Looking at
Social, Personal and Health Education

Teaching and Learning in Post-Primary Schools

PROMOTING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING

The Inspectorate wishes to thank Gairmscoil Mhuire, Athenry, Co. Galway for permission to use the cover photograph.

CONTENTS

Looking at Social, Personal and Health Education is a composite report, based on the findings of subject inspections in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), including Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), carried out in 63 post-primary schools during the 2010/2011 academic year. Inspectors observed over 300 lessons, interacted with students, examined students' work and had discussions with teachers, co-ordinators of SPHE and RSE, and members of in-school management. The inspectors also used questionnaires and focus-group interviews to gather views of students regarding their experience of SPHE and RSE. This report identifies features of good practice and offers recommendations in areas where further development is required. The Inspectorate is grateful to the schools, teachers and students who contributed to this research and who shared their professional and personal views and insights.

Since the evaluations on which this composite report is based were conducted, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has developed a new *Framework for Junior Cycle*, which is to be introduced by schools on a phased basis from 2014. For the first time, schools are being given the facility to plan for, design and evaluate their own junior cycle programmes. These programmes will be based on the framework's eight underpinning principles and twenty-four learning statements. One of the eight principles is that the students' experience contributes directly to their physical, mental, emotional and social well-being and resilience. A number of the statements of learning derive from this principle. It is clear that whole-school implementation of SPHE will continue to provide a structure for addressing students' needs in this area. Schools should take account of the findings of this report when planning their provision under the terms of the Framework.

This composite report complements *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention,* a recent joint-publication of the Department of Education and Skills, the Health Service Executive and the Department of Health. These guidelines, together with the *Action Plan on Bullying* (Department of Education and Skills 2013), acknowledge that the whole-school implementation of SPHE and RSE provides a structure for educating young people about their health and well-being in a planned, coherent and developmental way.

Readers of this report and of *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools* will note a shared emphasis on the importance of schools having a suitably-qualified core SPHE team that is led by an effective whole-school co-ordinator. Both publications also make reference to the importance of experiential teaching approaches, and the need to ensure that any contributions from external facilitators are integrated into school programmes in a way that supports continuity and progression in students' learning.

It is hoped that *Looking at Social, Personal and Health Education* will be a valuable resource for teachers, school authorities and policy-makers and that it will support the implementation of best practice in the provision of junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle RSE.

1.1   PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report is based on an analysis of the findings from subject inspections of SPHE (including RSE) carried out by inspectors in the academic year 2010 / 2011. The report analyses the strengths and areas for development identified by inspectors and comments on the quality of provision in the following areas.

- subject provision and whole-school support for junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle RSE
- preparation and planning for junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle RSE
- teaching and learning of SPHE in the classrooms visited
- assessment of students' progress in SPHE

This report is intended as a resource for teachers, school authorities and policy-makers and aims to promote best practice in the provision of junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle RSE.

1.2   SPHE AND RSE IN THE POST-PRIMARY CURRICULUM

Section 9 of the Education Act, 1998 requires that every school use its available resources to promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and to provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents and having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school.

In 1996, *Relationships and Sexuality Education* (RSE) *Interim Curriculum and Guidelines* (NCCA, 1996) was introduced into post-primary schools. It was envisaged that RSE would be taught within the context of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). In 2000, the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework*[1] (Department of Education and Science, 2000) was introduced. This document provided a flexible framework within which schools could plan a three-year SPHE programme to meet students' needs. The framework comprises the following ten modules.

- Belonging and integrating
- Self-management: a sense of purpose
- Communication skills
- Physical health
- Friendship
- Relationships and sexuality
- Emotional health
- Influences and decisions
- Substance use
- Personal safety

The *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework* sets out aims and learning outcomes for each module in each year of the programme. While schools have flexibility within the framework to order the topics according to school or class needs, all content outlined in the framework should be covered. The modules should be re-visited each year to facilitate a spiral approach to the development of students' knowledge, skills and attitudes. Since 2003, the provision of the equivalent of one class period of

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[1]Both of these documents are available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment: www.ncca.ie

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) per week for all junior cycle students is mandatory.

In accordance with Department of Education and Skills Circular 0037/2010, *Relationships and Sexuality Education*, post-primary schools are obliged to develop an RSE policy and to implement a programme in this area for all students from first year to sixth year. Junior cycle RSE should be taught as an integral component of SPHE. In senior cycle, schools are required to teach RSE, even in the absence of a timetabled SPHE class. The *RSE Interim Curriculum and Guidelines* outline the expected content of an RSE programme under the following three key themes.
- Human growth and development
- Human sexuality
- Human relationships

The *RSE Interim Curriculum and Guidelines* should inform the development of each school's RSE programme. A whole-school RSE policy should underpin the planning, delivery and evaluation of the RSE curriculum programme in each school.

A draft senior cycle SPHE curriculum framework is also available to schools on the NCCA website to support them in planning provision for SPHE at that level.

1.3 SUPPORT FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SPHE AND RSE

A range of actions has been taken by the Department to support the implementation of SPHE and RSE. *Social, Personal and Health Education: Junior Certificate Guidelines for Teachers* (NCCA, 2001) were provided in 2001. These guidelines provide practical advice on planning and co-ordinating SPHE and suggest strategies for teaching and learning.

The RSE Support Service and the SPHE Support Service (Post-Primary) were established in 1996 and 2000 respectively. Since then, an extensive programme of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities has been provided to support teachers in the implementation of RSE and SPHE programmes in post-primary schools. The SPHE Support Service is a partnership between the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Health and Children and the Health Service Executive (HSE). Regional development officers (on secondment from schools to education centres) and health-promotion officers (from the HSE) have provided school management and teachers with CPD workshops, cluster group meetings and whole-school seminars on a range of SPHE themes. These include areas such as RSE, substance use, bullying prevention and intervention, sexual orientation, and physical and emotional health. School-based support has also been provided on developing a whole-school climate that facilitates SPHE. A full programme of SPHE-related CPD continues to be provided by the support services.

The Department and the support services have also developed a wide range of teaching materials, particularly in the area of RSE but also in relation to mental health, physical health, substance use and personal safety. This work has been done in partnership with other Departments and agencies.

1.4 THE SCHOOLS EVALUATED AND THEIR STUDENTS

Between September 2010 and May 2011, the Inspectorate carried out subject inspections on the quality of teaching and learning in SPHE (including RSE) in sixty-six post-primary schools. Three schools were omitted from this analysis as it was not possible to gather the full data set.

Tables 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 give an overview of the sixty-three schools by sector, gender and school size.

