Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Coláiste Abbain,
Adamstown,
County Wexford
Roll number: 71600B

Date of inspection: 15 December 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SOCIAL PERSONAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Abbain. 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 in senior cycle) and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of the 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 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 teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Coláiste Abbain is a co-educational vocational school with a current enrolment of 136 students, including a broad range of student backgrounds. The school participates in the School Support Programme under DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools). The curriculum programmes provided are the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is provided on the timetable for all junior-cycle class groups for one period per week during first, second and third year. This is in accordance with the requirements of circular M11/03. Junior cycle Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is delivered by the SPHE teacher as a component of the school’s SPHE programme during first, second and third year. RSE themes are revisited several times during the course of junior cycle so that learning is developmental, and this is in accordance with the syllabus.

RSE is provided in senior cycle and the programme is at the early stages of development as management and teachers are exploring the balance between the use of external guest speakers and teacher-led modules. Currently, lessons in RSE are provided on two occasions during fifth year and sixth year through the use of guest speakers who deliver seminars on aspects of senior cycle RSE. This is backed up by teachers who provide additional lessons to the class groups as deemed necessary. Management and teachers are aware that the RSE programme needs to be spiral and developmental in nature. There is also recognition that while guest speakers can augment teacher-led instruction, the trained teacher can best establish a climate of trust and openness which can allow for the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes over time. Teachers have recently participated in training in senior cycle RSE and in the use of the TRUST (Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching) resource. This will enhance the scope of teacher-led aspects of the programme. In firming provision for RSE in senior cycle, consideration should be given to a structure that draws on the outcomes of current review and student evaluations as well as the RSE Interim curriculum and guidelines for post-primary schools and circulars 0023/2010, 0037/2010, 27/2008, M20/96 and M4/95.
Whole-school supports for the subject include the provision of an SPHE classroom and an SPHE resource display area. A wide range of modern and informative posters on many aspects of SPHE, including important issues for teenagers, are displayed in classrooms. SPHE is included on school reports to parents and information letters are issued to parents annually in advance of the provision of lessons in RSE. Deployment of teachers to the subjects is very good; teachers are assigned by consent and interest and a long-term core teaching team has been established. The school is also very supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD) and there has been systematic engagement in ongoing training for SPHE teachers. This has impacted positively on the quality of teaching and learning evident in lessons.

SPHE has a very good profile in the school both as a curriculum subject and as part of broader philosophy through school structures, practices and policies that seek to endorse healthy lifestyles in a safe and supportive environment. The school identifies itself as a health promoting school. Whole-school structures and leadership combine to produce positive and proactive approaches in dealing with students’ overall social, personal and health education as well as attendance and participation. SPHE features as part of the focus of the School Completion Programme to support retention of targeted young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage. The junior cycle SPHE programme is supportive of the school’s mission statement, student code of behaviour and the pastoral care policy and SPHE teachers play a supportive role in the care structures of the school. Consideration should be given to the interface between the SPHE programme and the school’s guidance plan. This ought to be discussed by all personnel involved and documented in each policy. Similarly, this approach could be taken to the policies on anti-bullying, counselling and drugs.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Both an SPHE policy and an RSE policy are in place. The policies outline the school’s commendable dedication to education in these areas and recognise the rights of parents. Management indicated that the policies will shortly be considered and updated as part of the systematic policy review process. In updating these, it may be useful to access sample RSE policies on [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) and [www.ecdrumcondra.ie](http://www.ecdrumcondra.ie) as well as through the SPHE support service. In tandem with the review, revisions to the RSE programme for senior cycle will need to be documented. Ideally this, together with the school’s existing SPHE plan, should be appended to the policies.

The SPHE plan is detailed and comprehensive. It incorporates objectives to develop students’ skills and competencies to care for themselves and others and to make informed decisions about their health, personal lives and social development. Ten key aims emphasise standards for an environment of health promotion around valuing tolerance, fairness, effort, communication and the recognition of diversity. Within the plan, a curriculum plan for each year group is laid out in tabular format and integrates topics from the ten modules with learning outcomes, resources, methodologies and assessment procedures. The plan is both developmental and flexible, allowing for restructuring in response to events and challenges in students’ lives. Procedures for assessing and reporting on students’ progress are further detailed in another section of the plan. Commendably, the plan also espouses the use of differentiated methodologies to respond to student diversity and special educational needs and these are outlined as well as a list of appropriate general teaching methodologies. Evaluations by students, including evaluations on the sessions with visiting speakers and teacher module evaluations, are used to inform the plan.

Priorities for the strengthening and development of SPHE in the school are set out in an action plan for the coming year. The action plan focuses attention of school personnel on three priorities:
the development of SPHE in senior cycle; provision of team teaching for aspects of the programme; and CPD in new areas such as meditation techniques. The aim to explore the possibilities of team teaching is grounded in some practice in the past and the possibility of deploying two SPHE teachers on occasions. This and the other aims are worthy and merit the intended explorations.

