

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**St Bricin's College,  
Belturbet, Co. Cavan  
Roll number: 70350W**

**Date of inspection: 15 December 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)**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Bricin's College. 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 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 acting principal, acting deputy principal and SPHE teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the acting principal and the SPHE 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**

St Bricin's College, under the auspices of Co. Cavan Vocational Education Committee (VEC) has a total enrolment of 159 students. In line with the school's ethos a commitment to student care is evident in many school practices. In recent years a year head and tutor system has been established. This structure has become an integral component of the student support structure. The focus placed on positive behaviour, as evident in the recently revised code of behaviour, is a commendable means of promoting students' self esteem and confidence. In the current academic year a student peer mentoring programme has been established as an additional support to students. This is a worthwhile initiative.

Timetabled provision is made for SPHE in first, second and third year which meets the time allocation required under Circular Letter M11/03. However, it was noted during the evaluation that not all designated SPHE time was being used for the sole purpose of providing a taught junior cycle SPHE curriculum programme. This matter should be addressed by school management to ensure compliance with the circular.

A number of whole-school activities support students' social and personal development. The dedicated notice board for SPHE on the school corridor is an effective means of raising awareness and supports the development of positive attitudes amongst students. School personnel organise anti-bullying awareness activities based on the *Cool School Programme*. Some good practice was evident in the use of visiting speakers. In some instances the content of the programme is agreed with school staff in advance of the presentation and a formal evaluation of the visit takes place. To ensure consistent good practice it is recommended that a whole-school policy on the use of visiting speakers be devised in accordance with Circular Letter 0023/2010.

It is acknowledged by senior management that provision and planning for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is in need of urgent review. During the evaluation there was a lack of clarity around RSE provision. No evidence was provided to indicate the manner in which a senior cycle RSE programme had been provided in previous years. Furthermore evidence gathered from a meeting held with senior cycle students and student questionnaire data indicate that there are inconsistencies in the delivery of the junior cycle RSE module which is a mandatory component of the junior cycle SPHE curriculum framework.

School management recognises that an appropriate RSE programme as outlined in Circular Letter 0037/2010 must be developed and implemented. Some initial steps have been taken and one teacher has agreed to avail of training in the use of the recently developed TRUST (*Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching*) resource for teaching RSE in senior cycle. Best practice in the effective delivery of RSE is where students are exposed to the complete range of themes, recommended as part of a RSE programme, in each year of junior cycle and senior cycle. This facilitates the delivery of a broad and balanced programme and allows for a spiral approach to the learning outcomes for each topic. It is recommended that senior management in association with relevant staff plan and implement a RSE programme in line with relevant Department guidelines as a matter of priority.

Policy documents in the areas of RSE, substance use, anti-bullying and pastoral care were available during the evaluation. However, it was not apparent how these policies were devised and communicated to the school community. It is recommended that all of these policies should be reviewed and updated in line with relevant Department guidelines as soon as is feasible. The current in-school model of policy development as exemplified in the drafting of more recent policies will effectively support this work. Further guidance on all of the above policies is available on the education personnel section of the Department's website. ([www.education.gov.ie](http://www.education.gov.ie))

The arrangements for assigning teachers to teach SPHE should be reviewed. It has been the practice to deploy teachers to teach SPHE without prior consultation and in general teachers do not retain their class from first year to third year. This has impacted negatively on the creation of a sense of a subject department for SPHE and on ensuring consistency of programme provision. In the context of future deployment it is recommended that the principal seeks expressions of interest from staff and following consultation establish a core team of SPHE teachers. It was evident during the evaluation that there is sufficient capacity and interest among teachers to establish a highly-skilled core team.

There have been some good levels of engagement with relevant continuing professional development (CPD). Whole-staff seminars on *An Introduction to SPHE* was organised in 2009 and the school have had some engagement with the *Health Promoting Schools Network*. However, there is a need for staff to engage with a wider range of SPHE in-service. The acting principal and acting deputy principal are very supportive of CPD as a means of supporting high quality implementation of a SPHE programme. It is recommended that senior management carries out a needs analysis among the teachers of SPHE and devises an action plan to facilitate a systematic and incremental approach to CPD among all teachers of SPHE. It should be routine practice that all teachers new to SPHE attend at least the introductory RSE and SPHE in-services provided by the SPHE Support Service. A record of CPD attendance at the introductory, continuation and RSE training should be maintained in the subject plan and a copy of the information supplied should be retained in a subject-specific CPD folder. This information can be used to assess ongoing CPD needs and can be referred to at planning meetings as a means of sharing good practice.

## PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The school structures that support collaborative subject department planning for SPHE need to be reviewed. There is a lack of clarity around how SPHE was co-ordinated in previous years. This highlights a need for senior management to formalise procedures at whole-school level for the role of a subject co-ordinator. It is recommended that the duties attached to the role be agreed at whole-school level and systems that support and monitor the planning work undertaken by subject teams be established.

