Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in the Primary School

PROMOTING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING

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INSPECTORATE

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Inspectorate Evaluation Studies

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Contents

Tables

Figures

Foreword

The inclusion of a specific curriculum for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is one of the most critical features of the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). The SPHE curriculum outlines a range of objectives and learning experiences that pupils will be enabled to undertake and provides guidance on whole-school planning, organisational aspects associated with the subject area, and classroom planning. It draws together many of the programmes that schools were implementing previously under other subject areas, for example as part of their provision for Physical Education and civic education. In so doing, it presents a coherent, unified curriculum rather than a series of disjointed programmes which formerly were attended to largely at the discretion of schools.

The SPHE curriculum provides pupils with opportunities to learn personal and social skills while helping them to create and maintain supportive relationships and to become active and responsible citizens. Teachers are expected to cover content from each of the three curriculum strands, *Myself; Myself and others; and Myself and the wider world*, in any one year. Over a two-year cycle, pupils should be introduced to all aspects of the curriculum that are pertinent to their stage of development. An integral part of the SPHE curriculum is the provision of relationships and sexuality education (RSE). School staffs have received in-service support from the Department's support services to assist them in implementing the SPHE curriculum.

In 2007, as part of its ongoing evaluation of curriculum implementation, the Inspectorate conducted a thematic evaluation of SPHE in forty primary schools. This report presents the findings from that evaluation. In order to gain a clear insight into what was happening in the provision of SPHE, the inspectors observed teaching and learning, and conducted interviews with teachers, management and pupils. They examined relevant school documentation and pupils' work. Furthermore they analysed the responses provided by senior pupils and their parents in SPHE questionnaires.

The thematic evaluation shows that while much progress has been achieved in the implementation of the SPHE curriculum, some challenges remain. There is a need for all schools to ensure that they are providing a broad and balanced SPHE programme in which continuity and progression in the pupils' learning is assured. The report identifies a need for further development in teachers' use of a wide range of active-learning opportunities for pupils, in the implementation of RSE, in promoting more effective parental involvement, and in addressing the related areas of differentiation and assessment. Other areas for development include building the capacity of schools to evaluate their own effectiveness and to use the outcomes of self-evaluation to promote improvements in teaching and learning and pupils' achievement in SPHE.

The report will be of interest to teachers, principals, parents, school-support services, curriculum developers and policy-makers. I am confident that it will inform debate and policy decisions on the provision and delivery of SPHE and so benefit pupils in primary schools throughout the country.

Eamon Stack
Chief Inspector

Chapter 1

1.1 Curriculum design and development

This report presents the outcomes of an evaluation of the implementation of the curriculum for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in primary schools. The *Primary School Curriculum: Social, Personal and Health Education* (Department of Education and Science, 1999a), from here on referred to as the SPHE curriculum, was published as part of the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b). SPHE is one of the six areas of learning in the curriculum. Fig. 1.1 shows the structure of the curriculum.

Fig. 1.1: The structure of the Primary School Curriculum (1999)

Language		
Gaeilge		English
Mathematics		
Social, Environmental and Scientific Education		
History	Geography	Science
Arts Education		
Visual arts	Music	Drama
Physical Education (PE)		
Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)		
Religious Education		

SPHE is intended to provide particular opportunities to foster the personal development, health and well-being of the child and to help him or her to create and maintain supportive relationships and become an active and responsible citizen in society. The curriculum states that through SPHE, children can develop a framework of values, attitudes, understanding and skills that will inform their actions and decisions in these areas of their lives, both now and in the future. The curriculum for SPHE incorporates components on relationships and sexuality. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) includes the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and the development of attitudes, beliefs and values about relationships, sexual identity and intimacy (Department of Education and Science, 1996).

In the period prior to the launch of the 1999 SPHE curriculum, a number of initiatives had been taken within the primary school sector to address some emerging issues and challenges in the areas of health education and social and personal education. Programmes had been developed to tackle issues such as drug abuse, aspects of health education, the prevention of child abuse, and the need to provide relationships and sexuality education. Many of these initiatives had emerged in a haphazard way in response to particular social and educational concerns. One of the underlying purposes of the 1999 SPHE curriculum was to provide a systematic and coherent framework for Social, Personal and Health Education–a framework through which many of the most successful and important objectives of the earlier initiatives could be achieved within a co-ordinated primary curriculum.

1.2 The structure of the *Primary School Curriculum: Social, Personal and Health Education*

The SPHE curriculum provides the framework for teaching and learning. It is presented in two booklets: a curriculum statement and teacher guidelines. The curriculum statement outlines a range of learning objectives to be achieved by pupils at each class level as well as a variety of learning experiences in which pupils should engage. The teacher guidelines provide guidance on school and classroom planning and on appropriate methodologies and approaches in teaching SPHE, including exemplar lessons. The content of the SPHE curriculum is presented in three strands: *Myself; Myself and others;* and *Myself and the wider world.* The strands are further subdivided into ten strand units. Table 1.1 below shows the strands and the strand units of the SPHE curriculum.

Table 1.1: The strands and strand units of the SPHE curriculum

Strands	Strand units
Myself	Self-identity
	Taking care of my body
	Growing and changing
	Safety and protection
	Making decisions (3rd - 6th class)
Myself and others	Myself and my family
	My friends and other people
	Relating to others
Myself and the wider world	Developing citizenship
	Media education

1.3 Curriculum dissemination and support

The professional development support provided by the Department of Education and Science to teachers and schools to assist in the implementation of the SPHE curriculum was delivered by a very broad range of services. Partly, this reflected the wide variety of personal, social and health-related areas included in the curriculum. It also reflected the fact that several initiatives related to SPHE had existed prior to the publication of the SPHE curriculum in 1999.

The providers of professional support included the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) which had been established to support the introduction of the whole *Primary School Curriculum.* In addition support was provided by three curriculum support services whose establishment pre-dated the publication of the SPHE curriculum: the RSE Training Support Service for Schools, the Child Abuse Prevention Programme and the Walk Tall Programme Support Service, and the School Development Planning Support service (SDPS) which had also been in existence prior to the

introduction of the 1999 curriculum and which was charged with supporting the development of whole-school development planning.

The PCSP played a leading role in mediating the SPHE curriculum for teachers and in enabling them to implement it in their schools. It provided in-service seminars, school-based planning days and web-based resources. In addition, its local schools' advisors for SPHE (usually referred to as *cuiditheoirí*) assisted schools in a variety of ways, including visiting schools and advising teachers on the implementation of curriculum strands, providing useful sources of information in relation to resources and teaching materials, modelling teaching methodologies and sample lessons, and facilitating networking between schools. The SDPS provided in-school facilitation to support schools in reviewing their existing SPHE practices, in formulating whole-school plans for SPHE and in promoting improvements in specific aspects of teaching and learning. (Since September 2008, these two support services have been merged to form the Primary Professional Development Service).

The three pre-existing curriculum support services continued to offer a range of professional development opportunities to school staffs and various information seminars to others. The RSE Training Support Service for Schools provided advice, information and support for schools on all aspects of RSE, including information evenings for parents, policy-development information evenings and courses for teachers. All schools received training in the implementation of *Stay Safe*, a personal safety skills programme developed by the Child Abuse Prevention Programme. This initiative supported the implementation of personal safety education for pupils by providing in-service training for teachers and school managements as well as education opportunities for parents. School staffs had the option to attend information and training seminars in respect of the *Walk Tall* programme, a programme for the prevention of substance misuse. Support was also available to schools to develop and review their substance use policies. Following the publication of *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Health and Children, 1999 and 2004) schools were invited to nominate teachers to attend information and training seminars on the guidelines. At these seminars, the identification and reporting of child abuse were explained and the roles and responsibilities of teachers and school managements were clarified.

Table 1.2 summarises the programme of support provided to schools between 2001 and 2007 to facilitate the dissemination and implementation of the SPHE curriculum. Schools commenced the formal implementation of SPHE as a discrete curriculum area in September 2003. Following the formal implementation date, it was intended that the SPHE curriculum would be implemented in schools in a co-ordinated and comprehensive manner.

Table 1.2: Overview of SPHE in-service for schools

Year(s)	Support	Programme of support
1991–1992	In-service training	In-service training for whole staffs in the Eastern Health Board Area (now HSE) in the implementation of the Stay Safe programme
1992–1994	In-service training	In-service training for whole staffs in all remaining Health Board Areas (now HSE) in the implementation of the Stay Safe programme
1998–2000	In-service training	In-service training in the implementation of the Walk Tall Programme was offered to all schools
2001–2002	In-service training	SPHE Day 1 in-service for whole staffs One-day seminar regarding the Department's guidelines and procedures on Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children for the designated liaison person from each school staff
2002–2003	In-service training	SPHE Day 2 in-service for whole staffs One-day seminar regarding the Department's guidelines and procedures on Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children for a second member of staff on a pro rata basis according to the size of the school Half-day information seminar on developing a school substance use policy for a teacher and a parent from each school. Policy committee meetings were facilitated and a school visit arranged
2003–2004	Parent-teacher training seminar	Half-day information seminar on developing a school substance use policy for a teacher and a parent from each school. Policy committee meetings were facilitated and a school visit arranged
2003–2007	SPHE Cuiditheoirí Service	SPHE implementation commences in schools in September 2003 Support available to the school community through the PCSP web site
	In-service training	One-day seminar: Stay Safe training Three days: Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) One-day seminar (optional): Walk Tall Programme

1.4 Reviewing and evaluating curriculum implementation

SPHE in the Primary School is the third in a series of curriculum implementation evaluations by the Inspectorate. Previously, the Inspectorate evaluated the implementation of English, Mathematics and Visual Arts *(An Evaluation of Curriculum Implementation in Primary Schools: English, Mathematics and Visual Arts, 2005)* and Irish *(Irish in the Primary School, 2007).*

The present report is based on a thematic evaluation of SPHE in forty primary schools. Prior to this, the Department commissioned research into how schools were providing for various areas related to

SPHE. For example, in 2000, research on the implementation of RSE in primary schools was conducted (Department of Education and Science, 2000). This report, however, constitutes the first comprehensive study of the implementation of SPHE at primary level.

1.5 Report structure

Chapter 1 outlines the context and background to the evaluation undertaken by the Inspectorate. Chapter 2 describes the procedures and methodologies employed to gather the data in schools and it outlines the process of data analysis. Chapter 3 examines schools' planning and preparation practices for SPHE. Chapter 4 explores the issue of school and classroom climate and its contribution to the implementation of the SPHE curriculum. Chapter 5 reflects on the quality of curriculum implementation in SPHE through its analysis of teaching, learning and assessment. Chapters 6 presents the results from the parents' questionnaires, the pupils' questionnaires, and the pupils' focus group interviews. The report's main findings and recommendations with regard to the quality of implementation of SPHE are presented in Chapter 7.

Chapter 2

Evaluation Methodology

2.1 Scope of the evaluation

The evaluation of the implementation of SPHE was conducted in 2007 in forty primary schools, each with four or more mainstream class teachers. A total of 173 class settings were evaluated for SPHE provision. Interviews with principals and members of the teaching staff were conducted in each school. Written questionnaires were completed by 1013 senior pupils and focus group interviews were held in each school with a representative sample of these pupils. Their parents were also invited to complete written questionnaires and 902 completed questionnaires were returned in total.

The schools selected for this evaluation were chosen from those that had already been selected for whole-school evaluation in 2007 and to which letters of notification had already been issued. In each school, the evaluation was structured to ensure that all class levels were inspected. The cohort of schools included a variety of types and locations and involved single-sex, co-educational, junior, senior and fully vertical schools.

Table 2.1: The research base for the SPHE evaluation

Number of primary schools evaluated	40
Number of class settings evaluated	173
Number of interviews conducted with	
• boards of management	40
• principals	40
• focus groups of teachers	40
• focus groups of pupils	40
• post of responsibility holders with SPHE-related duties	19
Questionnaires (completed)	
• Senior pupils	1013
• Parents	902

2.2 Evaluation objectives

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the extent of the curriculum implementation of SPHE in Irish primary schools. It was intended that the evaluation would:

• identify variables that contribute to or impede effective teaching and learning in SPHE

• review the effectiveness of the delivery of RSE in schools

• recommend strategies that would enable schools to improve pupils' achievement in the curriculum area

• make recommendations aimed at supporting future curriculum design and implementation

• contribute to policy-making at the system level in respect of SPHE provision in schools.

2.3 Development of the evaluation model

The Inspectorate's evaluation model incorporated five main components of evaluation activity. These were:

• a thematic evaluation of the implementation of the SPHE curriculum in mainstream classes in forty schools

• discussions with school principals, class teachers and special-education teachers, teachers with specific responsibility for SPHE or an area related to SPHE in their schools, and a group of senior pupils in each school

• a review of whole-school planning documents, teachers' individual classroom planning and assessment, observation and examination of teaching and learning, and pupils' engagement and achievement

• the use of specific SPHE-based tasks with the pupils

• the administration of questionnaires to parents and senior pupils.

2.4 Conducting the evaluation

Three weeks in advance of the evaluation, an inspector contacted the school to inform the principal of the specific nature of this evaluation. The principal was informed that a whole-school evaluation of SPHE would be undertaken. A formal letter of notification was issued to the school. The principal was requested to complete a school information form in consultation with the staff.

One week in advance of the evaluation, the inspectors visited the school. They reviewed whole-school planning documents and the teachers' monthly progress records. The inspectors discussed SPHE provision in detail with the principal. This discussion provided an opportunity for principals to share their views on what was working well and what remained as a challenge in the implementation process for SPHE. A questionnaire on aspects of SPHE was distributed to senior-class pupils for completion by their parents. The inspectors visited classrooms and administrative and recreation areas. They held a pre-evaluation meeting with the teaching staff at which the rationale and procedures for the evaluation were outlined and any questions from teachers were answered.

The in-school evaluation phase was conducted over two to three days. The inspectors observed the class teachers teaching and examined the pupils' knowledge and understanding of SPHE. They reviewed a variety of documents including the teachers' individual classroom planning, the pupils' work in SPHE and records of the pupils' progress. Oral feedback was provided to individual teachers at the end of each class visit.

Following the class visits, the inspectors completed an evaluative commentary in relation to each aspect of practice reviewed. They applied a four-point quality continuum to each evaluation criterion to facilitate the collation and data analysis processes used in preparing this report. Table 2.2 shows the points used by the inspectors when describing practice for each evaluation criterion.

Table 2.2: The quality continuum used during the evaluation

Level	Approximate operational level	Additional terminology
4	Very good practice	Very good, significant strengths, very commendable
3	Competent practice	Good, strengths outweigh weaknesses
2	Scope for development	Scope for further development, fair, weaknesses outweigh strengths
1	Experiencing significant difficulty	Weak, poor

In each school, focus group discussions in respect of SPHE were conducted with a number of teachers selected randomly by the inspectors. Teaching and learning in SPHE were discussed as well as the school's strengths and those areas identified as requiring development by the teachers. An additional interview was conducted with any teacher with specific responsibility for the development

of SPHE or an area related to SPHE in the school. In every school, a focus group discussion was also conducted with a number of senior pupils, selected randomly by the inspectors. The inspectors administered a questionnaire to senior pupils that focused on matters related to SPHE.

Following the in-school evaluation phase, a post-evaluation meeting was held with the school staff. At the meeting, the inspectors acknowledged positive practice identified during the evaluation and outlined, where necessary, how the school might enhance its provision.

A school report on the quality of provision was issued to each school and published on the Department's web site. In accordance with the Inspectorate's publication procedures (Department of Education and Science, 2006a) the board of management of the school was given the opportunity to comment on the report in advance of publication. The evaluation report concerned the work of the school as a whole, affirming positive aspects of the school's work and, as appropriate, outlining areas for development. It was intended that the report's findings and recommendations would facilitate further self-evaluation and development planning in each of the forty schools.

2.5 The evaluation instruments

Various instruments were developed for this evaluation and are listed in the following table, table 2.3. The school information form provided an opportunity for the school to report on its self-evaluation of provision in SPHE. For their work in the schools, the inspectors used schedules to review whole-school planning and the teachers' planning, and to evaluate teaching and learning. In order to elicit in-depth perceptions in respect of SPHE, various discussion schedules were used with principals, teachers, post-holders and senior pupils. Questionnaires were administered to senior pupils and to the parents of the same pupils.

All schedules and questionnaires were returned to the Evaluation Support and Research Unit of the Inspectorate for analysis and these documents formed the basis for this report.

Table 2.3: The instruments used in the evaluation of SPHE

School factors	• School information form–completed by the principal in consultation with the staff
	• Schedule for discussion with the school principal
	• Schedule for discussion with a group of teachers
	• Schedule for discussion with any teacher or teachers who had special duties in SPHE or in an SPHE-related area
	• Schedule for discussion with a group of senior pupils
	• Questionnaire administered to senior pupils
	• Questionnaire administered to the parents of the senior pupils
Quality of whole-school planning	• Review schedule for school planning documents in SPHE and for planning in any areas related to SPHE
Quality of teaching and learning	• Schedules for classroom evaluation of teaching and learning in SPHE, including an examination of classroom planning and progress records
	• Discussion with pupils, an examination of their work, and the use of SPHE-specific tasks with pupils

2.6   School self-evaluation

The principals and the teachers of the forty schools participating in this review of curriculum implementation were specifically encouraged to engage in self-evaluation of their SPHE provision. In completing the school information form, they were requested to consider the effectiveness of the quality of teaching and learning in SPHE in their particular schools. They were asked to evaluate the quality of their teaching of the strands and strand units of the SPHE curriculum. They were also asked to evaluate the quality of their pupils' learning in SPHE.

2.7   Quantitative terms used in the report

A number of quantitative terms are used throughout the report. Table 2.4 provides a guide to the most frequently used terms.

Table 2.4: The quantitative terms used in the report

Quantitative terms used	Percentages
Almost all	More than 90%
Most	75-90%
Majority	50-74%
Fewer than half	25-49%
A small number	16-24%
A few	Up to 15%

Chapter 3

Planning and preparation for Social, Personal and Health Education

3.1 Introduction

Schools are obliged to provide a whole-school plan for each area of the curriculum, including SPHE. Ideally, the whole-school planning process for SPHE should involve teachers, management and parents working in collaboration. The school plan for SPHE should guide teachers in implementing SPHE in a coherent and consistent manner throughout the school. It should detail how the content of the SPHE curriculum is to be addressed both in specific SPHE lessons and through its integration with other areas of the curriculum. It should also state how SPHE is promoted through the creation of a positive school and classroom climate, taking account of the unique nature of each school. To ensure the successful implementation of the SPHE plan, its universal adoption by the teachers and school staff should be monitored on an on-going basis and the school community should review its impact and continuing merit at regular intervals.

3.2. Whole-school planning for SPHE

3.2.1 The whole-school plan for SPHE

The inspections showed that all the schools evaluated had a whole-school plan for SPHE. However, the quality of these plans varied. Just over half of them were judged to be of a good standard. Very good plans were in evidence in only a few schools. Fig. 3.1 below shows the inspectors' evaluation of the quality of the whole-school plan for SPHE and the associated planning process.

Where good planning for SPHE was found, the vision for SPHE, the content to be addressed and the teaching methodologies and strategies to be used were outlined in the planning documents. They detailed the approaches to assessment, provision for pupils with additional learning needs, the arrangements for guest speakers and the development of community links. The roles and responsibilities to be fulfilled in implementing the plan were included as well as the range of SPHE resources to be used to enhance learning and teaching. The majority of these plans also indicated how parents were to be involved in implementing SPHE. An example of an evaluative comment from one inspection report was as follows:

> Overall, the quality of the plan is commendable. The specific context of the school is clearly reflected in the document and the collaborative manner in which the plan was devised is described. Very beneficial reference is made between the curriculum objectives to be realised and the SPHE-related resources available in the school. Effective details of how SPHE principles will permeate all aspects of school life are provided as well as specific curriculum content detail. Clearly stated monitoring and reviewing procedures are outlined and both the management's and teachers' responsibility for this is documented.

Fig. 3.1:   An overview of the evaluation by inspectors of the quality of the whole-school plan for SPHE and the associated planning process, N=40 school plans
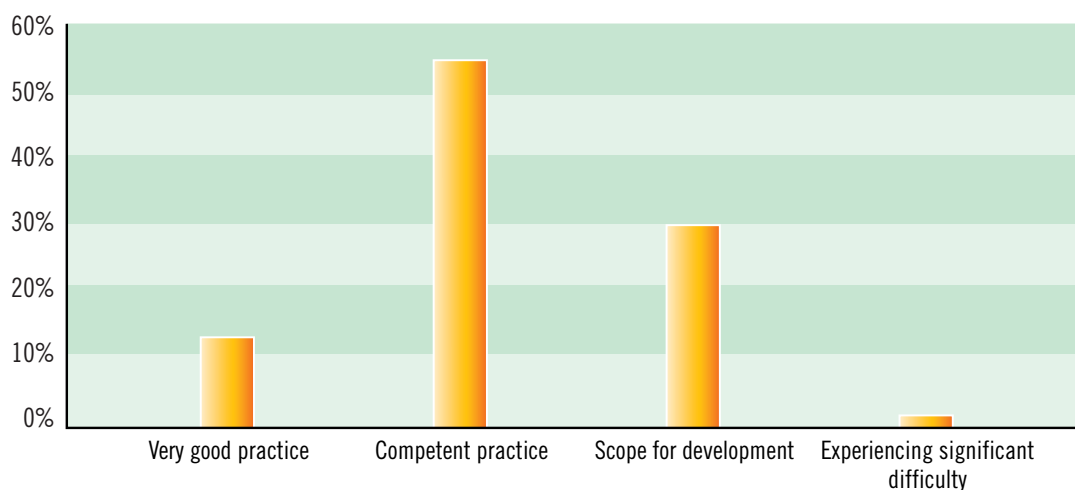
In most instances, schools had used the whole-school planning framework, as devised by the SDPS service and the PCSP service, to assist them in planning for SPHE. The use of the framework ensured that the range of issues relevant to the implementation of the SPHE curriculum was considered. As a result of using the planning framework, SPHE plans had many common features. Table 3.1 shows the frequency with which named aspects of provision for SPHE were addressed in the whole-school plans viewed by the inspectors.

Table 3.1: Aspects of provision for SPHE addressed in whole-school planning, N=40 school plans

Aspects of provision for SPHE addressed in whole-school planning	Number of schools
Vision	39
Approaches and methodologies	39
Resources	35
Assessment	34
Guest speakers	32
Community links	32
Roles and responsibilities	31
Provision for pupils with additional learning needs	31
Implementation planner	29
Parental involvement	28
Clear programmes of work for individual classes	24
Individual teachers' planning and reporting	16
Use of ICT	9

The inspectors found scope for development in planning in almost one-third of schools. Among the areas of weakness were the absence of clear programmes of work for individual class levels and guidelines to inform teachers' individual planning and reporting. These deficits had a negative

impact on continuity and progression for the pupils' learning in SPHE. There was obvious potential for ad hoc, uncoordinated themes to be delivered at each class level. Two issues for concern that arose in many school plans were the lack of planning for the use of information and communication technology (ICT) (75% of schools) and the lack of mention of parental involvement (30% of schools). One inspector reported that:

> The quality of the SPHE plan was poor in several aspects. The plan lacked specificity and had not been modified to suit the context of the school. There was mention of a programme of work but this was not appended. In the classroom, teachers were not certain about what aspects of each theme they should cover. In fact, the lesson content covered in first class was far more challenging than that evidenced in second class. There was no planning for how ICT might be used to enhance teaching and learning or for assessment in the subject.

