

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SPHE AT POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

Executive Summary

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FOREWORD

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1. BACKGROUND

In April 2000 the Department of Education and Science approved the Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) syllabus (Department of Education and Science Circular M22/00). SPHE was designed to match with and facilitate the educational principles that underpin the Junior Cycle (JC) curriculum and all post-primary schools were advised by circular (Department of Education and Science Circular M11/03) that SPHE must form part of the core curriculum of Junior Cycle by September 2003.

A number of research studies have been undertaken to date that have informed the development of this initiative (SPHE, 2004; Burtenshaw, 2003; Geary & Mannix-McNamara, 2002; Millar, 2003a; Millar, 2003b). All of these reports provide vital information on the operation of the SPHE Support Service and the roll-out of SPHE in schools. Nevertheless, gaps remain in our knowledge and understanding of SPHE implementation. Burtenshaw (2003) indicates the need to know more about the degree of integration of SPHE at school level and the underlying mechanisms, both in terms of the outcomes of the training activities of the SPHE Support Service and the potential synergy between SPHE and other curricular activities.

In addition, the information collected thus far has been provided by members of the SPHE Support Service, both Health Promotion Officers and Regional Development Officers, and by staff in schools. Two of the key stakeholders in the SPHE process have not been involved: students and parents. Given the approaches inherent in the recent policy documents on both parents (Investing in Parenthood: the Supporting Parents Strategy; Best Health for Children, 2002) and children (National Children's Strategy; Department of Health and Children, 2000), it is timely that these two sets of voices are given the opportunity to contribute their opinions. In the context of the school as a setting for working, learning and living all educational stakeholders should have the opportunity to participate in the production of a holistic picture of their school.

2. THE CURRENT STUDY

This study was commissioned by the SPHE Management Committee with the overall aim to examine the contribution of SPHE to the experience of Junior Cycle students in the education system and the contribution of SPHE to the Junior Cycle curriculum. A random sample of twelve schools representing a range of post-primary schools were considered as separate units in order to examine the relationship between the various factors that might have an effect on SPHE within schools. The modified case study approach employed in this study used mixed methodologies:

- Individual one-to-one semi-structured interviews were held with 49 members of staff in the 12 schools, including the Principal, the SPHE Coordinator, SPHE teachers and at least one other member of staff concerned with the social and emotional development of students. Each interviewee also rated on paper various aspects of the implementation process and the school as a setting for learning and health.
- Focus groups with parents took place in 9 schools, involving 57 parents. In one school no parents participated in the scheduled focus group and in two schools no focus groups were scheduled on the advice of the Principal.
- A participative workshop was conducted with three classes within each school, in which 686 students were involved. Students provided and analysed responses to the question “If it were your job to improve health in the school what would you do?”
- A total of 686 students completed questionnaires which were administered to all students participating in the workshops. The questions covered perceptions of the school and SPHE with a limited number of open-ended questions.
- Students who participated in the workshops were given questionnaires to take home for their parents, which were analogous to the questionnaires for students. Questionnaires for parents were distributed to students in all other SPHE classes by teachers. In total 911 parents completed and returned questionnaires.
- The RDO (Regional Development Officer) for SPHE was interviewed for each region in which the 12 participating schools were located.

3. FINDINGS

These methods elicited a rich variety of opinions from students, teachers, parents and SPHE Support Service staff on their perceptions of SPHE at present and their aspirations for its future. The findings are organised around five main themes: (a) the quality and value of SPHE, (b) the contribution of SPHE to the educational experiences and health of students, (c) supports for SPHE implementation, (d) the links with and perspectives of stakeholders, and (e) how SPHE can be built on in the Senior Cycle. The insights and understanding of stakeholders identify areas for possible improvements and challenges in practical and effective planning for the future of SPHE in post-primary schools.

- SPHE suffers from timetabling pressures and there are difficulties with curriculum overload that influence SPHE provision.
- SPHE has a lack of status in comparison to examination subjects.
- Insufficient time is given to SPHE.
- Many parents lacked sufficient knowledge to comment.

The majority of members of staff, parents and students perceive the quality of SPHE provision positively. Most members of staff interviewed believe their school is providing a worthwhile SPHE programme. As with other curricular areas, the importance of the teaching is stressed as the essential ingredient for successful delivery of a quality programme. The other issue repeatedly emphasised is the need to allocate sufficient time to the subject. A considerable majority of students are interested in SPHE, an attitude that is also reflected by parents.

3.1. The quality and value of SPHE

Key issues emerging on the quality and value of SPHE provision in schools:

- SPHE is challenging, worthwhile, valuable and helpful.
- Quality teaching is an essential ingredient for the successful delivery of SPHE.
- Sufficient and relevant resources are essential for the delivery of a high quality SPHE programme.

