Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

St. Anne’s Secondary School
Rosanna Road, Tipperary
Roll number: 65500L

Date of inspection: 20 April 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 St Anne’s Secondary School. 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 time 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. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Anne’s Secondary School is a girl’s school with a current enrolment of 370 students. The well-being of students is central to the work of management and staff of the school. Senior management reported that the SPHE programme is highly valued and makes a significant contribution to the pastoral care provision in the school and contributes to the caring and respectful atmosphere that pervades all aspects of school life. All junior cycle classes are timetabled for SPHE in accordance with Circular Letter M11/03. Students who opt to follow the Transition Year (TY) programme are also provided with a dedicated period per week for Health Education, and this additional provision is commended as it serves to continue students’ learning in the topics and themes covered as part of their junior cycle SPHE programme. RSE is embedded in the SPHE programme in junior cycle, and it was reported that an RSE programme is provided for senior cycle students and is delivered as part of the religious education programme.

A consultative and collaborative approach is taken to developing all school policies. A number of policies relevant to SPHE have been developed including anti-bullying, substance use, pastoral care and RSE policies. The RSE policy is in need of review and updating to reflect Department requirements and this task should be progressed as soon as is practical. The RSE template and guidelines to developing a RSE policy are available on the Department’s website (www.education.ie) and will provide useful guidance to progress this work.

A strategic approach is taken to the deployment of teachers to SPHE in line with their knowledge, skills and interest in the subject. Management has recently expanded the number of teachers deployed to deliver the subject from two to four teachers, and is commended for identifying teachers who possess the interest and skills appropriate to its effective delivery. Teachers new to SPHE have been consulted prior to being assigned to teach the subject, all teach their class groups
another subject and it is intended, where appropriate, that teachers would continue with the same class group for the duration of the junior cycle. Such strategies are in keeping with good practice. This approach ensures that teachers are knowledgeable of their students and can establish trusting relationships with their class groups, which are central to the effective delivery of SPHE.

There is good support for teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD). Most teachers have attended a number of inservice courses provided by the SPHE Support Service, including the introductory course, the continuation course, the RSE training course, and the co-ordinator’s course. The continued engagement with the inservice programme is recommended, especially for teachers new to the subject, to ensure all teachers are familiar with the content, methodologies and resources available to teach the subject.

Links have been established with a number of appropriate external agencies to support the work of the school and the SPHE department. Teachers ensure that visitors and guest speakers are suitably qualified, are well briefed about the aims and content of the SPHE programme and the context for their input. This is in keeping with the guidelines set out in the SPHE Handbook, Section 7. The school should also refer to Circular Letter 0023/2010, which sets out such guidelines for schools on the use of visitors to the SPHE classroom.

Teachers are mostly classroom based, and where this arrangement exists, it usually works well for the delivery of SPHE. In this school, the classrooms visited were well maintained and, in most cases, provided a suitable environment to support the interactive nature of the subject. However, in some cases the classrooms are small and restrictive for larger class groups. It is important that classrooms for SPHE have sufficient space for students to move around and where the furniture can be easily rearranged to suit the various interactive methods. This should be given consideration by management when assigning classrooms for SPHE.

Teachers have easy access to a television and DVD player and there is also access, when required, to computers and data projectors. Appropriate arrangements are in place to support the purchase of additional resources and materials to support teaching and learning.

It is commendable that the school actively contributes to students’ well-being through a number of whole-school co-curricular activities. The healthy eating and anti-bullying weeks, organised by the school, are examples of constructive initiatives that can have positive impacts on students’ attitudes and behaviour towards their well-being. A number of posters, paintings and poems are displayed throughout the school corridors which help to reinforce the key messages related to each of these important topics. In addition, the involvement of students in fund-raising initiatives to support a variety of charities is highly commendable, as they contribute to the promotion of concepts such as social responsibility and active citizenship.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The role of subject co-ordinator for SPHE is attached to part of a post of responsibility and the duties associated with this position are documented. Appropriate structures are in place to support subject department planning. Management provides opportunities for the teachers of SPHE to meet formally to discuss and plan for the organisation and delivery of the SPHE programme. Brief minutes of formal meetings are recorded and retained in the subject file and are also available to senior management, which is good practice.
A subject plan has been developed for SPHE and provides information about the organisation and delivery of the SPHE programme in the school. Programmes of work for each year group are also documented but consist mostly of reference to topics and chapters in the agreed textbook. While a textbook provides a useful resource and reference, it should not be relied upon as the central guide to planning or delivering a comprehensive SPHE programme. There is a need to develop common programmes of work for each year group, based on the syllabus. These should document the modules and topics to be covered and ensure that the topics are taught in an incremental manner to support students’ learning as they mature. Planning for the programmes of work should also include 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 learning-and-teaching methods, resources and assessment methods should also be identified for each module. This will provide a reference framework to guide teacher’s individual planning and preparation, and ensure a consistent approach to the delivery of the programme. The starting point for this work should be the outcomes that are outlined in the syllabus for each module and the SPHE department is directed to the SPHE Guidelines for Teachers and to the SPHE Handbook, which provide a wealth of information and guidance on effective planning and delivery of the SPHE programme.

