An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Grennan College,
Thomastown, County Kilkenny
Roll number: 70640I

Date of inspection: 26 March 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 Grennan College, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation (WSE). 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 throughout the week of the WSE, 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Management and staff view the SPHE programme as making a significant contribution to the well-being of students and as an integral component of the school’s pastoral-care structures. SPHE is appropriately provided on the timetable for all junior cycle classes in accordance with Circular Letter M11/03. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is also appropriately provided as part of the SPHE programme at junior cycle. Some elements of RSE are included at senior cycle, as part of the religious education (RE) programme, but there is a need for specific time to be identified and a more coherent approach to be taken to the delivery of a comprehensive RSE programme for each of the senior cycle year groups. It is recommended that following collaboration with teachers, parents/guardians, members of the board of management and students, appropriate arrangements be made for the delivery of a comprehensive RSE programme to all students, from first year to sixth year, in accordance with Circular Letter 0027/08. The school might find it useful to refer to the recently developed TRUST (Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching) resource for teaching RSE to senior cycle students, which is available through the training programme for senior cycle RSE.

The SPHE programme is currently delivered by two teachers, both of whom have extensive experience in teaching the subject. A teacher, who is new to the subject, has recently been deployed to provide temporary substitution for one of the permanent SPHE teachers. It is good practice that in such cases, which are exceptional, teachers are consulted by management prior to being deployed to teach the subject. Management is commended for identifying teachers who possess the interest and skills appropriate to the effective delivery of the subject. The school is cognisant of the need to build its capacity to continue to deliver the SPHE and RSE programmes and recognises the need to expand the present team of teachers. This development should be pursued as soon as is practical for all involved.

Where possible and appropriate, management endeavours to ensure that teachers remain with their class groups for the three-year cycle. This is commended as it ensures that teachers have
time to develop a positive and trusting relationship with their class group and also ensures a consistent pedagogical approach to students’ learning experiences.

Management is supportive and encourages continuing professional development (CPD) and teachers are facilitated to attend in-service courses upon request. It is commendable that there has been some engagement with the SPHE Support Service in the past. It is recommended that teachers new to the subject attend the introductory course as soon as is practicable. This will ensure that teachers are familiar with the range of approaches to teaching the programme and to facilitating students’ learning. Support for the future professional needs of the current team should also be strategically planned to ensure the continued expansion of teachers’ knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the school, particularly in the area of RSE. It is important that the professional capacity be developed within the staff to ensure that the RSE programme can be delivered as part of a coherent and developmental educational programme.

School policies are appropriately developed through a consultative approach involving the school’s educational partners. Policies relevant to SPHE and RSE have been developed to support the students and the work of the school, including policies on substance use, anti-bullying and a code of behaviour. The Child Protection Guidelines have been adopted in line with the requirements of the Department. The school has an RSE policy in place, but this is now in need of review and updating to reflect Department requirements. The progression of this task is recommended and the updated policy should aim to provide clear guidance to parents, students and teachers on all aspects related to the content and delivery of the programme for all year groups. Templates to facilitate this work are available at www.education.ie.

Links have been established with a number of appropriate external agencies to support the work of the school and the SPHE department. The input by visitors to the SPHE classroom is incorporated into the subject plan in advance to supplement, support and consolidate students’ learning. Teachers ensure that visitors and guest speakers are suitably qualified, and are well briefed about the aims and content of the SPHE programme and the context for their input. Students cover the focused topics with their teachers prior to the arrival of the visitor, ensuring that they are more informed and can engage in meaningful discussion with the visitor. This is in keeping with the guidelines set out in the SPHE Handbook, Section 7. The school might refer to the recently issued Circular Letter 0023/2010 that sets out such guidelines for schools in the use of visitors to the SPHE classroom.

Teachers are mostly classroom based, and this supports the delivery of the SPHE programme. Classrooms are bright and well maintained and provide an environment suited to the interactive nature of the subject. Teachers have easy access to a television and DVD player and there is also access, when required, to computers and data projectors. Resources and materials to support teaching and learning can be purchased from the allocated budget or upon request to management. Additional freely available resources are also acquired from government agencies that support health and well-being. These provide valuable information and can be used as stimulus material in lessons to promote learning in topics such as healthy nutrition, physical activity, emotional health, personal safety and drug awareness.

