An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Loreto Secondary School
Clonmel, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65330M

Date of inspection: 29 January 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 Loreto Secondary School, Clonmel. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in 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, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. 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 teachers of SPHE. The board of management 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

Loreto Secondary School, Clonmel is a voluntary secondary school for girls with a current enrolment of 519 students. Classes are organised into mixed-ability settings. A positive school climate that supports students’ social, personal and health education is evident and SPHE is viewed as an integral component of the school’s pastoral-care structures. Management is supportive of the subject department and this is evidenced by the amount of curricular time devoted to SPHE and personal development, the provision of dedicated classrooms in the adjacent Roseville building and the support for the range of guest speakers and activities that enhance students’ learning in this area. The time provision for the subject in junior cycle is in accordance with Circular Letter M11/03. However, it is recommended that the current practice of providing two periods per week for half the year for first-year students should be reconsidered. Whilst it is acknowledged that this practice allows for significantly reduced class sizes and also helps accommodate other curricular options, it is preferable that students have access to SPHE for the duration of the year. The time allocation for SPHE and personal development in Transition Year (TY) and fifth year is exemplary and is indicative of the commitment of the school to providing for the holistic education of its students. RSE is provided as part of the SPHE programme at junior cycle and appropriate time is provided for the delivery of RSE at senior cycle, with topics delivered through both the SPHE and religious education (RE) programmes.

Management recognises the need to develop a core team of teachers to deliver the programme and is also cognisant of the need to build its professional capacity to deliver the SPHE and RSE programmes. SPHE is presently delivered by a team of five teachers and it is good practice that these teachers are assigned to teach the subject following consultation. It is also welcome that the current group of teachers are interested in teaching the subject and all come from subject backgrounds that support students’ knowledge, understanding and awareness of their physical,
This diverse range of knowledge and skills can contribute to the development of all aspects of the SPHE programme. There is a need to consolidate the team of SPHE teachers and to expand their experience and expertise to deliver the programme. Management should also attempt to ensure that teachers remain with their class groups from first to third year, where possible and appropriate. This will help to establish trusting relationships and continuity in the delivery of the programme.

There is good support for teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD), with most teachers having been facilitated to attend the various inservice events as they become available. In some cases, teachers have undertaken significant professional development to support their knowledge and ability to deliver the SPHE programme, which is highly commended. The maintenance, by the school, of records of teachers’ attendance at inservice events and conferences is good practice. It is recommended that those teachers who are currently teaching the programme and who have not yet received any inservice should be facilitated to attend the introductory course as soon as is practical. This will ensure that these teachers are familiar with the range of pedagogical approaches to facilitate students’ learning. External health professionals are used extensively to support students’ knowledge and understanding of many aspects of RSE. It is important that the professional capacity be developed within the staff to ensure that the RSE programme can be delivered as part of a coherent and developmental educational programme and framed within the ethos of the school.

School policies are developed through a consultative approach involving members of the board of management, staff and parents, with students appropriately included where relevant. Policies relevant to SPHE and RSE have been developed to support the students and the work of the school, including policies on substance use, anti-bullying, a code of behaviour and dealing with critical incidents. The Child Protection Guidelines have been adopted in line with the requirements of the Department of Education and Skills. The school’s current RSE policy has been identified for review. The progression of this task is recommended and care should be taken to ensure that it provides clear guidance to parents, students and teachers on all aspects related to the content and delivery of the programme for all year groups and for the diversity of students.

A number of links have been established with relevant external agencies that contribute to the work of the school and the SPHE department. In keeping with good practice, teachers ensure that guest speakers are suitably qualified to deliver planned activities that support students’ learning in SPHE and RSE. The school’s existing guidelines and procedures in relation to visitors and guest speakers should be formalised and documented.

The provision of dedicated classrooms for SPHE in Roseville House ensures that the classroom environment is suitable to support the range of interactive methods used in the delivery of the programme. There is access to a television and DVD player and there is also access, when required, to computers and data projectors. Posters promoting social skills and well-being are displayed along some corridors in the school. Management supports the purchase of resources and materials on a needs basis and the subject appears to be adequately resourced to deliver all aspects of the syllabus.