Table 1.1: Schools evaluated in each sector

	Type	No.	% of sample
SCHOOLS BY SECTOR	Voluntary secondary schools	35	55%
	Vocational Education Committee (VEC) schools	13	21%
	Community and comprehensive schools	15	24%
	Total	**63**	**100%**

Table 1.2: Schools evaluated in each gender category

	Type	No.	% of sample
SCHOOLS BY GENDER	Co-educational schools	37	59%
	All-girl schools	11	17%
	All-boy schools	15	24%
	Total	**63**	**100%**

Table 1.3: Schools evaluated in each size category

	Type	No.	% of sample
SCHOOLS BY SIZE	< 250 students	10	16
	251-500 students	30	48
	501-800students	15	24
	801-1000students	4	6
	> 1000students	4	6
	Total	**63**	**100%**

1.5 METHODOLOGY USED IN THIS EVALUATION

During each subject inspection the inspector visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students' work, and had discussions with the teachers. In each of the schools evaluated, meetings were held with the co-ordinator of SPHE and/or RSE, and with senior management. Relevant school-planning documentation and teachers' preparation were also reviewed. In accordance with agreed procedures, two weeks notice was given in advance of each school inspection.

A questionnaire was administered to a group of third-year students in each school visited, to ascertain their experiences of junior cycle SPHE. The inspector also met with a group of senior cycle students in each school to find out about their experiences of SPHE, with a particular focus on provision for a senior cycle RSE programme as it applied to them. Table 1.4 provides further details of the evidence base for this composite report.

Table 1.4: Evidence base for this report

| EVIDENCE BASE FOR THE COMPOSITE REPORT	LESSONS OBSERVED	TEACHERS VISITED	STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRES	STUDENTS MET IN FOCUS-GROUPS
	301	264	2634	481

While almost all of the lessons observed were in junior cycle SPHE, a small number of senior cycle classes were also visited. Figures1.1 and 1.2 provide further details regarding the range of lessons observed.

Figure 1.1: No. of lessons observed in each year group
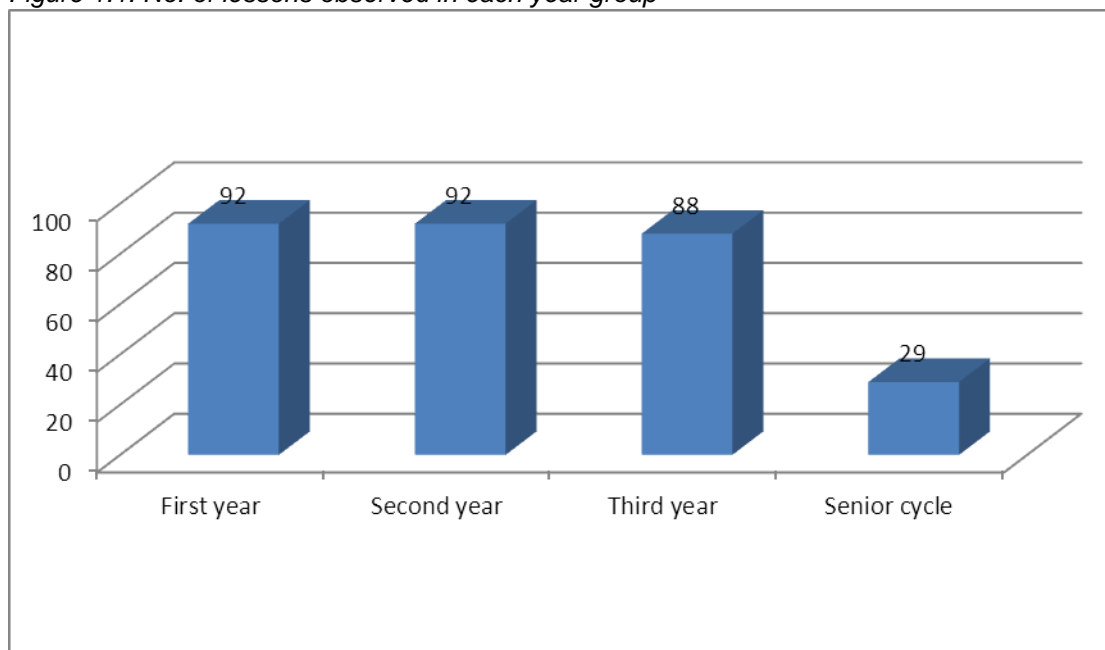
All of the lessons observed were based on one of the ten modules of the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework.* Figure 1.2 shows the number/percentage of lessons observed from each module.

Figure 1.2: No. of lessons observed from each module of Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework
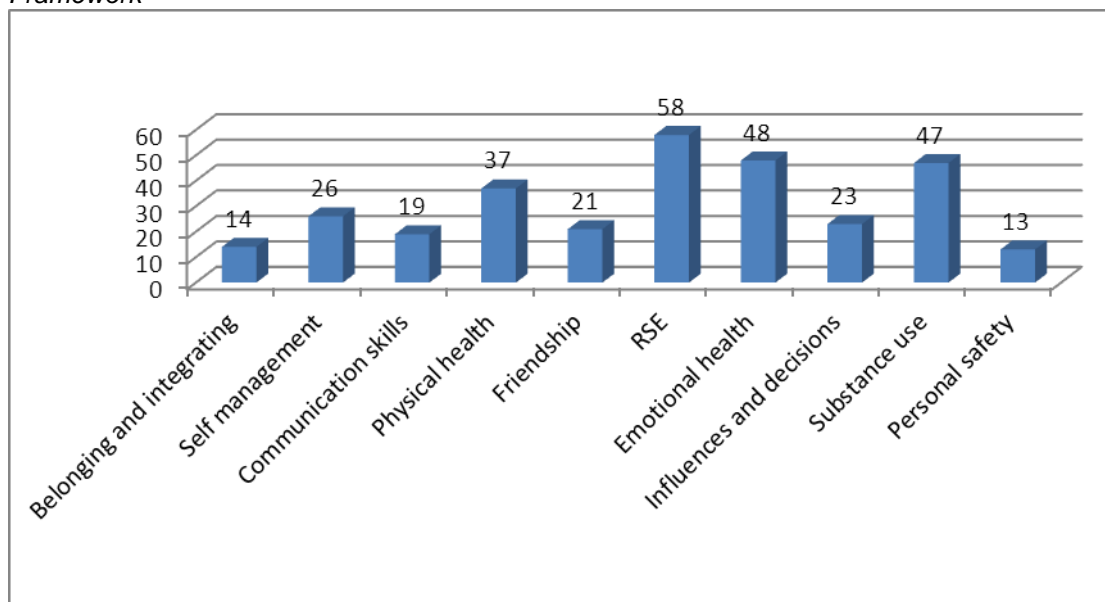
1.6   QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE TERMS USED IN THE REPORT

The following qualitative terms are used in this report. These derive from the quality continuum that informs all Inspectorate evaluations. The quality continuum is set out in *Looking at our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Second-Level Schools,* which is

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available in the Inspectorate section of the Department web site www.education.ie. Table 1.6 shows the percentage range indicated by each of the quantitative terms used in this report.

