

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta  
Department of Education and Science**

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

**Coláiste Mhuire  
Askeaton County Limerick  
Roll number: 71700F**

**Date of inspection: 8 & 9 April 2008**

**Subject inspection report**  
**Subject provision and whole school support**  
**Planning and preparation**  
**Teaching and learning**  
**Assessment**  
**Summary of main findings and recommendations**  
**School response to the report**

**REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SOCIAL PERSONAL AND  
HEALTH EDUCATION**

**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Mhuire, Askeaton. 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 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**

Coláiste Mhuire, Askeaton has a long tradition of providing Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) to its students. There is excellent whole school support for the organisation, teaching and learning of SPHE, resulting in a very supportive school environment for the delivery of the subject. The SPHE programme is provided for all junior cycle students at Coláiste Mhuire, in accordance with the requirements of CL M11/03. The Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme is provided as an integral part of the SPHE programme at junior cycle and at senior cycle the RSE programme is delivered on a modular basis by one of the Religious Education (RE) teachers as part of the RE programme. These arrangements are in line with CL 0027/08. The Transition Year (TY) programme is optional in the school and the inclusion of a well-developed RSE module in the TY Lifeskills programme is to be commended.

In line with best practice, a core team of three SPHE teachers is involved in the teaching of SPHE in junior cycle with some teachers having more than one class. There is a high level of commitment and enthusiasm among the team of SPHE teachers. The role of SPHE co-ordinator is well-established and undertaken on a voluntary basis by a teacher who has considerable experience in teaching SPHE. Commendably this co-ordinator currently teaches the subject to a number of classes and is a member of the school's student support team and guidance team. Management endeavours to ensure that one of the guidance counsellors is the SPHE teacher for all first-year classes and this arrangement complements the SPHE programme well. It is very good practice that teachers are assigned to SPHE by consultation. 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. This is important in building capacity for the future.

Whole-staff in-service has been provided in such areas as assessment for learning, child protection, the transition from primary to post-primary school 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 Departmental guidelines. School management is commended for facilitating and promoting the continuing professional development of the SPHE teaching staff. All SPHE teachers have availed of the two-day introductory training for SPHE in addition to various other in-service courses in the subject. The principal and the SPHE co-ordinator have attended relevant training days. The co-ordinator disseminates information on training available and teachers regularly share ideas they have acquired at training, at subject department level or at whole-school level as appropriate. This is good practice. Records of all training received by team members are maintained by the school and this assists in planning for the incremental development of teachers' knowledge and skills over time. It is notable that the SPHE team works closely with the SPHE Support Service as well as other external support services.

The SPHE programme makes a significant contribution to the pastoral care provision in the school and it is clear that it has become an integral and significant part of school life. There is very good collaboration between the SPHE team and senior management, the student support team, year heads, class tutors, learning-support team, guidance personnel, the chaplain, RE teachers and parents in planning for the needs of all students in the school. The weekly meetings of the student support team, the year heads and the assistant principals in addition to regular meetings of senior management with personnel responsible for learning support, guidance and chaplaincy ensures a cohesive approach to supporting students' welfare. An indication of the trust that students have in the pastoral care structure in the school is that when faced with an issue, students have no difficulty in approaching any member of the student support team and do so on a regular basis.

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 letters and permission slips are sent to parents and guardians with regard to the delivery of the SPHE programme.

The SPHE department expressed satisfaction with regard to having access to a wide range of resources to support teaching and learning in SPHE. Additional resources are allocated on the

basis of teacher requisition. All available resources are catalogued in the subject plan and storing arrangements are such that they enable easy access to these resources for all teachers.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

There is a strong commitment and an organised collaborative approach to planning the SPHE programme and very good progress has been made to date. 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. Agenda are decided in advance of department meetings and recently records of subject department meetings are being maintained. The role of the SPHE co-ordinator is clearly defined. Substitute teachers or those new to SPHE are well supported by the co-ordinator.

A subject plan for SPHE and RSE has been developed in addition to an SPHE planning folder which includes various details on the organisation, planning and delivery of the subject. Other planning documents which were made available during the evaluation include the first-year induction programme, an outline programme of work for junior cycle SPHE, the Lifeskills programme for TY and RSE teaching materials in use by the Religious Education (RE) teachers. There is however, scope for the development of a coherent written programme for RSE at senior cycle.