Resources to support teaching and learning are stored in the staff room and can be easily accessed. There is a need to collate and catalogue the existing resources and also to expand the range of resources to support the delivery of each topic. New resources to support teaching and learning of SPHE and RSE have recently been launched and information about these may be obtained by referring to the SPHE website, www.sphe.ie. The recently developed TRUST (Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching) resource for teaching RSE to senior cycle students will also provide a useful reference and resource for the school in delivering a comprehensive senior cycle RSE programme. This resource pack is available through the training programme for senior cycle RSE.

There was a good quality of individual planning and teachers had prepared thoroughly for the lessons observed.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was a good standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed. Students settled quickly and following roll call, teachers introduced the topic of the lesson. Lessons had clear aims and the learning intentions were effectively communicated to students at the outset. This good practice engaged students by stimulating their interest in the topic and providing them with tangible goals for their learning. Previous learning was effectively linked to new material through skilful questioning and brainstorming activities. Students’ responses to the initial questioning and tasks were recorded on the board and carefully categorised, which helped to provide a logical structure to frame students’ understanding of the topic. For example, in a lesson on mental ill health, students identified some of the effects of depression on a person’s feelings, energy levels, thinking and behaviour. This then provided a platform for students to identify coping strategies and to identify the various supports available for people affected, to help manage their symptoms of depression. Similarly, students’ understanding of different types and causes of addiction was highlighted on the board, which provided a basis for the remaining class activities on substance use.

Lesson content and pace were appropriate to each class group. A range of teaching methodologies was used, which included individual reflection, pair work and whole-class discussion. Every
effort was made to involve all students in the learning process and class activities. Questioning was a common feature of lessons and teachers included most students by carefully directing questions to named individuals. This good practice encouraged students’ involvement and was affirming of their responses and contribution to the class discussion. While all lessons included elements of active learning, it is recommended that more discursive and interactive tasks be used and set earlier in the lessons. Much of the very good questioning practices observed should be reserved until later in the lesson. This will ensure that students have had opportunities to reflect on the topic and to discuss and record their own attitudes, behaviours and opinions, prior to processing and generalising their learning experiences arising from their engagement in the tasks.

Some resources, such as worksheets, were used in the lessons and the textbook was used judiciously as a reference. There is scope for a broader range of stimulus material to be used to support students’ learning. For example, consideration should be given to the inclusion of web-based material, such as short online video clips, presentations or images, to provide exemplars and stimuli for discussion.

Classroom management was very effective and this contributed to exemplary student behaviour. Teachers have established a very positive rapport with their students, who were regularly affirmed for their contributions and efforts. Students were appropriately challenged and engaged in their lessons and a caring and respectful atmosphere was evident in all cases.

There was a good quality of learning in the lessons observed. Students demonstrated their knowledge and application of key skills such as assertive communication and responsible decision-making, particularly concerning issues identified in the lesson on addiction, substance use and abuse. Students’ responses to questions were informed and they confidently expressed their opinions and demonstrated a good understanding of the topics of their lessons. Lessons concluded with effective questioning that assisted students’ to summarise the main points and with the teachers’ outlining the topic to be covered in the next lesson, which is in keeping with good practice.

ASSSESSMENT

A range of assessment strategies is used by teachers to determine students’ engagement and progress in SPHE. In addition to frequent oral questioning and feedback from group work, students’ learning may also be assessed through the completion of work sheets, class tasks and written assignments. Home tasks are also given occasionally. In some cases, students maintain a folder containing their completed worksheets and assignments, which is stored in the classroom and distributed at the start of each lesson. This is considered good practice and should be adopted as common practice by the SPHE department.

The challenge for the SPHE department is to develop a common approach to the assessment process, which can be easily and consistently implemented by all teachers. The development of an “assessment toolkit”, involving formative and summative assessment strategies should be discussed as part of the subject department’s planning process. Further information on assessment in SPHE is available in the SPHE Guidelines for Teachers (pages 59-68) as well as the SPHE Handbook and from the website of the SPHE Support Service (www.sphe.ie).

Teachers maintain good records of students’ attendance and engagement in the subject. Teachers are available to meet with parents at parent-teacher meetings to discuss a student’s progress in the
subject. A comment on students’ progress is included on the formal school reports, which are issued twice per year.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
- SPHE is highly valued and makes a significant contribution to the caring and respectful atmosphere that pervades all aspects of school life.
- The time provided for SPHE in junior cycle is in line with Circular Letter M11/03.
- A number of whole-school policies which support the personal and social development of students are in place.
- There was a good standard of teaching and learning in the SPHE lessons observed.
- Lessons were characterised by exemplary student behaviour and a caring and affirming approach by teachers to all aspects of students’ engagement and learning.
- Students were appropriately challenged and included in their SPHE lessons, which succeeded in developing their knowledge and skills.
- A number of co-curricular focus weeks and whole-school events support students’ social and personal development during the school year.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
- The existing RSE policy should be updated and the RSE programme should be clearly documented for each year group.
- Planning for the programmes of work for each year group should be further developed in line with the syllabus.
- The range of resources available to support teaching and learning should be expanded to support the delivery of each topic.
- It is recommended that more discursive and interactive tasks be used and set earlier in the lessons, in keeping with the experiential learning cycle.
- The expansion and development of a common approach to the assessment process is recommended.

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.

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