3.2.2 The whole-school planning process

In almost all instances, the plans for SPHE were developed by the teaching staff. However, as the teachers reported, the intensity of their involvement in the planning process varied significantly across school settings. In some schools the teachers played a highly participative role in the plan's development while in other schools their involvement was limited to commenting on a prepared draft.

In the majority of schools, the plans prepared by the teachers were presented to and ratified by the board of management. In a few instances, the board took a more proactive role in the planning process contributing directly to the development of the plan. In 40% of schools, parents were involved in some aspects of the planning process for SPHE. The inspectors found that there was scope for development in involving parents in more than half of the schools. Only 5% of the schools sought the pupils' views during the planning process. Fig. 3.2 shows the frequency with which teachers, boards, parents and pupils were involved in the whole-school planning process.

Fig. 3.2: Representatives of the school community who participated in the whole-school planning process for SPHE, N=39 schools
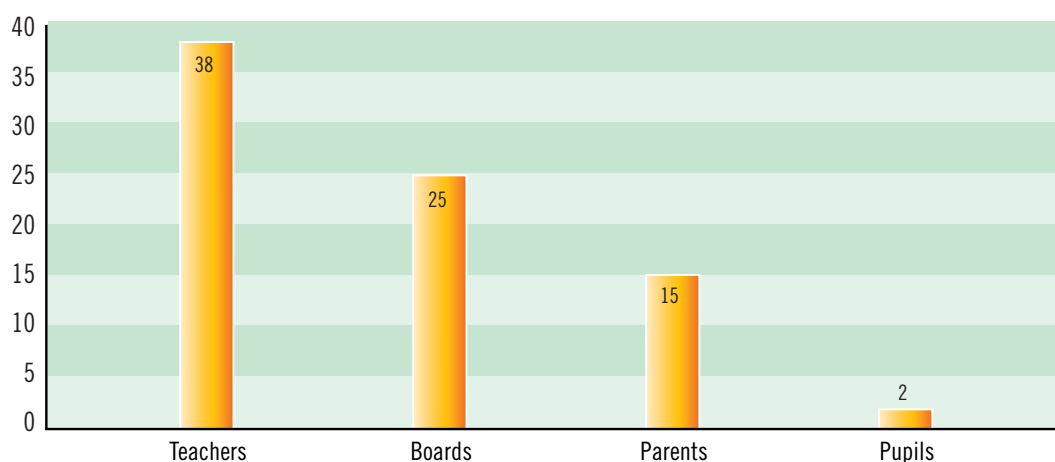
The inspectors found that nearly one-third of the plans for SPHE were ratified by the boards of management in the year coinciding with the SPHE evaluation. It is possible that the notification of a whole-school evaluation may have prompted many schools in the study to update their existing plans for SPHE or to put plans in place where they had not previously existed. Alternatively, draft plans may have been in place but had not been presented to the board for ratification prior to the evaluation's announcement.

The majority of SPHE plans included a reference to the importance of regular review of the implementation process and the continuing validity of the SPHE plan. Principals reported that the school-wide implementation of SPHE was regularly considered at staff meetings, with reported

annual or biennial reviews of SPHE occurring in 60% of schools. However, almost half the principals reported that systematic feedback was not given to, or garnered by, the curriculum co-ordinators with specific responsibility for SPHE. They also reported that the teachers' monthly progress records were not reviewed as a means of evaluating the implementation of SPHE. This finding highlights that important existing structures in schools were not used fully to assess the effectiveness of curriculum implementation in SPHE.

3.2.3 Whole-school planning for RSE

Relationships and Sexuality Education forms an integral part of the SPHE curriculum and should be taught in that context. Each school is expected to have a context-specific and relevant RSE policy in place. Schools are advised to work in close consultation and collaboration with parents in planning for and delivering RSE. A prime means of achieving this outcome is through the involvement of parents in the development and ongoing review of the school's RSE policy. Of the schools evaluated, three-quarters of them reported that they had a RSE committee at the time of the evaluation or had one in the past. In establishing such committees most schools opted for the approach recommended in the RSE guidelines and they directly involved representatives of parents, teachers and management in the policy-development process. One-third of such committees were functioning at the time of the evaluation and were involved in either preparing an RSE policy or in reviewing an existing policy.

The extent to which RSE training was accessed by committees when in situ varied very significantly from school to school. In some instances it was availed of by all members, while in others it was by the teacher members only. In nearly half the schools evaluated no training of any kind had been accessed. Where RSE committees continued to operate, many had established clear priorities for future development. They included the development of an RSE policy where one had not previously existed as well as the implementation of all elements of the RSE programme, in particular the more sensitive aspects. Longer-established committees had identified approaches to teaching sexuality education and the greater involvement of parents in the implementation of RSE as areas for development.

The inspectors found that in the majority of schools, whole-school planning for RSE was of a competent standard, with very good planning being in evidence in 10% of the schools. Where the inspectors found a good standard of planning they reported in particular on the collaborative involvement of teachers, management and parents in the planning and implementation processes. They also found detailed and informative policy documents which informed practice at individual classroom level. One inspector reported that:

> RSE planning is dealt with very effectively as an integral part of the SPHE plan. The programme content is laid out very clearly and concise details of the more sensitive lessons to be addressed are provided in an easy-to-understand manner. The resources and support materials available in the school are identified as well as an action plan for resourcing further relevant materials. Careful consideration was given to addressing teachers' and parents' concerns in implementing the RSE plan and frequently asked questions are addressed in the appendix to the document.

However in one third of the schools the inspectors found that the RSE policies had scope for development, with poorly devised policies reported in a further 8% of schools. In particular, inspection evidence showed the absence of a clear programme of content to be implemented at each class level which resulted in the uncoordinated or partial implementation of RSE throughout the schools in question. The inspections also found that certain aspects of the strand units of *Taking Care of My Body* and *Growing and Changing* were not being addressed by schools at all. In particular, these schools were found not to teach the anatomical names of male and female body parts or how the body parts develop. Learning in the area of sexuality, birth and new life was often only partially implemented and in some schools restricted to inputs from external speakers to senior pupils. The following evaluative comment from an inspector is illustrative of poorer practice:

> No formal RSE plan has been devised to date and there is no evidence of any substantive efforts to convene a representative working group to facilitate its development. Aspects of RSE are currently addressed on an ad-hoc basis, with the more sensitive aspects of RSE addressed with sixth-class pupils through the engagement of external personnel only. The principal confirmed that the programme content for the pupils was both decided upon and delivered by external personnel without input by or precise knowledge of the class teachers. He reported that teachers do not sit in on the delivery of the programme.

3.2.4 Communicating the whole-school plan for SPHE

In almost half the schools evaluated, the teachers were not provided with a personal copy of the whole-school plan for SPHE. They had access to a centrally located copy and the reasons given for not providing personal copies to teachers varied from thinking that it was not necessary to not having gotten around to providing it yet. In over three-quarters of the schools parents had access to a centrally located copy of the whole-school plan for SPHE, while 30% of the schools had circulated an abbreviated copy of the plan to all families. Only one school had placed a copy of the plan on its school web site.

3.2.5 The development of organisational policies related to SPHE

A wide range of organisational policies to support the implementation of the SPHE curriculum was in evidence in all the schools evaluated. All schools had devised a child protection policy. Almost all had used *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Health and Children, 1999 and 2004) and *Child Protection: Guidelines and Procedures* (Department of Education and Science, 2001) to inform their policy development, with the name of the designated liaison person being formally recorded in the policy. In the course of interviews with teachers, most conveyed an understanding of their school's child protection procedures and a capacity to act appropriately in the event of a suspicion or disclosure of abuse. Almost three-quarters of schools had procedures in place to inform new staff about their child protection policy.

Almost all schools had devised codes of behaviour, anti-bullying policies and health and safety statements. Most schools had policies to promote healthy eating, to address substance use matters and to outline approaches to the supervision of pupils. Policy statements to promote pupil attendance, care of the environment, home-school links and gender equality were in evidence in the majority of schools. Half the schools evaluated had written procedures to outline the management of any critical incidents, with just over one-quarter of them having devised policies on intercultural education.

3.3 Teachers' classroom planning

3.3.1 Classroom planning for SPHE

The inspectors found that most teachers were planning competently for SPHE at the classroom level with very good practice in evidence in just over one-third of instances. Fig. 3.3 below shows the inspectors' assessment of the quality of the teachers' individual planning for SPHE.

Fig. 3.3:   The inspectors' assessment of the quality of teachers' individual planning for SPHE, N=163 inspector comments
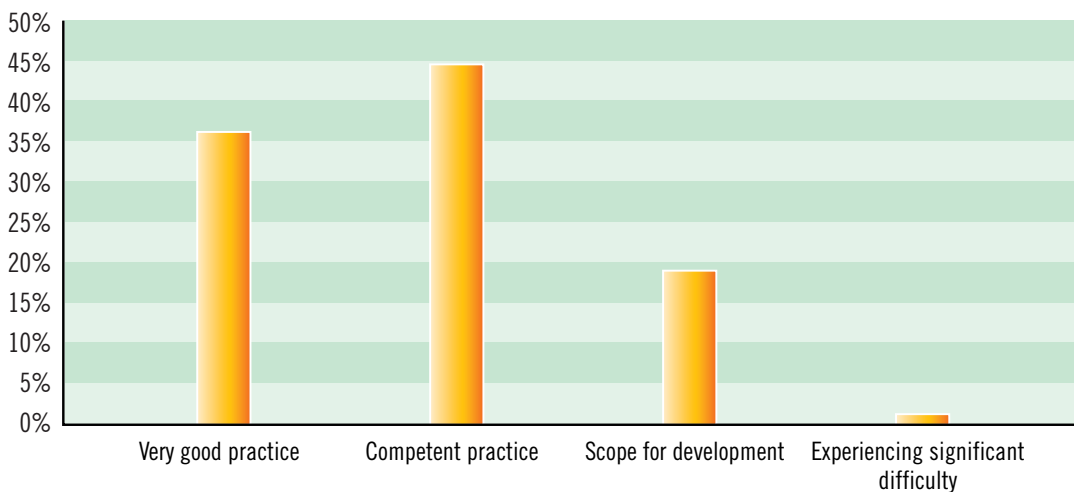
There were a number of common trends present in good classroom planning. This planning related clearly to the principles and objectives of the SPHE curriculum and to the school's own plan for SPHE. The teacher had planned for a broad and balanced programme of work in which all strands and strand units were addressed. The following statement from an inspection report describes very good practice as found in one particular class setting:

> This teacher provides comprehensive long-term and short-term planning for SPHE. There is evidence that she has reflected on the whole-school aims and objectives for teaching SPHE as laid out in the school plan and has adapted these to suit her own classroom context. All strands are comprehensively covered.

In 20% of the classrooms visited the teachers' planning displayed scope for development. In these instances the inspectors noted an over-emphasis on the strands *Myself* and *Myself and Others* with little development of the strand *Myself and the Wider World*. There was often insufficient use of the curriculum objectives as a focus for planning. The inspectors also found instances of poor collaboration between teachers and consequently little development and progression in lessons taught at each class level.

In interviews with teachers, almost all reported that they referred to the SPHE curriculum objectives for their class when engaging in planning for SPHE. Most also confirmed that they accessed both the school plan and the PCSP and SDPS materials when undertaking planning. However, inspection evidence was less positive in this regard. While most teachers were found to base their planning on the specific curriculum objectives for their allocated class, a significant minority of 20% of the teachers failed to ensure an adequate reflection of the breadth and balance of the SPHE curriculum in their planning.

3.3.2 Teachers' individual planning for RSE

Two-thirds of the teachers planned to a competent or very good standard for teaching and learning in RSE. Their annual programmes of work were based on the whole-school SPHE plan and were very closely aligned with their school's RSE policy. The learning objectives to be achieved at individual class levels were clearly delineated, including objectives addressing the more sensitive areas of RSE. In their planning, many teachers clearly indicated at what points in the year specific elements of the RSE programme would be addressed and the manner in which pupils' existing knowledge of these issues would be built upon.

The inspectors found classroom planning to be unsatisfactory in one-third of instances. Many of the teachers' planning documents in these instances did not outline the body of content to be taught. Some showed only an intention to implement the RSE programme partially and most of the teachers did not address the more sensitive areas of learning at all. This situation was exacerbated in a few schools due to the absence of a whole-school RSE policy to guide classroom planning. Fig. 3.4 shows the inspectors' assessment of the quality of teachers' individual planning for RSE.

Fig. 3.4:   The inspectors' assessment of the quality of teachers' classroom planning for RSE, N=156 inspector comments
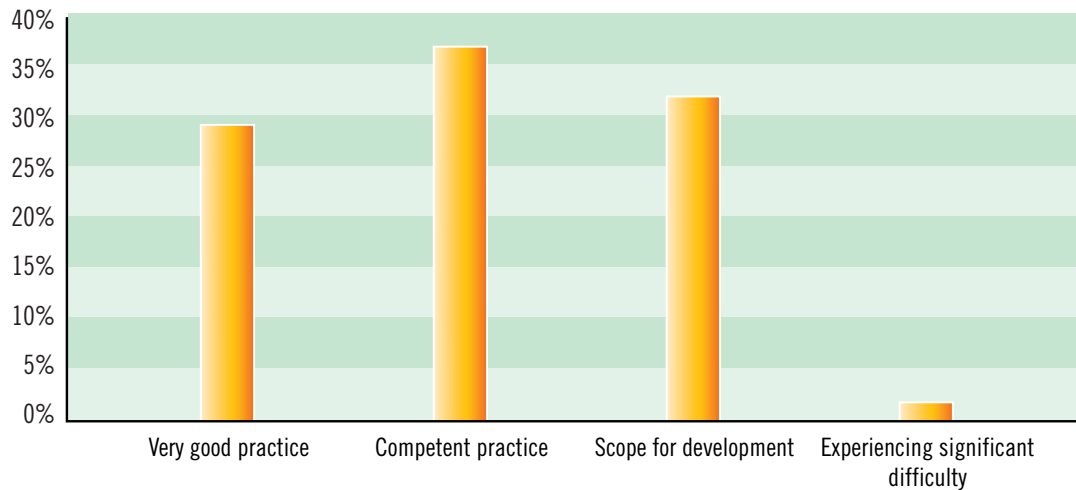
3.4 Integration of SPHE with other subjects

The inspectors found that a majority of the teachers regularly planned for the integration of SPHE with other subjects in a cross-curricular manner as is recommended in the SPHE curriculum. Where the inspectors identified very good practice, there was clear planning for integration both in long-term and short-term planning and appropriate themes were identified to facilitate integrated teaching and learning. The following is a finding by one inspector:

> This teacher plans effectively for learning through integration in her long-term and short-term planning. Excellent use is made of web diagrams to facilitate regular planning for integration.

In one-quarter of instances, teachers' use of an integrated approach was within the "scope for development" range. In such contexts the inspectors found a lack of regular, planned integration of SPHE and a need to identify content that could be addressed through integration. Where integration occurred it was by chance, as opposed to being properly planned. As one inspector commented:

> While some reference is made to integration, the particulars of integration opportunities are not developed to any extent.

In interviews, teachers stated that they integrated SPHE with other subjects regularly. English, Geography, and Visual Arts were the most likely subjects to be integrated with SPHE, closely followed by Science, History, and Physical Education. However, the inspectors did not find substantial evidence of integration in the teachers' planning documents. It would appear that the teachers perceived integration as being an informal rather than a planned activity. Fig. 3.5 displays the inspectors' findings of the extent to which learning in SPHE was regularly integrated with other areas of the curriculum.

Fig. 3.5:   The extent to which learning in SPHE is regularly integrated with other areas of
            the curriculum, N=163 inspector comments
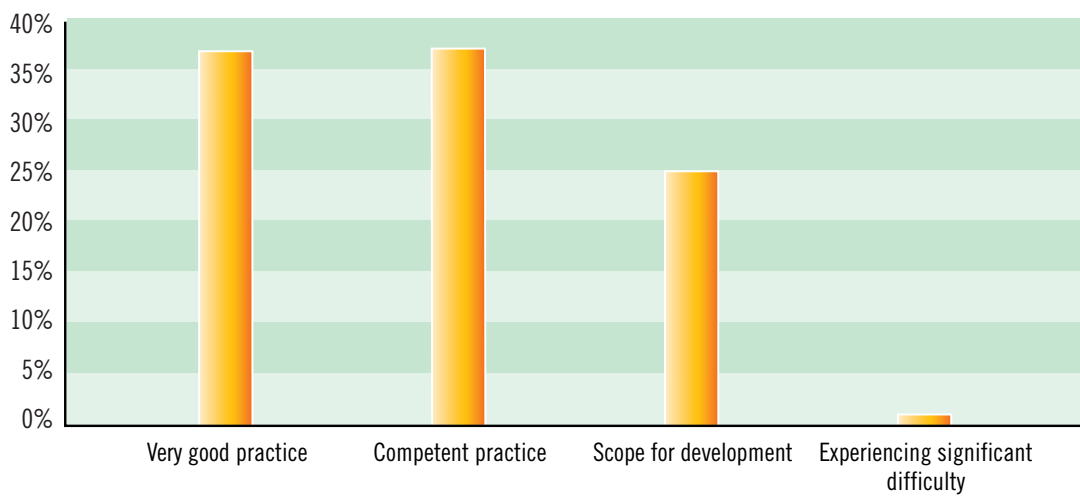
3.5 Monthly progress records

As in all areas of the curriculum, class teachers are required to record the progress made in teaching and learning in SPHE at the end of each month. An overview of the inspectors' findings with regard to the breadth and balance of curriculum implementation in SPHE as evidenced in the teachers' monthly progress records is presented in fig. 3.6.

Fig. 3.6: The inspectors' assessment of the breadth and balance of the SPHE programme being implemented as evidenced in monthly progress records, N=171 inspector comments
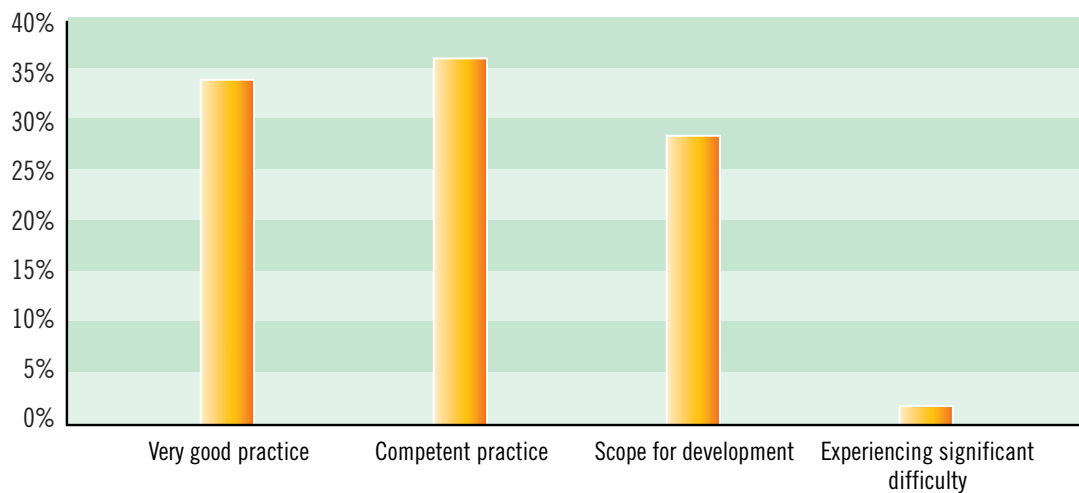
The inspectors found that the majority of monthly records indicated that a broad and balanced SPHE programme was implemented. In instances where there was very good practice the record provided a clear overview of both the SPHE content completed and the learning achieved by the pupils.

However, in almost one-third of instances scope for development was found with regard to the breadth of the SPHE programme. In particular, the inspectors found that learning in the *Myself and the Wider World* strand was irregular and limited. This inspector's comment exemplifies situations where teachers' planning and programme provision lacked appropriate breadth and balance:

> There is a great need to ensure that a balance is maintained across all the SPHE strands. The strand *Myself and the Wider World* should be planned for and implemented earlier in the school year and not timetabled in its totality for the final term as this could mean that it might not be attended. In fact, in discussing the matter with the teacher, this was found to be the case in the past two years.

In a small number of instances, the inspectors found that the programme coverage for SPHE was very limited and far less than what could be properly covered over a year's teaching if it was taught consistently. The clarity of the progress records maintained was poor in some instances and was uninformative and vague as to what exactly the teacher was covering. Such monthly progress

records could offer little to monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of the SPHE curriculum at either individual classroom or whole-school levels.

3.6   Time allocation for SPHE

The introductory volume to the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b) recommends a discrete, or specific, allocation of thirty minutes per week or one hour per fortnight for SPHE. In reviewing classroom timetables, the inspectors found that in almost all class settings the recommended time for SPHE was allocated. A small number of teachers reported blocking time to explore themes related to SPHE through other areas of the curriculum, while others reported that they allocated a portion of discretionary time to SPHE. One teacher commented:

> We teach it officially for thirty minutes per week but we dedicate much more than that to it. SPHE is a very wide subject and it permeates everything in our school. It is intrinsic to our daily routines and to the teaching of Religion, SESE and PE.

However in 8% of classrooms the inspectors found that discrete teaching in SPHE was occurring on a very irregular basis. The main explanation given by such teachers for not attending to SPHE on a regular basis was the time pressure they felt in coping with all areas of the primary curriculum.

3.7   The quality of classroom organisation and support for curriculum implementation

3.7.1 The provision of a rich environment for SPHE

As the creation of a rich environment for SPHE is important in the promotion of pupils' learning, the inspectors reviewed the extent to which the classroom environment contributed to effective teaching and learning in SPHE. They found that most teachers arranged pupils' seating in a grouped fashion which facilitated their involvement in group-based work. However, more traditional seating arrangements, for example where pupils were seated in rows, persisted in one in five classrooms. This layout was found to militate significantly against pupils' participation in group-based learning, an approach that is particularly relevant in SPHE.

The inspectors also examined displays of specific SPHE illustrative materials and pupil-generated work on display in classrooms and school corridors. They found that while most settings were SPHE rich in nature, fewer than half of the classrooms visited were exceptionally so. In most classrooms visited, the rules of the classroom were clearly on display and in the majority of instances they had been devised collaboratively and agreed with the pupils. The following is a comment from an inspector where very good practice was observed:

> This classroom presents as an extremely attractive and SPHE-rich environment. There is an abundance of pupils' work on display. The pupils' efforts are praised appropriately and every opportunity is taken to celebrate their successes however small. There are many "I can . . ." and " Now, look what I have learnt . . ." displays on the classroom walls.

In 20% of the classrooms, there was scope for development with regard to the richness of the classroom as an SPHE environment. Fig. 3.7 shows the inspectors' assessment of the quality of the richness of the SPHE environment in classrooms.

