An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Eureka Secondary School
Kells, County Meath
Roll number: 64410F

Date of inspection: 14 December 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 Eureka Secondary School. 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 teachers. 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

Eureka Secondary School currently caters for 719 female students. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is very well provided for as a curriculum subject and it benefits from strong whole-school support. Each junior-cycle class is timetabled for SPHE in line with the requirements of circular letter M11/03.

In senior cycle, a Personal Development module is delivered to all Transition Year students (TY). Topics include personal awareness, communications, positive thinking and self belief. Commendably, the relationships and sexuality education (RSE) programme in fifth year and sixth year is delivered by a teacher in the school. Each class group in senior cycle receives one module of RSE which is of ten weeks duration and this is delivered during Religious Education. This means that all students receive thirty class periods of RSE and this is very good. However, the timetabling of this module means that a number of students do not receive any RSE until sixth year. All students should be provided with aspects of the RSE programme as early as possible.

On occasion, the school has utilised the services of external speakers to complement the work of teachers in the junior-cycle SPHE programme. This includes representatives of Aware and the Juvenile Liaison Officer. Information regarding all talks provided to students is sent to parents in advance in line with good practice. The school has very clear procedures regarding the use of visiting speakers and these are clearly documented in the SPHE plan. These practices are in line with the requirements of Circular Letter 0023/2010 Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) & Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE): Best Practice Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools.
The current SPHE teaching team comprises nine teachers, many of whom deliver SPHE to more than one class group. Generally, teachers met with during the evaluation were clearly committed and dedicated to this subject. Every effort is made to assign teachers to their class groups for the three-year junior cycle and into senior cycle. Almost all of the current team are experienced teachers of SPHE having taught it for a considerable period of time. This is good. Commendably, there is flexibility in the school whereby new members can join the team while others can opt out from time-to-time.

Management is very supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development. There has been considerable engagement with the SPHE support service to enhance the professional competencies of SPHE teachers. Some of the current team of teachers of SPHE have attended the Introductory course and some the Continuation and RSE courses delivered by the SPHE support service. Others have attended courses hosted by the Health Service Executive (HSE). This attention to training is very good as it ensures that there is an incremental approach taken to the development of teachers’ skills. However, as some teachers have not received training in recent years, the school is advised to keep the training needs of all its SPHE teachers under review.

All teachers are timetabled to teach SPHE in rooms which facilitate the inclusion in lessons of active participative strategies such as group work. This supports the use of the learning methodologies advocated in the syllabus for the successful delivery of the subject. Very good efforts have been made by some SPHE teachers to ensure that there are appropriate displays of SPHE materials in their classrooms. These are very useful for maximising the potential of the students’ immediate learning environment to stimulate and retain their interest in issues and topics relevant to the subject. The acquisition of displays for the other classrooms that are used for the delivery of SPHE lessons is recommended.

Materials and resources have been made available to teachers which support the teaching and learning of SPHE and this is very good. All resources are stored in a room which is accessible to teachers. Some of the resources have been audited and catalogued. It is noteworthy that some teachers have developed their own resources which have been tailored to suit the individual needs of students. In addition, attention has been paid by some teachers to the acquisition of suitable web-based resources. It is recommended that all such resources be compiled and added to those already available.

The school is clearly committed to the promotion of SPHE in a wide whole-school context. Many systems which support the work of the SPHE teachers are in place. These include the year head and tutor system; Healthy Eating; a peer education programme and a friendship week. All of these initiatives are commended.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

SPHE is a core element of the pastoral care structure in this school. All of the necessary key policies relevant to or supportive of SPHE have been developed. These include the substance use policy, the anti-bullying policy and the RSE policy.

Co-ordination of the SPHE department was allocated to a teacher as part of the duties attached to a post of responsibility. However, this position lapsed following her retirement. It is recommended that the school now separate the position of co-ordinator from the schedule of posts and rotate this position among members of the SPHE department. This will ensure that the workload is evenly distributed between all members of the team. This would also build capacity
and expertise and avoid an over-dependence on one member of staff. Meetings of the full SPHE team occur at the start of the year and minutes are kept of these meetings. Thereafter, there is much informal contact between teachers.

Planning documentation was presented on the day of the evaluation which contained very detailed information. The SPHE programme comprises all ten prescribed modules and these are covered with all year groups. This plan is spiral and developmental. A particularly noteworthy initiative is the development of an action plan by the SPHE department each year. This is agreed by all members at the start of the year and a review of progress is undertaken at the end. This is very good practice.

