Subject Inspection
of
Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Waterpark College
Park Road, Waterford
Roll number: 64940L

Date of inspection: 16 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 Waterpark College. 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 their teacher, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teacher. In addition, two class groups of third-year students completed a detailed questionnaire and the inspector held a focused interview with a small group of senior students. 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 and the subject co-ordinator. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

A supportive whole-school climate exists for SPHE in Waterpark College with a strong commitment to student care and well-being. The personal development of students is valued by the school and all junior cycle class groups are provided with one period of SPHE per week. However, an anomaly exists where a small number of third-year students are withdrawn from SPHE for additional tuition in other subjects. This situation must be rectified forthwith to ensure compliance with Circular Letter M11/03. The recent introduction of a module of health education for students who choose the Transition Year (TY) programme is welcomed as it provides additional opportunities, through the formal curriculum, for students to learn about their health and well-being as they grow and mature. RSE is embedded in the SPHE programme in junior cycle. Senior cycle students are provided with some elements of RSE through the health education module in TY and the religious education programme at senior cycle. However, there is a need for a more comprehensive and coherent RSE programme at senior cycle.

A number of policies relevant to SPHE have been developed including anti-bullying, substance use and critical incident policies. The existence of these policies, in particular the critical incident policy, has served the school and its students well, and the school has provided exemplary support to students when required. The absence of a RSE policy should be addressed as a matter of priority. The school should refer to the relevant Department circulars (Circular Letters M4/95, M20/96, M22/00, M11/03 CL0027/08) in addition to the RSE policy template and guidelines, which are available from the Department’s website (www.education.ie), to inform its work in this regard. Once completed this policy should provide clear guidance for management, teachers,
students and parents on all aspects related to the content, organisation and delivery of the RSE programme in the school.

Three teachers are currently deployed to deliver the SPHE programme in the school. Management consults with teachers prior to their deployment and ensures that teachers are interested in teaching the subject. As two teachers are new to the subject, considerable and commendable efforts have been made by the SPHE co-ordinator to familiarise them with the programme content, appropriate teaching and learning methods and resources. The extensive engagement of the SPHE teachers with a local substance-use initiative and professional development programme is exemplary. It is recommended that management plan for the further professional development of the teachers new to the subject by ensuring that all SPHE teachers have opportunities to attend the relevant professional development programme provided by the SPHE support service. The consolidation of a core team of teachers, with the interest, knowledge and skills to teach the subject, will enhance the organisation and delivery of the programme in the school.

Good links have been established with a number of appropriate external agencies to support the work of the school and the SPHE department. Guest speakers are used on occasion to augment students’ learning across the various topics. While good procedures related to the purpose and role of guest speakers were reported during the evaluation, these should be appropriately documented as part of a whole-school policy. The school should refer to the SPHE Handbook, Section 7 and to Circular Letter 0023/2010, which sets out guidelines for schools on the use of visitors to the SPHE classroom.

The classrooms used for SPHE, which are mostly teacher-based, provide a suitable environment to support the interactive nature of the subject. Furniture can be easily rearranged and the rooms have sufficient space to facilitate student mobility. A television and DVD player, a data projector and laptop are available in the classrooms to support the use of various multi-media and electronic materials. Appropriate arrangements are in place to support the purchase of additional resources and materials to support teaching and learning.