Fig.3.7:   The inspectors' assessment of the quality of the richness of the SPHE environment in classrooms, N=163 inspector comments
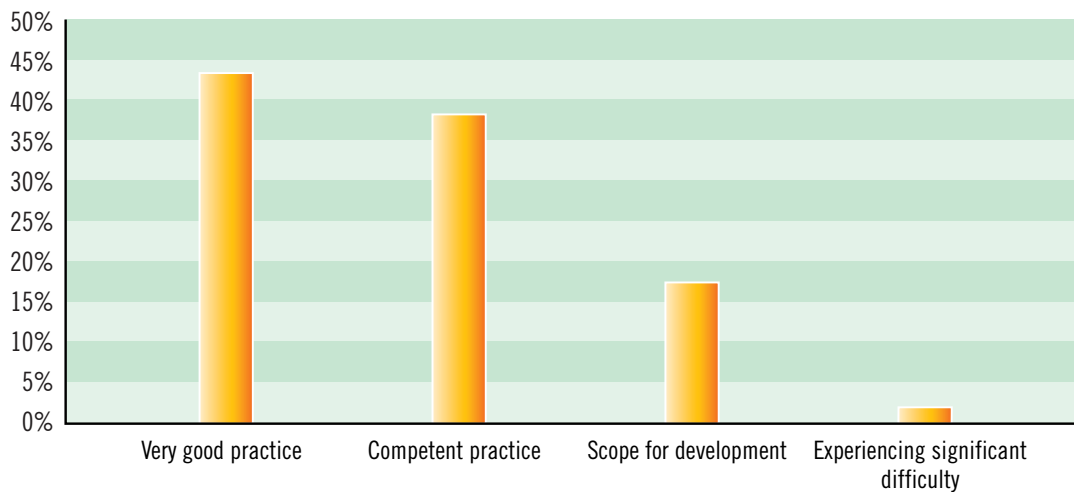
Almost all classrooms were well presented and were bright, clean and attractive. Fig. 3.8 below shows the inspectors' assessment of this area in the classrooms visited. The following is an example of an inspector's comment about very good classroom conditions:

> The classroom presents suitably as a teaching and learning environment. It is very clean, bright, structured and stimulating. The pupils have access to hot water and adequate hygiene facilities. The teacher has taught very good and safe classroom routines.

In a small number of instances, the inspectors reported that the classrooms were not fully suitable due to restrictions in classroom size or the non-replacement of bench desks or the non-availability of hot water for hand-washing. However, even where classroom facilities in terms of size or furniture were less than ideal, the inspectors commended some teachers for providing a stimulating learning environment and inculcating positive habits in their pupils. As one inspector commented:

> The classroom is located in an older section of the school and is not ideal in terms of structure or size. However, despite these limitations, the teacher provides a bright, clean and interesting learning environment. She encourages her pupils to show care and respect for their environment and belongings and the learning atmosphere is very positive.

Fig.3.8:   Inspectors' assessment of the brightness, cleanliness and attractiveness of classrooms
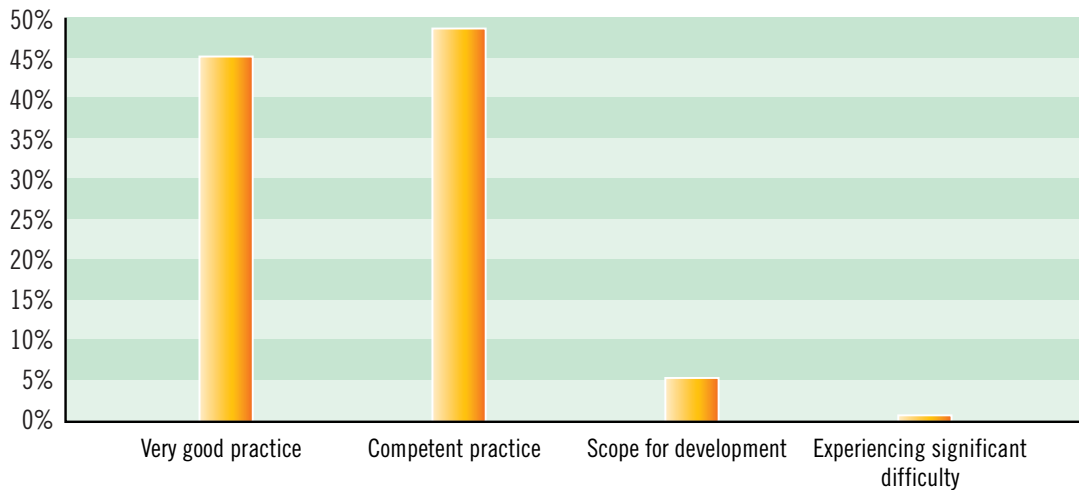
3.7.2 The availability and use of resources

Teachers were asked during interviews about the resources that they used most regularly in delivering the SPHE curriculum in their own classes. These included *Walk Tall: An SPHE Programme for the Prevention of Substance Misuse* (Department of Education and Science, 1999c), *Relationships and Sexuality Education* (Department of Education and Science, 2000) and *Stay Safe* (CAPP, 1997). Widespread use of a range of programmes to promote road, water and farm safety was also reported, as was the use of circle-time materials. Teachers reported less frequent use of posters, DVDs and ICT, with a few teachers expressing the view that insufficient resources of this type were available for use in schools.

The inspectors reviewed the extent to which appropriate learning resources for SPHE were available and effectively used in classrooms. The inspectors were satisfied with the range and use of SPHE resources in most classrooms. They praised the efforts made by teachers to review commercially-produced resources in order to select the best materials for their classes. They also commended the wide variety of resources collated by teachers from multiple sources, including a range of teacher-generated materials. The following was reported by an inspector where SPHE resources were being used effectively:

> Very significant thought and planning is given by this teacher to the breadth of resources to be employed to aid pupils' understanding in SPHE and the manner in which they are to be used to greatest effect.

Fig. 3.9: Inspectors' assessment of the availability and effective use of learning resources for SPHE, N=162 inspector comments
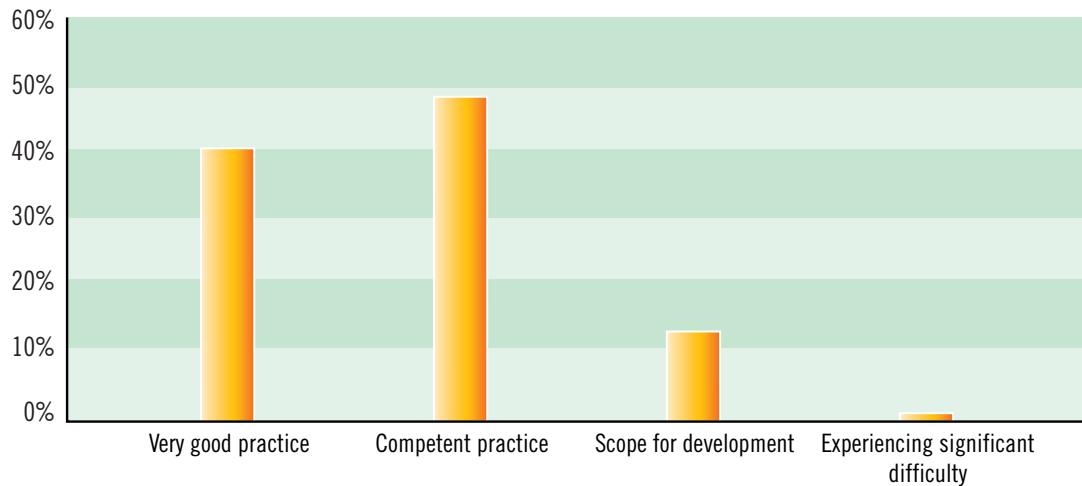
In a small number of instances, the inspectors found that while there was a good range of SPHE resources available in the school, the teachers did not draw on them appropriately. They also identified the need to increase the range of materials specifically for SPHE that was available in some schools, in particular the provision of appropriate visual resources.

While the inspectors found widespread good use of commercially-produced SPHE resources, they also found instances where this type of resource was used less effectively in schools and where teachers taught to the resource rather than basing their teaching more specifically on the curriculum objectives for their class grouping. *Making the Links* (Department of Education and Science, 2006), a resource issued to schools by the Department's support services, received favourable comment from teachers. They stated that it helped to strengthen and correctly position the link between curriculum content and the use of commercially-produced resource packs. The patterns of use by teachers of commercially-produced materials showed that fewer resources were easily available to them to support teaching in the areas of developing citizenship and media education, two components of the *Myself and the Wider World* strand. The inspections showed that this strand was addressed less regularly and thoroughly by teachers than the strands of *Myself* and *Myself and Others*. It would appear that the poorer implementation of the *Myself and the Wider World* strand is due in some measure to the lesser availability of relevant resources and teachers' dependence on the provision of such materials to aid curriculum implementation.

3.7.3 Engaging external speakers

Almost 60% of principals reported that their schools engaged external speakers and agencies to support the implementation of the SPHE curriculum. The range of personnel working directly with pupils during school time was very varied. The Gardaí and the local fire service featured prominently. Many principals reported engaging external personnel to assist in the implementation of the more

sensitive aspects of the RSE programme, most particularly with senior classes. Principals and teachers reported that the most commonly accessed RSE-related external supports were the Catholic Marriage Care Service (ACCORD), local nursing personnel and other people in the locality who had an established record of delivering RSE talks to senior pupils.

The principals reported that external speakers were selected following careful consideration. This included an assessment of the pupils' needs, consideration of the matter by the teachers–in some instances the board of management and parents' association were consulted–and taking into account the recommendations from neighbouring schools who used the supports previously. Schools that were participating in the Department's *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: DEIS* (Department of Education and Science, 2005) and other such initiatives were found to have ready access to a greater range of external speakers.

The majority of principals stated that the content delivered by the external speakers was agreed in advance and was in line with the content of the SPHE curriculum. They stated that the effectiveness of such interventions by external speakers was assessed through feedback from the teachers and pupils as well as direct monitoring by the principal in some instances. The teachers stated that they were very positive about the use of external agencies. One teacher commented:

> It is of great benefit to pupils when specialists or external people speak to them from the "real world". It provides a good link with the local community and the pupils' own environment.

The guidelines that accompany the SPHE curriculum make clear that schools should examine a number of questions when considering whether or not to invite speakers to the school to assist in the delivery of SPHE. The guidelines suggest, for example, that schools should identify the specific topics where an outside contribution is most useful and that the visit should be in accordance with the school plan. However, this evaluation showed that there were instances where the school adapted its programme to suit the availability of a speaker rather than sourcing a speaker whose contribution was intrinsic to the school's pre-planned programme. In some instances, the speakers were given considerable latitude in what they delivered, they did not get a comprehensive briefing from the school and their engagement with the pupils took place in the absence of the class teacher. While invited speakers can play a useful role in delivering the curriculum and may be used for a period to help teachers gain skills in certain areas, responsibility for the delivery of the curriculum remains with the school and its staff. Moreover, a school's need to engage external speakers should diminish as the teachers' own confidence increases.

3.8 Curriculum co-ordination for SPHE

The appointment of teachers to posts of responsibility provides opportunities for them to assume greater responsibility for curriculum development and instructional leadership in their schools. Of the forty schools evaluated, just over half of them reported having allocated specific responsibility

for the co-ordination of SPHE to a designated teacher who held a post of responsibility. In discussion with these teachers it was noted that a small number of them had been allocated their specific SPHE responsibilities shortly prior to the evaluation commencing. The primary duties attached to such post-holders were the co-ordination of the implementation and the review of the SPHE plan, liaising directly with teachers on matters related to SPHE, and the purchase and management of relevant resources. Other responsibilities included liaising with external agencies and speakers, and providing guidance for teachers on training and resources related to SPHE.

The inspectors found that the curriculum co-ordinators contributed positively to the implementation of SPHE in their schools, but they also concluded that the fulfilment of certain aspects of their role required significant development. In particular they recommended that curriculum co-ordinators would take a much more proactive role in the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of curriculum implementation through the use of formal review mechanisms. These would include the regular review of monthly progress reports to ensure that a broad and balanced programme was being implemented and providing regular opportunities to get feedback on implementation from teachers, pupils, parents and management. This in turn would allow for any necessary restructuring of programme implementation to ensure that SPHE was being implemented in a co-ordinated and comprehensive manner throughout the school.

A further 20% of schools confirmed that tasks related to SPHE were being completed by teachers with posts of responsibility, namely in the areas of health and safety, An Taisce's *Green-Schools'* initiative, and general environmental awareness and care initiatives. In a number of schools the principals reported taking direct responsibility for the co-ordination of SPHE activities.

3.9 Staff professional development in SPHE

As outlined in chapter 1, SPHE was formally introduced as a new and discrete curriculum area in 2003. A significant level of nationally co-ordinated in-service for teachers was provided to support its implementation. In addition, individual schools were provided with opportunities to access tailored professional development for their staffs from a variety of national support services, in response to the identified needs of their schools.

In the course of interviews with principals almost two-thirds of them reported that they had organised in-school or external SPHE training, or both, for their staff within the last five years. The content of the training varied significantly across school contexts. Areas that featured particularly prominently were RSE, *Stay Safe*, substance use, child protection, and planning for SPHE. A majority of the principals expressed a preference for the provision of training on an in-school basis. As one principal reported:

> We had the opportunity to self-evaluate and focus on the areas that needed attention in our particular school. The staff was able to engage with trainers on issues that were particularly related to our school and its needs.

Three-quarters of principals reported satisfaction with the level of support and guidance offered to them and their staffs to implement the SPHE curriculum, with one-quarter of principals reporting dissatisfaction. Where concerns were raised they centred on the time lapse that existed between the training received by school staffs and the school's subsequent implementation of the programme. The principals also expressed concern about the perceived lack of training received by recently graduated and appointed teachers during their undergraduate and postgraduate courses of education both in Ireland and in other jurisdictions. Difficulties being experienced by schools in addressing the breadth of the SPHE programme were also a cause of anxiety to principals, as was the implementation of the more sensitive aspects of the RSE programme. In response to such concerns some schools were proactive in sourcing trainers to facilitate the professional development of their own staff in response to the identified needs of their school. The principals expressed a general consensus regarding the need for ongoing support and guidance in the implementation of SPHE.

In the course of interviews with teachers, most of them reported that they had attended in-career development courses with an SPHE focus outside of those provided by the national support services for all primary schools. The nature of the courses varied widely, with evening and summer courses provided by local education centres featuring prominently. Almost all teachers stated that they took opportunities to reflect on their own practice in relation to teaching in SPHE and in turn used this reflection to further develop their practice. Such reflection manifested itself in a variety of formats from personal reflection on individual lessons taught, to reflection that influenced the planning of future lessons in SPHE to collaborative reflection with colleagues and professional development facilitators at a whole-school level.

3.10 Summary

Planning
- All the schools evaluated had devised a whole-school plan to guide the implementation of the SPHE curriculum. The quality of whole-school planning was good in the majority of schools.
- The inspectors identified scope for development in the quality of whole-school planning for SPHE in almost one-third of schools. The main area of concern in such schools was the absence of clear programmes of work for individual class levels, which in turn had a negative impact on ensuring continuity and progression in implementation from class to class.
- The level of involvement of teachers, pupils, school management and parents in the planning process varied significantly across school settings, as did the manner in which the content of completed plans was communicated to the education partners.
- The inspectors found unsatisfactory practice with regard to the development of RSE policies in one-third of the schools evaluated. In such schools, a review of the programmes of content confirmed that RSE was being implemented partially, with the more sensitive areas of the programme not being addressed.
- Most teachers displayed competent practice in planning for the implementation of SPHE at individual classroom level. However, in a small number of classrooms, teachers displayed an insufficient use of the curriculum objectives in their planning and they had not afforded adequate attention to content from the *Myself and the Wider World* strand. In the case of RSE, scope for development was identified in the classroom planning of one-third of the teachers.

Integrated provision

- A majority of the teachers integrated teaching and learning in SPHE regularly with other areas of curriculum. However, despite the fact that the teaching of SPHE through the use of cross-curricular opportunities is one of the three main recommended approaches, it was found to occur in an unplanned and uncoordinated manner in one-quarter of classrooms.

- In almost all classes the recommended teaching time for SPHE was allocated. Informative monthly progress records detailing the SPHE content delivered were maintained by a majority of the teachers.

- Where scope for development in the maintenance of progress records was identified, the inspectors expressed concerns regarding the lack of breadth in programme implementation and the usefulness of the records in reviewing programme implementation at a whole-school level.

SPHE environment

- The inspectors found that a rich environment for SPHE was successfully created in most classrooms and was exemplified in the arrangement of pupils to facilitate group-based learning and the displays of specific SPHE illustrative materials and pupils' work.

- Almost all classrooms were well presented and were bright, clean and attractive. However, in 20% of classrooms there was little material on display that was specific to SPHE.

- In most classrooms visited, the inspectors expressed satisfaction with the range of SPHE resources available and the manner in which they were used to support pupils' learning. Where the inspectors found scope for development, they identified the need for schools to make available an increasing range of resources. They also emphasised the need for teachers to judiciously use such resources to ensure the effective implementation of curriculum content.

- A majority of schools reported drawing on a variety of external speakers to aid in the implementation of the SPHE curriculum, in particular in addressing the more sensitive aspects of the RSE programme in senior classes. Such external assistance should be used judiciously and schools should be aware that responsibility for the content and delivery of the curriculum remains the responsibility of the school and its staff.

Co-ordinating the implementation of SPHE

- To support the implementation of the SPHE curriculum, just over half the schools evaluated had allocated specific responsibility for the co-ordination of SPHE to a designated teacher who held a post of responsibility. The inspectors found that the work of these teachers contributed positively to curriculum implementation. However, they recommended a significant strengthening of their role in the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of curriculum implementation to ensure that SPHE was being implemented in a co-ordinated and comprehensive manner throughout the school.

- A majority of schools and teachers reported availing of a variety of professional development opportunities to support the implementation of SPHE in their schools. A preference for the provision of training on an in-school basis was expressed as it was felt it responded more effectively to the particular needs and circumstances of the school.

- A small number of principals expressed dissatisfaction with the level of support and guidance offered to them and to their staffs. In some instances this was due to the schools' later implementation of the SPHE programme following participation in training. Concern was also expressed about the level of training specifically for SPHE that was provided in the colleges of education and its consequences for newly appointed teachers and their schools.

Chapter 4

The cultivation of a positive school and classroom climate

4.1 Introduction

The SPHE curriculum recommends that SPHE be implemented using a combination of approaches. Central to such approaches is the creation of a positive school and classroom climate. A positive school and classroom climate is one in which individuals are valued, cared for and respected. This chapter examines the manner in which the evaluated schools cultivated a positive school and classroom climate that fostered the health and well-being of all members of the school community.

4.2 The cultivation of a positive school and classroom climate

4.2.1 The views of principals and teachers

Principals and teachers were asked to comment on the successful strategies they used to promote a positive school and classroom climate. Most stressed the importance of promoting positive relationships between teachers and pupils in their schools. They discussed the deliberate steps taken to encourage and affirm pupils and to promote mutual respect. As one principal commented:

> We have worked hard to ensure the children are happy. We are kind towards them and regularly affirm them. Neither pupils nor teachers raise their voices in the classroom. The pupils know that the teachers respect them. We are also an open school, open to new ideas that may help us further in this regard.

The principals and teachers detailed a wide range of school initiatives to promote pupils' direct involvement in the life of the school. Such activities included co-curricular and extracurricular activities, involvement in committees for An Taisce's *Green-Schools* initiative and school assemblies. Most principals and teachers stated that they adopted a positive approach to the implementation of their code of behaviour and that the pupils' good behaviour was regularly acknowledged, for example by "pupil of the week" awards. They also discussed their promotion of healthy eating practices and their ongoing efforts to maintain or upgrade the physical environment of the school. Some of the principals reported that the pupil population had changed greatly in terms of ethnicity in recent times. They found that most aspects of this change were positive but they were still coming to terms with the rate of that change.

4.2.2 The views of parents

An analysis of the parents' questionnaires showed that the parents were strongly supportive of the efforts of the schools and the teachers to promote a positive school and classroom climate for their children. Table 4.1 below shows parents' responses to questions about their child's social and personal development at school.

Table 4.1: Parents' views on their child's social and personal development at school

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child has had the benefit of supportive relationships with the adults in his/her school	33.9%	51.6%	6.6%	1.0%	6.9%
School helps to build my child's self-esteem and self-confidence	42.4%	51.3%	3.7%	1.1%	1.5%
My child has friends at school	61.9%	35.3%	1.9%	0.5%	0.4%
At school, my child is encouraged to express opinions and listen to the views of others	38.5%	53.6%	3.8%	0.3%	3.8%
The school encourages all children to behave well	60.5%	36.7%	1.5%	0.3%	1.0%
The school encourages all children to be respectful of others	54.2%	42.2%	1.9%	0.6%	1.1%
The school encourages all children to take responsibility for their actions	51.8%	43.3%	2.6%	0.2%	2.1%
The school is a safe environment where my child can work and play	49.3%	45.3%	3.1%	1.1%	1.2%

Most parents considered that their child had the benefit of supportive relationships with the adults in their school. Almost all parents agreed that school helped to build their child's self-esteem and self-confidence, and that their child had friends at school. They indicated that their child was encouraged to express their opinions and to listen to the views of others. Almost all parents were of the view that pupils were encouraged to behave well, to be respectful to others and to take responsibility for their actions. Taking the opportunity to include a comment, one parent wrote:

> We are very happy with the school. The teachers are devoted to doing a good job, not only teaching the basics but developing and inspiring the young. In our experience all classes provide opportunities where pupils express opinions and learn to listen to the views of others. On any occasion I have been in the school, I have been taken aback by the kindness, gentle and patient care given to pupils by numerous members of staff. We are really lucky to have this.

In particular, many parents commented on the openness and approachability of the principal and teachers. The following comment exemplified those expressed by a number of parents:

> This is a fantastic school with a dedicated staff who have built up a strong relationship with the children and parents. It provides an environment in which parents and children are comfortable to discuss anything with the staff.

While almost all parents were of the view that the school environment was a safe place for children to work and play, a minority of parents disagreed and took the opportunity to detail their concerns.

These related to the supervision of pupils before and after school, particularly where their children were availing of bus transport to and from school. Some parents also expressed concern regarding class sizes and perceived dangers in outdoor play areas.

Most parents indicated that they were satisfied with the way bullying was handled at their child's school. However, bullying was an aspect of school life that caused concern to a number of parents, with 12% of parents expressing dissatisfaction with how schools dealt with the issue. This particular concern prompted significant written comment from parents and this will be considered more fully in section 4.3.

4.2.3 The views of pupils

In completing their questionnaires, the pupils considered a range of SPHE-related statements and indicated their level of agreement with the statements. The results that relate particularly to school and classroom climate issues are presented in table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: Results of the pupils' questionnaires

Statements	True	False	Don't know
My school is a good place to be	89.5%	4.8%	5.7%
I am treated well at school	89.1%	2.6%	8.3%
All children are treated equally in my school	79.8%	8.0%	12.2%
Children who are different are treated well in my school	85.8%	3.7%	10.5%
My classroom is a good place to learn things	96.6%	1.7%	1.7%
My teacher encourages me	85.2%	6.3%	8.5%
I am involved in making decisions in my class	63.6%	14.5%	21.9%
I have friends at school	98.6%	0%	1.4%
I join in activities and games in the yard	94.6%	3.1%	2.3%

Most pupils considered that their school was a good place to be and that they were treated well there. Most also agreed that all children were treated equally and that children who were different were treated well. Almost all pupils were of the view that their classroom was a good place to learn new things, with most of them indicating that their teacher encouraged them. A lesser number, but still a majority of pupils were of the view that they were involved in decision-making in their classroom. Almost all pupils confirmed that they had friends at school and that they joined in activities and games in the playground.

