

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science

Subject Inspection Report
Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

Davitt College,
Springfield,
Castlebar,
County Mayo
Roll number: 76060U

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SOCIALPERSONAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION

Subject inspection report

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Davitt College, Castlebar. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) 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, a response was not received from the board.

Subject Provision and Whole School Support

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is very well established on the curriculum at Davitt College. Prior to the formal introduction of SPHE, students traditionally were allocated one class-tutor period per week, the focus of which was student care. SPHE has a high profile amongst all members of the school community and has the active support of senior management, the board of management, the parents' association and the teaching staff.

SPHE benefits from very good whole-school support and resource provision for all junior cycle students in accordance with the requirements of CL M11/03. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is provided as an integral part of SPHE at junior cycle and of Religious Education (RE) at senior cycle where it is timetabled for the recommended time. While some aspects of health education such as first aid and personal hygiene are visible in the context of the social studies module in Transition Year (TY) it is recommended that in order to promote continuity from junior cycle SPHE, that health education be provided for in TY.

The school views SPHE as an important component of the school's pastoral care system and therefore, in so far as possible the class tutor is also the SPHE teacher for first-year and second-year classes. It is commendable that both guidance counsellors act as the SPHE teachers for third-year classes. This arrangement complements the SPHE programme well. As part of the whole-school approach to SPHE, the SPHE team ensures close links are maintained with senior management, the pastoral care team, the care mistress, the care master, year heads, class tutors, special needs team, guidance counsellor, school completion officer and the home-school-community liaison officer. In addition, other praiseworthy initiatives such as the School Partnership Programme, the mentoring programme and the school's counselling service, all support the SPHE programme very well. The School Partnership Programme, in conjunction with the Marino Institute of Education involves parents, teachers and students in promoting school improvement. The success of the mentoring programme is that it provides a support system for first-year students (mentees) to help them adjust to post-primary school life, while the TY students (mentors) develop their communications skills and social competency. Students availing of the counselling service may be identified through the care system or SPHE classes or at the request of a teacher or parent. It is clear that the SPHE programme is embedded in the pastoral care provision at the school and it has become an integral and significant part of school life. This is evident from the supportive school climate for SPHE and whole-school activities such as: the weekly care team meetings, the weekly year head meetings, the first-year induction programme, student council fundraising events, the Intercultural Day, Sports Day, the Crisis Support team, all of which support the SPHE programme. Management is very supportive of cross-curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, planned for and organised by the SPHE co-ordinator and team.

There is a collaborative spirit and positive attitude amongst those involved in the organisation and delivery of SPHE. Currently, eight staff members are involved in the teaching of SPHE in junior cycle and their work is co-ordinated in a very committed manner by the school's only religious education (RE) teacher and this co-ordination is part of the teacher's special duties post. The co-ordinator usually teaches SPHE and in future every effort should be made to ensure that the co-ordinator is provided with the opportunity to teach SPHE.

It is good practice that teachers are assigned to SPHE by consultation and that gender balance amongst the team of teachers of SPHE is good. Whilst many of the teachers are experienced in the delivery of the subject, it is laudable that new members are encouraged and supported to join the team, thus building capacity for the future. Management endeavours where possible, to allow teachers to remain with their class group from first year through to third year. The commitment from management to maintain classes at a reasonable size is a very positive feature of the school and facilitates SPHE classes particularly well. The SPHE team has access to television, video/DVD and overhead projectors for classroom use when required. A clear system is in place to support the procurement of teaching resources for SPHE.

Management facilitates collaborative planning for SPHE through the provision of formal meeting time, throughout the year, as part of its commitment to school development planning. In addition, teachers meet informally on a regular basis for ongoing planning and review. Whole-staff in-service has been provided around the areas of crisis response and child protection and other SPHE related topics. The Child Protection Guidelines have been adopted and a designated liaison person has been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines devised by the Department of Education and Science. The deputy principal, the guidance counsellors, and the SPHE co-ordinator have attended the relevant CPD days. Management is committed to supporting the continued training and up-skilling of teachers as appropriate and it is noted that the co-ordinator disseminates information on training available and maintains records of all training received by team members. It is suggested that these records be shared with management, as it will assist in planning for the systematic and incremental development of teachers' knowledge and skills over time.