Table 1.5: Qualitative terms used in this report

PERFORMANCE LEVEL	QUALITATIVE TERMS USED IN THE REPORT
Significant strengths	excellent; very good; highly commendable; of a very high quality; highly effective; very successful; few areas for improvement
Strengths outweigh weaknesses	good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; fully appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist
Weaknesses outweigh strengths	fair; scope for development; experiencing difficulty; evident weaknesses that are impacting significantly on student learning
Significant weaknesses	poor; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties

Table 1.6: Quantitative terms used in this report

| QUANTITATIVE TERM	PERCENTAGE OF OCCURRENCE
Almost all	More than 90%
Most	75-90%
Majority	50-74%
Fewer than half / A significant minority	25-49%
A small number	16-24%
A few	Up to 15%

CHAPTER 2
QUALITY OF SUBJECT PROVISION AND
WHOLE-SCHOOL SUPPORT FOR SPHE AND SENIOR CYCLE RSE

2.1 THE QUALITY OF SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE-SCHOOL SUPPORT

In evaluating the organisational aspects of SPHE, inspectors look at how SPHE is timetabled and the arrangements in place in schools to provide students with access to the SPHE and RSE programmes. The deployment of teachers to teach SPHE and their continuing professional development is also considered. Inspectors also look at how the whole-school climate supports students' personal and social development.

Inspectors described the overall quality of subject provision and whole-school support for SPHE and senior cycle RSE as very good or good in most of the schools visited. There was scope for development in this area in a few schools. Figure 2.1 shows the percentage of schools at each performance level with regard to the quality of subject provision and whole-school support.

Figure 2.1: % of schools at each quality level with regard to subject provision and whole-school support for SPHE and senior cycle RSE
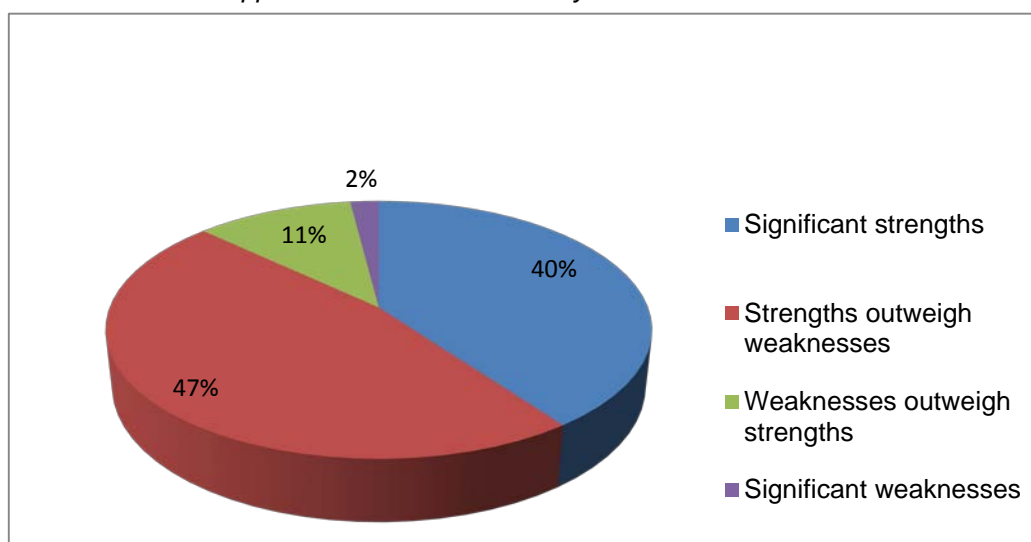
2.2 PROVISION FOR JUNIOR CYCLE SPHE

Department of Education and Skills Circular M11/03, *Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in all schools*[2]*,* requires that SPHE be timetabled as a discrete subject for the equivalent of one class period per week in each year of the junior cycle. Figure 2.2 shows the percentage of schools at each performance level with regard to the quality of provision for junior cycle SPHE.

Inspectors found that all of the schools visited provided junior cycle SPHE. The quality of provision for junior cycle SPHE was considered to be good or very good in most of these schools. However, there were evident weaknesses that had a negative impact on the quality of student access to the subject in 13% of schools. These included a failure to timetable SPHE as a discrete subject for all of the academic

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[2]Circular letters are available on the Department of Education and Skills website: www.education.ie

year; a failure to timetable SPHE for all students in all junior cycle year groups; the use of designated SPHE periods for purposes such as form-tutor duties, teaching other subjects, or providing study periods or learning support. In the context of the current junior cycle programme, school management should ensure that SPHE is provided for all students in accordance with the requirements of circular M11/03.

As the new *Framework for Junior Cycle* is introduced from 2014, schools should ensure that the junior cycle programme that they design addresses the principles, statements of learning and key skills that relate to the areas currently covered in SPHE. This could be achieved through continuing to provide the existing SPHE course, providing a short course in SPHE (either the short course developed by the NCCA or one developed by the school in accordance with NCCA specification) or other approaches.

Figure 2.2: % of schools at each quality level with regard to provision for junior cycle SPHE
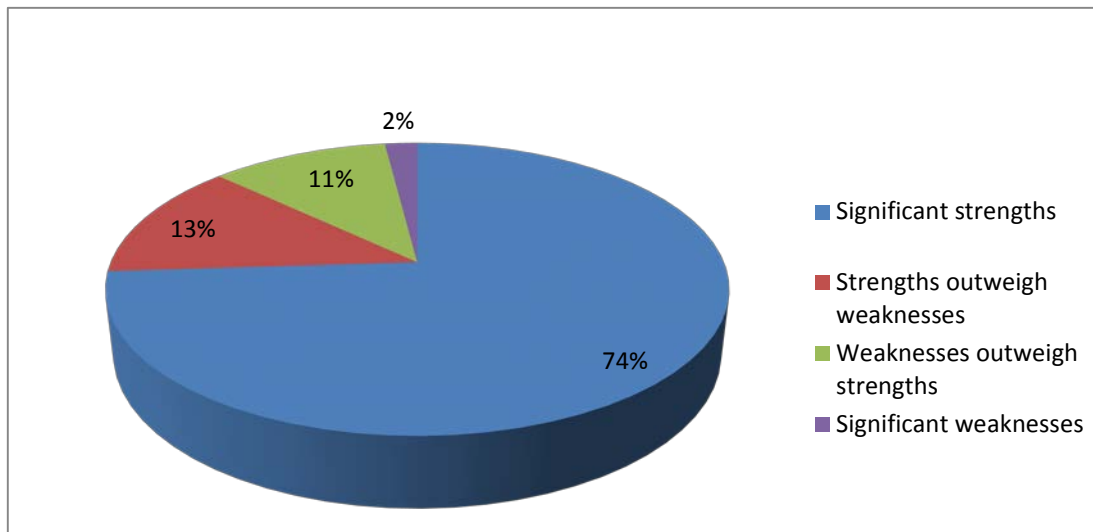
2.3 PROVISION FOR SENIOR CYCLE RSE