The acting principal is providing a very high level of support in establishing a subject department for SPHE. A subject co-ordinator has recently been appointed. The co-ordinator displays a very high level of enthusiasm for developing the SPHE programme in the school. The co-ordinator has been assigned to teach SPHE, which is good practice. The commitment of the co-ordinator is evidenced by the very good progress that has been made in drafting a subject plan for SPHE. In the context of reviewing the role of a subject co-ordinator it is recommended that the duties currently held by the co-ordinator of SPHE be examined. This member of staff is co-ordinator of four subjects, including SPHE. Given the full teaching load carried, the sustainability of this practice needs to be reviewed.

Senior management facilitates formal planning time on a regular basis throughout the academic year. However, it is not established practice that the teachers of SPHE hold a meeting on these occasions. Subject planning meetings are essential in order to plan collaboratively and provide a forum where teachers can share best practice. It is recognised that SPHE teachers are involved in teaching other subjects. This can lead to difficulties that restrict planning meetings. To overcome this problem, it is recommended that management gives consideration to scheduling subject-specific slots for team meetings to avoid clashes. The newly appointed co-ordinator has initiated planning meetings. A record of the first meeting was noted in the file. This good practice will facilitate continuity between meetings.

Many of the procedures outlined in the subject plan, while not fully operational in the school as yet, are indicative of good practice. The procedures outlined should come into effect as soon as is feasible. To establish a culture of reflective practice it is recommended that the practices and procedures outlined in the plan be reviewed annually on a collaborative basis. Two to three issues could be identified from each review and appropriate action plans devised. The outcomes of this self-evaluation should be discussed with the principal to facilitate a cohesive approach to leading and managing learning in SPHE.

At the time of the evaluation programme planning was the remit of individual teachers and in some cases no written planning documentation was available. This has resulted in there being a significant variation in the quality of programme implementation and presents significant challenges in facilitating a quality SPHE programme. It is recommended that all SPHE lessons be underpinned by a written programme plan.

Some exemplary teacher planning was evident. Two programme plans developed by individual teachers reviewed were of particularly high quality. These plans, which are closely aligned to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework*, outlines students' expected knowledge in terms of expected learning outcomes with very good efforts made to support an incremental approach to students' learning. In these plans deliberate efforts were made to sequence the modules in a manner that met the needs of the

student cohort and experiential learning was facilitated. This very good practice should be extended.

To support high quality teaching and learning in SPHE it is strongly recommended that the SPHE team, on a collaborative basis, develops a coherent and balanced three-year programme of work for junior cycle SPHE in the school. This plan should incorporate all ten modules of the *SPHE Curriculum Framework*. ([www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)) In the case of each year group, clear learning outcomes should be identified for each topic that will be covered on a term-by-term basis. This will ensure that there is an incremental approach taken to the development of students' knowledge, attitudes and skills from first year through to third year. It will also allow for certain topics to be revisited, thus ensuring that a spiral approach is being adopted to the implementation of the programme whilst also avoiding unnecessary duplication. This revised approach will support teachers by assisting with lesson delivery and inform ongoing reflective practice. As a starting point all teachers should use their own yearly plan as a working document. Particular attention should be paid to noting the planned learning outcomes, the teaching strategies and resources used in each lesson that proved particularly effective. This information should then be collated and used to inform the development of the three-year plan. Reviewing the effectiveness of particular teaching and learning strategies and resources should be routinely included as an item on the agenda of planning meetings in order to share good practice in facilitating SPHE lessons.

Whole-school measures to support continuity in teaching and learning in SPHE need to be reviewed. It is recommended that procedures be put in place at whole-school level to support smoother transitions in the event of staff turnover than has been the case to date. For example, it should be routine practice that a record of the work covered with classes is left for the teacher taking over a class.

It is good practice that a catalogue of existing resources is stored in the subject plan. However, it is acknowledged by senior management and staff that the range of shared resources available for SPHE is very limited with many of the materials outdated. Senior management is supportive of providing additional resources but teachers need to adopt a proactive approach in addressing resource issues. It is recommended that the SPHE team led by the co-ordinator carry out an audit of resources and devise an action plan to address proactively the shortfalls identified. The newly acquired resources should be centrally stored and remain the property of the school in the event of staff turnover.

Some very good quality short-term planning was noted in the lessons observed. Best practice was evident in lessons that were based on clear learning outcomes and where the range of teaching strategies chosen facilitated experiential learning.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In all classrooms visited during the evaluation there was a very good rapport and an atmosphere of mutual respect was evident between the teacher and the students.

All SPHE lessons were purposeful. At times there was scope to adjust the pace or pitch of the content covered to a level more commensurate with students' experiences and stage in the programme. Therefore, it is recommended that clear learning intentions are shared with students from the outset of all SPHE lessons. In keeping with the rationale underpinning SPHE, the chosen learning intentions should demonstrate an appropriate balance between the knowledge that

students should acquire, the skills that should be developed and the positive behaviours that are being promoted. This practice will assist with the pace and pitch of lessons and inform the choice of teaching strategies deployed.