During the evaluation teachers also presented good individual planning documents. These were based on the school's agreed SPHE programme, which uses the junior cycle SPHE syllabus as a flexible framework. These plans indicated how the general programme of work had been specially tailored for individual class groups. Also the practice of revisiting SPHE modules over the three-year cycle, ensuring a spiral and developmental approach to the delivery of the programme, is commended. Best practice was evident in individual plans which made reference to planned learning outcomes, methodologies, resources and modes of assessment and evaluation. The practice of individually tailoring the common programme of work to meet the needs of individual class groups should be further developed across the entire department. Consideration should also be given to planning of active learning methodologies and the further integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) into teaching and learning for SPHE. It is also advised that a review section be included in plans. This section should be used to record comments on the attainment of the learning outcomes of lessons. These comments will assist teachers in planning for methodologies and forms of assessment suitable for various topics. Teachers should maintain records of work completed in order to review progress and inform future planning and in the event that a class might have a change of SPHE teacher.

The guidance department has developed junior and senior cycle study skills units to be delivered to all classes for approximately five weeks during the first term. These study skills units are delivered by guidance personnel in the context of the self-management module of SPHE and useful study skills booklets have been designed to support this initiative. All subject teachers are encouraged to incorporate relevant aspects of the study skills programmes into their various classes as appropriate.

A policy committee consisting of representatives of teachers, students, parents and the board of management developed an SPHE/RSE policy a number of years ago (1997). This policy was recently reviewed and expanded on a collaborative basis by a committee representative of the whole-school community and facilitated by a member of the SPHE support service. Such consultative approaches to policy review are highly commendable. It is positive that clear procedures regarding the use of visiting speakers and outside agencies for SPHE classes have been documented in the SPHE policy. A critical incidents policy, a substance use policy and an

anti-bullying policy have also been developed and these policies support the SPHE programme well.

As SPHE has a high profile amongst all members of the school community, there is a whole school approach to organising co-curricular and extra-curricular SPHE related activities. Events such as the *Be Active-Healthy Eating Week*, the *Bullying Awareness Week*, the *Anti-smoking initiative* and student retreats support the work of SPHE very effectively. The provision of a wide range of guest speakers in such areas as bullying, substance use, physical health, sexual health, emotional health and personal safety is commended and supports the SPHE programme well. Guest speakers usually address parents the evening before they address students in school. There are a number of other whole-school initiatives and activities that support the work of SPHE very effectively such as the mentoring system, the first year induction programme, the homework club, peer teaching among first year students and Spectrum (an adolescent bereavement programme). The *Young Social Innovators* programme is available to TY students. It assists in developing social awareness and activism amongst young people so that they may become effective champions for social justice. In addition, the school is one of sixty schools involved in a pilot programme called *Be Real* which is delivered in the context of the TY guidance programme. The programme aims to help students to develop their self knowledge and to be self reliant. Such provisions are highly commended as they extend students' experience beyond the classroom into the real world and are thus very worthwhile learning opportunities. Teachers are also commended for their efforts made with regard to informal cross-curricular links with such subjects as Home Economics, Religious Education and Physical Education.

The school has a strong tradition of monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of its student support systems, for example a review of the class tutor system is currently ongoing. The SPHE subject plan and programmes of work are reviewed on an annual basis. Students are regularly provided with opportunities to reflect on work undertaken in SPHE class and on occasion, students undertake an end-of-module or end-of-year review in SPHE class. In order to further develop existing review mechanisms for the SPHE programme it is recommended that the school should undertake a review of SPHE provision to comprise the views of students, teachers and parents, as indicated in their SPHE policy. Feedback from such a review should inform future planning and delivery of SPHE. The school has shown great care and attention in planning and implementing its SPHE programme and the professional commitment and interest of the teachers involved is recognised.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Teaching and learning was of a high quality in all the SPHE lessons observed. There was evidence of very good short-term planning and preparation of resources for lessons. Teachers shared the learning outcomes with the class then summarised the lessons on closing and concluded with a reference to what would be the subject matter for the subsequent lesson. This very good practice is commendable as it provides a focus and structure for students' learning. Lessons were well structured and sequenced, and delivered at a pace that allowed students time and space to engage with and reflect on the key concepts of the lesson.

In all lessons teachers provided clear and comprehensive overviews of the topics under discussion. In some cases the main points of the lesson were highlighted on the whiteboard and students recorded these in their copybooks. Teacher instruction was combined with a range of teaching strategies and resources which were effective in engaging students in the learning process. Questioning was central to the methodology used in all classes and a good range of lower-order and higher-order questions was integrated into the development of topics. In most cases directed questioning was employed in a manner that challenged all students to remain alert and attentive and it was also effective in establishing the level of individual student's knowledge. This is good practice and is further encouraged. In other lessons instruction was varied by the provision of short

tasks using worksheets. This strategy further engaged students in their own learning and its use is recommended in all lessons. Greater use of ICT in SPHE lessons is a stated intention of the teaching team.

