

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

**Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT**

**Loreto College
Swords, County Dublin
Roll number: 60810B**

Date of inspection: 1 April 2009



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S E O L A Í O C H T A | A N D S C I E N C E**

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 Loreto College, Swords. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Social, Personal and Health Education (including Relationships and Sexuality Education in senior 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 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

Loreto College Swords is a Catholic voluntary secondary school and it currently caters for 632 female students. In first and second year, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Choir and Drama are timetabled for two periods each week as rotating modules of ten weeks' duration each. This commitment to the provision of a broad curriculum is acknowledged. However, the time allocation to SPHE in first and second year falls short of that outlined in Circular M11/03. More significantly, the current system means that all of these students do not engage with SPHE for a large portion of the year. Management reports that within the drama module, students engage with topics which are relevant to SPHE. These activities should now be documented and included in the SPHE plan. This may help to address some of the shortfall of time allocation. It is strongly recommended that the school reviews the timetabling of SPHE and adjusts it to ensure that students have contact with the subject over a larger portion of the school year. Provision for SPHE is very good in third year, where it is timetabled for one period per week for the full academic year.

Co-ordination of the subject is currently allocated to a teacher as part of the duties assigned to a post of responsibility. This support for SPHE is good. The work of the SPHE teaching team is co-ordinated in a very dedicated manner by this teacher. In the current year, six teachers, all of whom are experienced in teaching this subject, teach SPHE. Each member of the department is also assigned to teach another subject to their SPHE students. There is a very positive attitude to the subject and a spirit of enthusiasm is evident in the team. It is good to note that all of the teachers were assigned to SPHE following consultation; management is commended in this regard.

The school is very supportive of teachers' continuing professional development and attendance at in-service provided by the SPHE Support Service has been facilitated. Almost all SPHE teachers have attended the *Introductory Training* and the *Continuation Training*. A small number attended the *Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) Training* in the past. This interest in furthering and developing skills in SPHE is commended.

Resources to support the teaching of SPHE have been acquired and are centrally located so that they are accessible to the team. All resources have been audited and a list is included in the SPHE plan. Teachers have also devised or acquired handouts and worksheets for individual use in lessons. These have been meticulously catalogued and filed according to each year group. In addition, there are very good information and communications technology (ICT) resources in this school.

All of the classrooms in which SPHE lessons were observed are very suitable for the teaching of the subject. The size and layout of the rooms readily facilitate the active and participative teaching approaches recommended by the syllabus. Great efforts have been made by all SPHE teachers to ensure that there are appropriate displays of SPHE materials in their classrooms. These are very useful for maximising the potential of the students' immediate learning environment to stimulate and retain their interest in issues and topics relevant to the subject. During the evaluation visit, the visual promotion of SPHE around the school building was also very apparent. The large number of subject-related materials that were displayed throughout the school was impressive.

The school endeavours to promote SPHE in a wide whole-school context. Many systems are in place which support the work of the SPHE teachers; these include the year head and tutor system; a critical incident management team; the *Cool School Programme*; a student Leadership Committee; a Big Sister programme where sixth-year students mentor first-year students upon entry into the school and *Rainbows*. In addition, the school has held a *Friendship Week* and a *Healthy Eating* week as a further support to students. All of these initiatives are commended.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

SPHE is very clearly a core feature of the pastoral care structure in the school. All of the necessary key policies relevant to or supportive of SPHE have been developed. These include the substance use policy and the anti-bullying policy which sets out clear directions for tackling bullying behaviour. The relationships and sexuality education (RSE) policy is currently under review. It is recommended that the template available on the website of the Department of Education and Science at www.education.ie should be used to guide this process.

A co-ordinated approach has been taken to the development and execution of the RSE programme in senior cycle. A component of RSE is delivered by the religion department and this is documented in the SPHE plan. One of the SPHE teachers delivers a six-week module on *Healthy Living* to sixth-year students. This includes topics relevant to RSE. This information is shared with parents in advance of its delivery. The school might find it useful to refer to the recently developed TRUST (*Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching*) resource for senior cycle. It consists of a DVD and twenty accompanying lessons and is available through the training programme for senior cycle RSE.

In addition to the activities planned and delivered by the SPHE teachers, the junior cycle programme includes seminars facilitated by external personnel. The material covered by these speakers is agreed with the SPHE teachers and the principal in advance and information letters are sent to parents. The format of externally facilitated seminars may be either a talk with opportunities for questions or a workshop designed to include small group sessions. These events have included inputs by Bodywhys, Aware and members of An Garda Síochána. In all cases, handouts containing detailed factual information have been provided by these external facilitators to the SPHE co-ordinator and these have been meticulously documented as part of the SPHE department plan. In some cases, seminars were formally evaluated by the students. This good practice should be extended to include all such events and the results of the evaluations should be recorded and included in the department plan.

Planning for SPHE and the co-ordination of the subject is very well executed in this school. Management facilitates formal meetings of the SPHE teachers once per term. There is also a high level of informal contact between teachers. Minutes have been kept of all formal meetings and these are available in the SPHE plan. They indicate that a good range of relevant issues is discussed, including the organisation of programmes of work and arrangements for visiting speakers. In addition, at the end of each ten-week module, teachers and students engage in reflection regarding the aspects of the programme that have worked well. This reflective practice is very good. Consideration might now be given to more frequent evaluation to coincide with the conclusion of each topic within modules.