A modern, diverse and accessible collection of SPHE resources has been compiled, including those from the support service and relevant external agencies. Teachers routinely draw on a variety of resources, text books and handouts in planning and delivering lessons in order to match the topic to the learning need of the particular class group. These provide stimulating variety for teachers and students as no one text or format dominates lessons. Lesson planning is reflective of students’ current needs, context factors within the school community and emerging issues in wider society. By being acutely attuned to these factors, teachers adapt the curriculum plan to introduce or develop topics on a needs basis.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three SPHE lessons were observed, one in each of first, second and third years. The quality of teaching and learning in each instance was excellent.

All lessons had a clear sense of purpose, were well structured and appropriate to the interests and abilities of the students. Co-operative learning was the main feature of all lessons and, through a range of activities, learning was made enjoyable, meaningful and accessible. Resources, including ICT, the board and handouts, were used effectively.

Teaching of the subject was open and facilitative and employed a variety of challenging tasks that led to the highly effective development of students’ knowledge, attitudes and skills. Learning was participatory, experiential and active. Very many opportunities were provided for students to fully engage in the learning process; for example, to reflect on others’ lives as well as their own lives and to process information in a way that was relevant to themselves as individuals. Skilful questioning was used to encourage students to consider different perspectives on everyday issues.

Activities such as pair and group work were clear, achievable and time bound, with roles assigned and outcomes processed. The activities were combined with timely input from the teacher and opportunities for students to express their viewpoints. With one challenging topic, a walking debate was used as one of the key activities. The use of this methodology enabled students to reinforce and process key pieces of factual information as well as expressing an opinion in an enjoyable setting. In another lesson, role play activities were based on real-life situations in which personal skills were tested and developed. Games were used to energise the group and also to enable students to apply the learning in new contexts; for example, ‘Chinese whisper’ was used to enhance communicating and listening skills. Brainstorming activities were used to introduce a topic and the board work thus generated provided the basis for reinforcement of the key messages of the lesson. Scenarios were used in some instances to encourage reflection and application. Literacy skills were developed through the use of cloze tests and crosswords. In all activities, students were treated with respect and the teaching approach acknowledged their views while simultaneously balancing the achievement of the objectives of the lesson and enabling emerging discussions.

Excellent classroom management techniques employed helped to maximise student participation. Teaching was characterised by skilful verbal tone, posture, and movement to convey an enthusiastic, warm and purposeful setting that encouraged students to engage with the topic and
participate appropriately. A climate of trust and respect was strongly in evidence and a secure environment for dialogue and discussion around the topic was well developed. Class contracts have been developed and agreed by each class group. Factual information was dealt with in an age-appropriate way and in line with the syllabus. Commendable concern was shown for students’ personal development and safety and a commitment was evident to continuously work to build teaching knowledge and skills to mould responsible citizens for the future.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment strategies are well developed in the subject and careful thought has been given to this aspect of teaching and learning through the subject planning process. Ongoing formative assessment formed part of the activity of all lessons providing teachers with continuous information on student participation and progress at the time of learning. Questioning and monitoring was used to assess individual learning while firm but affirming responses were provided during tasks to maintain the facilitative learning environment.

Students maintain an SPHE copy, supplemented with handouts and worksheets. Samples of student copies included collections of work on various topics, learning logs, class contracts and written tasks that were corrected and dated by the teacher with useful formative comments added. At the end of the school year all students receive a certificate of participation in SPHE and parents receive formative feedback at parent-teacher meetings and twice yearly on school reports.

Students are asked to complete regular module reviews expressing what they liked, disliked and learned. A possible extension of this activity could seek to request students to reflect, not just on the knowledge but also on the skills or attitudes that have been fostered and developed. In addition, the commentary provided for parents on school reports could be extended to include comments on the skills and attitude development demonstrated by individual students over time.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation of SPHE:

- Very good provision is made for resources, teacher CPD, and timetabled lessons.
- SPHE and RSE policies are established and an excellent SPHE plan is in place.
- Provision for RSE in senior cycle is reflective and developing.
- Communication with parents in relation to SPHE and RSE is good.
- Lesson planning is attuned to students’ current needs, context factors within the school community and emerging issues in wider society, while also grounded in the syllabus.
- The quality of teaching and learning in SPHE is excellent with very effective use of cooperative learning strategies in all of the lessons observed.
- Assessment strategies are well developed in the subject.

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

- The RSE policy and senior cycle RSE programme should be reviewed.
A post-evaluation meeting was 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.

*Published June 2011*
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

Recommendations/findings will be acted upon.