Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Clonkeen College
Blackrock, County Dublin
Roll number: 60092U

Date of inspection: 7 December 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPHE

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Clonkeen College, 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 and Health Education (including Relationships and Sexuality Education in senior cycle) and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of the 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, 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 and teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is provided on the timetable for all junior-cycle students for one period per week during first, second and third years. This is in accordance with the requirements of circular M11/03. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is delivered by the SPHE teacher as one module in the school’s SPHE programme during first, second and third year in accordance with the syllabus.

No formal timetabling of SPHE is provided for transition year, fifth-year or sixth-year students. However, guest speakers are invited annually for a half-day seminar to deliver aspects of the senior-cycle RSE programme. While it is recognised that a number of school systems and policies were supportive of students’ care and development, provision for students’ social, personal and health education in senior cycle ought to be more formalised. For example, it is regrettable that SPHE is not included in the Transition Year (TY) programme given the role that the subject can offer in supporting the personal and social component of TY. It is recommended that senior management and teachers explore the possibility of introducing a personal development module into the TY programme and that RSE be included as a necessary component in that module.

Senior management has recognised the necessity to formalise the provision for RSE in senior cycle and to meet the requirements of circulars 0037/2010, 27/2008, M20/96 and M4/95. The principal reported that plans are underway to introduce SPHE into the fifth and sixth year curriculum on a modular basis next year and to include RSE within that overall framework. This would be a welcome development. To ensure that a RSE programme can be delivered as a developmental educational programme and framed within the ethos of the school, it is recommended that school or senior management reviews and updates the school’s SPHE and RSE policy. The school should access sample RSE policies on the websites of the Department of Education & Skills. In addition, it is strongly recommended that a small team of teachers who will be teaching senior-cycle RSE next year be identified as soon as possible. To develop professional capacity for teaching RSE, these teachers should engage with the SPHE support...
service and avail of pre-service training in the delivery of the recently published senior-cycle RSE resource entitled TRUST, Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching.

With reference to the use of guest speakers for senior-cycle RSE, best practice is where guest speakers would augment rather than substitute for class-based teacher-led instruction and this is outlined in circular 0023/2010. The trained teacher is the best placed person to deliver RSE as they can establish and develop a safe climate for optimal learning. In addition, the majority of the students interviewed as part of the evaluation expressed a preference for a RSE programme that would be developmental in nature over the three years rather than one that is largely information based.

The school is supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD) and there has been a good level of engagement in training for SPHE teachers. This has impacted positively on the quality of teaching and learning evident in lessons. However, the team of teachers has changed over the years and some teachers who are currently teaching the subject have not had any training. There is a need to consolidate the team of SPHE teachers and to expand their training so that the full potential of the subject can be realised. Seven teachers are deployed to teach SPHE and there is a gender balance among the team. Every effort is made to ensure that teachers remain with their class groups for the three-year cycle and this is commended. It is good to note also that some teachers are teaching another subject to their SPHE class groups. However, the majority of SPHE teachers only teach it to one group and many teachers are not interested in extending their deployment in SPHE. It is recommended that the SPHE team carries out a needs analysis to devise a three-year CPD plan. That plan should facilitate a systematic and incremental approach to maintaining and building capacity to teach the subject in both junior cycle and senior cycle. It is also recommended that, where teachers cannot avail of training in any given year, information and resources be disseminated to all members of the team.

To raise the profile of the subject in the school and to support cross-curricular approaches, the following suggestions should be considered: a presentation to whole-staff on SPHE and RSE by members of the teaching team; placing a SPHE notice board in the staff room; issuing an information leaflet to parents; and including some references to SPHE on the school website.

A collection of SPHE resources has been compiled and these are centrally located and can be easily accessed by all teachers. The resource collection should be extended, modernised and diversified. Currently, most teachers routinely rely on the SPHE text book in planning and delivering lessons. The SPHE support service is well placed to provide some valuable recommendations with regard to resources that might be deemed particularly relevant including resources for teaching SPHE to boys. These could provide stimulating variety for teachers and students.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject department planning is facilitated by school management as part of the calendar of meetings scheduled throughout the school year. Full attendance at SPHE meetings is often difficult as teachers generally attend planning meetings in their main subject area and this has limited the extent of collaborative planning. It is recommended that consideration be given to the scheduling of meetings to facilitate the full team to attend in future. One member of the teaching team acts as co-ordinator for the subject as part of a post of responsibility. It is recommended that the SPHE teachers discuss the role of the co-ordinator and the role be defined in the planning documentation.
The SPHE co-ordinator and principal should look at ways of enhancing collaboration and a more dynamic approach to planning for the subject among the team of teachers. From an examination of meeting minutes, it was evident that the focus of SPHE department meetings to date has been reviewing the SPHE plan and choosing text books for year groups. It is recommended that the agenda for collaborative planning meetings should be extended to include discussion on some emerging issues including the consolidation of the teaching team, provision for senior-cycle RSE, teaching RSE within the school ethos, resources for SPHE, and the development of assessment strategies for SPHE. It is recommended that the school principal review the meeting minutes and subject plan annually with a view to enhancing overall development for the subject, and, if necessary, set developmental targets for the department each year.

A common programme for SPHE has been developed and it schedules each of the ten modules to be covered in each year of junior cycle. The modules are listed in the same sequence each year and teachers should consider other sequential arrangements in order to allow topics from different modules to be integrated and to give greater flexibility and variety. It is suggested that teachers explore suggested programme outlines in the *SPHE Guidelines for Teachers*. It is recommended that the programme include key learning outcomes expressed in terms of knowledge, attitudes and skills to be gained by students from first year through to third year. It is also recommended that evaluation by students, including evaluations on the sessions with visiting speakers, be used to inform planning. The *Review of Module* template in the *SPHE Teacher Handbook* could be used for this purpose.