The school is proactive in promoting student well-being and ensuring that a respectful atmosphere pervades through a range of curricular and co-curricular activities. The provision of the “sacred space”, and the encouragement of students to avail of this facility to reflect and develop a deeper understanding and self-awareness, is exemplary. The development of an anti-bullying charter, which is prominently displayed in the school, is highly commended. In addition, students are provided with opportunities to participate in a range of conferences, seminars and courses.
promoting mental health, physical well-being and personal safety. It is very good practice that students who attend these events are provided with opportunities to present to their peers about their experiences when they return.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The SPHE teachers are facilitated to meet formally at least once a term. This provides a platform for teachers of SPHE to collaborate and contribute to the work of the co-ordinator. Brief minutes of these meetings are recorded. The work of the co-ordinator is central to the organisation and delivery of the SPHE and RSE programmes in the school and this role is well executed. Members of the SPHE department support each other in their work through regular discussions and informal meetings and through the sharing of resources. Good progress has been made in the subject department planning process and a subject plan has been developed that follows the template of the school development planning initiative (SDPI). The plan adequately documents the overall aims and objectives, and the main features of the organisation and delivery of the SPHE programme in the school.

Programmes of work have been developed for each year group and these are presented through a series of topics. To build on the considerable work completed to date, it is recommended that the programmes of work for each year group be expanded to ensure that all ten modules of the syllabus are adequately delivered in a logical and coherent manner. As a guide to the programme organisation, teachers should consult the recommended framework in the Department’s *Guidelines for Teachers*. The practice of revisiting each module over the course of the junior cycle will ensure that students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes are developed in an incremental manner as they mature. Furthermore, planning should also identify the specific learning outcomes for each year group and module. These learning outcomes should be expressed in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students are expected to acquire and develop. The most appropriate and effective learning-and-teaching and assessment methods can then be selected and applied to help achieve the desired learning outcomes. This will provide a reference framework that will guide an individual teacher’s planning and preparation and ensure a consistent approach to the programme delivery. It is suggested that this task should be completed collaboratively on a phased basis.

The RSE plan should also be expanded and further developed. This plan should identify clearly the specific topics to be covered with each year group and these should be aligned to key learning outcomes. This will ensure that the desired knowledge, understanding and skills related to RSE are developed in a coherent and age-appropriate manner.

Students’ participation in a range of co-curricular activities including annual fund-raising events and social concern programmes is highly commended, as these activities help to promote understanding of issues related to social responsibility and personal health and well-being. The identification of opportunities to establish relevant cross-curricular links should be identified in the subject plan, especially given the range of expertise within the SPHE department. Relevant topics or activities and the timing of their delivery in Home Economics, Religious Education (RE), Science, Physical Education and Guidance could be identified to augment and consolidate students’ learning in SPHE.

The SPHE department has developed or purchased a range of suitable resources such as DVDs, videos, textbooks and worksheets, which support teaching and learning in the subject. Resources
are stored in a central area, which ensures that there is easy access to materials in preparation for lessons. A textbook is also used with each year group.

There is a good review of the material covered and activities undertaken at a subject-department level. It is good practice that students have opportunities to evaluate some aspects of their programme. This provides valuable and informative feedback to teachers, which in turn ensures that planning is focused on meeting the needs of the students. Consideration should be given to developing a common system of programme evaluation. This may take the form of a focused questionnaire to facilitate students to highlight their views of the topics covered, resources and methods used and the quality of their engagement and learning.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was a good standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed. Good procedures had been established at the beginning of lessons to ensure that students were settled and focused. In one lesson, students rearranged the seating, without prompting by their teacher, to facilitate group work and an interactive approach to their learning.

In the lessons visited the topics taught were: barriers and solutions to participating in physical activity; substance misuse; stress and establishing friendships. In most cases, teachers outlined the content of the lessons and also linked new material with previous learning or with the students' own experiences. This good practice helped to place the topic of the lesson in context for the students and ensured continuity in their learning. In some cases, the teacher also shared the learning intention with the students and this commendable practice, which is in keeping with the principles of assessment-for-learning (AfL), provided clear direction to students regarding the knowledge, skills and values that they should acquire as a result of their engagement. The expansion of this strategy to all lessons is recommended.

Teachers developed their lessons through a facilitative approach, giving students opportunities for either self-reflection or sharing and discussing the focused topic in pairs or small groups. There was very good use of targeted questioning that ensured most students were encouraged to make a contribution to the class. In some cases, there was an over emphasis on whole-class questioning and discussion, which limited the time available for more focused tasks. It is recommended that a greater emphasis be placed on engaging students in the main activity or tasks sooner in the lesson. This will provide students with more time and opportunities to explore or reflect on the topic prior to processing the main points, in keeping with the experiential approach to promoting students' learning.