The school makes commendable efforts to inform and involve parents through a range of information evenings, particularly in the area of RSE. It is good practice that a letter is sent to parents outlining the content of the SPHE programme in advance of the introduction of the RSE module. Parents and students, through their representative groups, have had the opportunity to contribute to the development of policies. An RSE policy for junior and senior cycle is currently being developed. Core committees have developed a substance use policy, an anti-bullying policy and a draft SPHE policy. The next step is to formalise the draft SPHE and RSE policies through consultation with the whole-school community as appropriate. In addition a policy on visiting speakers and outside agencies for SPHE classes should be developed.

Planning and Preparation

There is a proactive approach, to planning the SPHE programme including the provision of resource materials to support teaching and learning. Subject-department meetings for SPHE are held at least once a term to plan and discuss the term's work. In addition, the SPHE teachers of each year group meet informally throughout the year. Agenda are decided in advance of department meetings and records of these meetings are recently being maintained.

Subject-department planning for SPHE is ongoing and a subject plan is being developed which includes details on the organisation, planning, teaching and learning and assessment of the subject. This subject plan is grounded in the school's mission statement and includes reference to effective methodologies and information on teaching resources, use of ICT, cross-curricular links, cultural diversity, homework, record keeping, reporting procedures, and information on planning for students with special needs. Details regarding SPHE department meetings, the SPHE support service, policy development and programme review are also included.

In accordance with good practice, common plans of work have been drawn up for each junior cycle year group by the teams of teachers involved. These are based on the junior cycle syllabus and comprise a series of long-term, medium-term and more detailed short-term plans, with flexibility for teachers to modify the programmes as necessary. SPHE modules are revisited over the three-year cycle, thus ensuring a spiral and developmental approach to the delivery of the programme. The practice of individually tailoring the common programmes of work, to meet the needs of individual class groups, should be further developed across the entire department. A programme plan for RSE at senior cycle including TY and the first-year induction day programme was also made available. However, it is now timely for the team to develop the school's own three-year SPHE curricular plan, using the junior cycle SPHE syllabus as a flexible framework. This should be defined in a single short document. Outlining on a term-by-term basis, the topics to be covered under each module, for each year group would provide a complete overview of the SPHE programme.

Teachers maintain records of work completed to date in order to review progress and inform future planning, in the event that a class might have a change of SPHE teacher. Substitute teachers or those new to SPHE are well supported by the co-ordinator and the subject-department folder including the programme plans can be easily accessed. Teachers are commended for their efforts made with regard to informal cross-curricular links. The development of more formal cross-curricular links with subjects such as Science, Home Economics, computer studies, Physical Education (PE) and Religious Education (RE) is a stated intention of the teaching team.

In the context of ongoing subject planning it is recommended that this good work be further developed such that the plans of work will be utilised as working documents. The plans, as they develop, should have a greater focus on students' learning and thus include the expected learning outcomes for each topic. Reference to choice and use of resources and teaching methodologies and consideration of assessment in SPHE would further enhance the existing plans. This process could be implemented on a phased basis. Ultimately, the formalisation, documentation, and compilation of discussions that are already ongoing are what is envisaged.

The SPHE Co-ordinator actively facilitates the sharing of resources and promotes good practice; this is commendable. She has developed a number of resource manuals for some of the modules of the SPHE programme and this good work should be further developed over time. The school's SPHE programme makes use of resources such as those produced by the North Western Health Board, the Substance Abuse Prevention Programme (SAPP) and a wide variety of educational packs, videos and DVDs. Students each have a copy of the *Grow Up* text book, which they refer to regularly in class. Resource materials are generally stored in the teachers' resource room next to the staff room. Requests for extra resources are made through the principal and these requests invariably receive favourable consideration. As additional resources become available over time, the team should consider cataloguing all resources, so that teachers and particularly teachers new to SPHE are aware of available resources.

