

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

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

**Moville Community College
Moville, County Donegal
Roll number: 76084L**

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Report on the Quality of Learning and Teaching in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

This Subject Inspection report

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Moville Community College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in junior cycle 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 the subject teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

Subject Provision and Whole School Support

Moville Community College, which has grown rapidly since opening its doors to students for the first time in September 2001, offers a very comprehensive education programme with a wide range of subjects. In keeping with the requirements of CL M11/03, SPHE is timetabled for all junior cycle students for one class period per week. The subject benefits from good provision and a supportive school environment. Discussions during the evaluation indicated that the subject is given high priority on the curriculum. There is a positive attitude and a sense of enthusiasm amongst those involved in the organisation and delivery of SPHE. This is commended and the challenge for the school is to maintain this attitude and enthusiasm for the subject as the school population grows. SPHE is considered to be an integral part of the pastoral care structure in the school and consequently the class tutor for each class is the SPHE teacher for that group of students. It is very

commendable that teachers are only assigned to teach the subject following consultation by management, and the school reports that there is no shortage of willing volunteers to join the SPHE department. Currently, twelve staff members are involved in teaching the subject in junior cycle and their work is co-ordinated in a very committed manner as part of the duties of an assistant principal's post.

A subject policy has been developed for SPHE as part of the school development planning process. Management is very supportive of collaborative planning and formal subject department meetings are organised for each year group, several times a year. It is commendable that these meetings focus on ongoing planning and review, as well as dealing with issues of a pastoral nature; the meetings are also an important element of the collaborative team approach to SPHE. The teachers are facilitated to attend in-service related to the subject and it is noted that some of the teachers had completed comprehensive training in a range of areas related to the SPHE syllabus, prior to their appointment in Merville Community College.

The school also makes commendable efforts to inform and involve parents through a range of information evenings and programmes, particularly in the area of relationships and sexuality education (RSE). An RSE policy has been developed for the school and, to date, it includes the programme in RSE for first and second year; the third year programme is currently being developed.

Planning and Preparation

The SPHE department has made commendable progress in subject planning and common programmes of work, which are based on the junior cycle syllabus, have been developed for each year group. It is good practice that the syllabus has been used as a flexible framework in subject planning and there was evidence of having tailored different aspects of the programmes of work, to meet the needs of the current cohort of students.

In a few cases, teachers presented very good individual planning documents, which outlined how the general programmes have been specially tailored for individual class groups, on a week-by-week basis. A range of resources and student support materials, which are filed according to topic, accompanied these planning documents; this organised approach to the subject is most commendable. Some very good practice was also noted in terms of teachers keeping a record of work covered to date; this could be used to review progress and inform future planning, as well as providing a record of work completed, in the event that a class might have a change of SPHE teacher, from one year to the next. It is recommended that the practice of individually tailoring the common programmes of work, to meet the needs of individual class groups, be extended and developed. The plans, as they develop, should focus on student learning, and thus include the learning outcomes for each topic. Reference to resources and methodologies for individual topics would also enhance the plans. It may be helpful to present the plans in tabular form to make them more user-friendly. This format could also allow for an end column to record progress and work completed to date. Where it is not already being done, it is recommended that all teachers maintain a record of work completed to date on an ongoing basis.

Resources used to support the delivery of the programme, in the main, are sourced from the Healthy Living, Healthy Times and Healthy Choices series of manuals, as well as On My Own Two Feet and a range of videos for RSE. Support materials and resources are stored in the staff room and in the Guidance Counsellor's office. There is no annual budget for SPHE, but resources are allocated by request.

Teaching and Learning

A good rapport between students and their teachers and an atmosphere of mutual respect characterised the interactions in all classes visited, resulting in a comfortable, pleasant and supportive learning environment. Effective use was made of student affirmation and students' contributions were warmly welcomed. Classroom management was good and there were some very good examples of drawing attention to the ground rules that had been agreed for the SPHE class, and in particular, in emphasising the importance of listening and maintaining respect for others during the classroom interactions; this is commended.

The quality of the short-term planning, for the lessons observed, was very good. In many cases, teachers shared the learning outcomes with the class and summarised the lessons on closing, thus providing a focus for the students; this approach is commended and encouraged. In addition, some teachers reminded students of the content of the previous week's topic at the beginning of the lesson and similarly at the end of the class period indicated what the subsequent lesson would entail; this is commended and is particularly important in SPHE, where the subject is delivered in one class period per week. There were excellent examples of lessons that were well structured and sequenced, while delivered at a pace that allowed students time and space to engage with, and reflect on, the concepts of the lessons. There was evidence of very good teaching and learning in many of the lessons observed. Student engagement was at its best when accompanied by well-chosen and well-used active learning methodologies. It is suggested that, when planning for and choosing methodologies, consideration should always be given to how the methodology can be used so that the learning outcomes of the lesson are attained. Opportunities to share good practice amongst the team, in relation to the use of methodologies and resources, could be considered as part of the team's planning meetings.