It is very apparent that the members of the SPHE department work closely together and they have adopted a collaborative approach to planning. Teachers follow a common programme and adapt it to meet the needs of their students. All ten modules outlined in the syllabus are covered with each year group. Good cross-curricular links have been established as part of planning for the department.

Individual planning by all teachers was very good. All teachers maintain records of work covered in all lessons. This is good practice. These records could now be augmented by the addition of notes on the methodologies, resources and modes of assessment being used to deliver each topic. This information would be a tangible document for future planning purposes.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Six lessons were visited during the course of the evaluation; five in junior cycle and one RSE lesson in senior cycle. There was a very good standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed. The topics covered were *pregnancy*, *personal hygiene*, *healthy living*, *bullying*, *body image* and *smoking*. The content, resources and methodologies chosen for each lesson created an appropriate balance between gaining knowledge, developing skills and fostering attitudes and values. In some lessons, the aims and the learning intentions were shared with the students. This is optimal practice and it should be adopted by all teachers as it provides a focus for students' learning.

All lessons were logical, well structured and progressed well. Good use was made of resources which were appropriate to the students and seamlessly integrated into lessons. A wide range of effective strategies was integrated into lessons observed and allowed student students to use initiative and creativity. These included questioning, brainstorming, group work, pair work, individual reflection and completion of worksheets, teacher talk, ICT and whole-class

discussions. Interactive methods are in keeping with the rationale of the syllabus and help to develop a range of social and cognitive skills. In most lessons, every opportunity was provided to students to contribute to these discussions through skilful facilitation by the teacher. As a result, students' engagement was very good. In a small number of lessons, there was a slight imbalance between teacher and student input. It is important that students are allowed to contribute to lessons without any unnecessary interruptions. This is recommended. Best practice was observed when students were afforded time to explore and discuss relevant topics and when this process was facilitated by the teacher. For example, in one lesson observed, students actively engaged with the topic of *Healthy Living* by participating in pair work which allowed them to discuss and share personal experiences. This facilitated the successful whole-class discussion which followed.

In a second lesson, where the topic in question was *bullying*, students were provided with scenarios to enact. This strategy meant that active participation by students was a core component of the lesson. These students were fully motivated and engaged with their learning. The activity was consolidated through skilful questioning by the teacher who also recorded all responses on the board. It should be borne in mind that many students are capable of undertaking this recording task and that they should be encouraged to do so on occasion.

In all lessons, students were well managed. A kind and caring atmosphere was observed throughout the evaluation. Class contracts, which had been devised on a collaborative basis between the class and the teacher, were on display or were evident in copies in all classrooms visited. This is good practice.

ASSESSMENT

Students in Loreto College Swords have a folder for SPHE which serves as a method of storing materials from their lessons. This good practice of encouraging students to file and store their SPHE materials is commended as it ensures that students and parents have a visible record of work and achievement at the end of the year.

In some of the lessons observed, teachers summarised the learning at the end of the lesson. However, it was noted that students were not provided with the opportunity to reflect on what they had achieved during the lesson. This practice of consolidating the learning is good but the engagement of learners is necessary to derive maximum benefit from it.

A range of assessment modes is used by teachers to determine students' engagement and progress in SPHE. These include the completion of worksheets, written assignments in addition to regular oral questioning. Increasing the level of student self-assessment would be a very useful mechanism for determining the full extent of the students' learning.

Formal reports are issued to parents at Christmas and summer. The school reports to parents on students' progress in SPHE. This generally takes the form of a comment on the school report. As part of planning for assessment, some consideration should be given to the basis upon which these comments are written. Teachers also have opportunities to discuss student progress at parent-teacher meetings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A post of responsibility has partially been assigned for the co-ordination of this subject.
- A core team of experienced teachers has been developed and there is a very positive attitude within the SPHE department.
- The school is very supportive of teachers' continuing professional development and SPHE teachers have attended courses provided by the SPHE Support Service.
- The school endeavours to create an environment that promotes SPHE in the wider whole-school context.
- Planning for SPHE and the co-ordination of the subject are very well executed in this school.
- All lessons observed were logical and sequential and resources were seamlessly integrated at appropriate stages.
- A wide range of effective strategies was integrated into lessons observed.
- A kind and caring atmosphere was observed throughout the evaluation.

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

- The school should review the timetabling of SPHE and adjust it to ensure that first and second year students have contact with the subject over a larger portion of the school year.
- The SPHE department should spend time exploring the criteria being applied when completing formal reports for parents on students' progress.

A post-evaluation meeting was 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.

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management commends the work of the SPHE co-ordinator and teachers of SPHE. The Board acknowledges that the two recommendations of the report are a means of building on the school's strengths in this subject area. The Board views the modular timetabling of SPHE in 1st and 2nd year as being more conducive to engaging with the subject as the class size is restricted to 20. The modules allow the school to give access to competing interests of Information Technology, Drama and Choir. The students' exposure to SPHE continues throughout the year when 60 students at a time have regular visits from speakers on related themes. The I.T. classes access SPHE related Websites etc. and the Drama classes focus almost exclusively on SPHE related topics. Friendship week, Mary Ward Week, Mental Health Week also bring SPHE themes into the domain of students all year round regardless of the timing of their modules. The Guidance Counsellor can also access students during the year.

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

The recommendation is in place regarding spending time exploring the criteria being applied when completing formal reports for parents on students' progress.