School structures, systems and strategies support the SPHE teachers well when providing for students' needs including those with special educational needs (SEN). One of the SPHE teachers is also a qualified learning support and resource teacher. His expertise is well utilised within the team for the benefit of enhancing students' learning experiences. Newcomer students are assisted on admission to the school, in accessing the curriculum through the provision of special English language classes in order to develop their proficiency in English. There has been valuable contact with management, teachers, parents, and students and outside agencies in the development and review of the SPHE programme in the school. Students normally undertake a review at the end of each module completed, however there is scope to formalise this process. The teachers review the SPHE programme at end-of-year subject meetings and in the context of the care team meetings and there are plans to formalise these reviews in the future.

Teaching and Learning

Effective teaching was observed over the course of the evaluation. There was evidence of good short-term planning for lessons, which included the prior preparation of the materials for class. This resulted in lessons that had a clear purpose and were generally well structured and pitched at an appropriate level for each group of students. Where best practice was observed, lessons were planned to serve specific learning outcomes and those learning outcomes were shared at the beginning of lessons with learners, helping them to connect new learning with previous work and also inviting them to share responsibility for the lesson. Making a link with previous lesson content is particularly important in SPHE, where lessons are delivered in one period per week.

Teachers' instructions and explanations were clear and precise in most classes observed. Teaching materials, which included students' handouts, worksheets, textbooks and the board, were used to enhance teaching and consolidate learning. While teachers already use ICT in class preparation and to produce resources for class, incidental usage of ICT as a teaching tool in classrooms remains an area for development.

All teachers used questioning to good effect to stimulate and interact with students, to check on understanding, to trigger discussion and to structure the learning activity. Their questioning styles interspersed questions directed to particular students with open questions eliciting whole-class responses or responses from willing individuals. Where best practice was observed, teachers progressed from recall and recognition questions to questions requiring higher-order thinking and personal responses. Given the wide variety of learning styles and students' abilities in the school, differentiation by questioning is recommended so that all students be included and targeted, thus encouraging the active participation of students who are less able and providing challenge for students who are more familiar with the subject matter.

In keeping with best practice for learning and teaching in SPHE, some opportunities were provided for students to acquire knowledge and understanding, balanced with time to reflect on behaviour, attitudes and values. This balance was most successfully attained when the teacher acted as facilitator and opportunities were provided for students to engage with lesson content in an active way. Therefore, some good examples of the use of appropriate experiential learning or active learning such as use of brainstorming, games, reflection, pair work and group work were observed. On occasion visiting speakers on a variety of topics are invited to SPHE classes. Other teaching strategies which could be incorporated regularly into SPHE lessons are; visualisations, case studies, role-play, debating, peer learning, collage work, artwork, problem-solving and co-operative learning. Some good practice was observed where students were encouraged to think, consider, analyse and synthesise issues and answers during activity-based learning. This practice is commendable as it assists students in developing higher-order thinking skills and should be incorporated regularly into SPHE lessons. Lesson activities were interspersed with timely input from the teachers and opportunities for students to ask questions where appropriate learning was linked to everyday life. On occasion students are encouraged to compose personal reflections on their ongoing work. This technique provides good evidence of students' learning and should be further developed in all SPHE classes.

Some further development of the skills associated with group work is necessary across the SPHE department. In the organisation and management of group work, consideration should always be given to questions such as "what and how will the students learn from their involvement in this activity?" Best practice was observed in group work when the activity was time bound, group members were nominated to key roles to complete their task and there was an effective reporting-back phase, followed by effective processing of the feedback to ensure that learning occurred.

To ensure that all students get the benefit of these good pedagogical practices taking place in individual classrooms, teachers are encouraged to formalise the sharing of professional expertise, so that the good practices observed during the evaluation can be consolidated across the entire department.

Very good rapport between teachers and students was evident in all the classrooms visited. Teachers consistently welcomed students' contributions and affirmed their responses well. This contributed to a positive and supportive classroom atmosphere that was conducive to effective learning. Teachers demonstrated concern for their students and the manner of their interactions was warm and considerate. In some classes, teachers spent some class time in general conversation with students. This was effective in developing a caring pastoral relationship with students and reflects well the student-centred ethos permeating the school.

