An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal & Health Education
REPORT

Sacred Heart Secondary School
Convent of Mercy, Clonakilty, County Cork
Roll number: 62170B

Date of inspection: 23 April 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPHE

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Sacred Heart Secondary School, Clonakilty, 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 & Health Education (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 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 and deputy principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The whole-school climate in Sacred Heart Secondary School, Clonakilty is one which is supportive of the five over-arching aims of the SPHE junior-cycle syllabus. Myriad school initiatives, practices, projects and policies demonstrate a consciousness of and value for students’ social, personal and health education, in the broader sense of the word. SPHE is recognised in school documentation as an element of the school’s approach to student support and care. While this is positive, provision for SPHE as a discrete subject in the school is currently less than satisfactory in some respects. It was clear during the evaluation that school management recognises the specific requirements in relation to SPHE in areas such as access, timetabling and deployment of teachers, and it demonstrated determination to implement the necessary changes to remedy the situation.

Currently, first-year students are not timetabled for SPHE. SPHE is formally provided for in both second and third year, but only for one class per week for half of the school year. As a means of meeting the requirements of Circular M11/03, it is recommended that all junior cycle students be timetabled for one class per week for each year of junior cycle. It is positive that SPHE is timetabled in Transition Year (TY) for one period a week for the duration of the school year. Due recognition and praise are also given to two other elements of the school’s TY programme, namely the mental health module and the peer mentoring programme, both of which were found to support the themes that are synonymous with the junior cycle SPHE syllabus and the draft senior cycle syllabus.

While some work has been undertaken in relation to the development of an RSE policy, it is strongly recommended that management advance this work in line with Circular 0027/2008. The website of the Department of Education and Skills provides a number of useful resources, including a set of policy development guidelines; a template; and a sample policy. The RSE Interim Curriculum can also be accessed at www.ecdrumcondra.ie.
The school’s provision of RSE for students requires formalisation, particularly in each of TY, fifth and sixth years. A minimum of six timetabled periods of RSE should be provided for all senior cycle students. These lessons should relate to the three themes identified in the RSE Interim Curriculum - Guidelines for Post Primary Schools. The school’s RSE programme should be appended to the RSE policy. Some RSE training for staff could prove valuable at this point.

In light of the role of guest speakers in the delivery of the school’s RSE programme, the preparation of a policy on the use of guest speakers is suggested for consideration. Circular 0023/2010 should inform the preparation of this policy. Another valuable resource for this work can be found in section seven of the 2003 SPHE Handbook.

It is positive that efforts are being made to establish a core team of SPHE teachers. In doing so, management is reminded of the desirability of teachers completing the two-day, introductory training before being assigned to teach SPHE. A number of existing team members are very experienced in the area and have availed of training offered by the SPHE Support Service. The principal has also availed of training provided for senior management and relevant training has been undertaken by the subject co-ordinator. This level of engagement with training is very positive. It is recommended that an audit of the team’s current training needs be completed. The outcomes of this might inform future training schedules, in terms of who accesses training and what training might be prioritised.

On occasions it has been possible for management to provide for the continuity of a teacher for a class group from second to third year. This is further encouraged throughout junior cycle, as best practice is where a teacher remains with his or her class group for the three-year cycle.

A clear system exists to support the procurement of resources for SPHE, with an annual budget allocated by management. A centrally located storage unit has been provided for resources, and this facilitates an ease of access to such supports for all. A classroom, the permanent layout of which supports the arrangement of seating in a circle or in small groups, is available for SPHE lessons. This is praised, as the room arrangement is highly supportive of the inclusion of active-learning strategies and co-operative learning.

Policies which are deemed to support the principles enshrined in the junior cycle SPHE syllabus have been developed and/or adopted in the school. These include: a substance use policy; an anti-bullying policy; a student-care policy and the child-protection policy. Management is to be credited for the preparation of a summary document, which seeks to summarise the actions a teacher should and should not take in relation to reported or suspected abuse cases. It is management’s stated intention to begin work also on a mental health policy. The school is working closely with the West Cork Mental Health Service and associated personnel in order to make this ambition a reality. Their intentions in this regard are commended and fully encouraged.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A subject co-ordinator oversees the planning work of the SPHE subject department. This position is filled on a voluntary basis. The co-ordinator, together with the members of the SPHE subject department, has developed a very comprehensive SPHE plan. This process is supported by management through the provision of time for formal department meetings approximately twice a term. It is positive to note that minutes of department meetings are being maintained.
Outline programmes of work have been agreed and prepared for both second and third years, as well as for TY. The programmes are time-bound, identifying work to be covered on a week-by-week basis. This level of detail is highly praised. Junior cycle programmes of work are based on the syllabus, and provide for each of the ten modules. These programmes of work demonstrate a balanced coverage of the SPHE junior cycle syllabus, although the feasibility of covering this amount of work, in this amount of detail, in just one period a week over half a year is questionable. Another positive feature of the programmes of work is the compilation of a generic list of relevant methodologies, resources and assessment modes. Over time, the members of the subject department are encouraged to advance this by seeking to identify, on a module-by-module basis, suitable methodologies, resources and assessment modes. Teachers are also encouraged to ground the programmes of work in the aims and learning outcomes of each module, as outlined in the syllabus.