In exploring the theme of community in the focus group interviews, the pupils displayed a strong sense of place and an appreciation of their school as a community. They recounted the wide array of curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular activities that they engaged in and the many roles that they played in such events. Such roles included agreeing on school and classroom rules, celebrating

individual and shared achievements in sport and other areas, their active involvement in the *Green-Schools* initiative and opportunities for their active engagement in decision-making. They also frequently demonstrated a very keen sense of pride in the work of their school and the learning opportunities that it provided for them. As one pupil stated:

> All the children in the community come to this school. We all learn a whole pile of stuff in school. Everyone helps out to get the school's Green-Flag. We recycle waste together, we pick up litter and we save energy. Every two years the junior and senior classes work together to produce and present plays to the parents. We love working together on school plays.

In the course of the interviews the pupils were asked to consider words or phrases that they would use to describe their school. Pupils' descriptions were strongly positive but they also pointed out areas in which they felt there was scope for development. The following comment by a pupil is representative of those collected across the forty schools:

> It is tough but fair. Other schools get away with things we wouldn't. It's really nice and I wouldn't swap. There's loads to do in sports and other things. You feel safe. Teachers are in the middle, not too mean or too soft. The teachers are kind and they help you out. We do things together like Christmas boxes and school photos. It's really easy to build relationships. But we could be given a bit more responsibility. It's easy to make friends. It's a good place to learn. You can join in activities and no-one is left out.

4.2.4 The findings of the inspectors

In evaluating the forty schools, the inspectors found that significant efforts were made in most schools to actively promote a positive school and classroom climate. They found that the pupils were affirmed by their teachers and that their sense of well-being was successfully promoted. In particular, the teachers' encouragement of pupils to care for others, and the schools' encouragement of healthy eating practices were commended. In a majority of schools, the pupils' active involvement in decision-making was praised. Most schools involved pupils in a wide range of artistic, sporting, environmental and community initiatives.

In the course of visits to classrooms, the inspectors gave particular attention to a number of key emphases that aim to promote a positive classroom climate. They examined the extent to which pupils were provided with opportunities to foster their self-confidence and self-esteem and the inspectors' findings are shown in fig. 4.1 below.

Fig. 4.1: The inspectors' assessment of the extent to which pupils are provided with experiences that foster self-esteem and self-confidence, N=163 inspector comments
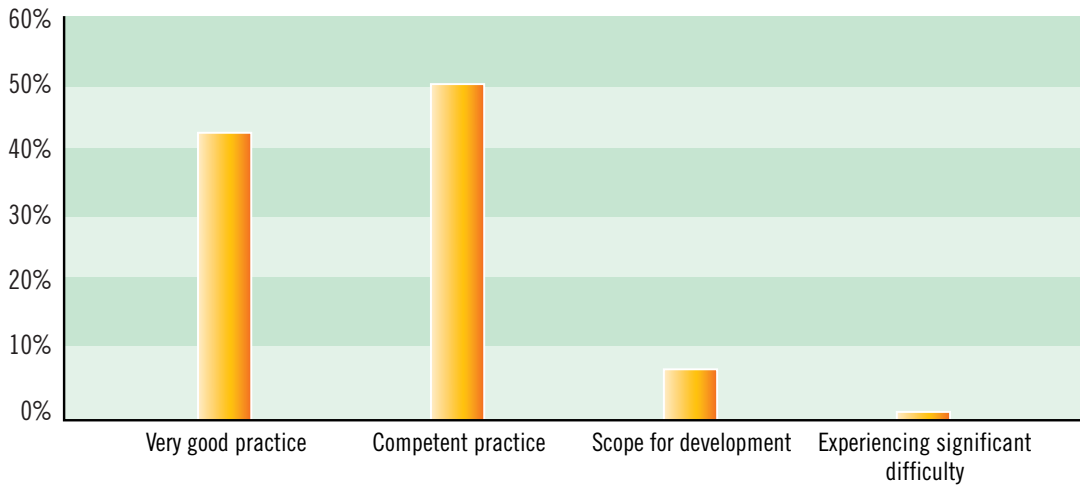
The inspectors found that almost all teachers successfully provided experiences that fostered the pupils' self-confidence and self-esteem. As one inspector commented:

> All pupils take an active part in SPHE lessons. Turn-taking is well developed. Pupils voice their opinions confidently and well. During the lessons observed there was lots of praise and it was used appropriately. The principal and teachers encourage all pupils to take part in the wide range of school activities that are organised.

In many settings, the inspectors reported on safe and accepting classroom environments and the teachers' affirming manner with the pupils. Pupils were given a great deal of encouragement and teacher-pupil interaction was positive. There was effective use of structured reward systems and suitable allocation of meaningful responsibilities to pupils.

In most classes observed, the pupils were encouraged to voice their opinions and contribute to class and group discussions. Fig. 4.2 shows the inspectors' assessment of the extent to which this occurred.

Fig. 4.2: The inspectors' assessment of the extent to which pupils are encouraged to voice their opinions and to contribute to class and group discussions, N=161 inspector comments
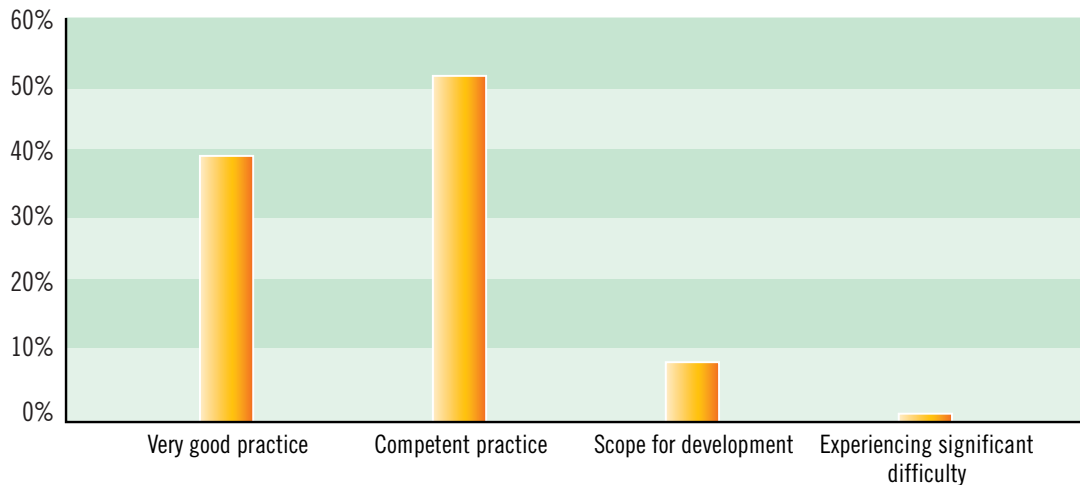
As may be seen from fig. 4.2 more than one-third of teachers displayed very good practice in this aspect of their role. One inspector reported:

> A very open and supportive atmosphere permeates the classroom. The pupils are honest and forthright with their contributions even where the experiences shared might not reflect particularly well on themselves.

Teachers employed appropriate approaches to encourage pupils' expression of their views, such as whole-class, group and partner-based discussion, brainstorming, debate and circle-time activities. Many teachers were particularly alert to the needs of less-confident contributors and they were astute and patient in including such pupils.

In 10% of classroom settings, the inspectors identified that there was scope for development in the teachers' practices. In particular they highlighted the over-use of whole-class discussion to the exclusion of group and partner-based discussion, the domination of discussion by the class teacher or specific pupils and difficulties experienced with discipline and classroom management matters.

As well as considering the pupils' capacities to express their views, the inspectors also examined the extent to which pupils were provided with appropriate opportunities for listening to and for interacting positively with the views and opinions of others. The results of this examination are shown in fig. 4.3.

Fig. 4.3:   Inspectors' assessment of the extent to which pupils are provided with opportunities for listening and for interacting positively and respectfully, N=164 inspector comments
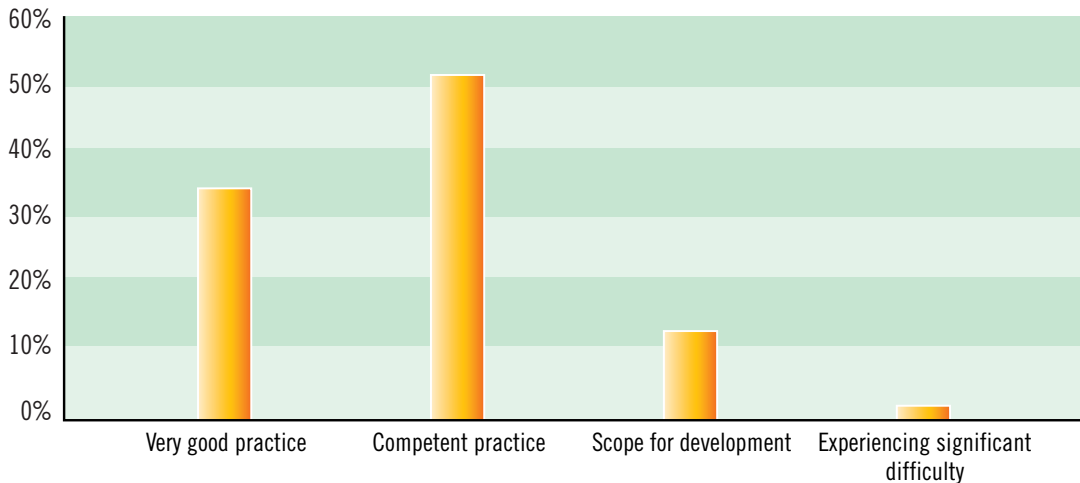
Most teachers provided such opportunities at a competent level, with one-third of teachers displaying very good practice. The use of smaller groups for discussion and active learning was found to be helpful in encouraging collaborative involvement and in promoting confidence and respectful listening. In particular the inspectors praised the efforts of the many teachers who actively encouraged pupils to take on specific roles in group-based activities, as well as turn-taking and engaging proactively with the views and opinions of others. As one inspector commented:

> The pupils are repeatedly encouraged to recognise that there are other points of view. At this stage of the year, they show a good capacity to move beyond expression of their own views to the consideration of the opinions of others. They are given plenty of time to formulate their thoughts and to express them orally and they are successfully encouraged to listen to each other.

In a small number of classrooms, the inspectors found that pupils did not display an ability to listen and interact positively and respectfully. In such contexts, the teachers had provided insufficient opportunities for the pupils to engage with the views and opinions of others in lesson design and implementation. Other concerns reported by inspectors related to the inadequate attention given to the development of productive listener-speaker relationships and the trenchant, and largely unchallenged, views that were expressed by some pupils and that were considerably at variance with the aims of the SPHE curriculum.

4.3 Bullying

The pupils' views on and experiences of bullying were sought using a questionnaire. Almost all pupils expressed the view that if they were bullied at school that they would know what to do. This finding validates the work being undertaken by schools in the implementation of anti-bullying education programmes. The data derived from the questionnaire is shown in the following tables.

Table 4.3: The pupils' response to the statement "If I am bullied at school I know what to do", N=971

If I am bullied at school I know what to do	
True	93%
False	5%
Don't know	2%

Three-quarters of the pupils agreed that bullying was dealt with well in their school, with almost 10% of pupils disagreeing and the remainder of the pupils being undecided.

Table 4.4: The pupils' response to the statement "Bullying is dealt with well in my school", N=977

Bullying is dealt with well in my school	
True	75%
False	9%
Don't know	16%

Pupils' satisfaction with the way in which bullying was dealt with in their school corresponded very closely with their parents' satisfaction ratings as expressed in the completed parents' questionnaires. In the case of parents, just over three-quarters of them expressed satisfaction, while 12% expressed dissatisfaction and just under 10% were undecided.

Table 4.5: The parents' response to the statement "I am satisfied with the way that bullying is dealt with at my child's school", N=884

I am satisfied with the way that bullying is dealt with at my child's school	
Strongly agree	34%
Agree	44%
Disagree	8%
Strongly disagree	4%
Don't know	10%

Of the total number of pupils who completed the pupils' questionnaire 12% reported that they had been bullied at school during the school year in which the evaluation was conducted in their school. This figure rose closer to 20% in the case of a few individual schools confirming that bullying is significantly more problematic in some schools than in others.

Table 4.6: The pupils' response to the statement "I have been bullied at school this year", N=1018

I have been bullied at school this year	
True	12%
False	83%
Don't know	5%

The questionnaire showed that 4% of the pupils admitted to having been involved in bullying another child at school.

Table 4.7: The pupils' response to the statement "I have been involved in bullying another child at school this year", N=1018

I have been involved in bullying another child at school this year	
True	4%
False	90%
Don't know	6%

In completing the parents' questionnaires, parents were invited to add additional comments if they wished. Many parents who expressed dissatisfaction with the manner in which bullying was addressed at the school level took the opportunity to return comment on the issue of bullying. Some parents' comments referred to bullying incidents that had occurred in the past and in other instances the bullying incidents were ongoing. They suggested that the schools needed to review their policies and practices regarding the notification of bullying incidents by pupils or parents and the way in which they were subsequently addressed. The parents expressed the view that different teachers in the same school dealt differently with reported incidents. A very small minority of parents who expressed dissatisfaction asserted that the bullying was being perpetrated by a member of the staff rather than a fellow pupil.

Parents also expressed the view that more vigorous supervision and preventive measures were required. As one parent commented:

> Whilst I am grateful and impressed at the commitment shown to resolving the issue of bullying with my daughter, I don't feel that the necessary policies and procedures are in place to prevent serious bullying incidents arising in the future. I would suggest a proactive approach, for example a "friendship stop" in the playground, a "buddy system" and a student council to achieve unity between staff and pupils on this issue.

4.4 Summary

Positive school and classroom environment

- The schools reported on a wide range of activities to cultivate positive relationships and to develop pupils' self-esteem, as well as initiatives to promote pupils' involvement in the life of the school.

- Most parents in their response to the parents' questionnaire expressed satisfaction with the way in which the school fostered their child's social and personal development. Similarly positive results emerged from the pupils' questionnaires and focus group interviews, with most pupils concluding that their school was a good place to be.

- In the course of their visits to classrooms the inspectors found that almost all teachers provided experiences to foster pupils' self-esteem and self-confidence. In most classrooms, the pupils were encouraged to voice their opinions, to contribute to class and group discussions and to interact with the views and opinions of others. However, in a small number of contexts scope for development in this aspect of teachers' practice was identified. In particular, the inspectors recommended a greater use of group discussion and partner-based discussion, a balanced distribution of pupil and teacher contributions, and the development of listener-speaker relationships.

Anti-bullying initiatives

- The efforts by schools to implement anti-bullying policies and programmes were validated as almost all pupils confirmed that they would know what to do if they were bullied at school.

- A significant majority of pupils and parents expressed satisfaction with the way in which bullying incidents were dealt with at school. However, in instances where parental dissatisfaction existed, it was very strongly expressed by them.

- Overall, 12% of pupils reported that they had been bullied at school during the year of the evaluation.

- The percentage of reported bullying for individual schools varied considerably, which tends to suggest that bullying is a significantly more challenging problem in some schools than in others.

Chapter 5

Teaching, learning, and assessment in Social, Personal and Health Education

5.1 Introduction

The teaching and learning approaches used in SPHE are crucial to the effective implementation of the curriculum. The curriculum emphasises the use of active learning approaches and the SPHE teacher guidelines identify a number of important outcomes for such learning. It is intended that pupils will begin from what they already know, explore possibilities, question, draw conclusions and reflect on outcomes. In this way, pupils will make their own of the learning and internalise what has been learned. Active learning should also help them to become more critical and discerning, to take responsibility for their own learning and to be able to transfer the learning to different situations.

5.2 The delivery of curriculum content in SPHE

5.2.1 The SPHE curriculum

As outlined in chapter 1, the SPHE curriculum consists of three strands: *Myself; Myself and Others;* and *Myself and the Wider World.* In turn, each of these strands is divided into a series of strand units. The content of the SPHE curriculum is presented under the strand and strand unit headings for each of the four class groups from junior infants to sixth class. The inspectors assessed the extent to which a broad and balanced SPHE curriculum was being delivered to pupils. They reviewed teachers' planning and records of the progress of learning in SPHE. They discussed issues of curriculum implementation with teachers and they interacted with pupils and reviewed their work.

5.2.2 The implementation of the *Myself* strand

A broad and balanced approach to implementation was in evidence in the delivery of most of the curriculum content of the *Myself* strand. The inspectors found that aspects of self-identity, such as self-awareness, developing self-confidence and making decisions were competently addressed. Issues of safety and protection, both personal safety and general safety such as road safety and water safety, were taught regularly in all the schools.

In learning about *Taking care of my body,* pupils regularly learned about food and nutrition and about health and well-being generally. However, the element of *Knowing about my body* which includes the naming of parts of the male and female body and identifying some of their functions was addressed significantly less frequently. Similarly in implementing the *Growing and changing* strand unit, learning about feelings and emotions was addressed much more frequently than was learning about *As I grow I change* and *Birth and new life.*

A significant percentage of teachers were found to experience difficulty in addressing aspects of the SPHE curriculum with their pupils. These elements centred on naming of body parts, the teaching of issues about body changes and aspects of birth and new life, areas that are commonly termed the "more sensitive aspects" of the RSE programme.

5.2.3 The implementation of the *Myself and Others* strand

Evaluation evidence confirms a broad and balanced implementation of the *Myself and Others* strand. Pupils were provided with regular opportunities to learn about family units and the roles played by different family members. Differing types of friendships and the influence of peer relationships were addressed frequently. The pupils were also provided with ongoing opportunities to learn about relating to others, including communicating, bullying and resolving conflicts.

5.2.4 The implementation of the *Myself and the Wider World* strand

Evaluation evidence shows that there was significant variation in the implementation of the *Myself and the Wider World* strand across school settings. Under the *Developing citizenship* strand unit, learning about the school community, the local community and environmental care issues were most widely addressed. However, the provision of learning opportunities with regard to wider communities, including national and European communities, was significantly less evident in schools. Learning in media education centred prominently on examining the role of advertising and newspapers. In many instances the pupils' learning in both developing citizenship and media education was scheduled for the latter part of the school year and there was no clear development of the content to be addressed. In some schools, there was no evidence of content from the *Myself and the Wider World strand* being addressed at all.

5.3   The implementation of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) aims to help children to learn about their own development and about their friendships and relationships with others. As such it forms an integral part of SPHE and is intended to be taught in this context. It provides structured opportunities for pupils to acquire knowledge and understanding of human sexuality and relationships through processes which will enable them to form values and establish behaviours within a moral, spiritual and social framework. Included among the broad objectives of the SPHE curriculum at primary level are that it should enable the child to create and maintain supportive relationships both now and in the future and to develop a sense of personal responsibility and come to understand their sexuality and the processes of growth, development and reproduction.

The inspectors found that in the majority of schools the RSE programme was being implemented fully. In these schools agreement was reached on the whole-school programme to be implemented and the associated language to be used. Schools' RSE policies and schools' sex education programmes were circulated to parents prior to the more sensitive lessons being taught. The RSE programme was delivered as a natural and integral element of SPHE and opportunities for the integration of learning with other areas of the curriculum, particularly Social, Scientific and Environmental Education and Religious Education, were used.

In these schools the teachers reported the use of a variety of methods to deliver the more sensitive RSE lessons. In some schools, lessons were delivered to boys and girls simultaneously, while in others they were delivered to gender-based groupings. In many instances a male teacher would talk to the boys while a female teacher addressed the girls. A significant number of teachers reported that their schools regularly availed of external speakers to deliver the more sensitive aspects of RSE. While the use of this latter approach was found to be commonplace, particularly in senior classes, its widespread use needs to be examined further. An over-reliance on external speakers can place restrictions on the level of follow-up that can be engaged in at the individual classroom level as the lesson content is not delivered by the pupils' teacher and the pupils themselves may have issues they wish to further discuss following the visit of the external speaker.

A few teachers reported on the effectiveness of modelling in developing their confidence and competence in delivering sexuality education. Members of the RSE training support service had visited these teachers' classrooms, on request, and had modelled lessons for them. These sessions were designed to improve the confidence and skills of the teacher to enable them to deliver the programme without the assistance of further external speakers. The following teacher's comment illustrates the transition that many teachers experience in implementing the RSE programme in its entirety in their classrooms:

> In teaching RSE, we found the naming of body parts hard at first. We also found it hard to talk about the baby in the womb. We had to overcome our own inhibitions initially. The pupils have no such problems and in fact most of what we tell them is not news for them any more. We send home the RSE programme to parents each year and often they have covered it with their children before we get to doing it at all. Children have a lot of information now and what we deliver is not always news to them. They know about birth and the womb and have the language for it now.

As reported in section 3.3.2, the evaluation evidence shows that, in a significant minority of schools, learning about aspects of sexuality occurs in a much less co-ordinated and comprehensive manner. This partial implementation of RSE was strongly confirmed during the inspectors' interactions with members of the school community. In the course of completing a written self-evaluation schedule in respect of RSE, one-third of school staffs confirmed that the effectiveness with which the strand unit *Growing and changing* was taught required review. Teachers in these schools were unhappy with the provision for pupils in sexuality education. More than a quarter (28%) of principals confirmed that only a partial RSE programme was being implemented in their schools. The areas most commonly reported as not being addressed were the sexuality aspects of the programme. In discussion, the principals attributed this partial implementation to teachers' lack of confidence and the nature of the programme content.

In interview, just under one-quarter of the teachers confirmed that they did not teach RSE to their classes, which in most situations referred to the naming of body parts and sexuality education

generally. In almost all of these cases the teachers reported that this aspect was delivered by another teacher in the school or by an external speaker.

Teachers were also asked to consider their familiarity with the RSE component of the SPHE curriculum and table 5.1 shows the teachers' responses. Just over one-third of the teachers interviewed considered themselves to be very familiar with the RSE programme, with just over half being reasonably familiar while 8% of teachers admitted to being unfamiliar with the RSE programme. As previously identified by school principals, the major challenges identified by classroom teachers in fully implementing the RSE programme was their lack of confidence and personal inhibitions. While the inspection evidence shows that RSE was being implemented well in the majority of schools, it is worrying to note that in one-third of schools, concerns regarding implementation persist.

Table 5.1: The teachers' familiarity with the RSE component of the SPHE curriculum, N=38 schools

Familiarity with the RSE component of the SPHE curriculum	
Very familiar	37%
Reasonably familiar	55%
Unfamiliar	8%

5.4 The quality of teaching in SPHE

5.4.1 The use of active-learning approaches

As indicated at the outset in this chapter, the use of active-learning approaches is critical to the effective implementation of SPHE. It requires the teacher to guide and direct the pupils' work, encouraging exploration, questioning and reflection in an atmosphere of trust and support. A range of different strategies to promote active learning can be used and includes drama activities; co-operative games; pictures, photographs and visual images; talk and discussion; written activities; the media and information and communication technology; and looking at pupils' work.

The inspectors assessed the extent to which active-learning approaches were in use in classrooms. Table 5.2 shows the results of the inspectors' assessments. In most of the SPHE lessons observed, they found that the teachers used a variety of active-learning approaches, with one-third of teachers displaying best practice.

Table 5.2: The extent to which a variety of active-learning approaches is used, N=159 inspector comments

The use of a variety of active-learning approaches	
Level 4	36%
Level 3	52%
Level 2	11%
Level 1	1%

The use of talk and discussion was observed in almost all classes. A range of written activities, including the use of worksheets, was seen in the majority of settings. Drama and co-operative games were observed in fewer than half the classrooms. ICT, media studies and the use of pictures and photographs were in evidence in only a small number of contexts.

