

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health
Education (SPHE)
REPORT**

**Hartstown Community School
Clonsilla, Dublin 15
Roll number: 91339F**

Date of inspection: 23 September 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | A N D S K I L L S**

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 Hartstown Community School conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in SPHE (including Relationships and Sexuality Education) and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over three 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 principal and teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and members of the SPHE team. 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

Hartstown Community School has a long tradition of providing for the social, personal and health education of its students. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is viewed as an integral component of the pastoral care programme.

A whole-school approach is evident in the provision of a pastoral care programme. The school, as part of its participation in the *Health Promoting Schools Initiative*, has taken a number of actions that positively support students' healthy eating and physical wellbeing. Established structures such as the year head and class tutor system, together with the work of the school's guidance team and chaplain make a significant contribution to supporting students' ongoing personal and social development. It is evident from discussions held with school management and staff that there is a supportive school environment for the further development of junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).

The current level of timetabled provision for junior cycle SPHE is not fully in accordance with the Department of Education and Skills Circular Letter M11/03. It is established school practice that students who are in classes in the top band are not provided with a weekly timetabled class of SPHE. It is recommended that the board of management in consultation with senior management addresses this issue as a matter of urgency. In accordance with Circular Letter M11/03, SPHE must be timetabled as a discreet subject for the equivalent of one class period per week in each year of the junior cycle. This is essential to facilitate high quality provision for a SPHE programme that includes the complete range of themes recommended as part of the junior cycle curriculum framework devised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

A number of activities are organised by the school chaplain and guidance team to support the personal and social development of senior cycle students. Students in fifth and sixth year participate in annual personal development days which include inputs in the areas of mental health, substance abuse and RSE.

In the current academic year very good work is being done to enhance the provision of senior cycle RSE. Traditionally RSE was provided as part of the personal development days and was usually organised towards the end of May. The RSE input consisted of a presentation from an external agency with some topics taught in senior cycle Religious Education complementing student learning. These arrangements did not provide enough time to deliver an RSE programme that included the complete range of themes and facilitated high quality student outcomes. This fact was recognised by staff and reported by students during the course of the evaluation. A proactive approach is evident in addressing these concerns and a major review got underway at the end of the last academic year. RSE will now be included as a module in the guidance programme. To support the development of a RSE programme plan and assist in the facilitation of a high-quality programme, a number of staff members are availing of training in the use of the recently developed TRUST (*Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching*) resource for teaching RSE in senior cycle. These developments are indicative of very good practice.

Teachers met with during the inspection displayed high levels of enthusiasm for and commitment to the teaching and further development of the SPHE programme. The teaching of junior cycle SPHE forms part of the role of class tutor. The tutors meet their class for a daily tutor time and, in some cases, have the same class for a second subject. Where feasible tutors retain their class from first year through to third year. During the evaluation it was obvious that these practices help to establish a very positive rapport with students. However, the current deployment practice also presents some difficulties. There is currently a large team of nineteen SPHE teachers, each teaching one class group SPHE. This presents challenges in ensuring full attendance at planning meetings, in making sure that all teachers are sufficiently upskilled, and in ensuring consistency of practice in programme delivery and programme evaluation. If the teaching of SPHE is to remain the remit of class tutors, it is recommended that a core SPHE planning team be established to oversee the organisation, planning consistent delivery and evaluation of the taught SPHE programme. The team should comprise the co-ordinator and a small number of teachers who are currently teaching SPHE.

Senior management is supportive of continuing professional development (CPD) as a means of supporting high quality implementation of SPHE. However, during the evaluation there was a lack of clarity around actual levels of engagement with subject-specific CPD among the current SPHE team. It is recommended that senior management carries out a needs analysis among the teachers of SPHE and devise an action plan to facilitate a systematic and incremental approach to CPD among all teachers of SPHE. A record of CPD attendance at the introductory, continuation and RSE training should be included in the subject plan. A copy of the information supplied at in-service should be retained in a subject-specific CPD folder. This would ensure that the information is available to each member of the team to be referred to when required. In recognising the significant challenges of upskilling such a large team of SPHE teachers, the possibility of establishing a smaller core teaching team may have to be considered by management.