The majority of parents, students and members of staff perceive the value of SPHE provision in the schools to be high. However, the challenge for schools in promoting and valuing SPHE within the school ethos cannot be underestimated.

The most frequent challenges for staff are dealing with timetable overload and ambivalence as to the value of SPHE when compared to examination subjects. Its value and importance are reflected in many positive contributions from parents and students, albeit with some reservations.

3.2. The contribution of SPHE to the health and educational experience of Junior Cycle students

Key issues emerging on perceptions of the contribution of SPHE to the health and educational experience of Junior Cycle students:

- SPHE contributes positively to students’ attitudes to health, especially for their future lives.
- SPHE helps students to think about and discuss health issues relevant to their age group.
- SPHE provides opportunities for the development of personal and social skills among students.
- It is difficult for staff to evaluate the influence of SPHE on health behaviours among students.

- There is agreement that SPHE has the potential to improve the health behaviours of students.
- Most parents and students are satisfied with the support SPHE offers in relation to keeping healthy.
- There is consensus that SPHE enhances the educational experiences of students, all groups were enthusiastic about the educational potential of the subject.
- Students are more ambivalent than their parents about the influence SPHE has on their education.
- Students express the view that SPHE is helpful to them in dealing with difficult situations.

There is almost unanimous agreement among members of staff and Principals, parents and students in all the participating schools, of the positive contribution of SPHE to health attitudes among students. The perception is that SPHE provides students with the opportunity to develop personal and social skills, promotes their self-esteem, self-confidence and wellbeing, contributes to their physical, mental and emotional health and fosters tolerance and respect for others.

The widespread belief is that the subject helps, or has the potential to help, students to think about and discuss health issues relevant to their age group. Staff are more reluctant to speculate on the influence of SPHE on health behaviours. This is mainly due to the difficulties in evaluating such a contribution. The majority of parents, on the other hand, express their satisfaction with the support that SPHE offers their children in keeping them healthy; on the influence it has on their physical activity, smoking and eating behaviour and on their approach to alcohol. Most students also consider that SPHE helps to keep them healthy, but they are more reticent than their parents about the impact it has on their decisions.

The perceived input of SPHE to students' educational experience is very positive. It was emphasised by members of staff, parents and students that the SPHE class provides students with a unique opportunity to express themselves openly. As a non-examination subject, it is regarded as a forum where issues relevant to students can be raised, where difficulties of all kinds can be discussed, it gives students and teachers alike the opportunity to examine and discuss issues relevant to the lives and wellbeing of young people, thus adding an extra dimension to the educational experience of students. Students prove to be more ambivalent than parents about the influence SPHE has on their education but,

on the other hand, they feel more strongly than their parents that SPHE is helpful to them in dealing with difficult situations. All groups of stakeholders are enthusiastic about the educational potential of the subject.

3.3. Supports for the implementation of SPHE

Key issues emerging on supports available for the implementation of SPHE in schools:

- SPHE staff, particularly those who choose to teach it and have been trained, enjoy the experience.
- The majority of the students enjoy learning during SPHE classes.
- The importance of continuity in relation to teaching SPHE to the same class over a period of years was stressed by teachers.
- Support and training for the teachers are regarded as essential for success of SPHE.
- SPHE is included in the school planning process in fewer than half the schools.

- Schools are keen to include SPHE in whole school planning.
- In almost all schools, policies and structures are in place that support the running of the SPHE programme.
- The role of the SPHE Coordinator is seen as pivotal to success.
- Members of the SPHE team who feel valued and supported express a strong sense of satisfaction in their work.
- More than half of parents think that schools need more support in their delivery of a successful SPHE programme.

Most members of staff on SPHE teams enjoy teaching the subject, particularly those who are trained. Support and training for teachers are regarded as being the most important aspects of delivering a successful SPHE programme. Teachers who choose to teach SPHE are generally more enthusiastic and dedicated than those who have been timetabled, without consultation, to teach the subject. The training and the Support Service are considered to be of great benefit and importance in the delivery of a successful SPHE programme. Most students enjoy learning the subject and their parents report that they do so too.

In over half of the schools SPHE is not currently included in the school plan but in three other schools the Principals are strong in their commitment to SPHE and its assimilation into the planning policies and processes. It was clear that it was considered desirable to include SPHE in the school plan at the outset, rather than as an afterthought. In almost all schools, there are some policies and structures in place that support the running of the SPHE programme.