In 12% of classrooms, the inspectors identified scope for development with regard to the range of active-learning approaches employed and the manner in which they were used. As one inspector described:

> An over-emphasis is placed on the use of whole-class discussion in this school, supported by the use of a commercially-produced worksheet. More group-based approaches would encourage greater pupil involvement, particularly from more hesitant pupils and those for whom English is not their first language.

Many inspectors also commented that while the active-learning approaches observed were used competently, teachers drew from a relatively narrow range of such approaches. In interviews, teachers themselves reported that talk and discussion was the active-learning approach most commonly used by them. However, they also indicated that drama activities, pictures and

photographs, co-operative games and media studies were used on a regular basis. This view did not concur with the findings of the inspectors in many classrooms.

5.4.2 The quality of talk and discussion

Talk and discussion is a key active-learning approach in SPHE and it can serve a number of different functions. It can be used to assess what pupils already know and to identify gaps in their existing knowledge. It can encourage pupils to explore a topic in some detail by presenting their own viewpoints and by listening and responding to the opinions and views of others. It can facilitate pupils' reflection where ideas and suggestions are teased out and clarified.

As talk and discussion is the most commonly used active-learning approach employed by teachers, the inspectors evaluated its quality in each classroom visited and the results of their evaluation are shown in fig. 5.1.

Fig. 5.1:   The extent to which talk and discussion is focused and incorporates clear learning objectives, N=163 inspector comments
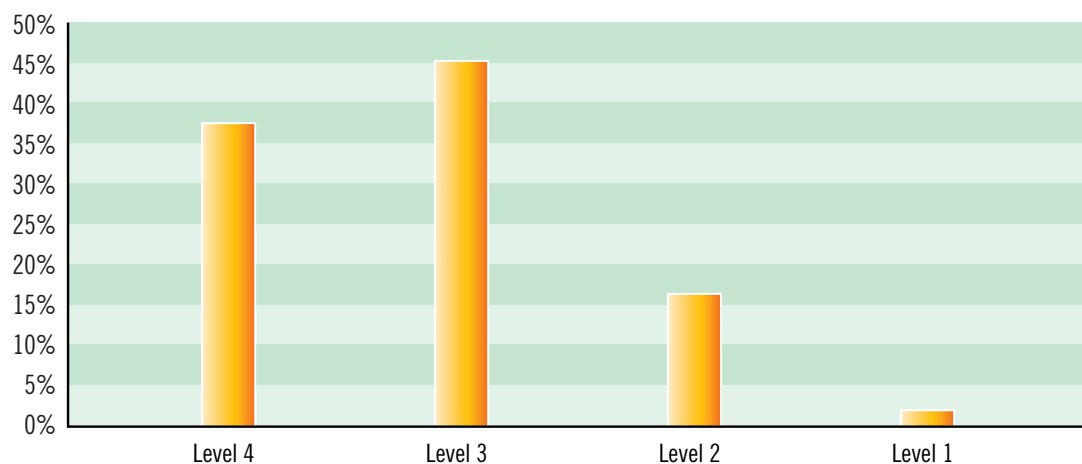
The inspectors found that in most class settings talk and discussion was focused and incorporated clear learning objectives. In these classrooms the teachers directed lessons capably and used questioning techniques with skill. As one inspector commented:

> The teacher expertly managed the talk and discussion aspects of the lesson, probing pupils' views and encouraging them to source solutions in a supportive but non-intrusive way.

Where the inspectors found the quality of talk and discussion to be good they commented favourably on the teacher's ability to guide the talk and discussion and to structure the associated learning activities so as to ensure that the lesson objectives were achieved. In particular they noted that pupils were exposed to important SPHE concepts and language. Communication skills were taught formally and the use of problem-solving approaches was encouraged.

Scope for development in the use of talk and discussion was identified in nearly one in five classrooms. In such contexts the inspectors expressed concern about the lack of clear lesson objectives to guide the talk and discussion. In some instances the nature of the SPHE concept being discussed was judged to be overly complex relative to the age and ability levels of the pupils. In classrooms where practice showed scope for development there was a lack of sufficient adherence to the topic under consideration as the talk and discussion wandered from the intended focus of the lesson. In a small number of contexts the inspectors found that the teacher or a small number of pupils overly dominated the talk and discussion.

5.4.3 The provision of opportunities for pupils to work collaboratively

Collaborative working in SPHE develops pupils' abilities and skills to work together and to be effective members of a team. It provides them with opportunities to respect the contribution of each individual and to learn from each other. While participating in collaborative-learning activities pupils should learn to talk openly, to interact with the perspectives of others and to work co-operatively towards the achievement of shared goals.

Fig. 5.2:   The extent to which collaborative-learning opportunities are competently employed, N=161 inspector comments
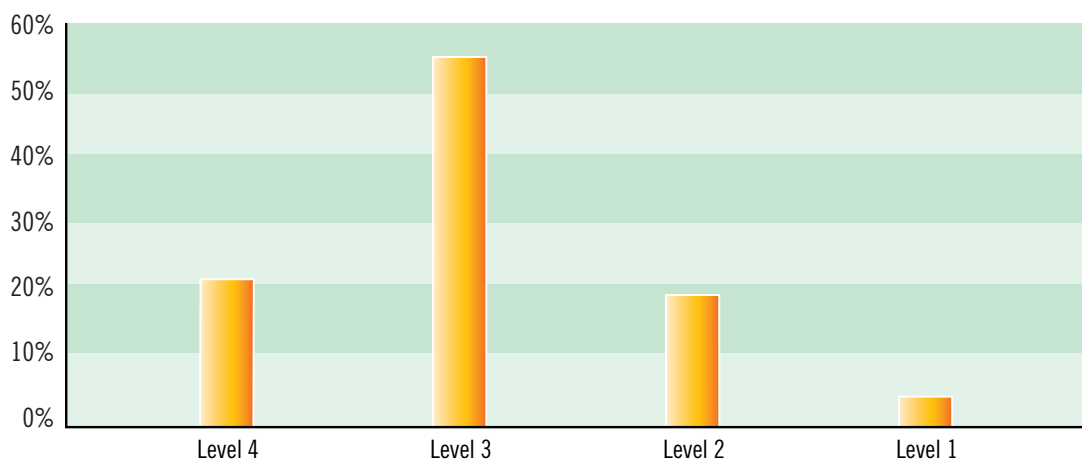
The inspectors reviewed the use of collaborative learning approaches. Their findings are shown in fig. 5.2 above. They found that collaborative learning was a praiseworthy feature in a significant majority of classrooms. Opportunities for engagement in collaborative learning were exemplified in well-structured and implemented group tasks and partner-based tasks, as well as co-operative games and circle-time activities. In particular the inspectors commented positively on the teachers' cultivation of teamwork and partnership among their pupils as reflected in this inspector's observation:

The excellent manner in which the group work was organised and managed in this lesson ensured that collaborative learning was facilitated–clear tasks, roles assigned, excellent capacities to work collaboratively, very well structured plenary and superb reinforcement of lesson messages.

However, in nearly one-quarter of classrooms the approaches to collaborative learning were not satisfactory. In some classrooms, insufficient opportunities were provided by teachers for the pupils to work collaboratively. In other classrooms, opportunities to engage in collaborative-learning activities were provided, but the inspectors expressed dissatisfaction with the way in which they were structured. In such situations the inspectors expressed concern regarding the lack of clarity or the overly complex nature of the shared task that had been assigned. This resulted in pupils being unsure of what was being asked of them, the outcome that was to be achieved and the manner in which they might engage with their peers. In other settings, inspectors found that while it was intended that pupils would work collaboratively during the course of the evaluation visit, they displayed a lack of familiarity with the process. In these classrooms there was no evidence of pupils being aware of the ground rules of successful collaborative working. There was also a failure to allocate distinct roles and responsibilities to individual group members to facilitate the effective working of the group as a whole and the achievement of the assigned task and the lesson objective.

5.4.4 The acquisition of values, attitudes and skills through active learning

The guidelines that accompany the SPHE curriculum advise that topics in the subject should not be taught in isolation; rather the subject aims to develop in the child a set of values, attitudes and skills relevant to a range of social, personal and health issues. These values, attitudes and skills are most successfully developed through pupils' engagement in activity-based learning. Pupils' active engagement in the learning process allows them to use the values, attitudes and skills that they have developed in a variety of situations, both within and outside the setting of the school.

Fig. 5.3: The extent to which opportunities are provided to acquire values, attitudes and skills through active learning, N=164 inspector comments
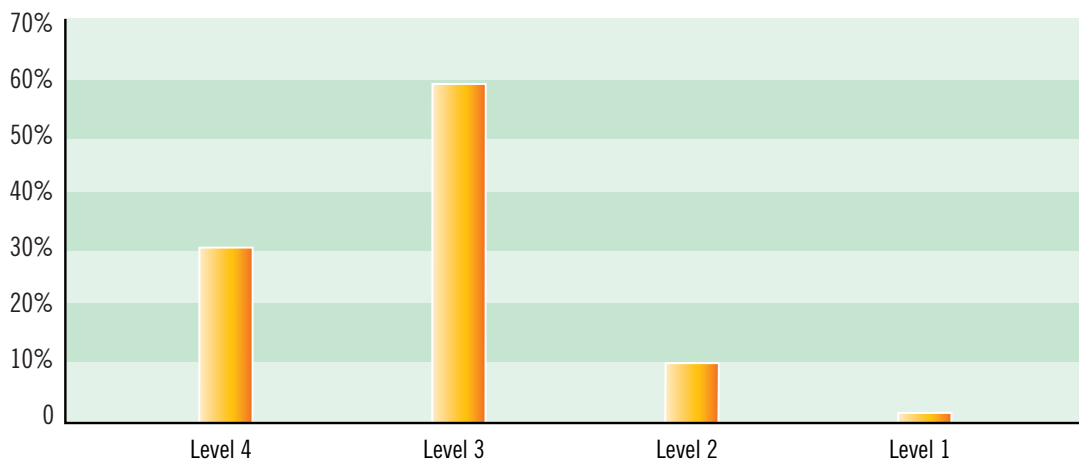
Throughout the course of the evaluation the inspectors concluded that in most classrooms, teachers were successful in providing pupils with opportunities to acquire values, attitudes and skills through active learning. The results of the inspectors' assessment are shown in fig. 5.3 above. The following comment is typical of settings where best practice was observed:

> It was evident that the teacher had reflected on what she wanted her pupils to learn in terms of gaining knowledge, developing skills and fostering attitudes and values. The pupils had regular opportunities to discuss, debate, collaborate and negotiate. They were learning to listen respectfully to the views of others and how to handle situations when they did not agree with others.

Where competent practice was in evidence the inspectors highlighted the skilled way in which the teachers drew out the values and attitudes inherent in pupils' contributions and used them as a foundation for the pupils' learning. They noted how the teachers challenged pupils' biases constructively where they were expressed rather than simply communicating teacher-generated messages. They also commented favourably on how pupils' attitudes evolved and became more all-encompassing over the course of the lessons observed.

However, in a small number of classrooms, the lessons observed were overly technical and failed to attend adequately to the attitudes and values inherent to the topic being addressed. For example, in one senior classroom, the SPHE lesson focused on the science of bacterial growth and infection and did not adequately stress the importance of personal hygiene from the health and confidence perspective or the social and interactive perspective–an issue so important to early-adolescents. In just over one-tenth of classrooms the inspectors judged that pupils were not afforded adequate opportunities to acquire values, attitudes and skills. This outcome was attributed to a range of factors. In some classrooms the lesson was overly teacher-directed and the pupils were provided with inadequate opportunities to explore the topic under discussion in an in-depth manner. In other settings there was a failure to link the issues being addressed to pupils' direct experiences and as a result the pupils' ability to transfer their learning to other situations was limited. A few teachers experienced difficulties in managing pupils' contributions effectively.

5.4.5 The use of real life events

The use of real life events in teaching SPHE contributes positively to pupils' learning. By addressing topics through the exploration of real life events that have meaning and relevance for the pupils, teachers are more likely to be successful in developing pupils' understanding, attitudes and skills. The real life events through which learning takes place may be of significance to individual pupils, to the school or local community, or to national and wider communities. Examples of real life events might include the birth of a new baby, a school or local celebration, or an international disaster.

A review of teachers' monthly progress records and observation of lessons during classroom visits confirmed that almost all teachers featured real life events regularly in their teaching of SPHE. Fig. 5.4 below shows the inspectors' assessment of the extent to which real life events are a feature of teaching and learning in SPHE.

Fig. 5.4: **The extent to which real life events are a feature of teaching and learning in SPHE, N=161 inspector comments**
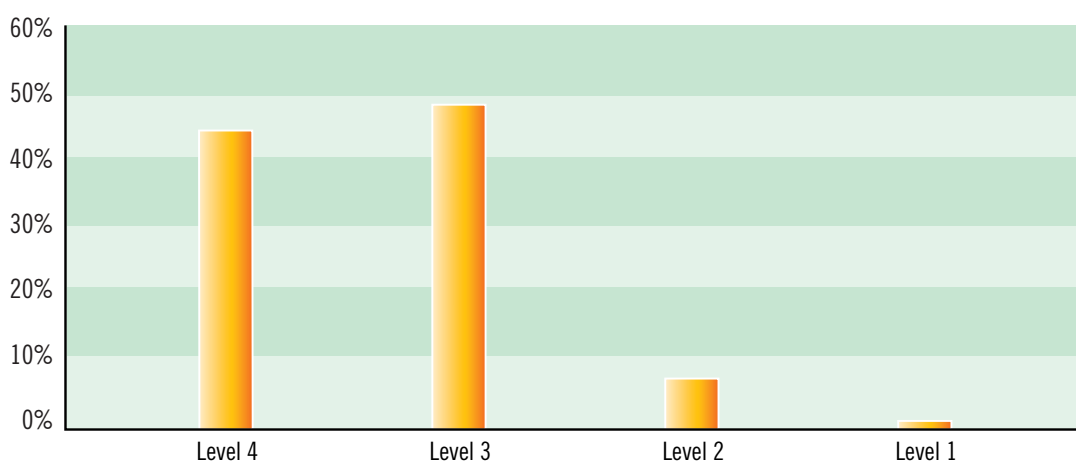
Almost half the teachers displayed best practice in this area of their work. In particular, the inspectors commended teachers on their selection of topics relevant to the pupils' needs and on how they encouraged pupils to relate the topics to real life situations at school, at play and in the community. In certain situations, teachers made effective use of particular incidents, for example bullying-related incidents that had occurred in the playground, to develop lesson content and to explore topics of concern.

5.4.6 The use of opportunities for linkage and integration

Many aspects of SPHE can be taught through linkage and integration. Teaching through linkage involves the teacher addressing SPHE curriculum content across more than one strand simultaneously, for example teaching about the role of advertising under the *Myself and the Wider World* strand in tandem with making decisions in the *Myself* strand. Teaching through integration occurs where aspects of the SPHE programme are addressed through teaching in other areas of the curriculum, for example English. This latter approach is one of the three key approaches recommended for the teaching of SPHE.

In most classrooms there was evidence of linkage and integration in teaching and learning in SPHE. The graphic shown in fig. 5.5 summarises the inspectors' comments on the extent to which opportunities for linkage and integration were used in the teaching and learning of SPHE.

Fig. 5.5: The extent to which opportunities for linkage and integration in teaching and learning in SPHE are used, N=165 inspector comments
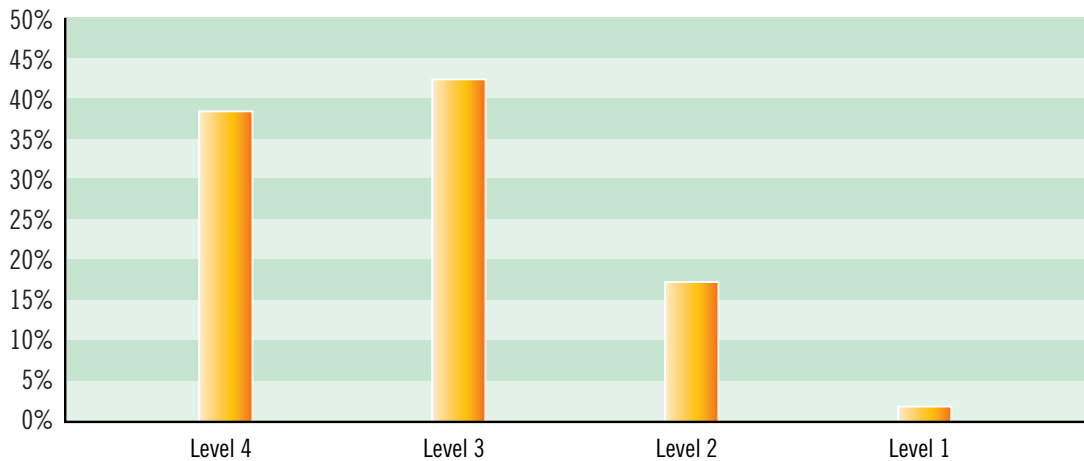
Skills and knowledge from other aspects of the curriculum were used to enhance work in SPHE. Integration opportunities with English; Social, Environmental and Scientific Education; and Arts Education featured prominently.

In a number of classrooms the inspectors found that issues in SPHE lessons were regularly addressed on a cross-strand basis. However, the inspection evidence also showed that in many instances engagement in opportunities for linkage and integration arose incidentally and in a haphazard manner. The inspectors recommended that linkage and integration be appropriately planned for in teachers' long-term and short-term planning to ensure that it occurred on a structured basis. In a small number of settings inspectors found no evidence of linkage or integration.

5.4.7 The quality of teaching in Relationships and Sexuality Education

Over the course of the evaluation, lessons addressing RSE-specific content were observed in nearly 40% of classrooms. In most of these settings the quality of the teaching was of a competent standard, with one in five teachers displaying very good practice. The inspectors' observations in this regard are shown in fig. 5.6.

Fig.5.6: Evidence of effective practice in teaching and learning in RSE, N=66 lessons
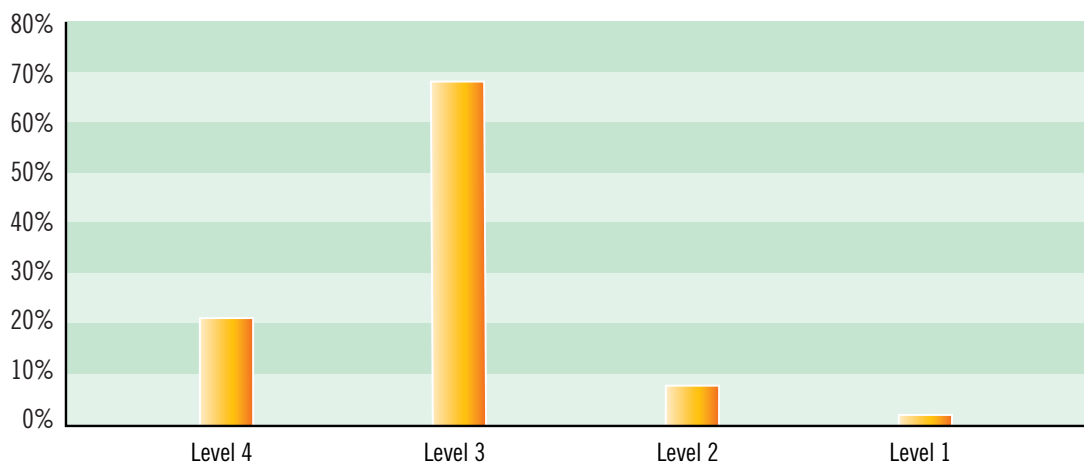
The lessons addressed a wide range of themes including self-esteem, feelings and emotions, relationships, decision-making, responsibility and difference. In a few instances the more sensitive areas of the RSE programme were addressed, specifically the naming of body parts as part of the strand unit *Taking care of my body*.

In just over 10% of classrooms where RSE was observed the inspectors concluded that there was scope for development or significant weaknesses in the manner in which it was taught. Among the concerns raised by the inspectors was the mismatch between the content of the topic being taught and the age and ability levels of the pupils. In such situations no account was taken of the need for differentiation. The inspectors also noted that in some settings topics were explored superficially and the teachers did not succeed in delving appropriately into the lesson content. As one inspector remarked:

> While this lesson dealt with the issue of feelings, links with the RSE-related areas of expressing feelings and managing feelings were not in evidence.

5.5 The quality of learning in SPHE

5.5.1 The pupils as active learners

In most classrooms evaluated, the pupils were judged to be active learners and this is shown in fig. 5.7. They participated actively in team and partner-based activities and games.

Fig. 5.7: The extent to which pupils are active learners in SPHE, N=171 inspector comments
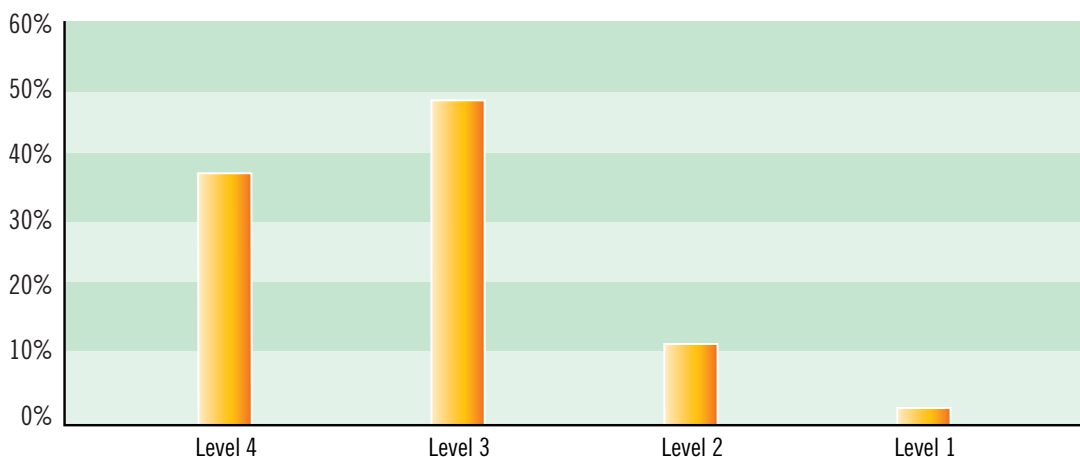
In many class contexts the inspectors commented favourably on the manner in which roles and responsibilities were effectively distributed to facilitate the participation of all pupils. They also commended the enthusiasm with which pupils engaged in SPHE lessons. As one inspector commented:

> The pupils engaged enthusiastically in the lesson and activities observed. They clearly enjoyed the SPHE lessons and positive learning outcomes were in evidence.

However, in one in eight classrooms there was scope for development regarding the extent to which the pupils were actively involved in their learning. The pupils' involvement in active learning was restricted due to the narrow range of active-learning approaches employed by the teacher, in particular an over-dependence on talk and discussion. In some instances teachers overly directed lessons rather than facilitating pupils to engage in active learning with their peers. The inspector's comment that follows is indicative of settings where there was scope for development in the extent to which pupils were engaged as active learners:

> In the lesson observed there was a preponderance of teacher-led activities. Talk and discussion was characterised by too much teacher questioning. The pupils were not given the freedom to explore the theme for themselves and to relate it to their own experiences.

5.5.2 The level of interest and challenge in learning activities

If learning in SPHE is to be effective, learning activities must be both interesting for pupils and appropriately challenging for them. The evaluation findings as presented in fig. 5.8 show that in most classrooms the learning activities were interesting and challenging.

