Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Mulroy College
Milford, County Donegal
Roll number: 71220O

Date of inspection: 10 November 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 Mulroy College, Donegal. 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

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. Commendably, SPHE is timetabled in fifth year. This report is confined to the teaching and learning of SPHE in junior cycle and to the provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in senior cycle.

In fifth year, the RSE programme is delivered as a distinct stand-alone module as part of the SPHE programme. This is taught by a teacher in the school who has attended training provided by the SPHE support service and who makes good use of the resource TRUST (Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching). In sixth year, other components of RSE are delivered by external speakers. Aspects of RSE are also delivered through Religious Education lessons in both fifth year and sixth year. Information regarding RSE planning was available in SPHE planning documentation. However, it is important that all components of the RSE programme and a description of how they are delivered are detailed in the SPHE plan. This is recommended. In line with good practice, information is sent to parents in advance regarding the delivery of the RSE programme.

External speakers include the Crisis Planning Agency, the Health Service Executive and Belong To. Currently, the evaluation of these inputs is undertaken informally. The school should ensure that any inputs by external speakers are formally evaluated and that all pertinent information arising out of this work should be included in the SPHE plan. The school reports that it follows 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 school has very clear procedures in place in this regard which are in line with good practice.
but does not yet have its own written policy when engaging visiting speakers. This is recommended.

The current SPHE department in junior cycle comprises six teachers. All teachers met with during the evaluation were clearly committed and dedicated to this subject. Almost all members of the current team are experienced in teaching SPHE for a number of years and this is very good.

Management is very supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development and there has been a high level of engagement with the SPHE support service to enhance the professional competencies of SPHE teachers. It is very apparent that an incremental approach has been taken to teachers’ training needs. Teachers are deployed to junior and senior-cycle SPHE in line with their experience and expertise. These are very good practices.

All teachers are timetabled to teach SPHE in rooms which facilitate the inclusion in lessons of active participative strategies such as group work. This is good as it 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 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; the buddy system between sixth-year and first-year students; an annual anti-bullying week and a Girls Active club which is designed to encourage female students to be more actively involved in sporting activities. Parents are also invited to the school for information evenings where presentations have been made on issues such as cyber-bullying.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The systems that are in place in this school are supportive of collaborative planning. Time is made available for all subject departments including SPHE to meet. Records have been kept from all such meetings. In addition, there is much informal contact between teachers within year groups. The level of planning of SPHE is very good and it is very clear that 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. However, the RSE policy should now be updated so that it fully reflects RSE provision in this school. Materials are available at [www.education.gov.ie](http://www.education.gov.ie) which will support this work.

Co-ordination of the SPHE department is undertaken by a teacher in a voluntary capacity. This teacher is very experienced in delivering this subject and in line with good practice, is a member of the current teaching team. The co-ordinator carries out her role conscientiously and is clearly committed to SPHE. Materials have been made available to teachers which support the teaching and learning of SPHE. These are stored centrally and can be accessed by all members of the SPHE department. In addition, individual teachers have also compiled or designed their own materials and this is very good. This work is shared informally between individual members of the team. It is recommended that these materials be added to the centrally stored resources, audited and catalogued into different year groups to avoid any unnecessary overlap.
Planning documentation was presented on the day of the evaluation and it contained information about the organisation of the department and all relevant planning materials for the SPHE and the RSE programmes. The SPHE programme for each year group consists of all ten modules as recommended in the syllabus designed by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Modules are presented in a spiral and developmental way.

All SPHE programmes of work are designed and agreed by teachers responsible for the different year groups and subsequently shared between the full team. These programmes of work contain a list of topics, include an estimated timeframe for their completion and outline the resources that will be used. One such programme of work contains more detailed information and includes the learning outcomes and methodologies. This is very good work and is an approach which should be adopted by all teachers. The inclusion of information regarding the modes of assessment that are being used to determine the learning would also enhance this work. This will ensure that the many good practices noted in the lessons observed are documented.

In almost all lessons, individual preparation for lessons observed 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**

Five lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation. There was a very high standard of teaching and learning in almost all of these lessons. Most teachers engaged in effective individual planning and preparation for their lessons, which included the prior preparation of resource materials. Good practice was observed where the aims and objectives were shared with the students for their consideration as part of the learning process and returned to at the end of the lesson. This is optimal practice and should be included in all lessons as it provides a focus and structure for the students.