Whole-school policies in the areas of substance use and anti-bullying have been ratified by the board of management. Good use has been made of the relevant Department guidelines and a commendable level of consultation among parents, students and staff informed the development of these policies. The school adopts some good procedures around the use of visiting speakers. To

standardise practice it is recommended that senior management and the SPHE team formalise a policy on the use of visiting speakers that is in keeping with Department Circular Letter 0023/2010.

While parents are provided with some information regarding the RSE programme in the school there is no evidence that a whole-school RSE policy that is in keeping with Department guidelines has been developed or ratified by the board of management. It is recommended that the board of management, through collaboration with senior management, staff, students and parents make provision for the development of a RSE policy in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Department in Circular Letter 37/10. These guidelines can be downloaded from the education personnel section of the Department of Education and Skills website at www.education.gov.ie.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Good structures are in place to support collaborative planning for the senior cycle RSE programme currently being devised. However, the whole-school structures currently in place to support collaborative subject department planning in SPHE are not effective. Traditionally formal meetings of SPHE teachers take place at least twice a year as part of a pastoral care meeting. This practice is blurring the lines between the pastoral role of form tutor and programme planning for SPHE. It was reported that the SPHE teachers also informally meet throughout the year to discuss the SPHE programme and to share resources. This is good practice. However, with the exception of the meeting held at the start of this academic year, records of past meetings were not available.

The position of co-ordinator of SPHE has, by tradition, been part of an assistant-principal post of responsibility. At the time of the evaluation no co-ordinator was in place due to the retirement and non-replacement of a post-holder. The absence of a co-ordinator is impacting negatively on the subject department planning process.

To support high quality teaching and learning, the structures that support the co-ordination and collaborative planning for SPHE should be reviewed. SPHE needs to be decoupled from general pastoral care meetings and a discreet subject department for SPHE needs to be established. While close links will remain with the pastoral care personnel, the primary focus of the SPHE team should be planning for and evaluation of the taught junior cycle SPHE programme. As a priority it is recommended that a subject co-ordinator be appointed to work with the core planning team recommended earlier in the report. Good practice would suggest that the subject co-ordinator has experience in SPHE and is assigned to teach at least one SPHE class. Once the subject department is up and running and sufficient capacity built among team members, the position could be rotated among the SPHE teachers. Senior management should facilitate meetings of the SPHE team as part of the calendar of subject department meetings. Records of each meeting should be kept and systematically filed to facilitate continuity between meetings and foster a culture of collaborative and reflective practice.

Programme planning for junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle RSE should be further developed. At the start of each year junior cycle SPHE teachers are provided with a resource pack that contains exemplar programme outlines from the SPHE *Guidelines For Teachers* produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and material from the SPHE Support Service. While this information ensures broad coverage of curriculum modules, it needs to be customised to meet the specific needs of the school and to take account of all the very good work that is

underway in the school. No programme plan for senior cycle RSE was available during the inspection.

There is significant need to develop detailed common programmes of work for SPHE and senior cycle RSE. This would optimise students' learning experiences and support teachers in teaching the subjects. Due to the spiral nature of the junior cycle SPHE curriculum, modules are re-visited each year. Therefore, clear learning outcomes that facilitate an incremental approach to the development of students' knowledge, attitudes and skills should be identified for each module of work from first year through to third year. This will allow certain topics to be revisited whilst also avoiding unnecessary duplication. The number of class periods planned for each topic should also be noted. Specific information with regard to suitable teaching, learning and assessment strategies, as well as suggested resource materials should also be included. This enhanced approach to collaborative planning will assist with the pace and pitch of lessons and inform ongoing reflective practice. The same planning approach should be taken for senior cycle RSE.

Some very good ongoing planning practices are evident in the work of individual teachers. In some instances teachers are using the exemplar plan as a working document and reviewing lessons by recording the topic and resources used. This information should be used to inform the development of the collaborative programme of work as outlined above. In reviewing lessons, teachers should pay particular attention to recording the effectiveness of the teaching strategies and resources used. This item should routinely be on the agenda of planning meetings in order to share good practice in facilitating SPHE lessons.