Members of the SPHE team who feel valued and supported within the school express a strong sense of satisfaction in their work. More than half of parents report that schools need more support in their delivery of a successful SPHE programme. The role of the SPHE Coordinator is seen as pivotal in the successful integration and delivery of the programme. It is the Coordinator who supports the SPHE team in the school, organises meetings of the team, allocates the SPHE budget and sees that training needs are met. In a few schools there is a sense of dissatisfaction at the perceived lack of structures and support.



3.4. Links with and perspectives of stakeholders

Key issues emerging on the links with and perspectives of stakeholders:

- A level of awareness among all staff is essential to increase the influence of SPHE.
 - The pastoral care ethos in a school has a major influence on the perception of SPHE.
 - The influence of the SPHE Support Service is crucial to increasing the knowledge and support for the SPHE programme among other teachers.
 - There is little engagement with parents in the planning and development of SPHE.
 - In all schools there has been some staff in-service training – this is regarded as a crucial support for SPHE.
 - RDOs have visited some schools to support the teaching of SPHE by working with the whole staff.
 - Outside agencies and guest speakers have been invited to most schools and are seen as positive additions to the SPHE programme.
- Parents that do comment are both enthusiastic and encouraging about the SPHE programme.
 - Many parents felt unable to comment due to their lack of knowledge of SPHE.
 - Some of the parents’ comments conveyed that they would like not only to know more about the SPHE programme but also to feel more involved with this aspect of their child’s education.

Perceptions vary greatly on whether SPHE complements the work of members of staff not on the SPHE team. In five of the schools, participants are positive about this issue, in five others they are negative and in the remaining two there is a mixed response. Where SPHE is seen to complement the teaching of other school personnel, the SPHE teams believe this to be dependent on the awareness of the general staff of the SPHE programme. Not surprisingly, the pastoral care ethos in the school is perceived to influence the extent to which the complementary element of SPHE effects the work of other school personnel. Thus, the Chaplain, the Religion teacher(s) and the Home-School Liaison teacher within the school have an important supportive role to play.

One school reports that their staff members have a good understanding of SPHE and that this is due to a visit from the SPHE Support Service RDO, who came to the school and worked with all the staff for a full day. In the majority of schools it is not considered relevant to have consultation with general staff members in relation to SPHE. This is due to the lack of knowledge and understanding of what the programme is about among those not on the SPHE team and, in some cases, those on the team. In relation to parents being consulted and informed about SPHE, although the majority of schools have an active parents' association, there is little involvement of parents in the planning or development of the subject. Although school staff emphasise the range of communications between the school and parents, both parents and students agree that there was relatively weak communication in relation to SPHE. The parent focus groups reinforced the general view that they had little knowledge but their enthusiasm to acquire information on the subject was clear.

The significance of the SPHE Support Service, their in-service training and visits, their encouragement and the back-up they provide to schools, is regarded as crucial to SPHE programme development. All participating schools have had some staff attend in-service training and generally the comments are positive on the assistance and encouragement that is given by the SPHE Support Service.

Generally, in schools where outside groups and guest speakers were invited into the school, there is a positive attitude to their value in supporting the work and development of SPHE.

Parents' expectations of the SPHE programme are reflected in their comments in the questionnaires. Parents identify a wide variety of topics for possible inclusion in the programme and among the most frequently mentioned were sexuality and sex, alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, relationships and social development, self-esteem, self respect, stress, grief and bereavement, feelings with particular emphasis on anger, healthy eating and health issues generally, responsibility, bullying, money issues. Overall, the responses are enthusiastic and encouraging but, in common with other curricular areas, many parents report that they feel unable to comment due to lack of knowledge of SPHE.

3.5. Continuing SPHE into Transition Year and Senior Cycle

Key issues emerging on how SPHE can be built on in Transition Year and Senior Cycle:

- Staff in most schools are in favour of the continuation of SPHE into the Senior Cycle.



- Important issues for the implementation of SPHE in Senior Cycle include timetabling, teacher training and the value placed on SPHE by all members of school community.
- A minority of both parents and students supported the continuation of SPHE into the Senior Cycle

A large majority of staff believe that SPHE should be carried through to Transition Year and Senior Cycle. The challenges which staff members raise for implementation include finding the time in an already overloaded curriculum at Senior Cycle level, the training of teachers, and tackling the perceived lack of value of SPHE among teachers, parents and students alike. Fewer than half of both students and parents consider that it will be helpful to continue SPHE to Senior Cycle. However, it is clear that students and parents in some schools have a more positive view of the possibilities than those in others.