Figure 2.3: % of schools at each quality level with regard to provision for senior cycle RSE
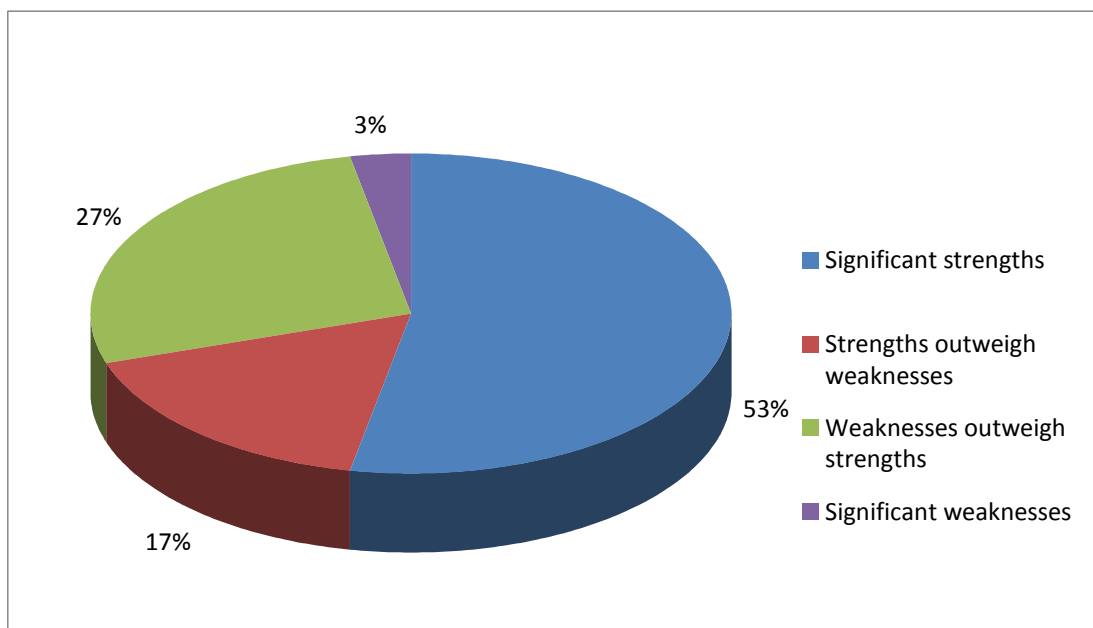
Schools must[3] provide senior cycle RSE, even in the absence of a timetabled SPHE class. In this evaluation, almost all of the schools were providing a programme of RSE for senior cycle students. Inspectors found significant variation, however, in the quality of this provision. The quality of provision for senior cycle RSE was good or very good in 70% of the schools evaluated. Effective practice was more likely in schools where a timetabled SPHE lesson was provided for part or all of the senior cycle, or where a structured RSE programme was incorporated into other subjects such as Guidance. Weaknesses outweighed strengths in the quality of provision for senior cycle RSE in 27% of schools.

Significant weaknesses were observed in a few schools. Inspectors identified several school practices that they considered to have a negative impact on provision. These included instances in which the RSE programme was limited solely to presentations made by external facilitators, with no follow-up lessons to optimise students' learning. In other cases, RSE was delivered using a cross-curricular approach but with no evidence of any co-ordination of the learning activities. Such practices as these resulted in a fragmented RSE programme. Timetabling arrangements in some schools resulted in the RSE programme not being available to all senior cycle students. During inspection visits, students commented on the inequity of provision inherent in this practice and the following extract from a school report describes an example of this practice.

> The relationships component of RSE is delivered through Religious Education and Guidance in senior cycle, while sexuality education is taught in Biology lessons. This, however, does not take into account those students who do not study Biology or Religious Education at senior cycle.

Department Circular M20/96 states that the time allocated for the RSE programme should be the equivalent of six class periods per year. This allows for an incremental approach to students' learning and the time should be arranged in a manner that facilitates the delivery of a broad and balanced RSE programme to all senior cycle students.

2.4 DEPLOYMENT OF TEACHERS TO JUNIOR CYCLE SPHE AND SENIOR CYCLE RSE

2.4.1 Junior cycle SPHE

Inspectors described the overall quality of deployment of staff to SPHE as good or very good in 82% of the schools visited. In most of these schools the principal assigned teachers to SPHE following consultation. Good practice noted in reports typically included the presence of a core team with a balance of male and female teachers and evidence of continuity in the role. Such deployment practice proved very effective in preventing a high turnover of staff and enabled teachers to build expertise in SPHE. The presence of an established core team also made it easier for schools to identify training needs and to establish a systematic plan for CPD. One school's good practice in this regard was noted in the school report as follows:

> Deployment patterns are very good, with evidence of a gender-balanced, core team and, where possible, provision for continuity of teachers.

In a small number of schools there was a need for significant change to the way in which teachers were deployed to SPHE. In the majority of these cases SPHE lessons were taught by a large number of different teachers, almost all of whom were assigned to teach the subject to only one class group. These practices did not support the development of a coherent SPHE subject-department structure, as the teachers involved in delivering SPHE tended to identify themselves as members of

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[3] Department Circular 37/10 Relationships and Sexuality Education

the subject department for their other subject area. Difficulties were also experienced by the schools in question in ensuring that all teachers were sufficiently skilled to teach SPHE. The following extract from a school report is typical of the advice provided by inspectors in such instances.

> Deployment of teachers to SPHE and RSE ought to be more purposefully managed when constructing the timetable annually so that only those with recent training and long-term interest in the subject are involved. A gender balance within the teaching team is desirable.

In a significant minority of the schools visited, class tutors were routinely assigned to teach SPHE. Inspectors found that this practice proved effective only in instances where there was a strong whole-school climate supporting SPHE and where senior management was strongly committed to providing sufficient resources to co-ordinate and upskill such a large teaching team. In most instances where SPHE was always taught to a class by their class tutor, inspectors found weaknesses. Class tutors did not always want to teach SPHE and sometimes lacked interest, experience or expertise in the subject. This sometimes resulted in designated SPHE time being used for other purposes or in modules of the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework* being omitted.

