Subject Inspection of Social, Personal & Health Education

REPORT

St Munchin’s College, Corbally, Limerick
Roll number: 64240G

Date of inspection: 5 March 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPHE

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Munchin’s College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Social, Personal & Health Education, including Relationships and Sexuality Education, and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days, during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers and examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. 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

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is provided for all junior cycle students in accordance with the requirements of Circular M11/03, in that it is timetabled as a discrete, stand-alone subject for one period each week. This is commended.

Relationships Sexuality Education (RSE) in junior cycle is planned and delivered as part of the school’s agreed SPHE programme. It is good to note that junior cycle RSE is delivered, in the main, by the teachers of SPHE. The fact that teachers’ work in this area is supported by visiting speakers points to the need for the school to develop a policy for visiting speakers. The SPHE Handbook provides a good template for this work. Simultaneously, management is directed to Circular 0023/2010 which offers guidelines on the use of visiting speakers to the SPHE and RSE classroom.

A classroom based RSE programme is not provided for in senior cycle. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency, as it would support the current provision that is being made for this aspect of student’s education via the use of guest speakers. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Management’s attention is drawn to Circular 0027/08, which follows on from two previous circulars, namely Circular M20/96 and Circular M4/95. The latter two circulars are also worthy of management’s consideration. As a first step in the process of providing a classroom based RSE programme in senior cycle, the school is advised to finalise and ratify the school’s draft RSE policy. To this end, management’s attention is also drawn to the template available on the website of the Department of Education and Science, which is intended to support schools in the task of developing this policy. The template can be accessed at the following website address: www.education.ie. In tandem with the development of an RSE policy, an RSE programme for senior cycle also needs to be planned and documented. Management and
teachers are referred to the RSE Interim Guidelines for support and guidance. These, along with a number of other valuable resources, can be accessed at www.ecdrumcondra.ie.

In relation to the deployment of staff for the teaching of SPHE some good practice was observed, with some areas for development also identified. Management reports that teachers are consulted prior to being assigned to teach SPHE. Considering the ‘all boys’ school context, it is positive that the composition of the teaching team generously provides for the delivery of the programme by male teachers. While a percentage of team members are relatively well experienced and have undertaken some training in the area of SPHE, other members are new to the subject and have not engaged in any training. Furthermore, best practice indicates that all teachers should have completed the minimum, two-day, introductory training provided by the SPHE Support Service in advance of being deployed to teach the subject. This also needs to be considered by management in the future deployment of staff. In further consideration of training, it is also recommended that an audit of teacher’s training needs should be carried out. The SPHE Support Service’s programme of in-service, which can be accessed at www.sphe.ie, could inform this process. The outcomes of the audit should be used to determine the team’s training needs in the short, medium, and long term.

There is a need in the school to develop what is commonly referred to as a core team of SPHE teachers. Ideally, this should be composed of teachers who are interested in and happy to teach SPHE, and who are committed to accessing the relevant training and are supported by management in doing so. In some instances, it was found that the SPHE teacher for a particular class group also teaches the class group for another subject. In light of relationship building and the value linked to getting to know students, this is considered to be good practice and is therefore further encouraged. School management reports a consciousness in relation to seeking to provide for continuity of teachers from first year to second year and again from second year to third year. However, there is no significant evidence currently that this consciousness is translated into action. As a result, this level of provision is further encouraged. The final point on deployment relates to the position of SPHE co-ordinator. Best practice dictates that, ideally, the co-ordinator should be teaching the subject. This needs further consideration by management. One way of addressing this might be that the position of co-ordinator would be rotated amongst all team members rather than being linked to a post of responsibility.

A centrally located storage unit has been provided to house SPHE resources and materials. The cataloguing of these resources and materials is recommended, as is the continued development and expansion of the collection. The SPHE Support Service has, in the past, identified a number of resources that would be valuable in the teaching of SPHE to boys. The relevant regional development officer may be able to inform in this regard.

Management’s support for the concept and practice of collaborative, subject-department planning is demonstrated by the fact that time is provided annually for a formal meeting of the department. Management is encouraged to seek to provide additional time over the course of the school year, within existing resources, for this very valuable process and practice.