Classroom management was very effective and students were attentive and engaged in their learning. There were some good examples of drawing attention to the ground rules that had been agreed for the SPHE class, in order to establish a climate of trust and respect. Seating was appropriately arranged so that the teacher and students could move easily and safely around the room. This also enabled the teacher to check on students' progress and allowed students the opportunity to ask questions and seek individual help in a non-threatening and supportive manner.

The SPHE department is commended for striving to provide motivational print-rich environments to support the teaching of SPHE. In all classes observed, students were purposeful and keen to participate in class activities. There was evidence that students were able to communicate orally their ideas and knowledge effectively. Students also demonstrated good teamwork skills appropriate to their class group and level.

Assessment

A whole-school policy on homework and assessment is currently being reviewed across subject departments and clear procedures are in place for regular assessment of students' learning and record keeping. A combination of assessment modes is used to assess students' competence and progress in SPHE. Although practice varies somewhat among teachers, these include oral questioning, work sheets, written exercises, discussions, and some assessment of project work. While there is some evidence of the use of peer-assessment and self-assessment in the lessons observed this should be further developed across the subject department. It is recommended that the SPHE team explore and further develop the area of assessment in SPHE over time with a view to formulating policy in this important area. In addition, planning for the assessment of students' progress should be incorporated with planning for teaching and learning during subject-department meetings. Greater consideration should be given to regular assessment of students' learning in SPHE; in that assessment should be viewed as an integral part of teaching and learning involving both teachers and students. In this way assessment is used as a tool for learning, as opposed to measuring the extent to which the topic has been learned. This would consolidate the good work currently evident in teaching and learning. Further information and advice on assessment in SPHE is available in the *Guidelines for Teachers* (pages 59-68) and from the SPHE Support Service. In addition, information on *assessment for learning* is available on the NCCA website (<http://www.ncca.ie>).

Students use a textbook and copybook to record key points during SPHE lessons. These are generally stored by teachers and are distributed to students at the beginning of each lesson. Teachers should consider the further use of such records of students' work and achievement as a tool for assessment. Appropriate class records of students' attendance and progress are kept using a teacher diary system, which is commendable as it assists teachers in building a profile of students' progress and achievement in the subject over a period of time. It is commendable that the school informs parents of students' progress in SPHE through information evenings and school reports twice a year. In addition, the student journal is signed on a weekly basis by parents and is checked and co-signed by the class tutor. The school reports on the usefulness of having students join their parents during the annual parent-teacher meetings.

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 established on the curriculum at Davitt College and benefits from a very supportive school environment.
- The school views SPHE as an important component of the school's pastoral care system.
- School structures, systems and strategies support the SPHE teachers well when providing for students' needs including those with additional educational needs.
- There is a collaborative spirit and a positive attitude amongst those involved in the organisation and delivery of SPHE.
- Management is committed to supporting the continued training and up-skilling of teachers as appropriate and it is noted that the co-ordinator disseminates information on training available and maintains records of all training received by team members.
- Subject-department planning for SPHE is ongoing and outline programmes of work for junior cycle SPHE, have been developed for each year group.
- The SPHE co-ordinator actively facilitates the sharing of resources and promotes good practice.
- Very good rapport between teachers and students was evident in all the classrooms visited.
- Classroom management was very effective and students were attentive and engaged in their learning.
- There was evidence that students were able to communicate orally their ideas and knowledge effectively.
- A combination of assessment modes is used to assess students' competence and progress in SPHE.

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

- The school's draft SPHE policy and RSE policy should be finalised and then formalised through consultation with the whole-school community as appropriate.
- The SPHE department should develop the school's own three-year SPHE curricular plan, using the junior cycle SPHE syllabus as a flexible framework.
- With regard to enhancing curricular planning in SPHE, the recommendations as detailed in the report should be implemented over time.
- The recommendations contained in the report with regard to teaching and learning are provided as a means of building on existing good practice, which was evident.
- The SPHE team should explore and further develop the area of assessment in SPHE over time.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and with the teachers of SPHE at the conclusion of the evaluation at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.