2.4.2 Senior cycle RSE
A core senior cycle RSE teaching team had been established in 63 % of the schools in the sample. Inspectors noted that the presence of a core team was a strong, positive, indicator of the quality of programme provision for senior cycle RSE. Where schools had not appointed an RSE co-ordinator and core team, the quality of the programme delivered varied significantly in accordance with the experience and expertise of individual teachers. This led to inconsistencies in the breadth and balance of the programme delivered.

External facilitators supported the RSE programme in 41% of schools. In a few schools, the guest presentation was the sole component of the RSE provided. Inspectors found that this practice did not facilitate optimal student learning. Some of the senior cycle students who met with the inspectors praised the guest presentations but expressed the view that additional class time was needed to facilitate further discussion and development of the issues that arose during the presentations. This finding highlights the valuable role that external facilitators can play in SPHE-related activities. It also reminds schools that external facilitators should be used only to supplement and support a programme that has been devised and delivered at school level, in accordance with the school's RSE policy. In many school reports, inspectors recommended that schools adopt procedures on the use of external facilitators that are in keeping with Department Circular 0023/2010 *Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) & Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE): Best Practice Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools.*

2.5 ENGAGEMENT WITH CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD)
Given that there is limited pre-service training available for SPHE, the professional development of teachers is heavily reliant on the CPD programme provided by the SPHE Support Service (Post-Primary).

In schools where there was systematic engagement with SPHE-related CPD, inspectors noted a high level of teacher competence in adopting strategies that supported good quality learning and greater teacher confidence about addressing sensitive issues. Active engagement with relevant CPD also had a positive impact on the quality of subject provision and on the breadth of the SPHE and RSE programmes delivered by schools. Clear benefits were evident where all teachers of

senior cycle RSE availed of the training opportunities provided by the SPHE Support Service, particularly in relation to the use of TRUST (*Talking Relationships, Understanding Sexuality Teaching*), a resource for teaching senior cycle RSE.

Best practice was evident in schools where school management and relevant staff carried out a routine analysis of CPD needs and prepared an action plan that facilitated a systematic and incremental approach to developing the skills of all teachers of SPHE and RSE.

Inspectors frequently urged school management to adopt a systematic approach to the professional development of teachers of SPHE and RSE. Inspectors stressed the importance of ensuring that all teachers of SPHE and RSE in a school avail of relevant introductory courses and that they be given the opportunity to proceed through all of the levels of training offered by the SPHE Support Service.

Inspectors noted that the practice of schools maintaining up-to-date records of attendance at CPD assisted school management and teachers in identifying and addressing emerging gaps or deficiencies in school provision for SPHE and RSE. Inspectors often advocated that a copy of the information supplied at each in-service course attended be filed in the SPHE and RSE subject-planning folder. This would ensure that the information was available to each member of the team and that it could be referred to and discussed at subject meetings. It was noted by inspectors that systematic engagement with CPD was much easier in schools where a small core SPHE team was established.

Inspectors found that the engagement of members of senior management in relevant SPHE training and the organisation of whole-staff CPD supported the development of a positive whole-school approach to SPHE.

2.6   SPHE IN THE WHOLE-SCHOOL CONTEXT

2.6.1   A whole-school approach to SPHE
The quality of the whole-school climate in supporting students' personal and social development was judged to be good or very good in 90% of the schools visited.

The implementation of an integrated and structured approach to supporting students' personal development was considered to be of great importance in supporting a positive whole-school climate. One report noted the following exemplary practice:

> The school has a number of initiatives and structures to actively support the pastoral care and personal development of students. These include the provision of additional counselling supports, a dedicated student-support team, a healthy eating programme, the recent introduction of an extensive physical activity and sports programme and active engagement by the home-school-community liaison teacher with parents.

Inspectors found that where the SPHE co-ordinator was also a member of the school's student-support team there were very effective links between the taught SPHE programme, senior cycle RSE, Guidance and relevant aspects of the pastoral care system.

The organisation of themed weeks in areas such as friendship, physical activity, healthy eating, safety and positive mental health was also found to be effective in supporting a whole-school climate for SPHE. Where school practice was of a very high quality, very good links had been established between the taught programme of SPHE and these whole-school activities.

Inspectors were of the view that initiatives such as the Cool School[4] and Healthy Schools programmes provided particularly good support for SPHE in a whole-school context. A few of the schools visited had achieved recognition as a Health Promoting School[5] (HPS). Inspectors noted the effectiveness of this initiative, as in the following extract from a school report:

> It is clear that care for the well-being of students generally is a priority in the school and this provides a supportive environment for SPHE. Significantly, the school was awarded HPS status in 2005. The associated work is all encompassing and broadly emphasises the well-being of students. Health-promotion weeks have been organised on themes such as mental health, sexual health and physical fitness.

2.6.2 Whole-school policies relevant to SPHE

All schools are required to put in place certain key whole-school policies to inform school practices and procedures in the area of SPHE. Almost all of the schools visited had a substance-use policy and an anti-bullying policy in place. However, inspectors found that 44% of schools did not have a whole-school RSE policy. This is a cause for concern because a whole-school RSE policy is necessary to provide staff with clear guidelines for the management, organisation and delivery of the RSE programme. Inspectors frequently recommended that schools devise a whole-school RSE policy that was in accordance with the procedures outlined in *Department Circular 37/10 Relationships and Sexuality Education*.

