Subject Inspection of Social Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Comeragh College
Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary
Roll number: 72400V

Date of inspection: 15 February 2011
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 Comeragh College, Carrick-on-Suir. 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, conducted an interview with senior students and administered a questionnaire to third-year students. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Comeragh College is a co-educational school with a current enrolment of 287 students. The school operates from two sites, located some distance apart, with one building housing junior cycle classes and the other accommodating the senior cycle. This less-than ideal situation is carefully managed and teachers ensure that the timetable functions effectively. The school provides the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and the established Leaving Certificate. The school is involved in the Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS) initiative and avails of a number of supports to promote students attendance, attainment and welfare. The school has a long tradition of providing a formal programme of Health Education, which is the name given to the provision of SPHE on the school’s timetable.

A streaming system operates at junior cycle. With the exception of the highest streamed class group in third year, which is not timetabled for SPHE, all junior cycle classes receive one period of SPHE per week. All fifth-year students receive a double period per week of Health Education and sixth-year students are provided with one period per week. The senior cycle provision for the subject is exemplary. However, the absence of timetabled provision for SPHE for the one third-year class group must be rectified, to ensure that the school is fully compliant with the requirements of Circular Letter M11/03. The withdrawal of SPHE, and Physical Education, from this class group’s timetable may, inadvertently, result in these students forming the perception that their personal health and well-being is not as important to them as their academic achievements.

SPHE is currently delivered by a team of five interested and committed female teachers, with varying levels of experience in teaching the subject. The continued development of a core team of SPHE teachers is recommended, as it will enhance the professional capacity and experience of all
the teachers and ensure continuity in the delivery of the programme. Furthermore, the recognition of the need for male teachers, with the interest and skills, to deliver the programme is welcomed. The achievement of this objective should be pursued, especially given the co-educational nature of the school. The intention of management to ensure that teachers remain with their class groups from first year to third year, where possible and appropriate, is commended. This helps to establish trusting relationships and consistency of approach in the delivery of the programme.

Teachers new to the subject are well supported through the exemplary work of the co-ordinator. Management supports teachers’ engagement in continuing professional development (CPD), with most teachers having attended relevant in-service events, including RSE training. The forthcoming engagement of the SPHE support service with the school and SPHE team will further enhance the professional development of all teachers.

Policies relevant to SPHE have been appropriately developed to guide and support the work of the school, including substance use, anti-bullying and critical incident. Management also provided confirmation that the Child Protection Guidelines have been adopted. Work has begun on the school’s RSE policy. The immediate 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, as outlined in Circular Letter 0027/08.

A requisition system is in place for the purchase of resources and materials to support teaching and learning and it was reported that management is very supportive of all requests. A substantial range of resources including texts, DVDs and worksheets are stored in a dedicated area that is easily accessible. There is very good access to information and communication technology (ICT) throughout the school.

In addition to the provision of the SPHE programme, the school has a number of initiatives and structures to actively support the pastoral care and personal development of students. These include the provision of additional counselling supports, a dedicated care team, a healthy eating programme, the recent introduction of an extensive physical activity and sports programme and the active engagement by the home-school-community liaison teacher with parents. The visual promotion of SPHE within the school is also very good. The display of students’ art work, a variety of posters and relevant information to promote the principles of physical, mental and social health and well-being positively contribute to students’ learning in SPHE. A dedicated SPHE notice-board is also available, which provides a useful mechanism to support the promotion of relevant events, information and student activities.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject department planning for SPHE is well advanced. The expertise and work of the co-ordinator is central to the effective organisation and delivery of the programme. Teachers are facilitated to meet formally to discuss and plan the programmes of work, and the proceedings of these meetings are appropriately documented. Consideration should be given to rotating the role of the SPHE co-ordinator at regular intervals between all members of the SPHE team. This will help to share the responsibility and to further develop the depth of experience and expertise of the SPHE team in undertaking these duties.

The SPHE subject plan is very well developed. It is a comprehensive and informative document and addresses all aspects of the programme’s organisation and delivery in the school. Of particular note is the inclusion of guidelines for the appropriate support of students with mild
general learning disabilities in SPHE lessons. The programmes of work for each year group are well developed and appropriately constructed to ensure that the syllabus is delivered in an incremental and developmental manner. The development of a framework for delivery of each module and topic that aligns the lesson content with the intended learning outcomes and resources is good practice. The expansion of this framework to also include the most appropriate teaching-and-learning and assessment strategies should be considered to further enhance this work.

A RSE plan has been developed, with identified learning outcomes aligned to the specific topics to be covered with each year group. This programme plans effectively for students’ knowledge, understanding and skills to be developed in a coherent and age-appropriate manner. The delivery of the programme should now be discussed. Senior students indicated that while elements of the programme are delivered, they would appreciate a more comprehensive RSE programme in all year groups.

The SPHE department has acquired and developed a range of appropriate resources to support teaching and learning of each module and topic. The collation of these resources and reference materials into a central access area is good practice. The compilation of all of these resources electronically, including short video clips and presentations, is exemplary as this ensures that teachers can access and use them with considerable ease. It also overcomes the difficulty of transporting hard copies from one campus to the other.