Discussions with management suggest that SPHE lacks a strong profile in the school. More likely than not, this stems from a lack of general staff awareness and understanding relative to the aims of the SPHE syllabus and the content of the programme. It is recommended therefore that serious consideration is given to the organisation of whole-staff in-service in the area. In combination with seeking to demystify the subject, this session should also seek to highlight the role that all teachers can play in relation to students’ social, personal and health education.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There is an SPHE co-ordinator in place, whose role is to oversee subject-department planning. While this teacher is not teaching SPHE currently, it is positive that they have experience of teaching the subject in the past. The fact that only a very small number of minutes were presented for review as part of the subject inspection, made it very difficult to get a sense of the progress that has been made in relation to SPHE in St. Munchin’s College. As relevant, therefore, the co-ordinator is encouraged to record and file minutes for all formal gatherings of the subject department. A number of templates are available which would provide structure to this very important recording process. The absence of a quantity of minutes also makes it difficult to determine the degree to which the subject-department plan collaboratively.

There is little provision obvious for the review and evaluation of the SPHE programme in the planning process. As a result, it is recommended that the co-ordinator, together with department members, undertakes a SCOT analysis. This would allow for the identification of any context specific strengths, challenges, opportunities and threats relevant to SPHE, whilst also providing a focus for future planning in the area and therefore future meetings. All concerned are also directed to the following resources for the valuable information and suggestions they provide in relation to review and evaluation: The SPHE Handbook, the SPHE syllabus and the SPHE Guidelines for Teachers. It is worth bearing in mind, and as each of the above publications indicates, approaches to review and evaluation should be all inclusive and thereby should involve teachers, parents, students and management.

While outline programmes of work have been agreed and drafted, these documents are in need of urgent review. This recommendation is made for a number of reasons. To begin, the programmes of work fail to identify clearly the modules and their associated topics. Furthermore, and as a result, it would appear that a number of the modules and topics, as identified in the syllabus, have been excluded from each of the first, second and third-year programmes of work. In addition, work identified in the syllabus for completion in a particular year is planned for delivery in an alternative year. To elaborate and for example, with specific reference to the Friendship and Communication Skills modules, topics that are intended for completion in first year are, in St. Munchin’s, planned for delivery in second year. Teachers and all concerned are directed to the syllabus for guidance and direction in relation to addressing each of these findings.

Programmes of work should support teachers in the delivery of a syllabus and therefore a good programme of work ought to guide and direct teachers in their planning and preparation for individual lessons. To this end, and building on the opening point of the previous paragraph, the following direction is also offered. The development of a revised outline programme of work needs to be considered. In addition to the need for outline programmes of work to be based on the syllabus, programmes also need to be time based. Good quality SPHE programme plans identify the work to be covered each week. This is a very feasible task considering that class groups are only timetabled for one lesson of SPHE per week. Best practice is where programmes of work also identify the desired learning outcomes for each lesson. Teachers are again directed to the syllabus, as this clearly identifies the aims and outcomes for each module, and this should inform the identification of the aims and intended learning outcomes for each individual lesson and, therefore, the planning and preparation for such lessons. The implementation of the latter recommendation will have a very positive impact on the overall quality of teaching and learning in SPHE in the school. The department is also strongly encouraged to integrate visiting speakers...
or relevant whole-school events into programmes of work, as these occasions should inform the
delivery of modules and topics.

In time, serious consideration should be given to developing more detailed, agreed programmes
of work. This would provide agreed suggestions in relation to the resources, methodologies and
assessment modes that might be utilised in the delivery of modules and each respective topic. To
support the development of detailed programmes of work, teachers are encouraged to begin
maintaining a record of completed work. Ideally, this record would identify, as outlined
previously, module, topic, resources, methodologies and approaches to assessment. The provision
by teachers of an evaluative and reflective comment following the delivery of lessons should also
be considered for inclusion as part of this ‘record of work’. These records would provide a good
basis for sharing approaches to teaching and learning in SPHE amongst the members of the SPHE
department. Such sharing could be facilitated during subject-department meetings. In time, these
discussions could lead to the development of the more detailed programme of work referenced in
the first line of this paragraph, which might otherwise be referred to as ‘A Guide to Teaching
SPHE in St. Munchin’s College’.