The school actively contributes to students’ well-being through a number of whole-school co-curricular activities. The organisation of a sports day, drugs awareness week and a planned anti-bullying week are constructive initiatives that can have very positive effects on students’ attitudes and behaviours. The organisation of the proposed anti-bullying week in September is appropriate as it can often prevent any issues arising later in the school year. Such whole-school initiatives
should be included in the relevant school policies to ensure coherence and consistency when dealing with issues within the school system.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A good quality of subject department planning for SPHE was evidenced during the inspection. Management facilitates subject teachers to meet formally at least once per term. Teachers also work collaboratively on a regular basis to share resources, discuss the programmes of work and support each other in their work. Brief minutes of formal meetings are recorded and indicate that much thought and effort has been invested in the planning process and the organisation of the programmes of work for students. Good progress has been made in the subject department planning process and a subject plan has been developed that follows the template of the school development planning initiative (SDPI). An SPHE policy has also been developed that provides valuable information about the organisation and delivery of the SPHE programme in the school. This good work, and the open and collaborative approach evident in the SPHE department, ensures that teachers new to the subject feel well informed and supported during their induction to teaching the subject.

Programmes of work have been developed for each year group and these are broken down topic-by-topic and presented in a logical order over the course of the year. All ten modules of the syllabus are covered with each year group, ensuring that the topics taught are progressive and support students’ learning in an incremental manner as they mature. The placement of these modules is appropriate to meet the needs of students at particular times during the year, such as covering topics about belonging and integrating and friendship in the first term of first year, and similarly applying the principles of effective decision-making in the last term of third-year when programmes and subject choices for senior cycle are being considered. It is recommended that the planning of the programmes of work be extended to identify 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. It will then be possible to align the most appropriate and effective learning-and-teaching methods, resources and assessment methods, with the planned programme content. The aim of this planning process is to provide a reference framework to guide teachers’ individual planning and preparation and to 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.

The identification of relevant cross-curricular links such as topics in Religion, Physical Education and Home Economics in the subject planning documents is commended. These can be most useful in augmenting and consolidating students’ learning when their delivery is well planned to coincide with the relevant subject departments’ programmes of work. The planning of students’ participation in a range of co-curricular activities, including annual fund-raising events and social concern programmes, such as contributing to the St. Vincent DePaul, is highly commended. Involvement in such activities helps to promote understanding of issues related to social responsibility and personal health and well-being.

The involvement of parents in the school through a number of initiatives is commended. The sending of letters by the SPHE department to parents to inform them of the delivery of the school’s RSE programme at junior cycle is in keeping with recommended good practice. The specific topics to be addressed should also be identified in these letters, as this can often provide an opening for parents to begin to discuss sensitive issues with their children. It also ensures that
parents, who may have some concerns or issues, may discuss these with the SPHE teacher prior to the delivery of the module.

Resources to support teaching and learning are stored in the teachers’ classrooms and can be easily accessed. A textbook is also used with each year group. The use of the textbook as a reference and workbook is appropriate and the continued judicious use of this resource is recommended. 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](http://www.sphe.ie).

Some review of the topics and resources used in the programmes of work is undertaken at a subject-department level. Students may also be involved in reviewing the input of visitors to the SPHE classroom, which is commended. Consideration should be given to further including students in the programme review process as a means of providing feedback to teachers about students’ experiences. This practice could help maintain focus in future programme planning on meeting the needs of students. A focused questionnaire, to facilitate students to highlight their views of the topics covered, resources and methods used and the quality of their engagement and learning, may be used for this purpose.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was a good standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed, which were characterised by careful and considered planning and preparation by teachers. In the lessons observed the topics taught were healthy eating, personal safety and substance use. Following roll call, teachers introduced the topic of the lessons to students. Previous learning was effectively linked to new material through skillful questioning and brainstorming activities. This helped to set the topic in context for students and create a sense of continuity in their learning. In most cases, the learning intentions of the lessons were also shared with students, in keeping with the principles of assessment for learning. In one lesson, the learning intentions were written on the board and were frequently referred to throughout the lesson. This provided clear direction for students about the content of the lesson and the knowledge, skills and values that they were expected to acquire as a result of their engagement. The expansion of this strategy to all lessons is recommended.