All lessons succeeded in developing students’ knowledge and skills through the range of effective teaching methods. In one lesson, groups of students took turns to present their projects to the class and invited questions on their chosen topic. The quality of the projects and their presentation was very high and resulted in some very interesting discussion and interaction amongst the students. Similarly, in another lesson students worked in groups to identify the barriers to participation in physical activity and then discussed how each of these barriers could be overcome. Of particular note, in another lesson, was the involvement of students in learning relaxation techniques as a method of reducing stress and anxiety. The promotion of analytical, problem-solving and communication skills through these activities is highly commended.

Lessons were characterised by excellent student behaviour. There was a very caring atmosphere in all lessons visited. Teachers demonstrated a good ability to keep students on task and a positive
and affirming approach was evident in all classroom interactions, which ensured that the classroom environment was conducive to learning. In some lessons, the use of music or a lighting candle enhanced the calm and positive atmosphere of the lesson.

Students demonstrated a good ability to communicate clearly about the topics and themes covered during their lessons. They confidently rationalised their opinions in an informed manner when questioned about the content and relevance of their lessons. All lessons concluded by recapping and summarising the main points and outlining the topics to be covered in the next lesson, which is in keeping with good practice.

ASSessment

A range of assessment strategies is used by teachers to determine students’ engagement and progress in SPHE. These include the completion of work sheets, written assignments and the completion of project work, in addition to regular oral questioning. Home tasks are given occasionally, which are reflective in nature and may stimulate some conversation between family members about a particular topic. This is commendable.

In some cases, class folders are maintained to store students’ completed worksheets and assignments. The challenge for the SPHE department is to develop the assessment process to ensure that there is an agreed and consistent approach to assessment and that students have a record of their engagement and learning in the subject. The expansion and development of the AfL strategies is recommended. These strategies may contribute to the development of students’ portfolios of learning, which may be used to form the basis of discussion at parent-teacher meetings regarding the level of student engagement in the topics being studied. The development of an “assessment toolkit” should be discussed as part of the subject departments planning process. Further information and advice on assessment in SPHE is available in the Guidelines for Teachers (pages 59-68) and from the SPHE Support Service.

At present, SPHE is not included in the school’s reports home to parents. School reports should include formative comments to affirm students’ engagement in SPHE. Comment-only reporting is recommended and an agreed bank of appropriate comments may be developed for use by the subject department that reflect students’ achievement of the key learning outcomes.

Overall, Loreto Secondary School provides a caring, affirming and positive approach to students’ learning and personal development through SPHE.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A positive school climate exists that supports students’ social, personal and health education and the school is proactive in promoting students’ well-being through its curricular and co-curricular activities.

- The time provided for SPHE in junior cycle is in line with circular M11/03 and there is exemplary timetable provision for SPHE and personal development for TY and fifth-year students.

- Good progress has been made in developing the SPHE subject plan and the co-ordination of the subject is well executed.
A range of resources has been compiled and catalogued by the SPHE department and these are easily accessible to all teachers of the subject.

There was a good standard of teaching and learning in the SPHE lessons observed.

Students were actively engaged in their SPHE lessons, which succeeded in developing their knowledge and skills through a range of effective and interactive teaching methods.

Lessons were characterised by excellent student behaviour and a very caring and supportive approach by teachers to students’ engagement and learning.

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

- A core team of SPHE teachers should be consolidated to ensure continuity and the development of the SPHE subject department.
- The professional capacity within the staff should be developed to ensure the effective delivery of the RSE programme. The existing RSE policy should be updated and the RSE programme, from first year to sixth year, should be clearly documented.
- The timetable arrangements for first year should ensure that they receive a single period of SPHE per week for the whole year.
- The subject plan should be expanded to document how the ten modules and related topics are delivered over the course of the junior cycle.
- Students should be engaged in class tasks sooner, in keeping with the experiential learning cycle.
- The expansion and development of a systematic and agreed approach to the assessment process is recommended. Students learning and progress in SPHE should be included in reports home to parents.

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

- The first years now all have one period a week for the entire year for S.P.H.E.
- Teachers will attend In Service during the course of the year.