The quality of individual planning for lessons observed as part of the SPHE subject inspection
varied significantly from very thorough to unsatisfactory. In some instances, for example, a range
of resources were either prepared or collected for use in lessons, while in other instances, there
was little or no evidence of the preparation, collection or use of resources. The overall impact of
this finding will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning in SPHE in St. Munchin’s College is consistent with the
finding in relation to the quality of individual planning for lessons, in that it ranged from very
good to unsatisfactory.

Where planning and preparation were found to be very good the following observations were
made: lesson content was consistent with the syllabus and the school’s agreed programme of
work; lessons were purposeful and relevant; lessons demonstrated structure; and lessons were
appropriately paced with a realistic amount of work planned for and delivered in the available
time. Consistency with the syllabus is essential, while consistency with the school’s own agreed
programme of work is equally important. As relevant, teachers are advised to consult the *SPHE
Syllabus*, the *Teacher Guidelines*, and the agreed programme of work when planning and
preparing for lessons. Some lessons lacked a clear purpose. Excellent practice was observed, not
just where lessons demonstrated purpose and where lessons illustrated relevance to the syllabus,
but where the lesson intention was openly shared with students at the outset, and where each of
the intended learning outcomes for the lesson were identified as part of this process. This
approach is advocated for inclusion in all lessons and should be informed by the aims and
outcomes identified in the syllabus. In instances where lessons were found to be poorly
structured and inappropriately paced, it is recommended that more time be devoted to planning
and preparation.

It is interesting to note that neither ice-breakers nor energisers were utilised in the lessons
observed. In terms of setting the scene, and in relation to both managing and motivating students,
these strategies are considered a valuable tool in the SPHE classroom. As a result, their
incorporation is advocated for consideration. As alluded to in the previous section of this report,
in some lessons a range of appropriate and carefully chosen resources was utilised in the delivery of lesson content. In some instances, in the selection of resources, there was a very strong emphasis on providing for the student who demonstrates a visual-learning preference. This, which is highly praised, is an approach that is recommended for consideration when choosing and developing resources for all lessons.

In the main, strategies employed sought to provide for a good level of student participation. More often than not, such strategies were based on pair or group work. With a view to keeping motivation and interest levels high among the students, teachers are encouraged to vary the types of active-learning strategies utilised in SPHE lessons. The *SPHE Handbook* and the *Guidelines for Teachers* provide a list of alternative strategies. At times, activities were really well managed, while at other times the opposite was true. Where pair or group work was well managed the following characteristics were apparent: clear instructions were issued to students and students understood what was required of them; activities were time-bound, and students were made aware of this; students were required to take responsibility for the assigned task and were asked to assume roles such as, chairperson and secretary; students’ participation and work was monitored closely by the teacher, with support and guidance being offered and provided as required. The latter provided ample opportunity for teachers to provide for the educational needs of individual students through differentiation of instruction and task. This is highly praised. When and where activities were well organised, students participated in an enthusiastic and interested fashion. As required, teachers are directed to the *Guidelines for Teachers* for further direction relating to using group work. It was found in some instances that chosen activities failed to take account of students’ abilities and therefore the activities, while valuable in themselves, failed to provide for optimum learning in the particular classroom situation. As relevant, this finding should inform teachers’ choice of future lesson activities.

The experiential method, which is recognised as the most appropriate method for use in SPHE lessons, while well provided for in some lessons, was not evident in the majority of lessons. As applicable, teachers are encouraged to explore the four phases of this teaching method, namely experiencing, processing, generalising and applying. The revised, *Healthy Living - Teachers Lesson Plans Booklet*, which has been produced by the Health Promotion Service of the Health Service Executive (HSE) West, illustrates how this method can be very effectively and very easily applied in the delivery of SPHE lessons. In addition, teachers are encouraged to seek to ensure that lesson structure, and all associated activities, allow for the full application of this method and in the order listed. In doing so, it is important to bear in mind that the full realisation of this approach may require more than one lesson. Every effort should be made by teachers therefore, to ensure that students leave each lesson with some little nugget of learning, which might be manifested for example in students gaining knowledge, acquiring a skill or perhaps recognising in themselves an attitude or value. If this is not provided for students, experience of SPHE can become nothing more than a series of unrelated events.