There is some evidence of the systematic filing of resources such as lesson plans and lesson notes, handouts and worksheets. This practice is noted as very good and is, therefore, further encouraged. In this regard, the very good approach evident in relation to the filing of resources for the Belonging and Integrating module, where items are filed by topic for each of second and third years, is recommended for wider application. This could be developed alongside, and in tandem with, the development of more detailed programmes of work. Based on evidence gathered during the evaluation, the teaching team is well poised to bring planning to this next level.

Significant time and thought have gone into identifying the activities organised and provided for by other subject departments, which are seen to support students’ learning in SPHE. The document which details such activities seeks to demonstrate how various subject areas including, for example, English, Mathematics, and the modern European languages, provide opportunities for the acquisition of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are associated directly with SPHE. This action also supports the general premise espoused in the junior cycle syllabus that every teacher is a teacher of SPHE. It also supports the point in the previous section which relates to the existence of a whole-school climate that is supportive of students’ social, personal and health education. In this regard, the efforts of management, the SPHE team and other staff members deserve to be recognised and acknowledged. Cross-curricular links are also being explored by the members of the SPHE department with other subject departments such as, for example, Religious Education and Science. Strategies need to put in place to formalise this approach as this has the potential to enhance students’ learning in various modules.

The quality of short-term planning for lessons observed as part of this subject inspection was of a very high quality. Teachers had prepared thoroughly for lessons. It was positive to note that lessons were generally consistent with the planned programme of work. A range of carefully chosen resources had been prepared and collated for use in the delivery of lesson content, some availing of information and communication technology to very good effect. These included very good PowerPoint presentations which, in addition to being informative, were also very visually stimulating. In addition, and in terms of the overall selection of resources, there was a very strong emphasis on providing for the student who demonstrates a visual learning preference. This is highly praised. The degree of preparation for lessons impacted very positively on the quality of teaching and learning observed.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three lessons were observed during this evaluation. Based on this evidence, the quality of teaching and learning in SPHE in Sacred Heart Secondary school is very good.

Lessons were purposeful, with a good focus on the modules and topics as identified in the junior cycle SPHE syllabus. It is very good that students were made aware of the module and topic being explored in each lesson, and that, in some cases and as relevant, students were informed of the plan for forthcoming lessons. Best practice was where students were also informed of the intended learning outcomes for each lesson. This approach is recommended in all lessons. For support in this task, teachers are directed to the syllabus, where module aims and outcomes are clearly identified.

Lessons were very well thought out and therefore very well structured. They were action packed but appropriately paced, the former being particularly praised for the very direct and hands-on involvement of students that it demanded. In one lesson in particular it was observed that there was a tremendous amount of very valuable work undertaken in a relatively short timeframe. This is indicative of two things: the teacher’s competence and high levels of student co-operation.

A very good range of appropriate methodologies was utilised in the delivery of lesson content, all of which promoted maximum student participation. Particular credit is due where lesson planning, and therefore delivery, gave due regard to the incorporation of experiential learning and its four distinct phases, namely experiencing, processing, generalising and applying. As applicable, this approach to the teaching of SPHE is further encouraged. As required, teachers are directed to the relevant section of the SPHE Guidelines for Teachers. Furthermore, the revised Healthy Living – Teachers Lesson Plans Booklet, which has been produced by the Health Promotion Service of the HSE West, and which illustrates how this method can be very effectively and very easily applied in the delivery of SPHE lessons, may be of value to teachers.

The high quality PowerPoint presentations referenced previously were used to very good effect, often providing structure to the lesson, stimulating students’ thinking and discussion, guiding students’ activity, and seeking to summarise students’ learning. Excellent use of PowerPoint was observed in one third year lesson at lesson closure where, in addition to the above, it was used to brighten and lighten, whilst also checking students’ learning. In another third year lesson, ICT was used, once again to very good effect to package the lesson content and to reinforce students’ learning through the playing of a well-chosen video clip.