Figure 2.4: % of schools in which key policies were in place
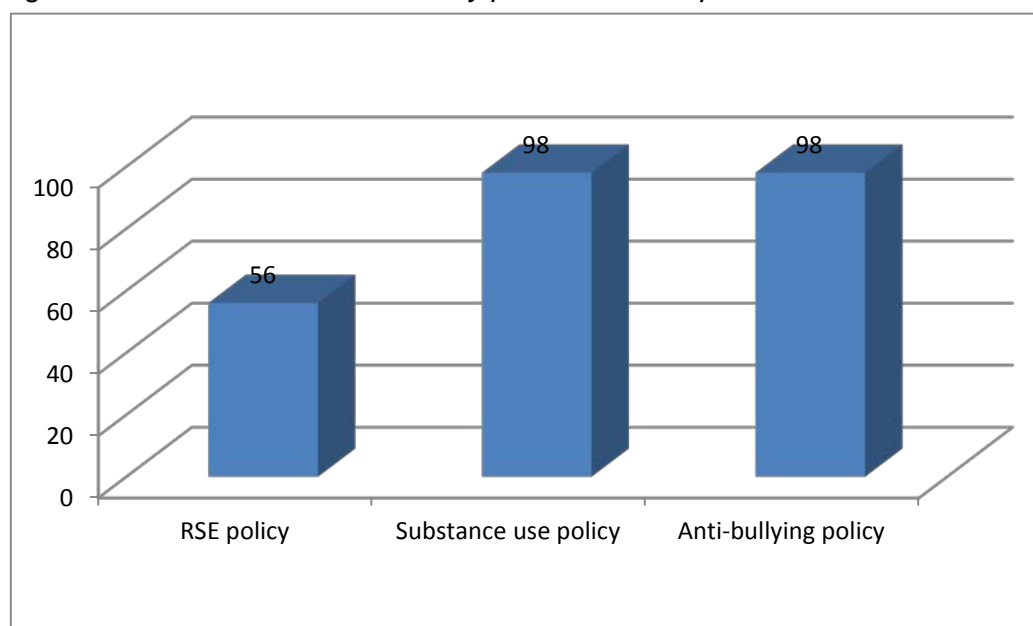
In many instances inspectors found that some or all of the whole-school policies relevant to SPHE were in need of updating. This finding highlights the need for school management to develop systematic review procedures for all school policies. This would ensure that written policies adequately reflect current school practice and are in accordance with Department circulars and guidelines. Inspectors also highlighted the need for SPHE-related policies to clarify the links that exist between curricular programmes in areas such as Guidance and SPHE and to specify the

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[4]Advice and support on implementing an anti-bullying programme is available from the SPHE Support Service (Post-Primary) at www.sphe.ie
[5]Further information on the Health Promoting School is available in Section 3 of *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention*

school procedures relating to referrals, confidentiality, and the protocols associated with external facilitators.

2.7 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE-SCHOOL SUPPORT

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- All of the schools visited made provision for junior cycle SPHE.
- 96% of schools made provision for senior cycle RSE.
- The deployment of teachers to SPHE was good or very good in 82% of the schools.
- Systematic engagement with relevant CPD was associated with a high level of teacher competence in SPHE and RSE.
- 98% of schools visited had a substance-use policy and an anti-bullying policy in place.
- The quality of the whole-school climate in supporting students' personal and social development was good or very good in 90% of schools.

CONCERNS

- There was scope to improve students' access to junior cycle SPHE in 13% of schools.
- Evident weaknesses were found in the provision of senior cycle RSE in 30% of the schools visited.
- 44% of schools did not have a whole-school RSE policy.
- There was scope for development in deployment practices used to assign teachers to senior cycle RSE in a significant minority of schools.
- In a small number of schools, inspectors were of the view that significant change was needed to the manner in which teachers were deployed to SPHE.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In the context of the current junior cycle programme, school management should ensure that SPHE is provided for all students in accordance with the requirements of circular M11/03. As the new *Framework for Junior Cycle* is introduced from 2014, schools should ensure that the junior cycle programme that they design addresses the principles, statements of learning and key skills that relate to the areas currently covered in SPHE.
- A broad and balanced RSE programme, as outlined in *RSE Interim Curriculum and Guidelines,* should be taught to all senior cycle students, even in the absence of a timetabled SPHE class.
- Core teaching teams, led by a subject co-ordinator, should be established for junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle RSE. School management should facilitate a systematic and incremental CPD programme to support the work of these teams.
- The management of all schools should develop a whole-school RSE policy, in accordance with Department Circular 0037/2010 *Relationships and Sexuality Education*, in consultation with staff, parents, students and members of the board.

3.1   THE QUALITY OF PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The overall quality of preparation and planning for SPHE and senior cycle RSE was very good or good in the majority of schools. Weaknesses in planning practices were identified in 28% of schools, with ineffective practice evident in a few instances. The percentage of schools judged to be at each quality level is shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: % of schools at each quality level with regard to subject planning and preparation for SPHE and senior cycle RSE
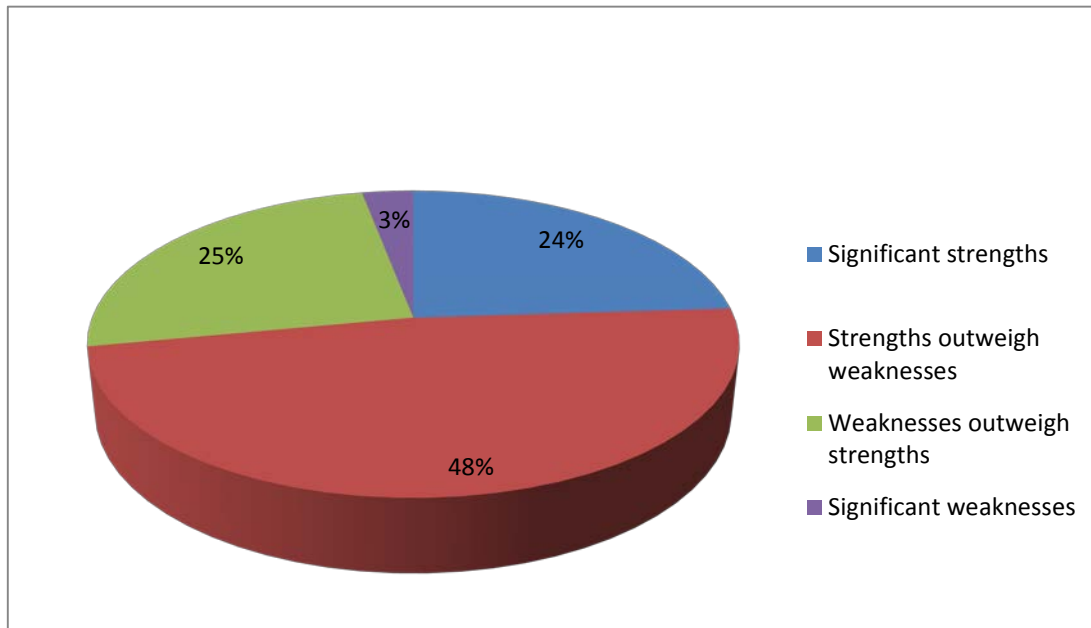
3.2   THE SPHE DEPARTMENT

3.2.1   SPHE subject-department meetings

School practices and procedures to support subject planning were found to be effective in 75% of schools. Features of good practice included the regular organisation of subject-planning meetings for SPHE in a way that facilitated the attendance of all relevant staff. Records of subject-department meetings in SPHE were kept in 81% of schools. Inspectors observed that this good practice facilitated continuity between meetings.

The organisation of subject-department meetings was observed to be very difficult in instances where there was a large number of SPHE teachers. The following extract from a school report is typical of inspectors' comments in this regard.

> Full attendance at SPHE meetings is often difficult as teachers generally attend planning meetings in their main subject area and this has limited the extent of collaborative planning.