A lesson on alcohol began with an individual student activity, followed by a brainstorm on peer pressure. Students then worked in groups of four and each group was given a different case study on a situation regarding alcohol, with some probing questions for discussion. Roles were clearly defined in the groups, the teacher moved between groups and joined in where appropriate, and, following the feedback, which was very well processed, there was time for some discussion around the issues that emerged, with very good links to previous knowledge and the everyday influences and pressures on students regarding alcohol; students participated well in the discussion. This lesson provided an example of well-managed group work. In cases where group work may not have achieved the objective of the lesson, some attention should be given to the processing of the information from the groups and to the seating arrangements for the students, both while working in the groups and during the feedback or discussion in the plenary session.

A lesson on drugs provided students with opportunities to explore behaviour and attitudes as well as acquire knowledge. A brainstorm on drugs immediately engaged all class members and this was followed by an individual test questionnaire to establish what the students already knew about the topic. The teacher explained to the students that the questionnaire would be used to inform planning for subsequent classes so that I can help you learn what you need to know on drugs; this was a very good strategy to help establish students' level of knowledge and to focus on students' needs. An effective handout provided information on the consequences of taking drugs and was also used as trigger material for the successful pair-work that followed. The feedback from the pair-work was well processed, before opening the discussion to the whole class.

Students learned how to explore, express and acknowledge feelings in a lesson that demonstrated an excellent example of the appropriate and effective use of circle time, resulting in a very powerful session, with excellent results in terms of achieving the objectives of the lesson. Each student was provided with a very safe space in which to express personal feelings, of both a positive and negative nature, using short sentences on flash cards as a trigger. Students had the opportunity to develop their vocabulary in terms of expressing feelings and the lesson was also used to help the class members work out positive solutions to a number of issues that emerged during the lesson; the effective role of the teacher as facilitator was also crucial to the success of this lesson.

Students generally engaged well with the lessons and teachers worked hard to ensure that all students could contribute to the group work and discussion; some students asked questions to clarify the content. However, in some cases, students who were more vocal and more confident were inclined to dominate the discussion. It is recommended that the secure environment of the SPHE class be used to provide all students, and particularly those who may be shy or apprehensive, with structured opportunities to develop confidence in speaking out in public

Assessment and Achievement

It is noted that in some classes, students have a folder for SPHE and this serves as a system for filing the materials from the lessons; the folders are generally stored securely in the classroom and distributed at the beginning of the class. Encouraging students to collate and store their materials is good practice as it provides a clear record of students' work and achievement for the year, or indeed over the three-year cycle. It also ensures that materials of a personal nature are not left lying around the classroom. It is recommended that teachers generally should encourage all students to adopt a method for the filing of their materials so that a record is kept of all of the good work completed in SPHE.

It is laudable that the school reports to parents on students' progress in SPHE as part of the regular student progress reports three times per year; this generally takes the form of a comment from the teacher about students' progress in the subject. It is recommended that the SPHE team further explore the area of assessment in order to engage students in assessment as opposed to relying solely on the teacher; planning for the assessment of students' progress could then be incorporated with planning for teaching and learning. The suggestion in the previous paragraph about storing materials from lessons could act as a basis, for example, for student self-assessment, where students are provided with opportunities to reflect on their learning at the end of a lesson, or on completion of a topic. In this way assessment is used as a tool for learning, as opposed to measuring how much or how well a topic has been learned. Student reflection and self-assessment could also inform planning and review of 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 the NCCA website (www.ncca.ie) contains information on assessment for learning, which teachers might also find useful.

There were some very good examples of teachers engaging in reflective practice, in terms of thinking about how the SPHE lessons could contribute to improving students' self-esteem over the course of the year. This is commended.

Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations

The following are the main strengths and areas for development identified in the evaluation:

- SPHE benefits from good provision and a supportive school environment. A positive attitude and a sense of enthusiasm exist amongst those involved in the organisation and delivery of the subject, which is co-ordinated at assistant principal level.
- A subject policy has been developed and formal subject department meetings are organised for each year group, several times a year. Common programmes of work have been developed for each year group.
- Some very good individual planning documents were in evidence, there were excellent examples of lessons that were well structured and sequenced and some very good practice was also noted in terms of teachers keeping a record of work covered to date. There were some very good examples of teachers engaging in reflective practice, while the school reports regularly to parents on students' progress in SPHE.
- An atmosphere of mutual respect characterised the interactions in all classes visited, resulting in a comfortable, pleasant and supportive learning environment.
- There was evidence of very good teaching and learning in many of the lessons observed. Student engagement was at its best when accompanied by well-chosen and well-used active learning methodologies. These included the effective use of group work and pair-work, reflection and circle time.
- Students generally engaged well with the lessons and teachers worked hard to ensure that all students could contribute to the group work and discussion. However, in some cases, students who were more vocal and more confident were inclined to dominate the discussion.

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

- The common programmes of work should be individually tailored to meet the needs of individual class groups. They should focus on student learning, and thus include the learning outcomes for each topic, as well as reference to resources and methodologies.
- Where this is not already being done, teachers should maintain an ongoing record of work completed to date.
- The secure environment of the SPHE class should be used to provide all students with structured opportunities to develop confidence in speaking out in public.
- All students should be encouraged to adopt a system for the collation and storage of their personal materials for SPHE.
- Assessment as a tool for learning, including student reflection and self-assessment should be explored and planning for the assessment of students' progress should be incorporated with planning for teaching and learning.

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