Some good examples of appropriate experiential learning or active learning such as use of brainstorming, reflection, discussion, pair work and group work were evident in the lessons observed. Other teaching strategies which could be incorporated regularly into SPHE lessons are: visualisations, case studies, role-play, debating, games, collage work, artwork, problem-solving, narrative expression, project work and co-operative learning. 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 for reflection 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. Class discussions proceeded in accordance with previously agreed ground rules and personal information was dealt with in a sensitive and discreet manner. Opportunities to share best practice in the effective use of experiential learning recommended for SPHE delivery should be included during subject planning time. Teachers are also encouraged to formalise the sharing of professional expertise, in terms of subject knowledge and mechanisms for assessment in SPHE.

A stimulating classroom environment was created and enhanced by displays of students' work completed in SPHE lessons. The atmosphere in lessons was positive, conducive to learning and marked by excellent rapport between teachers and students. The students were very well-behaved and respectful of their peers and teachers. Students' copybooks indicate good progression in their work. Students worked well both individually and collaboratively and demonstrated very good knowledge and understanding of the concepts related to the various topics and good teamwork skills appropriate to their class group and level. This was evident from their answers to questions, class discussions and the completion of tasks.

## **ASSESSMENT**

A whole-school policy on homework and assessment is currently being developed across subject departments and clear procedures are in place for record keeping. In line with best practice, the need to monitor and assess students' progress in SPHE is recognised by the teaching team as an important element of a holistic health education programme. It was evident during the evaluation that planning for the assessment of students' progress in SPHE is incorporated into the planning of lessons. A combination of assessment modes is used to assess students' competence and progress in SPHE. These include oral questioning, work sheets, written exercises, discussions, reflections and some assessment of project work. There was some evidence of students being facilitated to reflect on and evaluate their own learning, as part of the lesson. This very good practice illustrates the great value of assessment at the time of learning and should be further developed. On occasion students are given home tasks in order to consolidate learning in SPHE class. This good practice is encouraged as it can support continuity between lessons and provide an opportunity for the provision of formative feedback to students on their progress in SPHE.

It is commendable that a reflective journal is currently being developed with first year students with a view to continuing this practice for the three years of the junior cycle. In addition personal reflection is built into the school's report card system, and is an important element in promoting positive student behaviour. The SPHE teachers have expressed their intention to explore and further develop the area of assessment in SPHE and in particular the reflective portfolio over time. Further information and advice on assessment and portfolio development in SPHE is available in the *SPHE Guidelines for Teachers* and from the SPHE Support Service.

All students utilise a copybook and a folder to store materials from SPHE lessons. This good practice ensures that students and their parents have a tangible record of work and achievement in the subject. Teachers make good use of the school journal as a means of communicating with parents in relation to their children's progress. In addition, the school reports to parents on students' progress at annual parent/guardian/student-teacher meetings. However, the school should now consider additional formal mechanisms to facilitate feedback to students and their parents regarding achievement in the subject. A school-based certification system or the inclusion of SPHE as part of the regular school report for students could be considered, in this regard.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is excellent whole school support for the organisation, teaching and learning of SPHE, resulting in a very supportive school environment for the delivery of the subject.
- There is a high level of commitment and enthusiasm among the SPHE teachers.
- Management is committed to supporting the continued training and up-skilling of teachers as appropriate.
- The SPHE programme makes a significant contribution to the pastoral care provision at the school.
- The school makes commendable efforts to inform and involve parents with regard to the delivery of the SPHE programme.
- There is a strong commitment and an organised collaborative approach to planning the SPHE programme and very good progress has been made to date.
- A subject plan for SPHE and RSE has been developed in addition to an SPHE planning folder which includes various details on the organisation, planning and delivery of the subject. Teachers also presented good individual planning documents.
- The school's SPHE/RSE policy was recently reviewed and expanded on a collaborative basis by a committee representative of the whole-school community and facilitated by a member of the SPHE support service.
- There is a whole school approach to organising co-curricular and extra-curricular SPHE related activities.
- Teaching and learning were of high quality in all the SPHE lessons observed and there was evidence of very good short-term planning and preparation of resources for lessons.
- The atmosphere in lessons was positive, conducive to learning and marked by excellent rapport between teachers and students.
- Students worked well both individually and collaboratively and demonstrated very good knowledge and understanding of the concepts related to the various topics.
- A combination of assessment modes is used to assess students' competence and progress in SPHE.
- An SPHE reflective journal is currently being developed with first year students with a view to continuing this practice for the three years of the junior cycle.

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

- The practice of individually tailoring the common programme of work, to meet the needs of individual class groups, should be further developed across the entire department.
- The school should undertake a review of SPHE provision to comprise the views of students, teachers and parents, as indicated in their SPHE policy.
- Teachers are encouraged to formalise the sharing of professional expertise, in terms of subject knowledge, the effective use of experiential learning and mechanisms for assessment in SPHE.

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.

## **Appendix**

### **SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

#### **Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report**

- The Board are gratified by the SPHE Inspection Report
- The Board and school are happy to accept the recommendations of the report