3.6. Limitations

Although the schools were randomly selected, they were not representative of the proportion of the different types of schools within the country. Nevertheless, the sampling process ensured that all school types were included. It was particularly difficult to obtain views from parents, a number of the planned focus groups were not possible and there was substantial variation across schools in response rates to the questionnaire for parents, so the parental data is generally of unknown representativeness. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that these data are not necessarily suitable for between school comparisons.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research findings indicate that the value of the SPHE programme is not in dispute. The widespread view among all the stakeholders is that the SPHE programme provides students with the opportunity to develop personal and social skills, promotes their self-esteem, self-confidence and wellbeing, contributes to their physical, mental and emotional health and fosters tolerance and respect for others. In order that SPHE becomes a valued and effective part of the curriculum, structures need to be in place to ensure that its importance is visible to everyone within that school community. Once SPHE becomes part of the whole school approach its implementation process is more effective.

SPHE is facilitated by the leadership of Principals and school Coordinators, the development of whole school planning and the consultative process of policy development, the careful selection and training of SPHE teachers and SPHE Coordinators, and continuity in the timetabling of SPHE teachers. Whole school training, as well as specific training for Principals and SPHE Coordinators assists this approach.

In addition, time needs to be allocated for team meetings and coordination; SPHE should be on the report card and have a table at parent-teacher meetings. SPHE is more successful when it is delivered by volunteer trained teachers, to small class groups of students who have been consulted as to the content of SPHE, with up to date and relevant resources, including class folders for students.

All stakeholders, and parents in particular, require more information on the aims, processes and content of SPHE.



5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for the improvement of SPHE implementation in post-primary schools have been identified following consideration of the research findings. They are presented below in relation to the stakeholder groups to which they apply, though in many cases implementation will require cross-sectoral action.

5.1. Department of Education and Science

Leadership

- The requirement for all schools to implement SPHE in the Junior Cycle needs to be reiterated. The Department of Education and Science Inspectorate in partnership with the SPHE Support Service must continue to ensure that schools are adopting SPHE for all three years of the Junior Cycle, including through the implementation of whole-school evaluation and subject inspection.
- The SPHE Support Service works to help identify and offer support to schools that are having difficulties with either timetabling and/or inclusion of SPHE in planning processes. Having identified the schools in need of help in the implementation of the SPHE programme, supports such as that from the School Leadership Development Support Service and those identified below may be of extra benefit.

SPHE Policy development

- Through whole-school evaluation and subject inspection, the Department of Education and Science needs to continue to ensure that whole school plans are being developed in post-primary schools that incorporate SPHE policies and subject plans.
- The SPHE Policy development process being followed should adhere to the recommendations set out by the Department of Education and Science in relation to consultation with all stakeholders within a given school. Following such a consultative process the understanding, commitment and ownership by all stakeholders of the implementation and delivery of SPHE will be enhanced.

5.2. Department of Health and Children and the Health Services Executive

Leadership

- Both the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Health and Children provide support for SPHE, and such collaboration is important for the future of the initiative. The Department of Health and Children and the HSE have a responsibility to ensure that the policy and resource supports for SPHE are in place within the health sector and that the elements of health and social policy that refer to and rely on the full implementation of SPHE at school level are enacted.
- Both the Department of Health and Children and the HSE must work with the Department of Education and Science to ensure that the voice of the health sector continues to influence SPHE as it develops.

Communication

- The Health Service Executive in partnership with the Department of Education and Science is uniquely placed to communicate about and advocate for SPHE in schools at local and regional levels. This is particularly in relation to setting the community context for SPHE and assisting schools to link with their local communities.

- Both the Department of Health and Children and the HSE should engage with communities and in particular parents as to the role of SPHE in the education and health maximisation of young people.

Training and Resources

- The contribution of Health Promotion Officers for Schools, as members of the SPHE Support Service to the introduction, maintenance and improvement of SPHE implementation is substantial, and crucial to the continuance of the SPHE Support Service. In particular, the training provided in conjunction with the Regional Development Officers for SPHE, the development of resources for classroom teachers and their advocacy role for SPHE within the Health Service needs to be recognised and supported at both national and regional level by all those involved in the implementation of SPHE.

5.3. SPHE Support Service

Training

- More emphasis needs to be given to the value of whole school in-service training in order to create a whole school approach that will support the SPHE programme.
- The in-service training for teachers needs to deliver ideas and methodologies that can be transferred to the real life situations of most schools, where there can be large class groups, inappropriate rooms and problems with noise levels.
- The development and inclusion of a timetabled session dedicated to the discussion of best practice and teachers' experience in all training programmes is recommended.
- The specific training for both Principals and Co-ordinators which includes evidence-based examples of good practice and team-building, should continue to emphasise the benefits of such learning for the development of effective implementation.