Fig. 5.8:   The extent to which learning activities are interesting and challenging, N=162 inspector comments
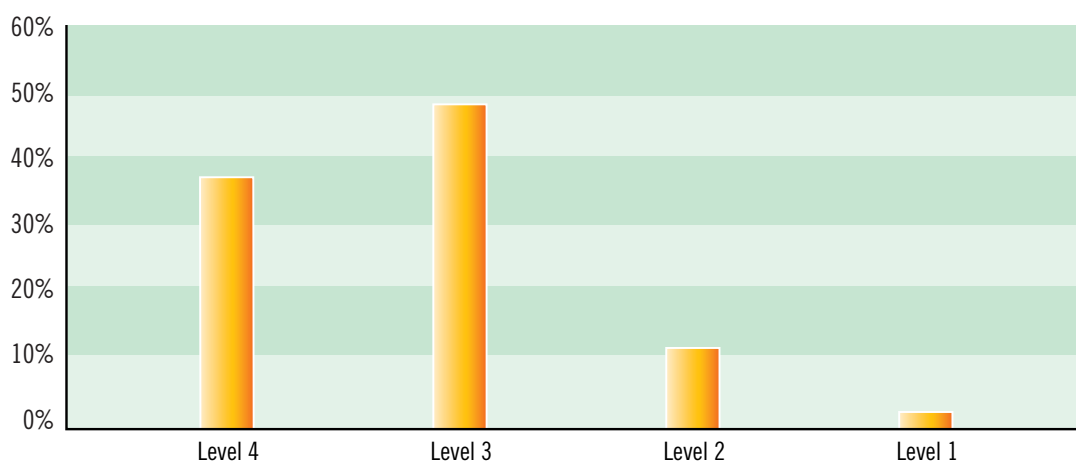
Successful lessons incorporated effective teacher planning and resourcing. New content was suitably introduced through relating it to the pupils' existing knowledge and real life events were explored. The pupils readily asked questions, offered opinions and collaboratively explored ideas. As one inspector commented:

> The many different elements in this lesson made it very interesting for the pupils. They were listening, speaking, acting out, role-playing and giving advice. The learning activities served to challenge their thinking regarding their emerging responsibilities as they enter adolescence.

In one in six classrooms the learning activities observed were insufficiently interesting and challenging. This resulted from a failure by teachers to appropriately match the content, structure and level of challenge inherent in the lesson to the age range, abilities and interests of the pupils.

5.5.3 Provision for individual difference and differentiation in learning tasks

Pupils come from a variety of backgrounds, beliefs and understandings. Pupils within the same class can be at many different stages of their personal, social and health development. Consequently, it is intended that teachers would make due provision for pupils' individual differences in implementing curriculum content in SPHE. Despite this important emphasis, the evaluation findings shown in fig. 5.9 indicate scope for development in 30% of classrooms in the level of planning and provision for individual differences and in the differentiation of learning tasks. In such settings, the teachers failed to take account of pupils' differing abilities, interest levels and stages of maturity in structuring and implementing learning opportunities.

Fig. 5.9:   The quality of the provision for individual differences and differentiation in learning tasks, N=161 inspector comments
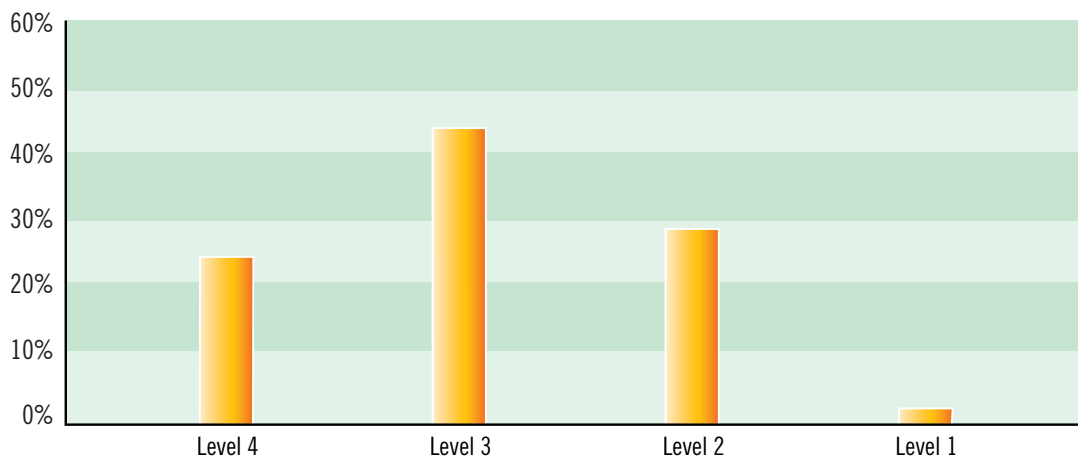
However, in the majority of classrooms where appropriate provision for pupils' individual differences was in evidence, the inspectors observed differentiation in questioning, in task assignment, in provision for pupils with special educational needs and in the arrangement of groups. In some instances, teachers and special needs assistants worked collaboratively to provide significant additional assistance for particular pupils. In some other cases, the teachers operated mixed-ability groups for the benefit of the pupils.

5.5.4 Progress in pupils' learning

In most classrooms the evaluation found that there was clear evidence of regular progress in pupils' learning and this is evident from fig. 5.10 which shows the inspectors' assessments.

Fig. 5.10: The extent to which there is evidence of regular progress in pupils' learning, N=164 inspector comments
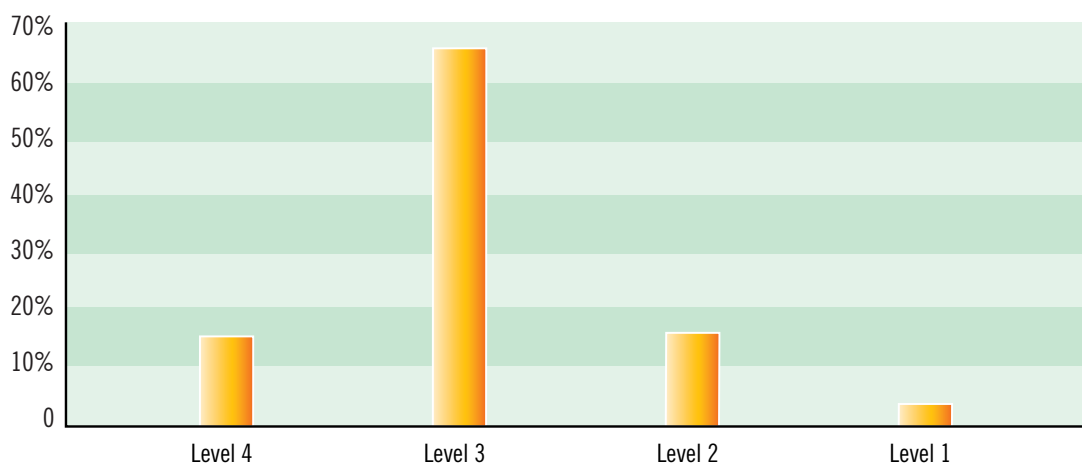
Positive progress in pupils' learning was found in schools where SPHE was taught on a regular basis. In such schools, the inspectors commended the opportunities availed of by the teachers to consolidate pupils' learning by revisiting particular content in a planned and consistent manner and through the regular use of integration opportunities. In schools where competent practice was observed, daily events and occurrences in the classroom and school were used productively to provide important opportunities for the progression of pupils' understanding. Topics and themes that had been addressed in discrete SPHE lessons were now being addressed as a natural and integral part of the pupils' everyday lives at school. In schools where positive learning progress was in evidence, the inspectors noted the competence and confidence with which the pupils engaged in discussion on topics that they had previously addressed. Pupils also demonstrated capacity to relate their learning to real life events and to their own direct experiences. They also praised the quality of the pupils' work on display, as well as the work in copybooks and portfolios.

However, in 20% of classrooms, there was scope for development with regard to the regularity of progress being made in pupils' learning. In some instances pupils' inadequate progress was a direct result of the fact that SPHE was not being taught on a regular basis. In other contexts pupils showed insufficient knowledge and understanding of topics that had been previously completed by them. In some classrooms there was minimal evidence of pupils' completed work, with a total absence of pupils' work in some settings. Some teachers' inadequate planning and recording of progress made it difficult to assess the progress that pupils had made.

5.6 Assessment

Assessment is as crucial to SPHE as it is to any other curriculum area. Whole-school agreement is critical to the role of assessment in SPHE, the assessment strategies to be used and the manner in which progress is to be communicated to pupils, to parents and to other teachers. Assessment in SPHE enables the teacher to adapt the learning and teaching approaches in use in the classroom to ensure that they are appropriate to the curriculum objectives and content being addressed and that they take due account of the most effective ways in which pupils learn. Teachers can use the outcomes of assessment to modify curriculum content and delivery in response to pupils' differing abilities and needs in order to optimise the learning potential of each pupil. Assessment provides an important insight into what pupils know, understand and can do, and how they transfer learning from one situation to another. The school's assessment in SPHE should assess effectiveness through the school climate and atmosphere, through discrete SPHE time and through integration with other subjects. It should also provide opportunities to promote pupil self-assessment through which pupils establish goals and targets for themselves, learn the value of monitoring their own progress and develop responsibility for their own learning.

In the course of the evaluation almost all teachers reported that they assessed pupils' progress in SPHE and that most of their schools had an agreed whole-school approach to assessment. However, the inspectors found an appropriate range of assessment modes in evidence in fewer than half the classrooms visited. The extent to which an appropriate range of assessment modes was used is shown in fig. 5.11 below.

Fig. 5.11: The extent to which a range of appropriate assessment modes is used, N=169 inspector comments
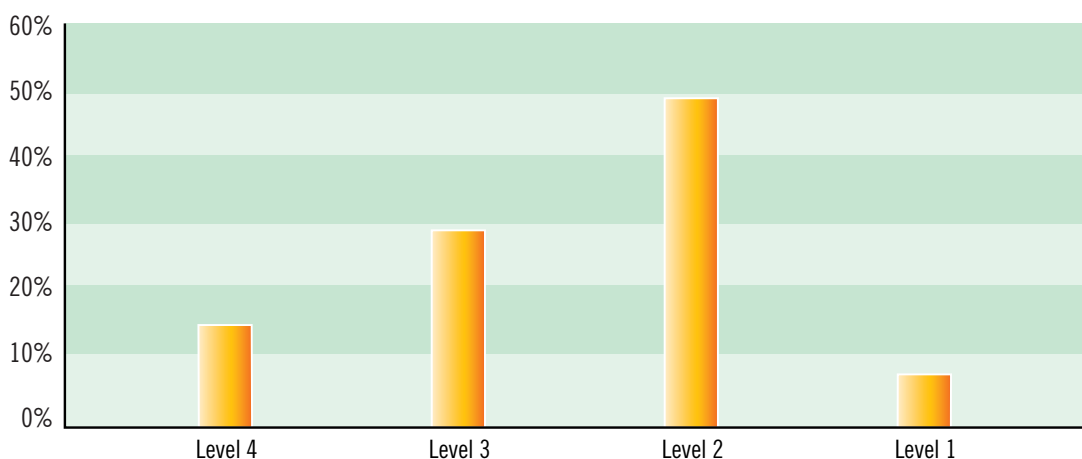
In the majority of instances, there was scope for development in relation to the range of assessment strategies that teachers employed and in the records of pupils' progress maintained. Observation was frequently recorded by teachers as the primary assessment strategy in use but the inspectors

found that it was rarely accompanied by a formal recording of pertinent observations of pupils' progress. The teachers' only written assessment records regularly consisted of a range of examples of pupils' work in copybooks or collections of completed worksheets. In the main, assessment in SPHE was found to be carried out on an incidental basis.

The inspectors expressed concern with regard to the extent to which assessment results were used to inform teaching and learning. They concluded that there was scope for development in the majority of classrooms visited. This was due mainly to the absence of assessment records. In discussion with the inspectors, some teachers showed awareness of the strengths and needs of individual pupils but had recorded little in writing. The widespread lack of formal, recorded data on pupils' progress in SPHE made it difficult for teachers to make informed judgements to enlighten teaching and learning or to update parents regarding their children's progress at parent-teacher meetings and in written school reports.

Many of the benefits of SPHE are not evident until long after pupils have left the primary school. Therefore assessment must focus on the aspects of the SPHE programme that can be realistically assessed during the pupils' time in school. In the course of interviews with the teachers they indicated that their assessment practices focused on assessing a broad range of areas including pupils' behaviour and self-esteem, how the pupils were getting on with others at school and the

learning that they had acquired at the end of specific units of work. They also articulated challenges that they were experiencing in assessing progress in this particular area of the curriculum as is evidenced in the following teacher comment:

> It's hard to know really. Should we assess that they all know their telephone number if we are doing a *Stay Safe* lesson? It is so vast really. We could look at social skills, self-esteem, confidence to complete tasks, the ability to communicate and to listen. It is not about knowledge only. It is about their attitudes, how they treat others. It's a challenge and we haven't quite grasped it yet in this school.

Very good assessment practices were found in 15% of classrooms. In these classrooms, assessment approaches included structured teacher observation in which teachers focused on specific aspects of SPHE and recorded significant observations. They also included well-structured, teacher-designed tasks and tests, as well as the collation of portfolios of pupils' work and records of pupils' engagement in project activity. The inspector's comment that follows reflects the observation of very good assessment practice:

> A variety of assessment techniques is used in assessing SPHE: checklists, folders, teacher-designed tasks, *Stay Safe* booklets and anecdotal notes. Pupils reflect on their own learning: what they enjoyed most, the work they are most proud of, the work they found difficult.

5.7 Summary

Curriculum content

- Most of the content of the *Myself* strand was being implemented. However, scope for development in implementation was identified regarding the naming of body parts and identifying their functions, as well as the addressing of body changes, birth and new life.
- There was a broad and balanced implementation of the *Myself and Others* strand.
- In the *Myself and the Wider World* strand, aspects of citizenship that related to wider communities and media education generally were not adequately addressed.
- While evaluation findings showed that the RSE programme was being implemented competently in a majority of schools, only a partial programme was being implemented in a significant minority of schools. In these schools the sexuality education aspects of the programme were not being taught appropriately. This finding was confirmed in discussions with principals and teachers, and in the schools' self-evaluation of the effectiveness of their teaching.

Methodologies and approaches

- In most of the SPHE lessons observed teachers used a variety of active-learning approaches which is critical to the effective implementation of SPHE.
- The inspectors expressed concern about the extent to which active-learning approaches were used in some classrooms and about the over-emphasis on the use of talk and discussion, and written activities. However, in most class settings talk and discussion was focused and incorporated clear learning objectives. Where scope for development in the quality of talk and discussion was found, it was due to the absence of clear learning objectives to guide the discussion, as well as the teachers' lack of adequate skill in guiding and directing the activity.
- Opportunities for pupils to work collaboratively, which is a guiding feature of teaching and learning in SPHE, was observed in a significant majority of classrooms. In nearly one-quarter of classrooms, however, approaches to engaging in collaborative learning were judged not to be satisfactory due to the provision of insufficient opportunities for pupils to work collaboratively or the inappropriate manner in which activities were organised.
- While there was evidence of the use of linkage and integration in most classrooms visited, in many instances it occurred incidentally rather than being planned systematically.
- The teaching of RSE-specific content was competent in most of the classrooms where it was observed. In the main it dealt with relationship-focused issues rather than the sexuality education aspects of the programme. Scope for development was identified in 10% of classrooms. This was linked to the absence of appropriate differentiation in teaching in response to pupils' differing abilities and needs, as well as the superficial treatment of topics in some settings.

Pupils' learning

- In most of the classrooms visited the pupils were judged to be active learners. However, in one in eight settings the inspectors concluded that pupils were not sufficiently active in their learning.

This was due to the narrow range of active-learning approaches employed and that lessons were overly directed by the teacher rather than facilitating pupils to engage with their peers.

- In most classrooms, learning activities were judged to be interesting and challenging. In the small number of classrooms where learning was deemed to be insufficiently interesting and challenging, it resulted from a failure by the teachers to match the content, structure and challenge of lessons to the age range, abilities and interests of the pupils.

- Scope for development was found to exist in 30% of classrooms in the quality of teachers' planning and provision for pupils' individual differences and the differentiation of learning tasks, despite the importance of making due provision for pupils' individual differences in implementing curriculum content in SPHE.

- In most classrooms there was clear evidence of regular progress in pupils' learning due to the regularity with which SPHE was taught and through the frequent use of consolidation and integration opportunities. The progress of pupils' learning in one in five classrooms was not satisfactory. In these settings pupils displayed insufficient knowledge and understanding of topics previously addressed and an inadequate development of their values, attitudes and skills.

Assessment

- Appropriate assessment strategies to evaluate pupils' progress in SPHE were found to be in use in fewer than half of the classrooms visited. In the main, assessment was found to occur on an incidental basis. As a result, assessment outcomes could not be used in a structured and co-ordinated manner to inform teaching and learning, or to update pupils, parents and other teachers on progress.

Chapter 6

Parents' and pupils' views on Social, Personal and Health Education

6.1 Introduction

SPHE is a shared responsibility of parents, teachers and members of the wider school community. Their involvement and contributions are essential for the effective implementation of the SPHE programme in the school. The SPHE curriculum places a significant emphasis on the development of effective communication strategies between home and school, most particularly between teachers and parents. It is considered to be essential that they find ways of listening to each other, taking the opinions and concerns of both home and school into account.

The views and opinions of parents were sought as part of this evaluation of SPHE. This was achieved through the administration of a written questionnaire to the parents of sixth-class pupils, and the parents of fifth-class and sixth-class pupils in the case of smaller schools. A sample of six to eight pupils in each school also participated in a focus group interview. These interviews allowed for a more in-depth exploration of their views on and experiences of SPHE.

The parents and pupils who participated in this evaluation provided a unique insight into how SPHE is being implemented in their schools. Their contributions confirm widespread support for SPHE as a curriculum area and for the work being done by schools in this regard. Many achievements in pupils' knowledge and understanding are highlighted. The results also draw attention to a range of areas requiring further development to ensure that the effective implementation of SPHE is realised across all schools.

6.2 The administration of the parents' questionnaires

In their questionnaire parents were asked to consider a range of statements regarding their own child's social and personal development at school and the SPHE programme being implemented and to indicate their level of agreement with them. They were also given the opportunity to include additional comments if they wished. A total of 902 questionnaires were returned, 82% of the number originally distributed. Table 6.1 shows these details.

Table 6.1: The number of parents' questionnaires distributed and returned

Number of questionnaires distributed	Number of questionnaires returned	Percentage returned
1,099	902	82%

Parents' views on their child's social and personal development at school have already been discussed in chapter 4. This section will focus on parents' views of the SPHE programme being implemented in their child's school. Table 6.2 presents the overall results of this aspect of the parents' questionnaires.

Table 6.2: Parents' views on the SPHE programme being implemented in their child's school

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
I am aware of the school's plan for SPHE	28.2%	53.9%	7.7%	1.3%	8.9%
I am familiar with the work my child does at school about personal safety	31.0%	53.2%	9.2%	0.7%	5.9%
I am familiar with the work my child does at school about co-operating with others	31.9%	54.9%	7.7%	0.2%	5.3%
I am familiar with the work my child does at school about healthy eating and exercise	49.6%	45.2%	3.1%	0.5%	1.6%
The school promotes healthy eating	59.8%	35.7%	2.3%	0.6%	1.6%
I support the school's policy on healthy eating	63.0%	33.3%	2.5%	0.5%	0.7%
I sometimes follow up on my child's SPHE work at home	24.4%	54.3%	11.8%	1.8%	7.7%
I am aware of the school's policy on Relationships and Sexuality Education	28.3%	48.6%	9.2%	2.4%	11.5%
The Relationships and Sexuality Education programme is being implemented in my child's school	27.9%	48.9%	4.2%	1.4%	17.6%
I support the approach the school takes to teaching my child about relationships and sexuality	35.0%	45.6%	3.9%	1.6%	13.9%
I would feel comfortable approaching the school to talk about the school's SPHE programme, including relationships and sexuality	37.5%	47.0%	6.7%	2.1%	6.7%

6.3 Parents' awareness of and support for SPHE

Most parents confirmed that they were aware of the whole-school plan for SPHE in their child's school. Where parents provided additional comment, they expressed the view that the introduction of SPHE was a positive development and one that they welcomed. Many parents also commented on the thorough and effective manner in which SPHE was handled in their child's school and acknowledged the efforts made by the school to keep parents informed regarding the particular topics being addressed. As one parent commented:

> [The school] has been a very supportive and positive force in helping my children develop socially and emotionally over the years. I've always been aware of the SPHE plan and information has regularly been sent home to parents. The SPHE programme is being implemented thoroughly in my opinion. It's such a positive development, long overdue and I only wish it had been around in my day.

However, 18% of parents stated that they were either unaware of or unsure of the school's SPHE plan as is evidenced in this parent's remark:

> Up to this point I was unaware of the SPHE plan or curriculum. I was unaware my son in 6th class was actually doing the subject. I really don't know what SPHE is. I have never received any information on it.

In their individual comments many parents expressed the view that they would like to be better informed regarding the school's plan and programme for SPHE and felt that this task was the duty of the school. Other parents were of the opinion that they had a personal responsibility to become better informed. Many parents stated that their lack of awareness of SPHE-based work in the school was primarily due to the fact that their child did not talk at home about the work they had done at school. A number of parents also confirmed that they had only been made aware of the plan and curriculum shortly prior to the evaluation.

Most parents confirmed that they were familiar with the work their child did in relation to personal safety matters and co-operating with others. The level of the parents' familiarity with their child's work about healthy eating and exercise rose to 95%. Almost all parents further confirmed that their child's school promoted healthy eating and that they supported the school's policy in this regard. These responses strongly endorse the positive impact of schools' efforts to involve parents more directly in the implementation of particular aspects of the SPHE curriculum.

Just over three-quarters of parents confirmed that they sometimes followed up on their child's SPHE work at home. Many parents emphasised that promoting their child's learning in SPHE was very much a shared task between home and school. Sometimes this involved parents in following up directly on specific issues that had been addressed at school. On other occasions parents themselves took the initiative in discussing SPHE-related matters with their children. The following comment is representative of the views expressed by many parents:

> I am aware that SPHE is part of my daughter's work. She does not discuss it very often at home but she recently brought home a very good questionnaire on alcohol and I was very impressed with her knowledge. I discuss the main principles of SPHE myself with my child and I trust that the school programme will be implemented at an age-appropriate level and improve my child's understanding.

A small number of parents indicated that while they would like to engage in follow-up work with their children at home, such opportunities were not available to them. In such circumstances homework related to SPHE was not assigned and the pupils' completed work was retained at school. The following remark by a parent reflects this discontent:

> While we are familiar with the school policy on SPHE and fully support it, we are not aware of the specific content being taught at any particular time. Not much SPHE work is done for homework. The copybook is kept at school and therefore it makes it is difficult to follow up on my child's work at home.

A few parents felt very strongly about the potential of SPHE to promote their child's social and personal development, particularly in circumstances where parents and teachers could work collaboratively. As one parent expressed:

> My daughter struggles with her self-confidence and she has very low self-esteem because of which she often becomes very withdrawn. I feel she is strongly benefiting from taking part in the school's SPHE programme. I would like to be more aware of how the programme progresses and how I can support and encourage her to benefit fully from SPHE.