Individual planning folders were presented by the majority of teachers. These folders contained information about the resources being used for lessons and the manner in which the department plan is being adapted to suit the individual needs of class groups. One individual plan included more comprehensive information regarding the methods and assessment strategies being deployed. The inclusion of this information is very good practice and one which should be adopted by all members of the subject department. In so doing, this will provide very valuable information for all SPHE teachers which would prove very useful for planning purposes. The inclusion of learning outcomes would also enhance this work.

Evidence gathered during the course of the evaluation indicated that, in a small minority of SPHE classes, the RSE component is not being delivered. This is a very serious omission. As a matter of priority, the school is urged to address this and to ensure that all students in all class groups receive the full RSE programme. This is recommended.

In the lessons observed, individual preparation was very good. This was evident through, for example, the provision of handouts and worksheets which were seamlessly integrated into lessons at appropriate stages.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Six lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation including one RSE lesson in senior cycle. There was a very good standard of teaching and learning in all of these lessons. All teachers engaged in effective individual planning and preparation for their lessons, which included the prior preparation of resource materials. In all lessons, good practice was observed whereby the aims and objectives were shared with the students and in a few lessons, documented on the board for their consideration as part of the learning process. This is optimal practice and should be included in all lessons as it provides a focus and structure for the students.

The content and pace in all of the lessons observed was appropriate. Lessons were well structured and were characterised by smooth transitions from one stage to the next. Many opportunities were provided to students to participate actively in lessons. Consequently, the balance between teacher and student input was very good. For instance, in a lesson on Healthy Eating, group work was used very effectively. In this instance, all roles were clearly defined and each task was appropriately timed. Opportunities were also provided to students to process their learning through discussion and analysis.

In a second lesson, also on ‘Healthy Eating’, a variety of methodologies was used. This included brainstorming, a short table quiz, completion of a written task, and group work. Following this activity, students were required to record their main points on a large A3 sheet which was then

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displayed on the wall. This is very good as it ensures that this valuable information is not lost and can be re-used where necessary.

A wide range of teaching methodologies was observed and many of the strategies are in keeping with those recommended for the delivery of SPHE. These included individual reflection, brainstorming, pair work, small group work, questioning, role play, art work, projects and the completion of worksheets. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) was used effectively in one lesson to display information for the students to discuss. Students were afforded many opportunities to use their initiative and they rose very well to these challenges.

It is good to note that the class contract had been agreed with the classes visited and was on display in all rooms. Good routines were evident in the classes visited. This included the monitoring of student attendance. There was a friendly and caring atmosphere in all lessons observed and a positive rapport had been developed between teachers and their students. Teachers were very sensitive to the needs of students and this was particularly evident in the RSE lesson in senior cycle which was expertly handled.

In all cases, instructions were clear and precise. Students’ participation in the classroom activities was closely monitored by the teacher and help and assistance were afforded when necessary. Students’ efforts and contributions were well received and appropriately affirmed. All lessons were very well managed and discipline was very good. All discussions remained focussed on the topic-at-hand.

The quality of learning was very good. This was evidenced by the very good discussions which took place during lessons, written work, feedback from group work activities and the responses to questions. Good practice was observed in some lessons where students were required to evaluate their own learning at the end of the lesson. This practice should be extended to all classes.

**ASSESSMENT**

The SPHE department has developed an assessment policy for SPHE and this document outlines a range of assessment practices. These include teachers’ observations of students’ engagement in pair work, group work, class discussions, questioning, completion of worksheets and responses to tasks. These are very good practices and should be used by all teachers, where appropriate, to enable them to determine students’ progress in lessons.

In all lessons, students were provided with resources by the teacher. These took the form of handouts or worksheets. In some classes, a system is in place for students to store and file personal materials such as these from SPHE lessons in a folder which is stored by the teacher and distributed to students at the beginning of the lesson. This is very good practice and one which should be observed by all SPHE teachers. It is important to monitor this work to ensure that students are filing all materials systematically. Communication with parents is maintained at the annual parent-teacher meetings as appropriate. Currently, the school does not report on SPHE through its formal reporting mechanisms. This should be addressed at the first opportunity.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is very well provided for as a curriculum subject and it benefits from strong whole-school support.
- The RSE programme in fifth year and sixth year is delivered by a teacher in the school.
- There is flexibility in the school regarding the deployment of SPHE teachers whereby new members can join the team while others can opt out from time-to-time.
- Management is very supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development.
- The school is clearly committed to the promotion of SPHE in a wide whole-school context and SPHE is a core element of the pastoral care structure.
- A particularly noteworthy initiative is the development and review of an action plan by the SPHE department each year.
- There was a very good standard of teaching and learning in all of the lessons.

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

- The school should ensure that SPHE is included in formal school reports.
- The school should make certain that all students are provided with aspects of the RSE programme as early as possible.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of SPHE and 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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