There are a number of whole-school initiatives which promote students’ social awareness, in addition to their health and well-being. These include a local parish drug-awareness initiative that involves training a number of TY students to support the delivery of drug-awareness programmes in the local primary school. In addition, students are also involved in fundraising initiatives for a dedicated charity. Involvement in these activities positively contributes to the promotion of concepts such as social responsibility and active citizenship. The extracurricular sports and physical activity programme also facilitates students to engage in activities that promote positive attitudes and behaviours towards their well-being.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Appropriate structures are in place to support the subject department planning process, with formal planning meetings organised once per term. The work of the SPHE co-ordinator is central to the delivery of the programme and this role is well executed. Minutes of formal meetings are appropriately documented and retained in the subject planning documentation. To enhance the planning process and support the delivery of the subject, time should be given at subject department meetings to discuss effective teaching and learning strategies for SPHE, in particular the experiential learning cycle. Responses from senior cycle students from their experiences of SPHE and RSE lessons, expressed a preference for discursive and interactive lessons with less dependence on the use of textbooks.
Good progress has been made in developing a subject plan, which provides a good overview of the organisation and delivery of the SPHE programme in the school. To build on the good work already completed, the subject department should also document its approach to the identification, inclusion and differentiation for students with additional educational needs. Evidence of good practice in this area was identified during the inspection, but the variety of approaches lacked appropriate documentation. Opportunities to identify and deliver common themes and topics from other curricular areas should also be documented. This will help to develop a coherent cross-curricular approach to support and consolidate students’ learning. Furthermore, whole-school initiatives that support students’ personal and social development should also be identified in the subject plan.

Programmes of work for each year group in junior cycle are documented and follow the modules and topics as outlined in the *SPHE Guidelines for Teachers*. The practice of revisiting each module every year ensures that students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes are developed in an incremental manner. This ensures that topics and material can be appropriately contextualised to suit the age and maturation level of students. The further expansion of the programmes of work is recommended to 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 and should be aligned with the most appropriate learning-and-teaching methods and modes of assessment. This will provide a reference framework to guide individual planning and preparation, and ensure a consistent and coherent approach to the delivery of the programme. This work should be completed on a phased basis and shared by all members of the SPHE team.

While elements of RSE are delivered at senior cycle, no formal, coherent and incremental programme is documented. A programme of work for RSE at senior cycle must be developed and should be included in the SPHE subject department plan. In addition, the SPHE and RSE teachers should document its procedures for providing parents with adequate notice regarding the purpose and content of the planned programme of work prior to its delivery.

SPHE plans are reviewed periodically by the SPHE department. To enhance the review process, consideration should be given to including the views of students. This may take the form of a focused questionnaire to highlight students’ views of the topic, resources and methods used. This will provide valuable and informative feedback to assist future planning.

An adequate range of resources and texts have been collated to support the delivery of the programmes of work. Textbooks are used occasionally as a resource and reference to support students’ learning. Resources are centrally stored and this good practice ensures that all members of the SPHE team have easy access to the materials in preparation for their lessons. The SPHE department is encouraged to continue to acquire and develop additional resources, including electronic and multi-media materials, to support teaching and learning of each topic. The establishment of a shared electronic folder on the school’s network should be considered to facilitate ease of access and sharing of planning documents and resources.

There was high quality individual planning and preparation for all lessons observed. Teachers had prepared lesson plans and had carefully selected a range of appropriate resources to support students’ learning of the focused topics.
THE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning was generally of a good standard, with instances of very good practice observed. The topics taught were appropriate and relevant to the age and stage of development of students and included study skills and substance use. Teachers introduced the topic of the lesson and also used a variety of skills and tactics to revise learning from previous lessons. These included questioning, pair work and small group work. This good practice helped to place the topic of the lesson in context for students. It is recommended that teachers expand the initial introduction to discuss the intended learning outcomes for the lesson with students. These should clearly identify the knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire and develop as a result of their engagement.

Good efforts were made to involve all students in the learning process and class activities. Questioning was a common feature of lessons and included most students by carefully directing questions to named individuals, in addition to global questioning. Teaching was most effective when students were engaged in interactive tasks from an early stage of their lessons, which included individual reflection, pair work and small group work. In one lesson, a walking debate was used to determine the range of class opinions on a number of alcohol-related issues. This led to some very interesting and insightful debate in response to probing questions to challenge opinions. Very good practice was also observed when reference was made to the school policy for dealing with substance-use issues, which also reinforced students’ learning.

In some instances, a traditional whole-class approach was used for prolonged periods of the lesson, mostly through question-and-answer activities, which resulted in students being relatively passive in the learning experience. Teachers should ensure that there is an appropriate balance between teacher input and student activity. Involvement in the in-service programme provided by the SPHE support service will help to familiarise teachers new to the subject with the range of appropriate methodologies. Teachers should review Section 5 of the SPHE School Handbook for further information and ideas of successful approaches to teaching SPHE.

