relevant training. As a result, the appointment of a co-ordinator is recommended for immediate consideration. No records relating to formal, subject department meetings were available for review, a finding which stems directly from the fact that such meetings are not facilitated by management. This raises concerns about coherence in the delivery of the programme. As a result, it is recommended that management give serious consideration to how this matter might be addressed.

As a direct outcome of the previous two findings, a subject plan has not been prepared in relation to SPHE in North Presentation Secondary School. It is recommended that this finding is addressed as soon as is practicable. Furthermore, an agreed programme of work for each of first, second and third years has not been developed collaboratively by the relevant teachers. There was clear evidence, however, of individual teacher planning of programmes of work. While this is a positive finding, it is strongly suggested that, as an alternative, the members of the subject department would plan the 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. As a start, 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. The subject syllabus, as well as the associated teacher guidelines, are two publications that are considered an extremely important resource for such planning work.
As a follow-on planning activity, it is suggested that, in time, the SPHE teachers would look at developing a more detailed programme of work. This should 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 teachers begin to maintain a record of work covered. The template designed for such work should make provision for information such as the following: term; week number; topic; methodologies; resources; assessment and teacher evaluation or comment. This type of record will prove invaluable to the teachers as they attempt, in time, to develop a more detailed, programme of work for each of first, second and third years. To begin teachers of each year-group could meet to agree a more detailed 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 North Presentation Secondary School, Cork*. In addition to this, it would also promote discussion amongst the teaching team relative to teaching and learning in SPHE. For both of the reasons outlined, it is an approach that is strongly encouraged.

Teachers are encouraged to revisit two booklets prepared some years previously and reviewed as part of the subject inspection, one which relates to first year SPHE and the other which relates to second year RSE. These demonstrate significant commitment on the part of teachers, and the work undertaken in their preparation is acknowledged and praised. They suggest an approach that could perhaps be rejuvenated in the school.

Planning was apparent in each lesson observed, with some very high quality lesson planning evident in some instances, including the development of detailed lesson plans. A good range and number of resources were prepared and/or collected for use in the delivery of lesson content, including information communication technologies. Both of these findings indicated that teachers prepare well for lessons.

**Teaching and Learning**

The overall quality of teaching and learning in SPHE in North Presentation Secondary School is good.

The majority of lessons commenced with a short recap of work covered in the preceding lesson. This approach is particularly commended in SPHE lessons for the continuity it helps to forge between lessons, which take place only once weekly. In one instance a smart board was very well utilised to support this process, enabling the re-introduction of material, through the display of saved screen shots, which stimulated students’ memory and supported students’ input in relation to previous work.

Lessons demonstrated a clear relevance to the five over-arching aims of the SPHE junior-cycle syllabus. However, it is important that subject matter explored in individual lessons be wholly consistent with the individual aims and outcomes identified for each of the ten modules identified in the syllabus for each relevant year. This was not always obvious, and neither was the module and topic being explored. To this end, and as relevant, two recommendations are offered. First and foremost, teachers are strongly encouraged to evaluate any planned lesson against the stated aims and learning outcomes for each module and associated topic under exploration. This will assist teachers in ensuring that all planned activities are wholly relevant to the syllabus. Secondly,
teachers are encouraged to reference as part of lesson delivery the module under investigation and the relevant topic. This helps to keep students informed in relation to programme content and direction. This should include also a student-friendly reference to lesson aims and the intended learning outcomes.

In one lesson, subject matter intended for an alternative year was explored. As relevant, teachers are reminded that the syllabus is ‘the’ point of reference when planning and delivering lessons. In two instances, due to a lack of time, teachers were unable to conclude the lesson as planned. This tends to be an issue with SPHE and as a result, teachers are advised to under-plan rather than over-plan lesson content. Such an approach will seek to ensure that an all important lesson conclusion is provided. It is essential that students leave all lessons with a realisation of some little nugget of learning, be that in terms of knowledge gained, skills developed, or the fostering or recognition of an attitude or value. Where this does not happen, the value and relevance of the work covered in a lesson is compromised, and students’ experience of SPHE can become nothing more than a series of unrelated events.

Overall, lessons were well structured, with smooth transitions from one part of the lesson to the next. In the main, teachers demonstrated a good level of skill and competence in relation to teaching SPHE. An informed and systematic approach to training, as discussed previously, will help to extend this finding across the department as a whole. There was a commendable focus on subject-specific language in a number of lessons. This is encouraged in all lessons. Significant efforts were made by all teachers, and in all lessons, to make the topics under discussion as meaningful as possible for the students. In a lesson that focused on smoking, for example, students were helped to calculate the cost of smoking twenty cigarettes a day, as well as the cumulative cost over a week, a month and a year. The total, which was then compared with potential income and essential expenditure, left a lot of students surprised. In this instance, but also in general, this approach to teaching is praised for the very valuable learning it clearly facilitates. It was very positive to note that a cross-curricular approach to subject matter was also evident in a number of lessons. This was particularly well utilised in a lesson that focused on self-esteem. In this lesson the teacher, who also taught the class for English, reminded students of work completed as part of Media Studies, in which the power of the use of Photo Shop was revealed. This reference facilitated a full and frank discussion in the SPHE lesson in relation to the potential effect that this technique has on a young girl’s level of self-esteem.