It is evident from the parents' contributions that their awareness of the SPHE plan and how it is being implemented varied significantly across the respondents. It is also apparent that there is a strong interest among parents to understand more about SPHE and the specific content of the programme being implemented in their child's school.

6.4 Parents' awareness of and support for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

Just over three-quarters of parents reported that they were aware of the RSE policy in their child's school, with a similar number confirming that the RSE programme was being implemented. Most of them expressed support for the approach taken by their child's school in teaching about relationships and sexuality, with just over 5% of parents expressing dissatisfaction.

Parents' individual comments on RSE focused almost exclusively on the sexuality education aspects of the programme. Many parents acknowledged the importance of parents and teachers working together to promote children's learning in this area of SPHE and they recorded appreciation for the work being done by schools. Parents considered that their child's learning in RSE at primary level was an important preparation for their transition to adolescence and post-primary school.

However, many parents expressed the view that while RSE was being implemented, sexuality education issues were not being addressed early enough or regularly enough in their child's education. As one parent stated:

> RSE was taught in one lesson last year which is not good enough. It would be worthwhile to consider implementing the programme earlier. Most pupils know about relationships and sexuality at a much earlier age. Sufficient time should be allocated to this programme.

One-quarter of parents expressed a lack of awareness of RSE generally and how it was being implemented in their child's school. In some instances parents queried as to whether the programme was being implemented at all due to an absence of communication with home on the matter. Other parents commented that they were unaware of what RSE content was implemented at school as their child opted not to continue discussion on the issue at home. However in almost all instances, parents welcomed the opportunity for greater awareness and involvement. As one parent commented:

> My son is at a curious age. He never ever talked about a sex programme in his school. We have an open relationship. As far as I know myself and his dad answer his questions about his sexuality. I would be happy if the school helped out more in this area, as children are curious and confused.

A number of parents expressed the view that sexuality education should be taught to boys and girls separately, so as to minimise inhibitions and aid pupils' discussion. A very small minority of parents recorded objections to the teaching of RSE at primary school level due to the nature of the content delivered.

6.5 The administration of the pupils' questionnaires

In conducting the evaluation it was considered important to access the views of pupils. Under the supervision of the inspectors, sixth-class pupils, and in the case of smaller schools fifth-class pupils and sixth-class pupils, completed written questionnaires in the classroom. The questionnaire sought pupils' responses regarding their personal feelings and ways in which they thought and acted in relation to a range of themes related to SPHE.

6.6 Pupils' views on the relevance of learning in SPHE

As SPHE was formally introduced as a discrete curriculum area in 2003, the pupils who were interviewed in the focus group interviews should have experienced four to five years of formal instruction in this area. In the course of the discussions with the pupils, it emerged that all pupils were of the view that learning in SPHE was important. The following extract from one focus group interview strongly reflects the views expressed by pupils generally:

> SPHE is very important because it covers loads of subjects and it teaches you loads about life. We learn more about other people and what happens when we grow up. It allows us to be different. It helps us to have better relationships, better friends and to be yourself. It helps us to make decisions and realise the consequences. It helps us to take care of ourselves and to know what to do.

The pupils were able to reflect on the issues and topics that they had addressed at school, such as substance use, personal safety and decision-making. They displayed a good understanding of these issues as well as ownership of associated values, attitudes and skills. They also demonstrated a commendable capacity to relate their learning at school to their own life experiences.

Equally they emphasised the importance of what they are learning now for future life experiences. As one pupil contributed:

> SPHE is useful and valuable for life. It helps us grow to be better persons and to have a better life in the future. It teaches us how to act and how to live.

6.7 Pupils' views on how they experience learning and teaching in SPHE

The provision of opportunities for pupils to work actively and collaboratively with their peers on issues of interest to themselves was a defining feature of learning and teaching in SPHE for the pupils interviewed. They expressed particular enjoyment in engaging in collaborative discussion, role play, circle-time activities and co-operative games. They were of the shared opinion that learning in SPHE was different from that of learning in other curriculum areas due to the greater level of collaboration and sharing. As one pupil in a focus group interview commented:

> In SPHE, you interact with the people around you. You listen to them and have them listen to you. You learn about shape in Maths but you learn about much more exciting things in SPHE. You listen to your teacher in Maths but you listen to each other in SPHE.

In the pupils' questionnaires, most pupils reported having regular opportunities to work with other children in groups. However, almost 18% of pupils reported that such opportunities were not provided regularly or that they were unsure. Table 6.3 shows the results of the pupils' responses when asked about the opportunities they had to work collaboratively in SPHE.

Table 6.3: Results of the pupils' questionnaires – opportunities to work collaboratively in SPHE, N=1013

Statements	True	False	Don't know
In SPHE I often work with other children in groups	82.4%	8.2%	9.4%

Where collaborative learning was used, the pupils reported that they had opportunities to work in a wide range of groups whose membership changed regularly. They also confirmed that the responsibilities for completing different tasks were shared regularly among the group members. The pupils interviewed indicated a distinct preference for working in groups over working individually, as is indicated in the following focus group extract:

> We like working in groups and it's fun. The groups are mixed up all the time for all sorts of discussions. The groups change often so that you get an opportunity to work with other children. It's good to mix and learn new things. It's nice to move around as this helps you to get to know people better.

For productive learning to occur in SPHE, pupils must be provided with well-structured opportunities to express their opinions and to engage with the views of others. In completing the questionnaires most pupils confirmed that they liked to share their point of view in class, with just under one-quarter of pupils either disagreeing or being unsure. These results are shown in table 6.4 below. Fewer than half of the pupils were firmly of the view that others in their class liked to listen to what they had to say. Similarly, a majority of the pupils confirmed that they liked to talk to their teacher, with less than half being confident that their teacher liked to talk to them. These outcomes confirm

that much progress is being made in the implementation of SPHE, in the promotion of relationships and interactions between pupils and their peers and teachers. However, they also point to areas for further development, most particularly in the area of how pupils experience interactions and relationships with others in their classroom.

Table 6.4: Results of the pupils' questionnaires – opportunities to express opinions and engage with the views of others, N=1013

Statements	True	False	Don't know
I like to share my point of view in my class	76.5%	10.3%	13.2%
In my class, others like to listen to my views	46.6%	9.4%	44.0%
I like to talk to my teacher	66.0%	12.9%	21.1%
My teacher likes to talk to me	47.3%	4.1%	48.6%

6.8 An overview of some learning outcomes for pupils in SPHE

6.8.1 Happiness, self-confidence, feelings and friendship

Learning in SPHE focuses strongly on developing pupils' self-esteem and self-confidence and their capacity to form friendships and relationships with others. In the questionnaires almost all pupils described themselves as being happy, with three-quarters of pupils portraying themselves as being confident. Most pupils indicated that they were thoughtful about the feelings of others, with just over one-quarter reporting that they fell out regularly with their friends at school. Almost all pupils stated that they took responsibility for the things they did. The pupils' responses to questions about happiness, self-confidence, feelings and friendship are shown in table 6.5 below.

Table 6.5: Results of the pupils' questionnaires–happiness, self-confidence, feelings and friendship, N=1013

Statements	True	False	Don't know
I am a happy person	94.4%	0.6%	5.0%
I am a confident person	76.4%	7.6%	16.0%
I am thoughtful about the feelings of others	80.5%	3.6%	15.9%
I often fall out with my friends at school	26.1%	64.0%	9.9%
I take responsibility for the things I do	92.6%	2.1%	5.3%
I find it easy to talk about my feelings	35.8%	44.0%	20.2%
When something is worrying me, I have someone I can talk to	85.0%	6.8%	8.2%

In the focus group interviews pupils indicated enjoyment in talking about their feelings in SPHE lessons and in how they deal with the differing emotions they experience. However, in completing the questionnaire significantly fewer than half the pupils said that they found it easy to talk about their feelings. This would suggest that pupils find general discussion about feelings and emotions relatively easy to engage in but they find it more difficult to address important personal feelings with others.

In discussing possible pressures that senior pupils might be experiencing, issues around their transition to post-primary school were most frequently mentioned. In the main, pupils' worries centred on fitting in, making friends and achieving academically. A small number of pupils confirmed that these were concerns that they were experiencing at that time. Many pupils suggested particular strategies that they were using currently or would use to address anxieties. Thinking about their problems and talking them through with critical adults or friends were commonly reported. This was further confirmed in the pupils' responses to the questionnaires with most confirming that they had someone to talk to if something was worrying them. Many pupils also suggested that their engagement in physical activity served them well to counterbalance any concerns they might be experiencing.

6.8.2 Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

Table 6.6: Results of the pupils' questionnaires–Relationships and Sexuality Education, N=1013

Statements	True	False	Don't know
I am happy with my body	81.3%	9.1%	9.6%
I know about how my body changes as I grow older	90.7%	2.8%	6.5%
In my school, I feel comfortable asking questions about my body	26.9%	49.1%	24.0%

Issues of body image generally hold important significance for senior pupils and learning about body growth and development forms a core part of their learning in SPHE and RSE. Table 6.6 shows the pupils' responses to questions about their body and how it changes as they grow older. When asked to indicate their satisfaction with their own body, most pupils stated that they were happy. Almost 20% of pupils however were either unhappy or unsure. As would be expected in senior classes, almost all pupils confirmed that they knew how their body changed as they got older. The importance of knowing about body changes was strongly emphasised by pupils in the focus group interviews as is exemplified in the following pupil comment:

> In SPHE you learn about how your body changes as you grow up and you are better informed. If you didn't know this you wouldn't know what would be happening to you and you would be scared.

However, despite the apparent importance of knowing about body changes, almost half the pupils who completed the questionnaire confirmed that they would not be comfortable in asking questions about their body, with close to a further quarter of pupils being unsure. This raises

questions with regard to the effectiveness with which this aspect of the SPHE and RSE programmes is being implemented and how this sensitive area could be addressed in a more ongoing and inclusive manner.

6.8.3 Healthy eating and exercise

Table 6.7 presents the pupils' responses to questions about healthy eating. Almost all pupils confirmed that their school had a healthy eating policy. In reflecting on their own eating practices, most pupils said that they ate healthily most of the time, with almost all pupils confirming that they engaged in regular exercise. In the focus group interviews with pupils, the quality of the physical environment of their school and the opportunities provided to participate in physical activities at school and in their local community were strongly valued by them. When asked about aspects of their school experience that they would like to change, the wish for improvements in recreation spaces and more regular engagement in physical activity at school featured very prominently.

Table 6.7: Results of the pupils' questionnaires–healthy eating and exercise practices, N=1013

Statements	True	False	Don't know
My school has a healthy eating policy	92.7%	3.1%	4.2%
I eat healthily most of the time	80.4%	8.5%	11.1%
I take regular exercise	90.2%	4.1%	5.7%

6.8.4 Safety and protection

Safety and protection issues are addressed extensively in the SPHE programme and most schools make use of the *Stay Safe* programme to help teach pupils about personal safety matters. The impact of this work was evident in the pupils' responses. Most pupils confirmed that they would know how to protect themselves if they found themselves in a dangerous situation, with only a few pupils indicating that they did not know or were unsure. These responses are shown below in table 6.8.

Table 6.8: Results of the pupils' questionnaires–safety and protection, N=1013

Statements	True	False	Don't know
I know how to protect myself in dangerous situations	86.4%	4.3%	9.3%

6.8.5 Citizenship and media education

As reported earlier, areas of content from the *Myself and the Wider World* strand, most particularly aspects of citizenship and media education, were found by inspectors to be receiving less attention in the implementation of the SPHE curriculum. This was further confirmed by the pupils' responses which are shown in table 6.9. While a majority indicated that they learned about how government

works and how advertising influences people, a significant minority of pupils indicated that these areas had not been addressed or that they were unsure. In the case of environmental awareness and care however, almost all pupils confirmed that they learned about and took care of their school and local environment. Interviews with teachers and pupils verified that care for the environment was promoted through integration with learning in Social, Environmental and Scientific Education.

Table 6.9: Results of the pupils' questionnaires – citizenship and media education, N=1013

Statements	True	False	Don't know
I learn about how government works	63.8%	13.6%	22.6%
I learn about how advertising influences me	69.7%	8.4%	21.9%
I learn about and take care of my school and local environment	93.4%	1.3%	5.3%
In SPHE I have been taught to respect different cultures and peoples	90.6%	2.6%	6.8%

Almost all pupils confirmed that they had learned about cultural diversity and inclusion in SPHE. Their awareness and knowledge as expressed in the focus group interviews reflected to a great extent their direct experiences of differing cultures at school and in their local environment. For pupils who attended schools with few if any newcomer pupils, their learning was significantly based on classroom discussion, consideration of texts, and the use of the internet. In the case of pupils who attended schools in which multiple nationalities were represented, they displayed a greater

understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity and inclusion. They confirmed that their understanding emanated significantly from talking to and playing with their newcomer peers as well as accessing opportunities to learn about the countries from which their newcomer peers had come. As one pupil stated:

> We have been looking at other countries, especially the ones the children in our class are from. Our friends come from lots of different countries and different cultures. In our school people come from lots of different places. We all stick together, we are friends and as a school we help each other and work together.

In the circumstances of an ever-evolving cultural context in Ireland, inspectors found surprisingly little evidence of the co-ordinated use of the intercultural education guidelines for primary schools that were produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2005).

6.8.6 Pupils' progress in learning in SPHE

The assessment of pupils' learning and progress in SPHE was addressed in detail in chapter 5 with the evaluation showing scope for development in assessment practices in the majority of schools evaluated. When the pupils were asked to consider whether their teacher thought they were good at SPHE, only just over one-quarter of pupils indicated that this was true. Almost 70% of pupils revealed that they did not know what their teacher thought about their progress in SPHE. These results are presented in table 6.10 and they highlight strongly the importance of teachers monitoring individual pupils' progress in SPHE more effectively and engaging in dialogue with pupils on the matter.

Table 6.10: Results of the pupils' questionnaires–pupils' progress in learning in SPHE, N=1013

Statements	True	False	Don't know
My teacher thinks I am good at SPHE	28.7%	2.5%	68.8%

6.9 Summary

Views of parents

- Most parents reported that they were aware of the SPHE plan being implemented in their child's school. They expressed strong support for the plan and for the work of the school in its implementation. They also indicated that they availed of opportunities to follow-up on work related to SPHE at home. However, almost 20% of parents were not aware of either the SPHE plan or the accompanying programme being implemented. These parents expressed a keen interest in developing a greater understanding of the work their child was doing at school.

- Similar findings emerged in relation to parents' awareness of the RSE policy, with most parents supporting its implementation. The parents judged the promotion of pupils' learning in RSE to be a shared task with the school and again expressed appreciation of the work of the school in this regard. However, many parents expressed the view that sexuality education should commence earlier in a child's education at primary level and that it should be addressed more often. One-quarter of parents were not aware of the RSE policy in their child's school and were unsure if the programme was being implemented.

Views of pupils

- Like their parents, all pupils expressed the view that learning in SPHE was important for them both now and in the future. They displayed a good understanding of the content they had covered and a capacity to relate their learning in different areas of the SPHE programme to their own life experiences. They considered learning in SPHE to be different to learning in other areas of the curriculum due to the opportunities provided to engage in active learning and to work collaboratively with their peers.

- In the main the pupils considered themselves to be happy and confident. While just over one-quarter of the pupils reported regularly falling out with their peers, most of them considered themselves to be thoughtful about the feelings of others. While the area of feelings and emotions was regularly addressed in SPHE lessons, a significant percentage of pupils reported finding it difficult to talk about their feelings. Nonetheless, most stated that they had someone to talk to if something was worrying them.

- Almost all pupils confirmed that they knew about how their body changed as they got older but only one-quarter of pupils expressed feeling comfortable in asking questions at school about these changes.

- The ongoing work by schools to promote healthy eating and exercise received strong support from pupils, with most reporting to eat healthily most of the time. Almost all pupils stated that they took regular exercise with pupils in many of the focus group interviews stating that they would like improved recreation facilities and increased opportunities for engagement in physical activity at school. Safety and protection matters also came through as being effectively implemented with most pupils confirming that they knew how to protect themselves if they found themselves in a dangerous situation.

- Almost all pupils reported having opportunities to learn about different cultures and peoples. The manner in which learning was structured varied between schools with multiple-nationality enrolment to those with few or no newcomer pupils. As might be expected, the former category of schools was more successful in incorporating cultural diversity and inclusion issues into the everyday aspects of school life.

- In examining the area of pupils' assessment with the pupils themselves, a majority of them reported not knowing how their teacher thought they were progressing in SPHE.

Chapter 7

Main findings and recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the main findings and recommendations of the evaluation of the implementation of the SPHE curriculum in primary schools.

7.2 Main findings

7.2.1 Whole-school planning

While all schools evaluated had a whole-school plan for SPHE, signification variation was found in both the quality of the plan and in the level of consultation engaged in with the education partners in the plan's development. Just over half the plans were judged to be of a competent standard. In such cases, schools made effective use of the SDPS or PCSP curriculum planning framework for SPHE while also taking due account of the particular circumstances of the school. These schools articulated their vision for SPHE clearly. They detailed the content to be addressed, the active-learning approaches to be employed and the contexts in which learning in SPHE would be facilitated. Due consideration was also given to a range of organisational issues including differentiation, assessment and parental involvement. A clear link was evident between whole-school planning, individual-teachers' planning, and teaching and learning in classrooms.

There was scope for development in whole-school planning in almost one-third of schools. In these schools there were no clear programmes of work for individual class levels or guidelines to inform teachers' individual planning and reporting. As a result there was obvious potential for ad hoc, uncoordinated delivery of themes to occur at each class level. There was an absence of planning for the use of ICT in three-quarters of schools and no mention of parental involvement in almost one-third of plans. These deficits had a negative impact on continuity and progression for pupils' learning in SPHE.

In almost all schools evaluated, the teaching staff developed plans for SPHE. The plans were then presented to and ratified by the board of management and communicated to varying extents to the school community using a variety of means. Nearly one-third of plans for SPHE were ratified in the year coinciding with the evaluation.

The majority of plans made reference to the importance of regular review. That such review was undertaken on an annual or biennial basis, primarily through discussion at staff meetings, was reported by 60% of principals. However, feedback to SPHE curriculum co-ordinators and the review of individual teachers' monthly progress records were under-utilised significantly when evaluating the effectiveness of the implementation of the SPHE curriculum in individual schools. There was also scope for development regarding parental involvement in the planning process in more than half of the schools evaluated. Only 5% of schools sought pupils' views in the planning process.

Most parents confirmed that they were aware of the plan for SPHE in their child's school. Many of them commented on the thorough and effective manner in which SPHE was addressed and they acknowledged the efforts made by the school staff to keep parents informed regarding the particular topics being addressed. However, 18% of parents stated that they were either unaware of or unsure of the schools' SPHE plan. Many parents expressed the view that they would like to be better informed regarding the school's plan and programme for SPHE and felt that this task was the duty of the school. Other parents were of the opinion that they had a personal responsibility to make themselves more informed.

In the majority of schools, whole-school planning for RSE was judged to be of a competent standard. In these schools, policy documents were detailed and informative and were used effectively by teachers to guide teaching and learning at individual classroom level. The inspectors commended the collaborative involvement of teachers, management and parents in the planning and implementation processes.

In one-third of schools the inspectors found that the RSE policies displayed scope for development, with poorly devised policies in evidence in a further 8% of schools. In these schools, there was no clear programme of content to be implemented at each class level. This resulted in uncoordinated and partial implementation of RSE. Certain aspects of the strand units of *Taking care of my body* and *Growing and changing* in particular were not being addressed by these schools. Learning in the area of sexuality, birth and new life was often only implemented partially and in some schools learning opportunities were restricted to inputs from external speakers to senior pupils.

Three-quarters of parents indicated that they were aware of the RSE policy in their child's school, with most of them expressing support for the approach being taken. One-quarter of parents expressed a lack of awareness about RSE generally and about how it was being implemented. In almost all instances they indicated that they would welcome the opportunity for greater awareness and involvement.

Just over half the schools reported having allocated specific responsibility for the co-ordination of SPHE to a designated teacher with special duties. While acknowledging the contribution of the curriculum co-ordinators, the inspectors recommended that the co-ordinator should take a much more proactive role in the monitoring and the evaluation of the effectiveness of curriculum implementation in SPHE.

7.2.2 Classroom planning and monthly progress records

The inspectors found that most teachers planned competently for SPHE and that a majority planned appropriately for RSE. Where planning was judged to be good, classroom planning related appropriately to the principles and objectives of the SPHE curriculum and to the school's plan for

SPHE. These teachers ensured that a broad and balanced programme of learning for SPHE was planned in which all strands and strand units, including the more sensitive areas of RSE, were addressed.

One in five teachers had scope for development in their classroom planning for SPHE. This rose to one-third of teachers in relation to planning for RSE. The inspectors found insufficient use of the curriculum objectives as a focus for planning. Inadequate collaboration took place between teachers to ensure development and progression in lessons taught at each class level. There was an over-emphasis on the strands *Myself* and *Myself and Others* with little development of the strand *Myself and the Wider World* and failure to plan for implementation of the more sensitive areas of RSE.

A majority of teachers planned regularly for the integration of SPHE with other subjects as advocated by the SPHE curriculum. However, in one-quarter of classrooms inspected integration occurred by chance rather than being appropriately planned.

In reviewing teachers' monthly records the inspectors found that a broad and balanced SPHE programme was implemented in a majority of classrooms. Where very good practice was in evidence, the records provided a clear overview of both the SPHE content completed and the learning achieved by pupils. In a small number of cases programme coverage for SPHE was found to be limited and the progress records maintained were vague and uninformative.

The evidence available from monthly progress records and teachers' timetables suggested that in almost all classrooms the recommended time for SPHE was allocated. In 8% of classrooms it emerged that discrete teaching in SPHE was occurring on a very irregular basis.

7.2.3 The provision of a rich environment for SPHE

Almost all classrooms were well presented and were bright, clean and attractive. Most teachers arranged seating to create groups which facilitated pupils' involvement in collaborative work. More traditional seating arrangements, such as pupils sitting in rows, were found to persist in 20% of classrooms and militated significantly against pupils' participation in group-based learning.

Most classroom environments for SPHE were rich in nature and included displays of specific illustrative materials for SPHE and pupil-generated work. In one in five classrooms there was scope for development with regard to the richness of the SPHE display in the environment.

7.2.4 The use of resources

Class teachers were found to draw significantly from a wide range of commercially-produced resources to support the implementation of the SPHE curriculum. Some use was also made of

posters, DVDs, teacher-generated materials and ICT. The inspectors expressed satisfaction with the variety of resources they found and the manner in which they were employed in most settings visited.

In a small number of schools, the inspectors concluded that the teachers did not make effective use of the available resources while in other schools the level of resourcing needed to be increased.

Concern was expressed in some instances where teachers were found to be teaching to the commercially-produced SPHE resource rather than basing their teaching more specifically on the curriculum objectives for their class. The inspectors found that, as a result of fewer resources being readily available to deal with the areas of developing citizenship and media education as part of the *Myself and the Wider World* strand, this strand was addressed less regularly and less thoroughly.

Almost 60% of principals reported that their schools engaged a variety of external speakers and agencies to support the implementation of the SPHE curriculum. External personnel were found to be engaged regularly to assist in the implementation of the more sensitive aspects of the RSE programme, most particularly with senior classes.