One lesson observed typified best practice in the teaching and learning of SPHE. The lesson, which was based on *Communication*, began by a series of re-call questions that assessed students' learning from the previous lesson. This is very good practice in a SPHE context where lessons are delivered once a week. Students' attention was effectively directed to the new content to be covered in the lesson by the teacher sharing planned objectives. A subsequent ice-breaker activity enabled students to experience the difficulties of getting a message across without talking and thereby challenging them to think about other ways of communicating. Digital presentations and flash cards contained very good images that linked to students' own experience. This supported high quality learning as concrete examples made higher-order concepts more easily understood. Effective questioning strategies and group work enabled students to process the information and provided the teacher with opportunities to clarify misunderstandings. Towards the end of the lesson students had to reflect on and apply their learning through the completion of a worksheet that provided a good summary of the lesson. Student learning in this instance was of a very high standard as students were facilitated to actively participate in the experiential learning cycle that underpins SPHE programme implementation.

In all SPHE lessons observed questioning strategies were used to very good effect to assist students' acquisition of knowledge, as well as the formation of positive attitudes and behaviours. Positive interactions were promoted by the close attention paid to the established ground rules for lessons. However, on other occasions there was an over-reliance on teacher-led activity. Active experiential learning is a key principle underpinning the teaching and learning of SPHE. Therefore, it is recommended that all teachers be mindful of incorporating strategies that 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.

Students demonstrated a good understanding of the material covered in lessons. They indicated a willingness to participate generally responded appropriately to lesson content. However, evidence of the quality of student learning from previous SPHE lessons varied significantly in the work reviewed during the evaluation. In all cases the work reviewed referred to this year only. Some very good student use of ICT was noted in the compilation of E-folder for SPHE in some class groups.

In a number of classes the quantity of written work did not demonstrate a level of progression that was commensurate with the students' stage in the junior cycle. The aims of SPHE highlight the need for students to be provided with opportunities for review and reflection. Therefore, it is recommended that students be provided with additional opportunities to complete written activities that are linked to the planned learning outcomes and assessment strategies for the lesson. Activities such as worksheets, quizzes, case studies or personal-reflection activities to enable students to grapple with the topics under discussion, challenge their own ideas and reflect on their learning. This will provide additional opportunities for teachers to monitor written work.

Due to the integrated and holistic nature of the SPHE programme, students need to reflect on work covered in previous years. Some very good practice was noted where students had developed a system for the storage and filing of their work from SPHE. 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 across all classes. This will 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.

Students who met with the inspector during the evaluation recognise the value of SPHE as a means of supporting them to develop skills in areas such as team work, setting goals, making informed decisions and becoming confident communicators. They agreed that SPHE lessons have supported their learning in areas such as substance abuse, healthy lifestyles and personal safety.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Some good assessment strategies are used by individual teachers. Teacher monitoring of class activities served to assess individual levels of learning and provided affirmation and feedback on the tasks assigned. This is good practice. In one lesson a home task was assigned. This particularly good practice provided students with opportunities to use and apply classroom learning. Some teachers use group project work and self assessment as a summative assessment practice on completion of a module of work. These assessment strategies are in keeping with the rationale underpinning the SPHE curriculum. Some further consideration needs to be given to assessment in SPHE. It is recommended that the SPHE team devise an assessment policy to standardise practice. Information is available in the *SPHE Guidelines for Teachers* (pp 59-68). The end-of-module review forms should also be used to allow students to provide feedback on the work covered and to assess their learning. The information obtained can prove useful in informing ongoing programme development.

Teachers maintain records of student attendance and very high quality recording of student progress and the work covered in class was noted in some teacher diaries. It is commendable that the school reports to parents on students' progress in SPHE at parent-teacher meetings and on the school reports.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- In line with the school's ethos a commitment to student care is evident in many school practices.
- The acting senior management team demonstrates a high level of commitment to the further development of SPHE and RSE.
- It was evident during the evaluation that there is sufficient capacity and interest among teachers to establish a highly-skilled core SPHE team.
- The recently-appointed subject co-ordinator displays a very high level of enthusiasm for developing the SPHE programme in the school.
- Some exemplary teacher planning for SPHE was evident with very good quality short-term planning noted for some of the lessons observed.
- In all classrooms visited during the evaluation there was a very good rapport and an atmosphere of mutual respect was evident between the teacher and the students.
- One lesson observed typified best practice in the teaching and learning of SPHE.

- Students who met with the inspector during the evaluation recognise the value of SPHE as a means of supporting them to develop skills in areas such as team work, setting goals, making informed decisions and becoming confident communicators.

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

- School management should ensure that all designated SPHE time is used for the sole purpose of providing a taught junior-cycle SPHE curriculum programme.
- Senior management in association with relevant staff should plan and implement a senior cycle RSE programme in line with relevant Department guidelines.
- A core team of SPHE teachers should be established following staff consultation. A CPD action plan that facilitates a systematic and incremental approach to CPD among all teachers of SPHE should be implemented.
- School practices that support effective subject department planning in SPHE should be established.
- A collaborative programme plan for SPHE should be developed and implemented.
- All students should be provided with opportunities to complete written activities. An agreed system of folders that enables students to file and store this information should be introduced in all classes.

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