A range of appropriate resources were used to support students’ learning. These included worksheets, video and, in one lesson, ICT was effectively used to present a video clip that challenged the stereotype of a drug addict. The accompanying worksheet ensured that students were clearly focused on the relevant aspects of the video clip. The use of such accessible and relevant resources is highly commended, and the continued sourcing and use of similar resources to support the delivery of relevant topics is recommended.

Most lessons provided students with opportunities to develop key social and communication skills. One lesson provided opportunities for some students to present the main points from their group discussion to the class, which is good practice. However, it is important that all students are appropriately focused and listening to the presenter with the same attention that they afford their teacher. When relevant, teachers should reinforce the class contract as a means of ensuring that all contributions are listened to and valued.

Students demonstrated a good understanding of the focused topics and articulated the relevance of the material covered to their own lives. Lessons concluded with effective questioning by the teacher that assisted students’ to summarise the main points of the lessons. In some lessons teachers consolidated students’ learning by processing their responses to the set tasks on the board. Homework was set in one lesson, which is welcomed. The practice of note-taking of work
covered in lessons was varied. Teachers should develop a common approach to both recording class proceedings and to the variety of home tasks that support students’ learning.

All interactions in the lessons observed were positive and affirming and a good rapport has been established between students and their teachers.

**ASSESSMENT**

Teachers maintain a record of students’ attendance at lessons. Formative assessment in SPHE takes place during lessons through observation of students’ engagement and through oral questioning. Students’ progress in SPHE is reported to parents at the annual parent-teacher meetings. In addition, the facility to add a comment on students’ progress in SPHE is available on the school reports system; however the use of this facility is at the discretion of each teacher, which may result in an inconsistent approach to reporting on students’ learning in SPHE to parents.

Assessment of students’ learning in SPHE is poorly developed at present. There is a need for an agreed and consistent approach to the assessment process, the recording and retention of students’ work and the reporting of students’ learning and progress to parents. A range of assessment methods and milestones for each year group should be established, which should be based on the identified learning outcomes. Teachers should also agree on a method for students to retain a record of all of their work in SPHE, such as a dedicated folder. This will provide the basis for a meaningful comment to parents to inform them of their son’s learning and progress in SPHE.

Further information and advice on assessment in SPHE is available in the *SPHE Guidelines for Teachers* (pages 59-68) and from the SPHE support service. In addition, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) website (www.ncca.ie) contains information on assessment for learning, which will enhance the subject department’s approach to formative assessment and constructive pedagogies.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A supportive whole-school climate exists for SPHE in Waterpark College with a strong commitment to student care and well-being.
- Good progress has been made in developing a core team to deliver the SPHE programme in the school. There has been good engagement with external agencies that support student care and also provide for the professional development of teachers.
- The subject is well coordinated and good progress has been made in developing a subject plan.
- The quality of teaching and learning was generally of a good standard.
- Lessons were well planned and a good range of resources was used to support teaching and learning.
- A range of active methodologies were used that were effective and appropriately challenging to support students’ learning.
- All interactions were positive and affirming and a good rapport has been established between students and their teacher.
• A number of whole-school initiatives are organised to support students’ social and personal development.

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 provided with SPHE in accordance with Circular Letter M11/03.
• A RSE policy must be developed and a coherent programme for senior cycle students must be implemented as a matter of priority.
• Teachers new to SPHE should attend in-service training as soon as practicable and management should plan for the future professional development needs of all SPHE teachers.
• Subject planning documents should identify the strategies for inclusion and differentiation of tasks for students with additional educational needs and the opportunities for cross-curricular planning and delivery of common themes.
• Programmes of work should be expanded to identify the specific learning outcomes for each year group and module, which should be aligned to the appropriate teaching and learning and assessment strategies.
• Teachers should ensure that there is an appropriate balance between teacher input and student activity, where possible, by increasing the use of experiential and active methodologies.
• There is a need for an agreed and consistent approach to the assessment process, the recording and retention of students’ work and the reporting of students’ learning and progress to parents.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and subject co-ordinator at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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