An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

St Joseph’s Secondary School
Navan, County Meath
Roll number: 64360Q

Date of inspection: 20 January 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 St Joseph’s Secondary School, Navan, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. 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 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, deputy principal and subject co-ordinators. 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

St Joseph’s Secondary School, Navan has had a longstanding tradition of offering a health education programme to all classes and the school is very proud of this commitment. The school has allocated one class period per week for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) for all junior cycle classes in accordance with Circular Letter M11/03. It is very good to note that a similar provision has also been made in senior cycle. This report is confined to the teaching and learning of SPHE in junior cycle and to the provision of RSE in senior cycle.

Every six weeks, management releases all SPHE teachers in each year group to facilitate a subject department meeting at the time of the scheduled SPHE lesson. On these occasions, the relevant year head or a member of the senior management team meets the year group at an assembly. In light of the statutory requirements of 2003 for all schools to timetable one period per week for SPHE, this is not an appropriate use of the time as students are losing out on valuable class time. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that alternative arrangements for SPHE subject department meetings be put in place.

The SPHE team comprises twenty-one teachers. In the junior cycle, twelve teachers deliver the SPHE programme and two additional teachers deliver the RSE component. Seven teachers deliver the SPHE and RSE programme in senior cycle. It is good that the vast majority of these teachers are very experienced in teaching SPHE. It is noteworthy that management makes every effort to ensure that these teachers teach another subject to their SPHE class. However, in terms of its size this is a substantial team. The school should now consider reviewing the size of the SPHE team in
order to develop a smaller, more cohesive department. The establishment of a core team of SPHE teachers is strongly advised. By so doing, the members of the team would be able to plan more collaboratively and it would be easier to ensure a consistent approach to the delivery of the SPHE and RSE programmes.

In addition to the classroom activities planned and delivered by the SPHE teachers, the junior cycle programme includes inputs by external personnel. All SPHE classes within each year group are concurrently timetabled to facilitate this provision and for planning purposes. In keeping with recommended good practice, the SPHE teacher is expected to remain in the classroom when outside speakers are delivering aspects of the SPHE programme.

The school is supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development. All of the teachers who are currently teaching SPHE have attended a variety of training events relevant to SPHE and RSE. This commitment by teachers to continuing professional development is good. When a core team has been established, it would be useful for the SPHE department to conduct an audit of its members’ current training needs so that any areas for development can be discussed with school management and appropriately addressed.

The two teachers who deliver the RSE component of the junior cycle SPHE programme have significant expertise in this area. It is good that teachers are delivering the RSE programme in both junior and senior cycle as opposed to external facilitators. However, this system means that two teachers are timetabled to each class for the duration of the RSE module, as the main teacher of SPHE for the class is released from this responsibility when the RSE module is being delivered. This is an opportune time for the school to review this arrangement in order to build capacity and expertise within the SPHE team. For instance, the assigned SPHE teacher could also attend the RSE lesson to observe and provide support where necessary. This form of team teaching could gradually build capacity and confidence regarding the delivery of RSE amongst the SPHE team and significantly reduce the risk of depending on a small number of teachers to deliver this area.

School management facilitates a number of initiatives that promote SPHE in a wider whole school context. The school has engaged with the Cool School programme. Each year, a Friendship week is organised for all students in first year. Some transition year (TY) students have attended seminars on substance use and have delivered a short module to first year students as part of a peer mentoring programme. Rainbows, a bereavement counselling service, is also available in the school.

A good range of resources to support the teaching and learning of SPHE has been acquired by the school. These can be accessed by all teachers. Information and communications technology (ICT) has been used by the teachers in the development of resources and in some cases, it is used to enhance teaching and learning. All of the classrooms are adequate in proportions and facilitate the inclusion of the active participative approaches that are so important in SPHE lessons.

**Planning and Preparation**

Two co-ordinators, one for junior cycle SPHE and one for senior cycle SPHE, have been appointed with the associated duties forming part of their posts of responsibility. This support for SPHE is very good. The co-ordinator in junior cycle is currently not teaching SPHE but is very
experienced in the subject. It is important that the co-ordinator be actively involved in teaching the subject.