Student activity, which it is good to note predominated in lessons, was organised effectively and very well managed, with careful planning evident for each of the tasks that were undertaken with students. Activities were also appropriately challenging. All of this is highly praised. Where pair or group work was utilised 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, for example, chairperson and secretary. All of this is consistent with best practice. In addition, students’ participation was closely and carefully monitored by the teachers, with support, encouragement and direction being offered 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, too, is praised.
Students were highly engaged with lesson content. They worked diligently, and they participated in a very enthusiastic manner. Feedback from activities was, in general, very well processed and in some instances students’ answering was noted as excellent. Students spoke confidently and competently in relation to the subject matter of observed lessons and in relation to topics associated with the SPHE curriculum. Teachers are to be credited for this finding. Teacher-student relations were extremely positive, and room arrangement supported a safe, orderly and participative learning environment.

Question-and-answer sessions were well utilised to develop lesson content. Students were given sufficient time to answer and students’ answers were affirmed. On occasions, it was found that it would have been better to have involved more students in question-and-answer sessions.

It was very positive to see that efforts were made to summarise lesson content as this helps to ensure that students leave each lesson with some definite learning, be that in terms of knowledge gained, skills acquired or attitudes recognised in themselves.

ASSESSMENT

Programmes of work indicate a relatively good focus on assessment. Homework was assigned in each of the lessons observed and, as relevant, work previously assigned was reviewed. The school’s SPHE plan emphasises informal classroom observation as the key approach that is to be used by teachers to determine students’ progress and achievement in relation to SPHE. While the value of this approach is acknowledged, its capacity to provide clear evidence of students’ achievement of the learning outcomes identified in the syllabus is limited. As a result, the department is encouraged to look at developing an assessment toolkit. The starting point for this work should be the module outcomes in the syllabus. A number of options exist: classroom activities; home tasks; self-assessment; peer-assessment and portfolio assessment, some of which are already in use by individual teachers. 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. The Guidelines for Teachers provide a model on which this could be based.

There is a good focus on review and evaluation in relation to the overall SPHE programme and students’ experiences of it. The completion of a review with third-year students in May/June 2009 is commended. The team is encouraged to continue to provide such opportunities for students. The preparation of a document which seeks to summarise students’ feedback should be considered, as it could inform teachers’ planning work, as well as teaching and assessment in SPHE. The use of lesson reviews is encouraged, as is the inclusion of reflection exercises, with the latter being particularly appropriate as modules conclude. 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.

The inclusion of SPHE on the school’s report template for parents is recommended. Teachers are advised to look at preparing a bank of comments that might be used when describing students’ progress and achievement in SPHE. The five key aims of SPHE would 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.
Very best practice is where planning for assessment is incorporated into lesson planning and into lesson structure and delivery. This reflects an assessment model that is moving from *assessment of learning* to *assessment for learning* (AfL). There was some evidence of this in lessons observed, for example traffic lighting was seen in one lesson, and as an overall approach it is further encouraged. AfL is discussed in the *Guidelines for Teachers*.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The whole-school climate is one which is supportive of the five over-arching aims of the junior cycle SPHE syllabus.
- Management demonstrates determination to implement the necessary changes to improve the school’s provision and support for the junior cycle SPHE syllabus.
- Discrete SPHE lessons are timetabled for TY students.
- Efforts are being made by management to establish a core team of SPHE teachers and a number of team members are very experienced in the area and have availed of training.
- SPHE is well resourced.
- A very comprehensive SPHE plan has been developed. This contains outline programmes of work, which possess a number of positive features.
- Significant thought and time have gone into identifying relevant cross-curricular activities.
- The quality of short-term planning for lessons observed was very good.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed was very good.
- A clear consciousness around assessment is evident in planning documentation, which includes provision for student review of the SPHE programme.

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

- It is strongly recommended that management timetable SPHE for all junior cycle students for the equivalent of one class period per week, as required by Circular M11/03.
- School management should advance the development of an RSE policy.
- Provision should be made for discrete lessons in RSE in each of TY, fifth and sixth years.
- It is recommended that the teaching team’s current training needs be identified, and that this information informs the SPHE department’s training schedule.
- The subject department should begin developing more detailed programmes of work.
- The very good approach evident in one planning folder in relation to the filing of resources is recommended for wider application.
- The subject department should work on developing an assessment toolkit.
- The inclusion of SPHE on the school’s report template for parents is recommended.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the 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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