- The possibility of accreditation for participants in the SPHE training programme could be explored with the Department of Education and Science and the Teaching Council as a means of validation of and support for SPHE teachers.

Resources

- SPHE teams within schools require the development of appropriate and relevant classroom resources that can be tailored to the specific needs of individual schools.
- Regional and local directories of potential outside experts/speakers who understand the SPHE programme and are willing to work within its policy framework, complementing, not replacing classroom teachers, would be helpful to schools.

Support

- Further supports for both planning and management of SPHE within schools is required and should be developed in conjunction with the School Development Planning Initiative and the School Leadership Development Support Service. Thus a co-ordinated approach involving all three initiatives is recommended.



- The development of an on-line forum where best practice can be shared and discussed by SPHE Coordinators and teachers is suggested.
- In line with the current activities of the SPHE Support Service, the continuation of on-going support for the whole school related to their perceived specific needs is advised.
- The vision of SPHE needs to be iterated alongside its value in relation to enhancing the learning experience of students as well as the working experience of staff. The Support service should review promotional aids to assist schools to clarify this for parents and communities.

Quality

- It is clear that the quality of SPHE implementation varies substantially across schools. The SPHE Support Service must consider the quality assurance issues that arise from this and could investigate appropriate responses in conjunction with the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate.

5.4. Principals

Policy development

- The development of whole school planning is fundamental to the creation of a supportive whole school approach, and this process should include SPHE from the outset, assigning SPHE the same level of importance and attention as any other subject area.
- As laid down by the school planning process, such policy development should be as inclusive and consultative as possible. The school planning process should also ensure that once an SPHE policy or subject plan has been developed it needs to be implemented and reviewed regularly by all stakeholders in order to make it effective for the planning and delivery of SPHE. Such a policy should include issues of teacher training, support for the SPHE team within the school, communication with parents and the role of students in the development of SPHE at school level. It should also link closely with the school's RSE and substance use policies.

Staff recruitment

- The assignment of staff to SPHE needs to be conducted in consultation with the individual teachers and the SPHE Coordinator



- Ensuring continuity of SPHE teachers throughout the Junior and Senior Cycles, as far as is possible, will allow for the building of relationships based on trust and stability between staff and students.
- The provision of appropriate support and training for those appointed as SPHE Coordinators is crucial.
- There is a need to ensure a more even gender balance in relation to SPHE delivery.

Timetabling

- The development of an SPHE team is important and needs to be supported by the timetabling of team meetings.
- The release of staff for all of the SPHE in-service training will ensure a confident and effective teaching group. This will also create a pool of trained teachers within the school.
- Timetabling SPHE teachers to teach more than just SPHE to individual class groups will assist the full potential of the SPHE programme to contribute positively to more traditional educational outcomes.
- The timetabling of periods in which Coordinators can develop resources, attend training meetings with their team and plan for each term is also desirable.

- Principals should also work with the school community to develop smaller class sizes for SPHE wherever possible.

5.5. SPHE Coordinators

Effective team building

- The creation of a team of trained SPHE teachers who meet regularly for mutual support in terms of resources and discussion time as well as training information should be encouraged.

Continuation of SPHE into the Senior Cycle, including Transition Year

- The curriculum framework for SPHE at Senior Cycle makes provision for student consultation at individual school level, and this should be facilitated by SPHE Coordinators or teachers when the process of Senior Cycle implementation is being planned at school level.

Communication

- The development of a means of informing parents about the content of the SPHE programme on a termly basis is likely to engender more parental interest and support. Having SPHE on the report card would be part of on-going communication process with parents, so too would be the inclusion, where applicable, of a specific SPHE table at parent teacher meetings.

- In many schools SPHE teachers also teach other subjects and talk to parents in relation to the latter. Their role as SPHE teachers needs to be flagged so that parents are encouraged to discuss SPHE as a subject as well.
- Ensuring that school staff are kept up to date in relation to the content of the SPHE programme being delivered is important. This could coincide with the creation of a forum where, as part of the whole school plan, a coherent and integrated teaching plan is developed.

5.6. SPHE Teachers

- The teachers need to ensure they attend all SPHE in-service training in sequence, as far as is practical.
- Teachers should also identify their specific training needs and seek support in order to meet them.

5.7. Students and Parents

- Within the context of the approved SPHE curriculum, students need to be actively consulted and heard in relation to the content of their SPHE classes; such processes could include discussions on SPHE during school council meetings.
- Parents need to be kept informed on the SPHE policy and content of the programme. Such communications should be directly to the parents in clear and understandable formats for example via a school website and parent/teacher meetings.



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