On occasions, teacher input tended to predominate, and very often this occurred when and where students were well placed to contribute to lesson content. As lessons commenced, for example, some teachers tended to tell students what they had explored in the last lesson rather than asking the students for their own input and insight. Likewise, there was also a tendency, particularly in the summary of lesson content, for teachers to tell students what they might have learnt from a particular activity or exercise rather than asking students for their own interpretation or understanding of what was garnered from the activity or even the lesson. To this end, it is important that teachers remind themselves that the role of the SPHE teacher differs somewhat from the role of other subject teachers, in that the SPHE teacher facilitates rather than directs
learning. In fact, one of the most important recognitions for any teacher of SPHE is that, on occasions, students can learn as much from each other as from their teacher.

Question and answer sessions were, generally speaking, well utilised to develop lesson content. As alluded to previously, there is room for improvement in the use of questioning at lesson outset and at the conclusion of lessons, in order to ascertain the level of students’ understanding and learning. In general, students were given sufficient time to answer and students’ answers were also affirmed. In some lessons students’ answers to questions showed an ability to respond well, together with a clear understanding of the topics being explored. In other lessons the opposite was true. Occasionally it was found that teachers could have built on students’ understanding by the use of more open questions and by encouraging students to explain and justify their thinking.

In general, the classroom environment, which is determined largely by room arrangement, didn’t fully support the creation of a participatory learning environment. When and where possible, teachers are encouraged to ‘deconstruct’ the traditional classroom layout during SPHE lessons. The fact that students are assigned to base classrooms should support teachers in this task, as classroom furniture can be re-arranged by the students themselves during the break between classes. Classroom atmosphere was generally positive and, where this was the case, relations between students and their teacher were based on respectful interactions. However, at times, there was an obvious lack of respect for the teacher and simultaneously, therefore, an apparent lack of appreciation amongst students for SPHE as a subject. This can be addressed by the adoption of more effective classroom-management strategies. Furthermore, in some lessons students were not so good at listening to each other. The ground rules, which should be agreed and drawn up by students at the start of the year, would provide a good basis for challenging and addressing inappropriate student behaviour, such as talking out of turn and inattentiveness. Ground rules should be openly displayed and referred to over the course of lessons, as required. Teacher instruction was admirably honest in some lessons, with appropriate personal anecdotes being provided as a backdrop to the topic being explored. This bears testament to the mutual regard on which the teacher-student relationship is built in such instances, which is of tremendous value in an SPHE classroom.

The decision to introduce an SPHE textbook should be kept under review. This suggestion stems mainly from the fact that it appears, from a review of students’ textbooks and copybooks, that in some instances students have very little work completed in their textbooks. This is a very serious finding considering the time of year. This needs further exploration at school level. This finding also points to the possible need to establish a system that would support the collation, filing and storage of students’ work including handouts or materials relating to classroom activities. This will be discussed again in the following section.

ASSESSMENT

The assessment of students’ progress and achievement in SPHE in St. Munchin’s College is an area that is in need of further exploration and work.

The department is encouraged to look at developing an assessment tool-kit. The starting point for this work should be the outcomes that are offered at the end of each module and as outlined in the syllabus. A number of options exist, for example, classroom activities, home tasks, self-assessment, peer-assessment and portfolio assessment. The SPHE Guidelines for Teachers as well
as the *SPHE Handbook* deal with assessment quite extensively, and templates are provided for reproduction and use with students.

Teachers are strongly encouraged to look at portfolio assessment. As a first step in this process, a system that supports and facilitates the collation, filing and storage of students’ work needs to be introduced. Following on from this, the *Guidelines for Teachers* provides a model on which the department’s work in relation to portfolio assessment could be based. It sets out, for example, the need to agree the criteria to be applied in relation to items for inclusion, as well as a formal recognition system for all submitted items. In time, students’ portfolios could be used to inform feedback provided to parents.