Questioning was a common feature of lessons and teachers endeavoured to include all students by carefully directing questions to named individuals. This promotes students’ involvement by affirming and valuing their responses and contributions. While all the elements of active learning were present in the lessons observed, at times the initial questioning phase was protracted, leaving little time for the planned activity tasks. In all lessons, the learning tasks were well planned, focused and organised to actively engage students. However, students would have benefited more if these tasks were introduced much earlier in their lessons, with questioning reserved until later in the lesson to facilitate the processing of students’ learning experiences. Good practice was observed in one lesson, when students were actively engaged in reflective and discursive tasks in pairs and small groups early in their lesson. Teachers should ensure that the structure and pace of lessons allows sufficient time for students to actively explore or reflect on the topic prior to processing the main points, in keeping with the experiential learning cycle.

There was good use of stimulus resources in many of the lessons. In one lesson, students were required to read the food label of some common processed food products and to place the equivalent of the sugar content in sugar lumps into a jar. This task successfully illustrated to
students the actual amount of sugar contained in products such as concentrated orange juice, breakfast cereal, snack bars and carbonated soft drinks. It clearly facilitated students to make informed choices about their nutritional practices. In other lessons, worksheets and case studies were used as stimulus material for discussion. A lesson on personal safety, which focused on safety when using social networking websites, would have benefited from some integration of information and communication technology to provide some tangible examples of the material.

Students’ behaviour was exemplary in the lessons observed and teachers have established a very positive rapport with their students. A caring and respectful atmosphere was evident and students were affirmed for their contributions and efforts throughout their lessons.

The quality of learning in the lessons observed was good. Students’ responses to questions were informed and they confidently expressed their opinions and demonstrated a good understanding of the topic of their lessons. Lessons concluded by summarising the main points and outlining the topic to be covered in the next lesson, in keeping with good practice.

ASSESSMENT

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 one case, students maintain a folder containing their completed worksheets and assignments. This is stored by the teacher in the classroom and distributed to students at the start of each lesson. This is in keeping with good practice and should be adopted as common practice by the SPHE department.

The challenge for the SPHE department is to develop an agreed, consistent and coherent approach to the assessment process. The development of an “assessment toolkit” should be discussed as part of the subject department planning process. The expansion and development of the assessment-for-learning strategies, including student self-assessment and portfolio assessment should be considered as part of a formative approach to students’ learning. Further information on assessment in SPHE is available in the SPHE Guidelines for Teachers (pages 59-68) as well as the SPHE Handbook.

Currently, SPHE does not feature on formal school reports. In order to enhance the profile of the subject and to provide feedback to parents regarding students’ engagement and progress, it is recommended that SPHE be included within the formal school report system. The SPHE department should discuss and agree assessment criteria in advance of its inclusion in the school report system.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A positive school climate exists that supports students’ social, personal and health education and the school is proactive in promoting students’ well-being through its curricular and co-curricular activities.
- The time provided for SPHE in junior cycle is in line with Circular Letter M11/03.
• Good progress has been made in developing the SPHE subject plan and the co-ordination of the subject is well executed.
• A number of whole-school policies which support the personal and social development of students are in place.
• A range of resources has been compiled and catalogued by the SPHE department and are easily accessible to all teachers of the subject.
• There was a good standard of teaching and learning in the SPHE lessons observed.
• Students were actively engaged in their SPHE lessons, which succeeded in developing their knowledge and skills through a range of effective and interactive methods.
• Lessons were characterised by excellent student behaviour and a caring and affirming approach by teachers to students’ engagement and learning.
• A number of 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 professional capacity within the staff should be developed to ensure the effective delivery of SPHE and in particular the RSE programme.
• The existing RSE policy should be updated and the RSE programme should be clearly documented for each year group.
• The planning of the programmes of work should be extended to identify the specific learning outcomes for each year group and module.
• Students should be engaged in class tasks sooner in keeping with the experiential learning cycle.
• The expansion and development of an agreed, consistent and coherent approach to the assessment process is recommended. Students learning and progress in SPHE should be included in reports home to parents.

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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