Some of the policies in the school plan are relevant to and supportive of students’ social, personal and health education. These include the substance-misuse policy and the anti-bullying policy. In addition, the guidance counsellor is involved in teaching SPHE and this facilitates collaboration between both departments in the school and a connection with the guidance plan.

A SPHE and RSE policy is in place and the policy reflects the values and ethos of the school. Senior management has already identified this policy for review and intends to conduct this process shortly. It is recommended that the policy should contain greater clarity and guidance for teachers on teaching all areas of RSE, including family planning and sexuality, so that the spiritual, moral and ethical aspects can be addressed by all teachers in a consistent manner. The policy should also include guidance for teachers on the use of guest speakers. In addition, the policy should cross-reference with the aforementioned school policies as well as the guidance plan and the child protection policy. When developed, the programme for RSE at senior cycle should be appended to the policy and parents should be informed annually with regard to RSE programme implementation.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Five SPHE lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation, including first, second and third-year lessons. Lesson topics included communication, balance in my life, bullying and friendship. There was a good standard of teaching and learning in all SPHE lessons. Lessons had a clear purpose, were well structured and set at an appropriate pace and level for each group of students. In their teaching, teachers demonstrated good enthusiasm for the subject and for students’ personal development.

Lessons were delivered in a way which maximised student participation and in all lessons there was a very good balance between teacher input and student input. Students interacted excellently;
their hands shot up throughout, they contributed very well to lesson content throughout all phases of lessons by participating in a mature and interested way, and they listened to each others’ contributions respectfully. Teachers successfully generated a secure, inclusive and positive learning environment.

A class contract had been established with all groups and computer-generated samples of these that had been produced by students were on display in classrooms. It is recommended that a range of posters relating to aspects of the SPHE programme be sourced and placed in classrooms. These may serve as stimulation for discussion on topics or as possible reference points for students.

As each lesson commenced, students outlined what they had explored and learned in the last lesson. Learning outcomes for each topic and year group are listed in the SPHE syllabus. In this context, it is recommended that lessons begin by sharing the intended learning outcomes with students and that teachers use this as a means of assessment at the end of the lesson.

A variety of tasks was integrated into the structure of lessons including opportunities for self-reflection. In some instances, well-chosen ice-breaker tasks were employed during the initial phase of lessons. Teachers provided students with frequent opportunities to develop skills and confidence through well-planned group-work and pair-work activities. Students were familiar with such tasks and very much enjoyed the active learning opportunities provided. For example, when the tasks were set, the students quietly and quickly reorganised the classroom furniture to face each other and made the transition to discussion and social interaction easily. The tasks set were appropriately challenging, were focused and time-bound, roles were assigned to students, were well monitored by teachers and provided good opportunities for social skill development. The activities enabled students to reflect on the material being taught and to discuss issues with their peers. Teachers were supportive and encouraging in all instances and they took steps to ensure students’ understanding of the task and of key terminology. Students used a range of models during group tasks to record contributions and present the main points, including spider diagrams. The quality of lesson structure and delivery was very good.

Plenary discussion was facilitated at key stages during lessons to collate the views of all groups, to reinforce the key messages and to clear any misconceptions that arose. Teachers used questioning to good effect and in many instances teachers drew on students’ personal experiences and responses to develop their understanding of the topic or required them to explain their opinions. This approach is welcomed.

While the use of text books never dominated the activities of any lesson observed, textbook references were integrated in every lesson and teachers follow the text book sequentially with groups. Students have a SPHE copy but mainly complete reflection and written exercises in the text book. With a view to keeping motivation and interest levels high among students and teachers, teachers are encouraged to vary the types of resources used in SPHE lessons. The SPHE Handbook, the Guidelines for Teachers and resources from national and external agencies provide a considerably wide range of very valuable alternatives.

**Assessment**

Good practice in formative assessment was evident during lessons. Teachers used questioning and monitoring to assess individual learning and through their interactions with students they provided good affirmation and feedback on tasks. Teachers are strongly encouraged to look at
developing the range of assessment modes for the subject and consider the merits of introducing portfolio assessment. Information on this is available in the *Guidelines for Teachers*.

Currently, no formal reporting on students’ progress in SPHE takes place. This should be introduced and the subject should be included on the reports sent home to parents. The school’s reporting template should be adapted to accommodate reporting on student participation in SPHE as a core subject. In formal school reports, teachers could provide comments on students’ contribution to class and progress in relation to the development of knowledge, skills and attitude. Comments used in these reports should be based on the achievement by the student of the learning outcomes and objectives of the syllabus. It is also worth considering the merit of students contributing to their own progress report using the template and criteria in section 5 of the *Handbook*.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation of SPHE:

- SPHE is properly provided for on the timetable for junior cycle students.
- A SPHE and RSE policy has been developed.
- The school has a common SPHE programme for delivery at junior cycle.
- There was a good standard of teaching and learning in all SPHE lessons observed.
- The quality of lesson structure and delivery was very good.
- Students interacted excellently during their lessons.

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

- A core long-term team of SPHE and RSE teachers should be identified and consolidated and a three-year CPD plan should be put in place for these teachers.
- Provision for RSE in TY, fifth year and sixth year should be formalised and a programme for senior cycle RSE should be clearly documented.
- The SPHE and RSE policy should be updated and reviewed to provide greater clarity and guidance for teachers and it should include a policy on the use of guest speakers.
- Resources for RSE and SPHE should be extended and diversified.
- An assessment policy for the subject should be agreed and implemented by all teachers in the subject department and SPHE should be included on formal school reports.

A post-evaluation meeting was 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.

*Published October 2011*