A good range of strategies was utilised in the delivery of lesson content, with strategies that encouraged student participation predominating in all lessons. This is very highly praised. Excellent provision was made in lessons for the visual learner with, and as alluded to previously, the use of ICT making a wonderful contribution in this regard. An exercise in one lesson, which involved students designing and making a Christmas message card, serves as a very fine example of seeking to provide for students who demonstrate a preference for learning by seeing and doing. The exercise also proved very valuable in summarising for students key aspects of learning in SPHE up to then. The card was structured so that students were facilitated in reflecting on the following: themselves as unique and different; life’s treasures; personal strengths and personal ambitions. This level of creativity and innovative teaching is worthy of much recognition and praise.

Overall, student activity was well managed. Students were provided with clear instructions for assigned tasks, activities were time-bound, students were required to adopt roles such as, for example, chairperson or spokesperson, and students’ participation and work was closely monitored by the teacher, with the latter facilitating teachers in the provision of individual support.
and guidance and in the differentiation of tasks. Students participated in an enthusiastic and interested manner.

Experiential learning, with its four distinct phases of experiencing, processing, generalising and applying was evident in only one lesson. As a result, this approach is recommended for greater exploration and application by teachers. 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 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.

Relations between students and their teachers were notably positive and as a result, classroom atmosphere was most conducive to student learning. As alluded to previously, student participation was encouraged by the methodologies chosen, but also on a one-to-one basis through teacher encouragement of individual student’s contributions. Student input was readily affirmed. In general, classrooms deserve to be described as inviting to both the curious and the reluctant learner, with one room in particular standing out for the curiosity and interest it inspires upon entry. In this instance, colourful walls and rich displays of student work, together with personalised storage areas, demonstrated a sense of respect and regard for students and their learning.

It was found that, considering the time of the year, folders for a percentage of class groups were very light in content. The reason for this finding is unclear, due to the fact that no opportunity existed for the inspector to engage in formal conversation with the SPHE teachers, either on a one-to-one or group basis.

**ASSESSMENT**

For the reason stated in the previous paragraph, the findings in relation to the assessment of students’ progress and achievement in SPHE in North Presentation Secondary School are inconclusive. The absence of subject-department planning documentation is a contributory factor to this lack of clarity.

It is perhaps worth noting that, more often than not, assessment is identified in SPHE subject inspection reports as an area for development. In the absence of any indication as to the state of play in relation to assessment in SPHE in this school, and as a result of the point previously made, teachers are referred to, on a needs basis only, the *SPHE Guidelines for Teachers* and the *SPHE Handbook*. Both publications deal extensively with assessment.

Feedback to parents in relation to students’ advancement and attainment in terms of SPHE is facilitated through parent-teacher meetings. A review of the school’s report template indicated that SPHE is not included in reports issued to parents at key times during the school year. In order to give due recognition to SPHE, the inclusion of the subject 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 such comments.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- North Presentation Secondary School demonstrates a strong tradition of providing for the affective education of its student cohort.
- Timetabled provision for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is in line with the requirements of Circular M11/03, and some provision is also made for this type of education in senior cycle.
- A positive approach has been adopted by management to the deployment of staff to the teaching of SPHE.
- Resources for use in the teaching of SPHE have being sourced and collated, and these are centrally located.
- The school is well resourced in relation to ICTs, and it was good to see this technology being put to good use in a number of lessons.
- Planning was apparent in each lesson observed, with some very high quality lesson planning evident in some instances.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning in SPHE in North Presentation Secondary School is good.
- A good range of strategies was utilised in the delivery of lesson content, with strategies that encouraged student participation predominating in all lessons.
- Relations between students and their teachers were notably positive and, as a result, classroom atmosphere was most conducive to student learning.

*Note:*
As detailed in the report, the findings in relation to the assessment of students’ progress and achievement in relation to SPHE in North Presentation Secondary School are inconclusive.

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

- The findings detailed in the planning and preparation section of this report, strongly suggest that the SPHE programme is not given the recognition it merits in the school. This needs to be addressed as a priority.
- As a matter of urgency, the school’s provision for RSE in senior cycle needs to be formalised.
- It is recommended that an audit of the professional development needs of the teachers in the subject department be completed, and that the outcomes of the audit be utilised to inform a systematic and incremental approach to training.
- It is strongly suggested that the members of the SPHE subject department begin to plan collaboratively. The report details an agenda for same, as well as a suggested approach. Management’s support will be required for the implementation of this recommendation.
- Experiential learning, with its four distinct phases, is an approach that is recommended for greater exploration and application by teachers in the teaching of SPHE.
- The inclusion of SPHE on the school’s report template is strongly advocated.
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.
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management welcomes the Inspection Report which acknowledges the various strengths identified in the evaluation as well as making recommendations for further development. The Board is committed to assisting management and staff in implementing the various recommendations at the earliest opportunity within the constraints of available resources. The report notes quite correctly the absence of an SPHE co-ordinator and that “no opportunity existed for the inspector to engage in formal conversation with the SPHE teachers”. The Board wishes to clarify for the purpose of this report that these situations were a direct result of the industrial action stipulated by teacher unions at the time coupled with the Department’s moratorium on Posts of Responsibility. At the time of the inspection teachers were constrained as regards the furnishing of records with the inevitable result that some findings were declared to be “inconclusive”. The Board agrees that the absence of a co-ordinator merits immediate consideration.

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

Management and staff are committed to addressing the co-ordination needs of the SPHE team in order to further facilitate planning and to inform the professional development needs of the teachers in this subject department.