An interesting range of co-curricular and cross-curricular events support students' social and personal development. Effective links with personnel from a number of outside agencies such as the Local Drugs Taskforce, drama groups and youth groups support this work. Students who spoke with the inspector during the evaluation recognised and appreciated the value of these activities had in supporting their learning in SPHE. To optimise learning, all co-curricular and cross-curricular activities should be incorporated into the revised programme plans in a manner that ensures that the topics covered before and after these activities supports student learning. Some very good cross-curricular links with Science, Physical Education and Home Economics were noted as a means of reinforcing students' learning. The effectiveness of this practice was praised by the students who met with the inspector during the evaluation.

There is a very good range of additional resources to support SPHE lessons. Deliberate efforts are made to ensure that the resources are kept up-to-date and are catalogued for ease of reference. This is very good practice. These resources are easily accessible to team members and there is scope to further use the resources to support lessons.

Good quality short-term planning was evident in the lessons observed. Best practice was apparent in those instances where the pace and pitch of lesson suited students' needs and where the range of teaching strategies deployed supported the active engagement of all students in the experiential learning cycle that underpins the SPHE curriculum framework.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Eight junior cycle lessons were observed during the evaluation. In all instances teaching and learning took place in a secure and supportive atmosphere. It was clear that positive relationships exist between the students and their teacher. Planned activities were well managed and students' contributions encourage and affirmed. Very good attention was paid to ensuring the students

understand the ground rules for SPHE lessons. In instances where special needs assistants (SNA) attended lessons they acted as a valuable support for the students.

All lessons were purposeful and generally in line with the programme plan. However, there is a need for teachers to agree the learning outcomes for each topic in each year to facilitate consistent practice between classes. The majority of lessons began by the teacher sharing the lesson objectives with students. This strategy proved effective in setting the scene and assisting in the development of a logical lesson structure and should be used as routine classroom practice. To enhance the formative assessment potential of this strategy it is recommended that time be taken in each lesson to revisit the intended outcomes. This would consolidate students' learning by reinforcing key points of information and facilitate further opportunities for student reflection and self-evaluation.

Each lesson had a clear focus and relevant links were established with previous learning. Best practice occurred in lessons where questioning strategies or previously assigned home tasks were used to actively engage students with previous lesson content. This allowed the teacher to assess students' understanding of previously taught material or to provide additional clarifications.

In the majority of lessons the advance preparation and effective use of a number of well-chosen resources served to stimulate students' interest and support learning in a manner that was in keeping with the rationale underpinning the junior cycle curriculum framework. For instance, in one lesson on *Motivation* students were asked to work in groups on a comic-strip story and discuss the possible positive and negative influences on motivation. Very good use of higher-order probing questioning strategies during the plenary session served to elicit detailed responses and provide opportunities for students to reflect and to discuss the topic in a way that supported high quality learning. In another lesson based on *Study Skills*, students were provided with a study planner and assisted in drafting a personal study plan which was going to be transcribed onto an A3 page for home use. This activity provided opportunities for students to develop important skills, facilitate informed decision making and achieve a sense of self-fulfilment as they prepare for examinations. It was noted that the handout used in one lesson was specifically adapted to support a student with a visual impairment. This practice is indicative of the inclusive learning environment evident in the school.

On occasion students were provided with opportunities to develop skills and confidence in well-planned group-work and pair-work activity. This practice enabled students to actively engage with the topic and discuss the issues with their peers. These activities also provide opportunities for quieter students to develop social skills. However, in most of the lessons observed there was scope to adjust the balance of teacher-led and student-led activity. At times there was an over-reliance of the class text-book and where additional resources available in the school may have proved beneficial in optimising learning. Active experiential learning is a key principle underpinning the teaching and learning of SPHE. Therefore, in order to build on the good practices already evident and to encourage active student engagement, it is recommended that all teachers be mindful of incorporating strategies that facilitate experiential learning and allow for an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-led activity. The active engagement of teachers with subject-specific CPD will facilitate this adjustment.

In some classrooms the provision of a dedicated space to organise colourful wall displays, posters of class goals and agreed rules for SPHE served to create a sense of shared student ownership in the learning process. This is very good practice. Evidence from classroom observation, student questionnaires and focus-group interviews clearly indicates that students enjoy SPHE and they view learning as being particularly effective when a variety of teaching and learning approaches

is used. Students recognise the value of having a dedicated SPHE lesson as a means of supporting their social and personal development.