Good links have been established with relevant external agencies to provide additional information and complement the work of the SPHE department. The procedures for the inclusion of guest speakers and visitors to the SPHE classroom follow good practice, in accordance with Circular Letter 0023/10. The formalising of these procedures into a policy on visitors to the school should be undertaken.

A considered and reflective approach is taken by teachers to the development and delivery of the SPHE and RSE programmes. Consideration should also be given to the inclusion of some element of student evaluation of the programme at regular intervals.

The standard of individual planning was of a high quality.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

All of the SPHE lessons observed were excellently planned, with clear and achievable learning outcomes. This prior preparation ensured that the quality of teaching and learning was of a very good standard. Good practice was observed in each lesson, where teachers introduced the topic of the lesson, established links with previous learning and outlined clearly the intended learning outcomes. The use of the whiteboard or PowerPoint presentation to present the learning intention ensured that students had a clear focus for their learning. In some lessons, ICT was used effectively to signpost the direction of the lesson and to provide the stimulus material for the lesson tasks.

All lessons were very well structured and most were well paced. The topics, tasks and resources were appropriate to the age, ability and interest of students. In the lessons observed the topics covered were decision making, positive mental and emotional health.

A variety of appropriate methods were used to engage students. Questioning was used effectively to assess students’ prior knowledge and to determine their understanding of the topic and tasks. Teachers skilfully differentiated questions to suit the ability levels of students and to draw on
their personal experiences. A mixture of higher-order and lower-order questions were targeted to named students, with good use of wait time and supplementary questions to provide students with sufficient time to think and to clarify or to prompt them to elaborate on their responses.

A facilitative approach was taken in all lessons, with a strong emphasis on the experiential learning cycle. In this way students were fully engaged through reflective and interactive tasks that promoted the acquisition of knowledge and the development of identified skills. Tasks set were appropriately challenging for students and provided them with opportunities for self-reflection, sharing and discussing the topic in pairs or small groups. For example, in lessons on decision making, students learned how to construct a decision-making rubric in response to a challenging dilemma with a list of possible options, the advantages and disadvantages of each option and the predicted outcomes. The application of this exercise from a hypothetical to a real situation further helped to consolidate and contextualise the learning experience. In another lesson, students were skilfully directed, through a series of progressive tasks, to recognise a range of physical, psychological and social traits associated with depression and to identify a number of positive strategies to reduce the associated psychological challenges. The construction and implementation of tasks in all lessons ensured that students were engaged in self-reflection, analysis and application, which are central to achieving the aims of the SPHE programme.

All teachers ensured that learning was consolidated at the end of the lesson by revisiting the intended learning outcomes. This good practice ensured that students could identify and describe their learning arising from their engagement in the set tasks. In many lessons, students used a copybook to record elements of their work and this is commended.

Lessons were characterised by very good student behaviour, which was promoted through effective classroom management. Teachers demonstrated a very good knowledge and awareness of all of their students and a caring atmosphere was evident in all of the lessons visited.

**ASSESSMENT**

Good records of students’ attendance and participation in class are maintained by all teachers. A range of summative and formative approaches is used as part of the assessment process in SPHE. This “assessment toolkit” includes the completion of self-assessment tasks, the completion of home tasks and a variety of projects. A common approach to the assessment process should be considered by the SPHE department. The identification of a number of assessment milestones for each year group, using the suite of instruments already in place, should be discussed as part of the subject department planning process. This will promote consistency across the SPHE department and further enhance the quality of engagement and work produced by students.

The use of a copybook and dedicated folder by students is good practice. A review of some copybooks and folders indicated that students are making good progress. The copybook and folder system has the potential to further contribute to the assessment process and this is an area that should be considered for further development.

A formative comment on students’ progress in SPHE is included on the school reports to parents and the availability of SPHE teachers at parent-teacher meetings is in keeping with standard practice.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school has a long tradition of providing a programme of SPHE on the curriculum at junior cycle, with exemplary provision at senior cycle.
- There is good whole-school support for SPHE, which is an integral component of the school’s pastoral-care structures.
- The SPHE programme is excellently co-ordinated, with a systematic and organised approach to subject planning and a detailed, comprehensive subject plan in place.
- The SPHE department has developed a good range of suitable resources, which are centrally stored and accessible to all teachers of the subject.
- The quality of teaching and learning in the SPHE lessons observed was very good.
- All lessons were characterised by a positive and affirming approach and a good rapport has been developed between students and their teachers.
- There is a good reporting system in place to inform parents of students’ engagement and progress in SPHE.
- A number of initiatives and structures are in place to actively support the pastoral care and personal development of students.

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

- Management must ensure that all junior cycle students are timetabled for SPHE in accordance with Circular Letter M11/03.
- The completion and implementation of a RSE policy to support the delivery of the RSE programme is recommended.
- Continued progress should be made in developing a core team to deliver the SPHE and RSE programmes.
- The continued development of the assessment process is recommended.

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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