In a few schools there was no dedicated subject department for SPHE and no discrete planning time was available for the subject. Inspectors found that this issue often arose where there was insufficient distinction between the teaching of SPHE, tutor duties and care structures in the school. Inspectors also noted that in instances

where teachers were assigned to teach only one class group for SPHE it was often difficult for the teachers to identify themselves as members of an SPHE department.

Small, core SPHE teams should be established in every school and meetings should be organised in a way that facilitates participation by all team members in planning for the delivery of SPHE.

In a small number of schools, planning for SPHE was incorporated into Guidance. While it is good practice to embed SPHE planning into a whole-school guidance programme, inspectors emphasised the need to make adequate provision for on-going planning and review for SPHE as a curricular subject.

3.2.2 SPHE co-ordination

95% of the schools visited had a recognised subject co-ordinator for SPHE. In schools where practice was considered to be very good, the position was assigned to an experienced teacher of SPHE who was currently teaching the subject. The periodic rotation of the role of co-ordinator within a team of experienced SPHE teachers was observed to be effective in building leadership capacity and in cultivating a sense of shared ownership with regard to programme planning.

In a few schools the co-ordinator was not currently teaching SPHE. Inspectors noted that this mitigated against meaningful leadership of planning for teaching and learning. In a few instances there was no subject co-ordinator for SPHE and this had a negative impact on the quality of collaborative planning.

3.3 SENIOR CYCLE RSE

In almost half of the schools evaluated, school practices and procedures in supporting subject planning for senior cycle RSE were not as effective as planning for SPHE. Very good practice in RSE subject planning was observed in only a small number of schools.

In 42% of schools, the teachers of senior cycle RSE did not meet to formally discuss or review the quality of programme implementation, while in one third of schools there was no recognised co-ordinator of senior cycle RSE. These practices had a negative impact on the quality of programme planning for RSE and led to inconsistencies in programme delivery among senior cycle classes.

Inspectors noted as a cause for concern that, in most schools, there was very little collaboration between the teachers who taught the junior cycle RSE module as part of SPHE, and the teachers of senior cycle RSE. This was deemed to be unsatisfactory, since there should be continuity and progression from the junior cycle programme delivered as part of SPHE to the RSE programme in senior cycle.

There is a need for schools to establish a small, core senior cycle RSE team within the SPHE team, led by an RSE co-ordinator, to plan and deliver the RSE programme. The following recommendation was included in a number of school reports.

> Meetings should be scheduled to allow the whole team of SPHE and RSE teachers to attend. Separate senior cycle RSE team meetings may be useful at times.

3.4   THE SPHE PROGRAMME PLAN

In 83% of the schools evaluated, SPHE teachers had agreed a common programme plan for junior cycle SPHE. This was deemed by inspectors to be very good practice as it facilitated consistent implementation of the SPHE programme across all class groups. Where there was no common programme plan, there was a significant variation in the quality of programme implementation across different class groups. The quality of the programme plans reviewed by inspectors varied significantly between schools.

79% of the programme plans inspected were found to be in line with the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework* and incorporated topics from all of the ten modules. The areas most commonly omitted from the remaining 21% of programme plans reviewed were aspects of the *Self-management* module as well as the *Belonging and integrating* module, especially in the programme plans for second-year and third-year students. Topics from the *Emotional health* and *Influences and decisions* modules were also omitted from the programmes planned in a number of instances.

Over half of the programme plans reviewed included information on appropriate teaching strategies and resources. However, the intended learning outcomes for each of the topics were stated in fewer than half of the programme plans. Inspectors noted that only a small number of programme plans provided any information or guidance on the strategies that would be used to assess students' progress in SPHE lessons.

Good practice in establishing cross-curricular links was noted in some plans. The following extract from a school report provides one example.

> Good practice is also noted in the cross curricular links that are promoted between SPHE and Guidance, Science, Home Economics, Physical Education and Religion. For example, a co-ordinated approach between SPHE and Guidance is undertaken to link issues such as decision making or self-management to subject choices or study skills.

To support the consistent delivery of a high-quality SPHE programme, the SPHE team should collaborate on the development of a coherent three-year programme plan for junior cycle SPHE. This programme plan should incorporate all ten modules of the SPHE curriculum framework. It is important that the school programme include information on the topics that will be covered in each module on a term-by-term basis for each year group. The specific amount of time allocated to each module should be clarified. Clear learning outcomes should be identified for each module in each year to ensure continuity and progression in the development of students' knowledge, skills and attitudes from first year through to third year. Appropriate teaching and assessment strategies that are clearly linked to the intended learning outcomes should also be included.

3.5   THE SENIOR CYCLE RSE PROGRAMME PLAN

In 62% of the schools visited there were evident weaknesses in the quality of programme planning for senior cycle RSE. Inspectors frequently recommended that schools document their senior cycle RSE programme to facilitate systematic evaluation of the breadth and balance of the programme provided.

Senior cycle students in over one third of the schools expressed a desire to have a broader RSE programme, with more time allocated by their school to the area. In a number of schools, students expressed dissatisfaction with the inconsistent delivery

of the RSE programme. This dissatisfaction was mostly due to the timetabling issues already noted elsewhere in this report. However, inspectors considered that the lack of a good documented RSE programme plan also had a negative impact on the delivery of the programme. The following extract from a school report provides a recommendation that would enhance provision considerably if it were implemented by all schools.

> To ensure balance, teachers and management should formalise the programme for RSE in senior cycle. The programme should match curriculum guidelines and cover all aspects of RSE, having regard to the school's characteristic spirit, and set out organisational, curricular and teaching details including a calendar of lessons for each year. This should be appended to the RSE policy.

Where a written programme plan was available, inspectors noted that topics in the area of exploring sexuality were often omitted. This is a matter of concern. All schools, in accordance with Department Circular 0037/2010 *Relationships and Sexuality Education,* should implement an RSE programme comprising the complete range of themes that are outlined in *RSE Interim Curriculum Guidelines.* The structure and content of the written programme plan should be similar to that recommended for the SPHE plan elsewhere in this report.