ASSESSMENT

While there is no agreed assessment policy for SPHE some good practice in integrating formative assessment strategies was evident in the lessons observed. Questioning strategies together with teacher monitoring of activities served to assess individual students' levels of learning and provide affirmation and feedback on the tasks assigned. This is good practice. Some of students interviewed during the evaluation had reported that they had experience of group and individual project work as part of SPHE lessons. This practice is a valuable summative assessment strategy.

To enhance existing practice, it is recommended that the SPHE team devises an assessment policy. As a first step existing assessment practices should be reviewed collectively and a range of assessment tools be agreed among the team. It is important that these assessment modes are fully compatible with the aims and objectives of the SPHE syllabus and implemented consistently among the SPHE team. Further information is available in the *Guidelines for Teachers* (pp 59-68) and from the SPHE policy document prepared by the previous SPHE co-ordinator in the school.

Almost all class groups had a folder for SPHE where class materials could be stored. This is good practice. However, only work related to the current academic year was evident in the sample of student folders reviewed during the evaluation. Due to the integrated and holistic nature of the SPHE programme, students need to reflect on work covered in previous years. Therefore, it is recommended that an agreed system of folders that enables students to store and file information from their SPHE class from first year to third year be introduced. This enhanced practice should allow students to build up a body of work over the years, to which they can refer, and facilitates the safe storage of personal information.

In most instances after a guest presentation students are asked to complete a school-based questionnaire. This information is used by the Chaplain to inform subsequent personal development days. It was reported that some use is made of the end-of-module review forms to allow students to provide feedback on the work covered and to assess their learning. It is recommended that these strategies be used consistently with all classes. It is very important that the information obtained from such review mechanisms is used to inform an ongoing cycle of programme development. A mechanism that would allow parental feedback to inform the cycle of review and evaluation could also be considered.

Teachers maintain good records of student attendance. In line with the ethos of the school, good efforts are made to inform parents about the SPHE programme. Parents are informed about the programme at information evenings and letters are also issued regarding retreats and personal development days. To support parents a very popular parenting course is organised as part of the adult education programme. The school, in association with the parents' council, also hosts a number of seminars for parents on topics that complement the SPHE programme.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a supportive school environment for the further development of junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).
- In the current academic year very good work is being done to enhance the provision of senior cycle RSE.
- Teachers displayed high levels of enthusiasm for and commitment to the teaching and further development of the SPHE programme.
- Good structures are in place to support collaborative planning for the senior cycle RSE.
- Some very good quality teacher planning and reflective practice were evident.
- An interesting range of co-curricular and cross-curricular events support students' social and personal development during the school year.
- In all lessons observed teaching and learning took place in a secure and supportive atmosphere.
- In the majority of lessons the advance preparation and effective use of a number of well-chosen resources served to stimulate students' interest and support learning.
- Students enjoy SPHE and recognise the value of having a dedicated lesson as a means of supporting their social and personal development.
- Good efforts are made to establish links with parents and the SPHE programme.

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

- The board of management should make provision for the development and ratification of a RSE policy in accordance with Circular Letter 37/10.
- SPHE must be timetabled as a discreet subject for the equivalent of one class period per week in each year of the junior cycle in accordance with Circular Letter M11/03.
- Senior management should carry out a needs analysis and devise an action plan that would facilitate a systematic and incremental approach to subject-specific CPD among all teachers of SPHE.
- The structures that support the co-ordination and collaborative planning for SPHE should be reviewed. Detailed collaborative programme plans should be developed for both junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle RSE.
- All teachers should be mindful of incorporating strategies that facilitate experiential learning and allow for an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-led activity.
- An agreed system of folders that enables students to store and file information from their SPHE class from first year to third year should be introduced.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and members of the SPHE team at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The board welcomes the positive findings of the report in relation to the high levels of enthusiasm and commitment of the SPHE teaching team and the very good quality of planning and reflection. The board is particularly pleased at the inspector's observation that all teaching and learning took place in a secure and supportive environment and that students feel that the dedicated lesson supports their social and personal development.

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

An RSE policy has been developed and has been ratified by the board. The weekly timetable has been modified to facilitate the timetabling of SPHE as a discrete subject for all junior cycle classes. It is hoped to focus on SPHE in the coming year at a whole school level. This would facilitate developing programme plans and promoting experiential learning. It would also facilitate the development of an assessment policy.