Members of the SPHE department meet formally twice per year in addition to the planning times that have been made available at the scheduled SPHE time. In junior cycle, the co-ordinator has developed a three-year plan for the delivery of almost all of the ten modules contained in the SPHE curriculum framework. This plan is spiral and developmental and in keeping with the aims and rationale of the SPHE curriculum. However, it is important that planning takes account of all ten modules each year. For instance, in the content overview, no reference is made to the module on Influences and Decisions. This should be borne in mind at the initial planning stages.

Five weeks have been allotted for the completion of each module. This allocation does not allow for the delivery of all of the ten modules. For this reason, the allocation of a set timeframe should be reviewed. This would also allow individual teachers to have the flexibility to adapt the SPHE programme to meet the needs of the particular class group. For example, the designation of five periods to meditation in second year as part of the SPHE programme may need to be reviewed.

The co-ordinator has invested significant time creating and developing a pack for all teachers. This contains an outline of content for each module, lesson plans and resources which teachers may consider using. The commitment and dedication of the co-ordinator for this meticulous attention to detail is highly commended. While recognising the level of support and direction that teachers need, responsibility for extending the range of accessible resources could now be spread across the team. For example, the SPHE department could, as a collective exercise, set about building upon the resources which are currently available to everyone. In some lessons observed, it was very apparent that teachers are already spending significant time and effort developing or acquiring resources for their individual use. These would make a significant contribution to the materials available to department members.

In senior cycle, the SPHE programme consists of distinct modules and these are delivered by different teachers who have developed particular expertise in the area. These modules include Mental Health, Careers, RSE and Substance Use.

No individual schemes of work were presented by any teacher during the evaluation. It is recommended that individual schemes of work be developed which are tailored to suit individual class needs. These should include aims, objectives, key learning outcomes required from each module, methodologies, resources and an indication of the modes of assessment to be used. Individual preparation for each lesson visited was good. This was evident through, for example, the provision of handouts and worksheets which were integrated into lessons at appropriate stages.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Seven lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation including one meditation lesson. All lessons began with a roll call. Most lessons were purposeful, well structured and there was very good continuity with prior learning. In all cases, the learning outcomes were shared with students and documented on the board. Students were also informed about the subject matter for forthcoming lessons as a further support to continuity. This is a particularly important strategy in a SPHE context where lessons are delivered in one period per week. All lessons occurred in an atmosphere of kindness and sensitivity.
Lesson content and pace were generally appropriate to each class group. Many of the teaching and learning strategies observed are in keeping with those recommended for the delivery of SPHE. The range of methodologies used in some instances provided students with opportunities for active, participatory and experiential learning. These included strategies such as brainstorming, pair work and group work, circle time, role play, questioning, discussion and reflection.

Some lessons observed were very successful. Good practice was evident when the lesson was not dominated by the teacher and where students were active, assumed responsibility for their own learning and where there was a clear purpose to each activity. For instance, in a lesson visited, students were placed in a circle. In order to create a secure environment, these students were put through a series of breathing exercises. The topic of the lesson was anti-bullying. Students were asked to reflect on a passage that the teacher read to them. The teacher exercised care and sensitivity in encouraging quieter students to speak out. In pairs, these students were required to improvise and create a short drama and act it out. All students engaged with the task enthusiastically and the level of learning was also good. The teacher then drew their attention to coping strategies and encouraged them to consider what they would do in the event of a bullying incident occurring. Responses indicated that students had learnt appropriate skills in the event of an incident.

A second lesson was equally successful. The topic of this lesson was ‘Friendship’. A series of probing questions encouraged students to reflect deeply on the attributes of a good friend and their responses were very good. ICT was used very effectively as a series of illustrations were shown to the students as a visual representation of the topic. The selection of material was very appropriate to the age profile of the students. Group work was managed effectively. All roles were carefully explained to students prior to undertaking the activity and appropriate time was given to processing information from the feedback session. A video clip was shown at this point which once again was very relevant to the topic. The lesson was summarised through the completion of an evaluation template where students were required to reflect on and record their own learning.

However, other observed lessons were not as good. In one class visited, students were required to draw an illustration of a bullying incident. Some students were able to complete the work in the assigned time while others were unable to do so. This is to be expected in a mixed-ability setting. However, the purpose of the activity was not clear as all students were given the choice of taking the drawing home to complete or storing it in their folders. Therefore, the educational value of this activity was diminished. It is important that there is a learning objective for all activities and a plan for how the learning objective will be achieved. In addition, students should always be required to complete any assignment set.