Lessons were well structured and were characterised by smooth transitions from one stage to the next. For instance, in a lesson on ‘Study Skills’ there were varied methodologies deployed by the teacher. These included teacher input, questioning, pair work and individual self-reflection. Information and communications technology (ICT) was used very effectively to indicate the aim and objectives of the lesson, reinforce key points and to summarise the learning following questioning of students. The level of learning was very good as evidenced by the constructive comments made by many members of the class.

In another lesson observed, games were used to great effect to determine students’ ability to recall material and to reinforce key concepts of the lesson. Students in this class were very engaged by the content and all of the methodologies that were included. As a result, their learning was equally good. A wide range of teaching methodologies was observed in other lessons and these strategies are in keeping with those recommended for the delivery of SPHE. These included role play, brainstorming, discussions, self reflection and the completion of worksheets. Students were afforded many opportunities to use their initiative and they rose very well to these challenges. In many lessons, the balance between teacher and student input was appropriate and this is good.

Student attendance was consistently monitored. There was a friendly and caring atmosphere in the majority of classes visited and a positive rapport had been developed between teachers and their students. In all cases, instructions were clear and precise. Students’ participation in the classroom activities was closely monitored by the teacher in all lessons and help and assistance
were afforded when necessary. In the one lesson where student engagement lapsed, it is suggested that the class contract should be referred to as a reminder to students of the importance of maintaining a mutually respectful atmosphere in SPHE lessons. Students’ efforts and contributions were well received and appropriately affirmed in all lessons. Generally, 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 overall. This was evidenced by the quality of the discussions which took place during lessons, written work which occurred in lessons, feedback from group work activities and the responses to questions. In the main, the level of written work in copies was appropriate for the time of year.

**ASSESSMENT**

The SPHE department has yet to devise a formal written assessment policy. It is recommended that this now be progressed following collaboration on assessment criteria. In practice, a range of assessment strategies is being used across lessons to determine students’ progress. These include teachers’ observations of students’ engagement in pair work, group work, class discussions, questioning, completion of worksheets and responses to tasks. In some lessons, students are required to evaluate their learning either verbally or in a written assignment. This is good work and worthy of praise. The development of a template to support the process of student reflection and self-evaluation is now recommended. This template should be used consistently by the SPHE teachers.

In all lessons, students were provided with resources by the teacher. This 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 in a folder which is stored by the teacher and distributed to students at the beginning of lessons. This is very good practice and one which should be observed by all SPHE teachers. Communication with parents is maintained through the school journal and annual parent-teacher meetings as appropriate. To date, SPHE is not yet included on school reports and this should be addressed following agreement of the assessment criteria that will be applied.

**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.
- All teachers met with during the evaluation were clearly committed and dedicated to this subject.
- Management is very supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development and there has been a high level of engagement with the SPHE support service.
- The level of planning of SPHE is very good and it is very clear that SPHE is a core element of the pastoral care structure in this school.
- There was a very good standard of teaching and learning in almost all lessons.
- Lessons were well structured and were characterised by smooth transitions from one stage to the next.
- A wide range of teaching methodologies was observed in lessons.
• In practice, a range of assessment strategies is being used by teachers to determine students’ progress.

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

• The SPHE plan should fully reflect the components of the RSE programme which are also being delivered in Religious Education.
• The RSE policy should be updated.
• The SPHE department should devise a written policy regarding the assessment of students.

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.

Published May 2011
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The report reflects a very thorough subject inspection.  
The tone of the report is very positive and most affirming for the teachers in the SPHE Department.  
It is gratifying to see that there is a real acknowledgement in the report of evidence of good teaching and learning and of good practice.  
The recommendations made are realistic and therefore achievable.  
The recommendations made, when incorporated, will enhance the SPHE programme in the college

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The RSE policy is in the process of being updated in consultation with other partners. This will be presented to the members of the Board of Management for ratification at the first BOM meeting in September/October 2011.

The SPHE Department has agreed a policy on assessment of students. SPHE has been included on the subject list on the end-of-term reports. It will also be included on the subject list for Parent/Teacher Meetings.

There will be a review of the SPHE Plan in the next school year as part of scheduled subject planning. The relevant components of the RSE and RE will be incorporated into the SPHE Plan.