7.2.5 Staff professional development

Almost two-thirds of principals reported that they had organised in-school or external SPHE training for their staff, or both, within the last five years. Training areas that featured prominently were RSE, *Stay Safe*, substance misuse, child protection and planning.

Three-quarters of principals reported satisfaction with the level of support and guidance available to their staffs to implement the SPHE curriculum. Where concerns were expressed they centred on the time lapse between the receipt of training and schools' implementation, the perceived lack of training received by more recent graduates and recently appointed teachers and the implementation of the more sensitive aspects of the RSE programme.

7.2.6 The cultivation of a positive school and classroom climate

School staffs reported that they engaged in a wide range of initiatives to promote a positive school and classroom climate. These initiatives included the establishment of positive relationships between teachers and pupils, the affirmation of pupils and the promotion of positive behaviour, the involvement of pupils in a variety of co-curricular and extracurricular activities and the promotion of healthy eating practices.

Parents were found to be strongly supportive of the efforts of schools and teachers to promote a positive school and classroom climate and they commented regularly on schools' openness and approachability. Most parents considered that their child had the benefit of supportive relationships with adults at school and that their self-esteem and self-confidence were promoted. They were of the view that pupils were encouraged to behave well, to be respectful to others and to take responsibility for their actions.

Most pupils considered that their school was a good place to be, that they were treated well at school and that their classroom was a good place to learn new things. Almost all pupils confirmed that they had friends at school and that they joined in activities and games in the yard. Most pupils indicated that their teacher encouraged them, with a majority confirming that they were involved in decision-making in their classroom. Overall, the pupils displayed a strong appreciation of their school as a community in which they fulfilled a variety of roles. However, many pupils also expressed a desire to be given greater responsibility at school and to play a more significant role in decision-making processes.

In the course of their visits to classrooms the inspectors found that almost all teachers successfully provided experiences that fostered pupils' self-esteem and self-confidence. This was achieved through the use of encouragement and affirmation, the promotion of positive relationships and the allocation of responsibilities. In most classrooms, the pupils were encouraged to voice their opinions, to contribute to class and group discussions and to listen and interact positively and respectfully with the views and opinions of others. In such settings, the teachers used a range of appropriate approaches to encourage the pupils to express their views while being particularly alert to the needs of less confident contributors. Group-based activities were used effectively to encourage collaborative involvement, and to promote confidence and respectful listening.

In one in ten classrooms the inspectors expressed concern, however, about the over-use of teacher-directed, whole-class discussion, the domination of the discussion by the class teacher or specific pupils, and difficulties experienced with discipline and classroom management.

7.2.7 Bullying

Almost all pupils confirmed that they would know what to do if they were bullied at school. Three-quarters of them agreed that bullying was dealt with well in their school. This corresponded closely with parents' satisfaction ratings.

It was reported by 12% of pupils that they had been bullied at school during the school year in which the evaluation was conducted. This figure rose to 20% in a few schools, confirming that bullying is significantly more problematic in some schools than others.

In cases where parents indicated dissatisfaction with the manner in which bullying was addressed at school level, they also took the opportunity to provide additional written comments about how they perceived the school had mishandled bullying incidents. Concerns centred primarily on a perceived inadequacy in the school's anti-bullying policy and practices to adequately address reported incidents.

7.2.8 Curriculum implementation

A broad and balanced approach to implementation was in evidence in the delivery of most of the curriculum content of the *Myself* strand. However the element of *Knowing about my body*, an element of the strand unit *Taking care of my body*, which includes the naming of parts of the male and female body and identifying some of their functions, was addressed much less frequently. Similarly in implementing the *Growing and changing* strand unit, learning about *As I grow I change* and *Birth and new life* were infrequently addressed. These findings confirm that a considerable percentage of teachers continue to experience difficulty in addressing the elements of the naming of body parts, the teaching of issues about body changes and aspects of birth and new life.

Evaluation evidence confirms a broad and balanced implementation of the *Myself and Others* strand. Significant variation was found in the implementation of content from the *Myself and the Wider World* strand across school settings. Limited implementation of aspects of *Developing citizenship* and *Media education* were found, in particular the provision of learning opportunities with regard to wider communities. Learning in these strand units was frequently scheduled for the latter part of the school year. In some schools there was no evidence of content from the *Myself and the Wider World* strand being addressed at all.

The RSE programme was implemented fully in the majority of schools. These schools had reached agreement on the content to be implemented at a whole-school level and on the teaching approaches and specific language to be used when dealing with RSE. In these schools the RSE programme was implemented as a natural and integral element of SPHE. However, the inspectors were concerned about the regularity with which many of these schools availed of external speakers to deliver the more sensitive aspects of RSE particularly in senior classes. Their concerns centred on the restrictions that over-reliance on external speakers could place on the level of follow-up that could be engaged in with pupils at individual classroom level.

The inspectors found that the implementation of RSE, in particular the more sensitive aspects, was problematic or required improvement in almost one-third of schools. This finding was confirmed by the schools' self-evaluation and through interviews with principals and teachers. In the course of interviews with principals and teachers, partial implementation was attributed to the nature of the programme content, personal inhibitions and a perceived lack of confidence in delivering the content

7.2.9 The quality of teaching

In most of the SPHE lessons observed, the inspectors found that the teachers used a variety of active-learning approaches, with one-third of teachers displaying best practice. The use of talk and discussion and written activities predominated. Drama and co-operative games were observed in fewer than half the classrooms. ICT, media studies, and the use of pictures and photographs were in evidence in only a small number of contexts.

In 12% of classrooms there was scope for development with regard to the range of active-learning approaches in use and the manner in which they were employed. The inspectors found that while the active-learning approaches they observed were used competently, the teachers drew from a relatively narrow range.

In most class settings talk and discussion was focused and incorporated clear learning objectives. In these contexts teachers directed lessons capably and used questioning techniques with skill. The pupils were exposed to important SPHE concepts and language and the use of problem-solving approaches was encouraged. Scope for development was identified in nearly one in five classrooms due to the ambiguity of lesson objectives and the teachers' inability to adequately structure and guide the talk and discussion.

Collaborative-learning opportunities were a praiseworthy feature in a significant majority of classrooms. Teachers competently implemented well-structured group and partner-based activities, as well as co-operative games and circle-time activities. The inspectors commended the teachers' cultivation of teamwork and partnership in their pupils. In nearly one-quarter of classrooms

approaches to collaborative learning were judged to be unsatisfactory. In particular, concerns were raised about the inadequate provision of collaborative-learning opportunities as well as the quality of provision in other settings.

Throughout the course of the evaluation the inspectors observed a breadth of topics being taught. Most teachers were successful in providing pupils with opportunities to acquire values, attitudes and skills through active learning. In just over one-tenth of classrooms, however, inspectors reported that pupils were not afforded adequate opportunities to acquire values, attitudes and skills. This outcome was attributed to a range of factors including: lessons that were overly teacher-directed with inadequate in-depth discussion among pupils, limited linkage of lesson content to pupils' direct experiences, or difficulties in managing pupils' contributions effectively during lessons.

Almost all teachers regularly featured real life events in their teaching in SPHE, with almost half the teachers displaying best practice. Teachers selected topics relevant to the needs of their pupils and addressed these topics in a manner that encouraged pupils to relate them to real life situations at school, at play and in the community.

In most classrooms there was evidence of linkage and integration in teaching and learning in SPHE. However, such opportunities arose primarily on an incidental basis rather than being appropriately planned. In a small number of settings there was no evidence of linkage or integration being used.

Lessons addressing content specific to RSE were evaluated in nearly 40% of the classrooms visited. In most of these settings the quality of the teaching was of a competent standard. In a few instances, the more sensitive areas of the RSE programme were addressed. In just over 10% of these classrooms there was scope for development in the manner in which RSE was taught. The inspectors were concerned about the mismatch between the topic content and the age and ability levels of the pupils, as well as the superficial exploration of some lesson content.

Most schools evaluated the quality of their own teaching as satisfactory or very effective across the strands and strand units. They identified *Growing and changing*, *Developing citizenship* and *Media education* as the strand units that they needed to review most.

7.2.10 The quality of learning

In most classrooms, the pupils were found to be active learners as they actively engaged in team and partner-based activities and games. In settings where good practice was in evidence, the inspectors commended the enthusiasm with which the pupils engaged in the SPHE lessons and the effective allocation of roles and responsibilities to facilitate the participation of all pupils. However, in one in eight classrooms pupils' involvement in active learning was restricted due to the narrow range of active-learning approaches employed by the teacher and the overly teacher-directed nature of the lessons observed.

In most classrooms, learning activities were found to be interesting and challenging. New content, related to pupils' existing knowledge, was suitably introduced. Real life events were explored and ideas were collaboratively explored. In one in six classrooms, learning activities were found to be insufficiently interesting and challenging due to a failure by the teachers to match the content, structure and level of challenge inherent in the lesson to the age range, abilities and interests of the pupils.

There was scope for development in 30% of teachers' planning and provision for individual differences and in the differentiation of learning tasks. These teachers failed to take account of pupils' differing abilities, interest levels and stages of maturity in structuring and implementing learning opportunities. Where appropriate provision for pupils' individual differences was in evidence, the inspectors observed differentiation in questioning, in task assignment, in provision for pupils with special educational needs and in the arrangement of groups.

In most classrooms SPHE was taught on a regular basis and there was clear evidence of regular progress in the pupils' learning. Teachers effectively consolidated pupils' learning by revisiting particular content in a planned and consistent manner and through the regular use of integration

93

opportunities. The pupils engaged confidently and competently in discussion on topics they had previously addressed.

The inspectors identified scope for development in the progress of pupils' learning in 20% of classrooms. In some instances this was attributed to the irregularity with which SPHE was taught. In other instances it demonstrated an insufficient emphasis on the development of values, attitudes and skills in addressing SPHE content. In some classrooms there was minimal evidence of pupils' completed work, with a total absence of pupils' work in others.

In the course of focus group discussions with pupils, it emerged that all pupils considered learning in SPHE to be important. They displayed good understanding of content that had been previously covered as well as ownership of associated values, attitudes and skills. They demonstrated a commendable capacity to relate their learning at school to their own life experiences, while also emphasising the importance of what they are learning for future life experiences.

The provision of opportunities for pupils to work actively and collaboratively with their peers on issues of interest to themselves was for them a defining feature of SPHE. While most pupils stated that they had regular opportunities to work with other children in groups, 18% reported that such opportunities were not provided on a regular basis. Most pupils confirmed that they liked to share their point of view in class but fewer than half of them were firmly of the view that others in their class liked to listen to what they had to say. The positive impact of the implementation of the SPHE programme on pupils' learning was evident in their responses across a range of topics including happiness, friendships, responsibility, healthy eating and exercise, safety and protection, and care of the environment. The areas where pupils required additional support included talking about personal feelings and asking questions about their body and how it changes.

Most parents confirmed that they were familiar with the work their child did in SPHE in relation to personal safety matters and co-operating with others. In the area of healthy eating and exercise 95% of parents expressed familiarity with and support for the work being done by the school.

With regard to RSE, many parents acknowledged the importance of parents and teachers working together to promote children's learning in this area of SPHE and they recorded appreciation for the work being done by schools. Many parents also expressed the view that while RSE was being implemented, sexuality education issues were not being addressed early enough or regularly enough in their child's education. Most parents confirmed that they sometimes followed up on their child's SPHE work at home, emphasising that learning in SPHE was considered a shared task between home and school. A small number of parents expressed a desire to have greater opportunities to engage in this type of follow-up activity.

7.2.11 Assessment

In the majority of classrooms, there was scope for development in the range of assessment strategies in use by teachers, in the records of pupils' progress maintained, and the extent to which assessment results could be used to inform teaching and learning and to update parents regarding their children's progress in SPHE. Assessment was found to consist primarily of unrecorded teacher observations, and the maintenance of a range of examples of pupils' work in copybooks or in worksheets. When the pupils were asked to consider whether their teacher thought they were good at SPHE, only just over one-quarter of pupils indicated that this was true. Almost 70% of pupils revealed that they did not know what their teacher thought about their progress in SPHE.

Very good assessment practices were found in only 15% of classrooms and included the recording of significant observations; the use of well-structured, teacher-designed tasks and tests; the collation of portfolios of pupils' work; and the recording of engagement and achievement in project-based activities. A number of inspectors also commented positively on some teachers' awareness of the strengths and needs of individual pupils and the manner in which this information was informally used to inform teaching and learning.

7.3 Recommendations

7.3.1 Whole-school planning

Systematic whole-school planning that includes provision for RSE as an integral element of SPHE is a key factor in ensuring the quality of SPHE in schools. Schools should pay particular attention to agreeing and recording the curriculum objectives to be achieved and the curriculum content to be addressed at each class level, as well as to the range of active-learning approaches to be employed. Specific consideration should be given to how the SPHE curriculum is addressed through the promotion of a positive school and classroom climate, through integration with other curriculum areas and through discrete teaching of SPHE. The manner in which associated aspects, for example differentiation and assessment, are to be implemented should be agreed and recorded by the school.

Planning for SPHE and RSE should be collaborative, involving teachers, management and parents. The opinions and input of the wider parent community should be accessed during the drafting and updating of the SPHE plan and the RSE policy. School initiatives to access the views of pupils and to involve them more directly in planning and review processes would enhance the collaborative process.

Teachers should be provided with a copy of the SPHE plan and the RSE policy. Parents and management should have easy access to them. Consideration should be given to the use of the school's web site to facilitate access by the entire school community.

Schools should consider assigning responsibility for co-ordinating SPHE to a staff member, possibly as part of the range of middle management or special duties responsibilities within the school. This teacher would be responsible for co-ordinating the development and updating of the school plan and the review of curriculum implementation. A review of the implementation of the SPHE curriculum, including RSE, should be conducted at regular intervals. During the review, co-ordinators should collect feedback from teachers, pupils, management and parents on the effectiveness of the implementation process. A structured review of teachers' monthly progress records, in tandem with an evaluation of pupils' progress records in SPHE, would be very helpful in this regard.

7.3.2 Teachers' classroom planning and monthly progress records

Classroom planning should be based on the principles and objectives of the SPHE curriculum, and the school's SPHE plan and RSE policy.

Teachers should place equal emphasis on all three curriculum strands *(Myself, Myself and Others* and *Myself and the Wider World)* and RSE when planning lessons.

Classroom planning should detail the learning objectives to be achieved and the content to be addressed. It should specify the teaching strategies and resources to be used, as well as approaches to linkage and integration, differentiation and assessment.

Due to the spiral nature of the SPHE curriculum, collaboration between teachers is essential in ensuring that there is development and progression in addressing similar themes at differing class levels.

Monthly progress records should provide a clear overview of the SPHE content addressed and the learning achieved by pupils. They should be reviewed closely at school level to assess the effectiveness of the implementation of the SPHE curriculum.

7.3.3 The use of resources

The generation of a rich classroom environment for SPHE is strongly recommended. At whole-school level, for example, the entrance and circulation areas should be used as much as possible to acknowledge and celebrate the identities, strengths and achievements of pupils and others through the provision of wide-ranging displays. Resources to support the teaching of SPHE may include a combination of commercially produced programmes, teacher-generated materials, visual and ICT-based resources, as well as CDs and DVDs.

SPHE resources should be selected for use in the school following a careful review of their suitability by the teachers. This review should be informed by the school's SPHE plan, any general policy of the

board of management regarding the selection of resources, and the characteristic spirit of the school.

To facilitate teachers' school-wide access to resources, the curriculum co-ordinator for SPHE should attempt to familiarise colleagues with the available resources, the manner in which they are best used and seek feedback on their usefulness.

7.3.4 Teachers' professional development

School staffs should assess their professional development needs in respect of SPHE collaboratively at appropriate intervals and individual teachers should be encouraged to review and, if appropriate, seek to improve their own skills in teaching SPHE. Professional development opportunities in SPHE should be provided on an in-school basis, insofar as practicable, to respond to identified priorities and the particular circumstances of the school. The sharing of expertise among staff members (for example, through peer teaching or team teaching, collaborative planning of lessons, the sharing of resources, and inputs and discussions at staff meetings), is a particularly effective way to provide effective professional development opportunities suited to the needs of the school. Particular attention should be paid to the professional development needs of newly-qualified teachers and newly appointed teachers to support the school's SPHE delivery.

Initial teacher education providers and the Teaching Council should ensure that adequate opportunities are provided to student teachers to become thoroughly familiar with the contents of the SPHE curriculum and to develop competence in the methodologies and approaches recommended in the curriculum guidelines for the subject. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring the competence of newly qualified teachers in the delivery of RSE and in the use of practical curriculum integration strategies. For example, the use of the SPHE curriculum as an exemplar subject when exploring integration in the context of teacher education courses would be highly beneficial.

Teachers' professional development needs in relation to the implementation of elements of the RSE programme should continue to be supported using online resources, through school-based capacity building and through the availability of support from the Primary Professional Development Service.

7.3.5 The cultivation of a positive school and classroom climate

School communities should give strong consideration to exploring a range of ways of allocating increased responsibilities to pupils and the greater involvement of pupils in decision-making processes at school.

Schools should consider the possibility of establishing a formal pupils' council.

7.3.6 Bullying

The Department of Education and Science has announced a forthcoming review of the existing advice on countering bullying in schools contained in *Guidelines on Countering Bullying Behaviour* (Department of Education, 1993). The revised guidelines should seek to provide clear advice, support and practical strategies to boards of management, principals, teachers and parents in respect of implementing anti-bullying policies at school level.

Boards of management should ensure that their anti-bullying policy is reviewed annually. Structured feedback should be sought from teachers, pupils, management and parents regarding the effectiveness of preventive measures and the school's responsiveness when bullying incidents occur.

Anti-bullying programmes should be implemented at each class level on an annual basis.

Vigilant supervision practices, during assembly, recreation periods and dispersion, in tandem with friendship-promotion initiatives should be actively promoted by all members of the school community.

7.3.7 Curriculum implementation

Schools should ensure that all elements of the RSE programme are implemented at all class levels on an annual basis. The naming of body parts, the teaching of issues about body changes and the consideration of aspects of birth and new life should be addressed at each class level in implementing the *Myself* strand.

Greater attention should be paid to implementing the *Developing citizenship* and *Media education* strand units of the *Myself and the Wider World* strand. These units should be implemented comprehensively on an ongoing basis throughout the school year at each class level.

In upholding the characteristic spirit and ethos of the school, boards of management should make every reasonable effort to ensure that the content delivered by external facilitators is fully in keeping with the school's ethos, the school plan for SPHE and the learning needs of pupils.

7.3.8 The quality of teaching

A wide and balanced range of active-learning approaches should underpin all teaching of SPHE. Such approaches should include: drama activities; co-operative games; pictures, photographs and visual images; talk and discussion; written activities; the media and ICT; and looking at pupils' work. Every effort should be made to integrate key SPHE concepts with other curriculum areas to avoid the possibility of "curriculum overload".

Talk and discussion sessions should be focused and skilfully guided by teachers to ensure the achievement of the intended lesson objectives. Teachers should provide frequent opportunities for pupils to engage in partner and group-based talk and discussion in addition to teacher-directed, whole-class discussion. A particular emphasis should be placed on the promotion of communication skills through which pupils develop the capacity to become both confident contributors and respectful listeners.

Teachers should provide regular opportunities for pupils to engage in well-structured, collaborative-learning activities with their peers as a means of developing their abilities and skills to work together and to be effective members of a team.

In addressing specific SPHE content, teachers should provide pupils with opportunities to acquire a balance of information, skills, values and attitudes through their engagement in active learning.

In implementing the RSE programme all aspects of content should be explored in a deep and meaningful way and due account should be taken of pupils' differing age and ability levels.

7.3.9 The quality of learning

Teachers should maximise opportunities for pupils to engage as active learners through their participation in team activities and partner-based activities. Pupils should be provided with opportunities to fulfil a wide and varied range of roles and responsibilities during these activities so as to facilitate the active learning of all pupils.

Pupils' learning should be consolidated through the revisiting of specific content in a planned and consistent manner, through the regular use of integration opportunities and through the reinforcement of learning through structured and incidental opportunities that arise in the context of the school and classroom climate.

Pupils should be provided with frequent opportunities to share their views with their teachers and peers as to how they are experiencing learning in SPHE. They should include opportunities to consider the ways in which they learn best and also the identification of aspects of the programme which they find more challenging.

As a means of ensuring that lessons are sufficiently interesting and challenging for pupils, teachers should ensure to appropriately match the content, structure and level of challenge inherent in lessons to the age range, abilities and interests of pupils.

Parents should be provided with structured opportunities to regularly follow up on their child's SPHE work at home. This should be facilitated through the allocation of homework related to SPHE and

the provision of opportunities for parents to review and discuss at home their child's ongoing SPHE schoolwork.

7.3.10 Assessment

Whole-school agreement should be reached on the role of assessment in SPHE, the range of assessment strategies to be used and the manner in which progress is to be communicated to pupils, to parents and to other teachers. These decisions should be formally recorded in the school's plan for SPHE and implemented on a school-wide basis.

Assessment approaches should include: teacher observation; teacher-designed tasks and tests; portfolios and projects; displays and presentations of work; and pupil profile cards. Assessment should be used formatively to modify content and delivery in response to pupils' differing abilities and needs to optimise the potential for learning of each pupil.

Teacher observation of pupils should focus on specific and pertinent aspects of SPHE. It should be accompanied by the formal recording of significant observations that contribute to the picture of the pupil's overall development.

Pupils should be provided with opportunities to engage in self-assessment as a means of establishing personal goals and targets, of learning the value of monitoring their own progress and of developing responsibility for their own learning.

7.4 Conclusion

This evaluation confirms that the implementation of SPHE as a specific curriculum area has had a positive impact on many facets of pupils' social, personal and health development. It also highlights a range of opportunities that must be acted on to ensure that SPHE is systematically implemented in all schools and that pupils' learning is optimised. Responsibility to ensure that SPHE is implemented fully in schools rests primarily with teachers and school management. However, members of the wider school community, policy-makers and support service providers must also play a vigilant role in supporting the work of the schools. As evidenced in this evaluation, the voice and perspectives of pupils and parents should also contribute positively to school-based and system-wide developments in the effective implementation of SPHE.

Appendix

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Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in the Primary School

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is a core component of the primary school curriculum. The SPHE curriculum provides pupils with opportunities to learn personal and social skills while helping them to create and maintain supportive relationships and to become active and responsible citizens. This report from the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science presents the results of a thematic evaluation of the provision and delivery of SPHE in forty primary schools. The data collected during these evaluations was further supported by the results of questionnaires completed by over one thousand senior primary school pupils and over nine hundred parents of those pupils.

This report highlights features of good practice and positive aspects in the provision and delivery of SPHE. It notes that in most classes SPHE was taught on a regular basis and that there was clear evidence of regular progress in pupils' learning. The report acknowledges teachers' good practices in using a variety of active-learning approaches in most lessons and comments positively on those schools where Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) was implemented as a natural and integral element of SPHE. Most heartening are the positive views expressed by pupils and their parents, with all pupils considering learning in SPHE to be important and their parents expressing the desire to support the work of the teachers by following up at home on the work done in SPHE at school.

The report also highlights areas for improvement and makes recommendations to aid teachers and school managements in improving the quality of the SPHE programme and its delivery. The inspectors reported that teachers should use a greater range of active-learning approaches with pupils; more care was needed in matching the subject content and its delivery to the pupils' ages and abilities; and more thorough assessment was required of pupils' learning in the subject. The inspectors also commented on the need for better implementation of RSE in primary schools.

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