The use of lesson reviews is encouraged, as is the inclusion of reflection exercises, with the latter being provided, for example, as modules conclude. Both would inform teachers’ judgements in relation to students’ learning in SPHE. Teachers are encouraged to use a variety of approaches to such activities, as students tend to tire of review and reflection exercises when the approach to it becomes predictable and repetitive. Such exercises should seek to provide opportunities for students to reflect, not just on the knowledge garnered but also on the skills or attitudes that may have been fostered and developed. End-of-module or end-of-topic, as opposed to end-of-lesson exercises, might be best placed to provide for all three. In addition, these exercises could be used to get feedback from students in relation to what went well and what did not go so well in each lesson. The outcomes of this can be used to inform future lesson planning and delivery. To this end, templates are provided in both the *Guidelines for Teachers*, as well as in the *SPHE Handbook*. Teachers are strongly encouraged to file summaries of students’ evaluations.

The inclusion of SPHE on the school’s report template is strongly advocated. The SPHE department will require school 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, provide a good reference point for the focus and wording of these comments. As part of the department’s exploration of assessment, some consideration could also be given to how the school might reward or acknowledge students’ completion of each year’s study. A school certificate, for example, might be developed.

Best practice suggests that planning for assessment is incorporated into lesson planning and into lesson structure and delivery. This reflects the assessment model that is moving from *assessment of learning* to *assessment for learning* (AfL). This is discussed in the *Guidelines for Teachers*, which also provides some very accessible examples of AfL at work in the SPHE classroom.

In conclusion, it is recommended that assessment be prioritised for discussion in forthcoming and future SPHE department meetings. In time, when an approach has been agreed and implemented, the drafting of a subject-specific assessment policy should be considered. This should include department policy on record-keeping and on reporting to parents.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- *[SPHE is provided for all junior cycle students in accordance with the requirements of Circular M11/03.*]
• Considering the ‘all boys’ school context, it is positive that the composition of the teaching team generously provides for the delivery of the programme by male teachers.
• A centrally located storage unit has been provided to house SPHE resources and materials.
• Individual planning for lessons was, in some instances, very thorough.
• The quality of teaching and learning in a number of lessons was found to be very good.
• In the main, strategies employed sought to provide for a good level of student participation.
• When and where activities were well organised, students participated in an enthusiastic and interested fashion.
• Classroom atmosphere was generally positive, and where this was the case relations between students and their teacher were based on respectful interactions.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• A class-based, RSE programme is not provided for in senior cycle. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.
• There is a need in the school to develop a core team of SPHE teachers who are interested in and happy to teach SPHE, and who are committed to accessing the relevant training and are supported by management in doing so.
• Existing outline programmes of work are in need of urgent review. In time, serious consideration should also be given to developing more detailed programmes of work.
• In some instances, greater time and attention needs to be devoted to the area of lesson planning and preparation.
• Teachers are encouraged to vary the types of active-learning strategies utilised in SPHE lessons and, as applicable, are encouraged to provide for the incorporation of the four phases of the experiential method.
• The adoption of more effective classroom management strategies is required in some instances.
• A review of students’ textbooks and copybooks suggests that, in some instances, students have very little work completed. This needs further exploration at school level.
• The assessment of students’ progress and achievement in SPHE is an area that is in need of further exploration and work.

Post-evaluation meetings were 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 appreciates the efficiency and courtesy of the Inspectorate in carrying out the subject inspection. The Board commends the work of the teachers involved in teaching Social Personal and Health Education throughout the school. The Board notes with regret that the report does not comment on the fact that there was industrial action in place throughout the country at the time of the inspection which limited the level of interaction between teachers and the inspector and also restricted changes being made in the posts of responsibility in the school. It notes the affirmation of the good practices that are in place in the department.

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 school changed to a teacher-based classroom system in the academic year 2010/2011. The subject co-ordinator is again teaching the subject in the academic year 2010/2011. The posts of responsibility are to be reviewed and the school will actively look at the position of co-ordinator rotating between those teaching the subject. THE RSE Policy has been sent to the trustees for review and approval and the school is actively engaged in organising the delivery of RSE to senior cycle classes. SPHE will be included as a subject on in house report cards for Christmas and Summer Examinations. School management will continue to actively encourage teachers to undertake in-service and CPD training. School management will actively look at the establishment of a core team for SPHE.

The Board will carefully consider all the recommendations contained in the inspection report, with a view to their implementation, in light of the needs of the whole school and in consultation with the partners in the college community.