In another lesson, the level of written work completed by students was extensive. These students answered questions in their workbooks, summarised their learning by answering questions and completed evaluation sheets. While opportunities were provided to students to engage in some discussion and this is good practice, the quality of the learning achieved in this lesson was less than optimal. In general in SPHE lessons, it is recommended that consideration be given to reducing the level of written work undertaken in favour of more student participation.

Overall, the SPHE department would benefit from sharing good practices regarding active methodologies. Although participative strategies such as circle time, games, and role-play were used in some lessons, consideration should now be given to exploring active teaching
methodologies with a view to their wider application across all lessons. This would enable all students to engage more actively with topics. Attention should also be given to the integration of the four stages of the experiential learning cycle in all lessons. Details of this are outlined in the SPHE Guidelines for Teachers (pages 26 to 27).

In all of the classrooms visited, it was noted that SPHE corners have been developed to enable students to display some of their own work. This good practice promotes a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the creation of a stimulating learning environment. Questioning strategies which included both global questions and those targeted to individual students were very effective.

**ASSESSMENT**

The SPHE co-ordinator has devised an evaluation form with very specific questions for students to use upon the completion of each topic. This is a very good initiative as it places responsibility on the students for evaluating their own learning. From lessons observed, the extent to which this template is being implemented by teachers and used by students varied between classes. This may well be due to the differing needs of students and to the unsuitability of the questions in the context of an individual class. This suggests that the type of questions may need to be reviewed to ensure their relevance to all topics and class groups. Therefore, it is recommended that the evaluation template be reviewed, adapted as necessary and used consistently by all teachers of SPHE.

Students’ progress is assessed on an ongoing basis through oral questioning. This varied between targeting individual students and distributing questions to the entire class. All students are provided with a pack containing handouts and worksheets at the start of the year. However, the level of completed assignments in these packs varied considerably. It is good that some teachers provide tailored worksheets and handouts to complement the learning. However, the SPHE department should now agree on how these materials should be maintained and stored by students.

Formal reports are issued to parents at Christmas and summer. Currently, the school does not report to parents on students’ progress in SPHE although this has been discussed at planning meetings. In order for teachers to measure students’ progress effectively, it is essential that the SPHE department devise a policy regarding assessment practices as an integral part of teaching and learning. In this, particular regard should be given to the principles of Assessment for Learning (AFL). The planning of assessment for each lesson should be linked with the expected learning outcomes. Materials in students’ folders could act as a basis, for example, for student self-assessment where students are provided with opportunities to reflect on their learning at the end of a lesson or on completion of a topic. In this way, assessment is used as a tool for learning. Further information and advice on assessment is available in the Guidelines for Teachers (pages 59 to 68) and from materials produced by the SPHE Support Service. As part of the discussion on assessment, consideration should be given to how the school will report to parents on students’ progress in SPHE.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- In addition to the junior cycle, the school provides SPHE lessons to senior cycle students.
- School management is very supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development.
- The school has a number of initiatives in place which promote SPHE in a wider school context.
- Two co-ordinators have been allocated to this subject as part of duties associated with posts of responsibility.
- Individual preparation for all lessons observed was good.
- In all lessons, learning outcomes were shared with students and documented on the board.
- In all classrooms, SPHE corners have been developed to enable students to display some of their own work.

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

- The current arrangement whereby SPHE class time is used to facilitate teachers’ meetings on a six-weekly basis for junior cycle classes should be reviewed at the earliest opportunity.
- The school should review the size of the SPHE team with a view to developing a smaller more cohesive department and a core SPHE team.
- The allocation of a set timeframe for the completion of modules should be reviewed so that a degree of flexibility exists to meet the needs of individual class groups and that all ten modules can be delivered each year.
- As part of planning for teaching and learning, the SPHE team should further explore the area of assessment and consider how the school will report to parents on students’ progress in SPHE.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the subject co-ordinators of SPHE, principal and deputy 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 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

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 Board of Management welcomes the many positive comments contained in our SPHE subject inspection report.

The Board is pleased to state that the recommendations are being reviewed and changes have already taken place:

- Assembly procedures have been changed
- Five periods of meditation have been reduced to two
- SPHE as a subject has been added to formal reports which are sent to parents at Christmas and summer.

The Board and school management also wishes to acknowledge its support for all teachers of the SPHE programme and recognises their dedication, commitment and the valuable contribution they make to the holistic development of our students.