3.6 INTEGRATION OF EXTERNAL FACILITATORS

External facilitators were used to support the SPHE or RSE programmes in 95% of the schools visited. The SPHE curriculum areas addressed by the external facilitators are illustrated in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2: % of schools in which external facilitators delivered particular aspects of SPHE
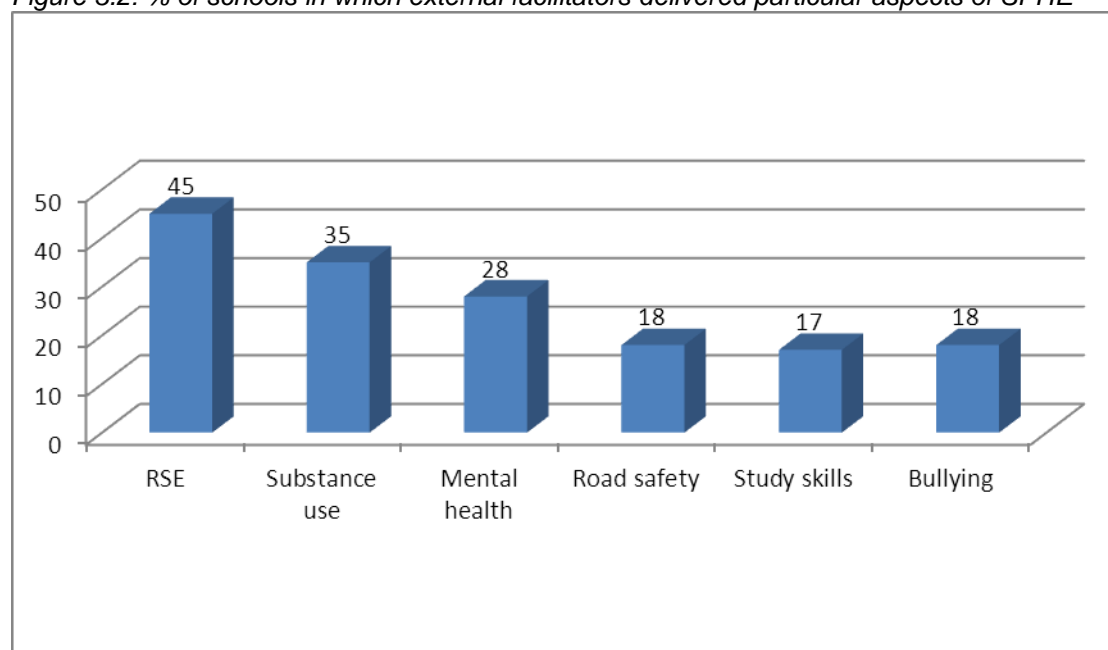
Students reported that they benefited from the expertise of external facilitators and often felt more comfortable asking questions of visiting presenters. Inspectors noted, however, that in most schools the input of the external facilitator was not effectively integrated into the relevant programme plan. All guest presentations should be incorporated into the sequence of lessons outlined in the programme plan, with a view to supporting continuity and progression in student learning. This would help to address the concerns raised by senior cycle students noted in 2.4.2 of this report.

To optimise the potential of guest presentations, all schools should adopt procedures on the use of external facilitators that are in keeping with Department Circular 0023/2010 *Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) & Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Best Practice Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools*.

3.7 COLLABORATIVE REFLECTIVE PRACTICES IN SPHE AND SENIOR CYCLE RSE

Inspectors found that collaborative reflective practice and review processes at subject-department level were underdeveloped in the majority of schools visited. While there was evidence that the SPHE and RSE programmes were reviewed in 70% of the schools, the review process most often involved the teaching team only, with student involvement evident in just half of these schools. Parental involvement in the development and review of the SPHE or RSE programmes was apparent in very few schools. However, some good practice was noted. The following extract from a school report describes very good practice.

> Regular review of SPHE provision includes the views of students, teachers and parents and this leads to regular goal setting. The next step for the team is the development and implementation of action plans, including performance indicators, designed to appraise progress in achieving these goals.

It is important that SPHE and RSE programmes are regularly and systematically reviewed in collaboration with relevant teachers and that a mechanism for seeking the views of students and parents be established. *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Skills, 2012) and materials produced by the SPHE Support Service (Post-Primary) provide support for such a review.

Inspectors observed some cases of exemplary reflective practice among teachers to support on-going improvements in delivering the SPHE programme. In these subject departments all of the SPHE teachers used the common programme plan as a working document. The key learning outcomes for each lesson, together with the resources, teaching approaches and assessment strategies that proved particularly effective in facilitating high-quality learning were routinely noted by individual teachers. This information was then shared and discussed at subject planning meetings. Inspectors noted that subject co-ordinators often played a pivotal role in leading learning in these schools by providing templates to teachers to assist them in recording the relevant information when reviewing their lessons. This type of reflective practice should be developed and supported in all schools, to disseminate expertise and to inform the further development of SPHE (including RSE) programmes.

3.8 PLANNING FOR RESOURCES

The quality of planning for resources at subject-department level was described as very good or good in 85% of the schools visited. Shared access to resources was facilitated in 95% of schools and in some instances the SPHE team was developing an electronic folder of shared resources. Where practice was judged to be very good, the resources were catalogued for ease of reference and categorised to ensure that they were appropriate to the age of the students.

In a small number of schools the range of up-to-date resources available in the school was insufficient. In light of the nature of the SPHE and RSE curriculum, subject teams should be proactive in updating the resources available to support students' learning.

3.9   INDIVIDUAL TEACHER PLANNING FOR THE LESSONS OBSERVED

Inspectors described the quality of individual teacher planning as good or very good in 92% of the schools visited. In 75% of schools, most of the SPHE teachers had tailored the common programme plan to meet the needs and abilities of their assigned class group. Inspectors found that this proved effective in ensuring that the programme implemented made allowances for changing circumstances in students' lives. The findings however do suggest that there is scope in 25% of schools for teachers to differentiate programme plans more effectively to meet the specific learning needs of their student cohort.

## 3.10   KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING SUBJECT PLANNING AND PREPARATION

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- There was a recognised subject co-ordinator for SPHE in 95% of schools.
- Records of subject-department meetings in SPHE were kept in 81% of schools
- SPHE teachers had developed a common programme plan for junior cycle SPHE in 83% of schools.
- Students reported that they benefited from the expertise of external facilitators.
- The quality of planning for resources at subject-department level was described as very good or good in 85% of schools.
- The quality of individual teacher planning was good or very good in 92% of schools.

CONCERNS

- There were limited opportunities for teachers of SPHE to meet as a subject department in 25% of schools.
- 33% of schools did not have a recognised co-ordinator of the RSE programme at senior cycle. Senior cycle RSE teachers did not meet formally to discuss or review the programme in 42% of schools.
- Some modules of the SPHE curriculum framework are not adequately emphasised in programme planning.
- There were evident weaknesses in the quality of programme planning for senior cycle RSE in 62% of schools.
- Senior cycle students in over 33% of the schools visited expressed a desire to have a broader RSE programme provided.
- Reflective practice and self-evaluation among SPHE and RSE teams were underdeveloped in the majority of schools visited.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- School management should schedule subject-planning meetings for SPHE and RSE in a way that facilitates the attendance of all teachers who deliver the subjects.
- SPHE teams should collaborate on the development and implementation of a common three-year programme of work for junior cycle SPHE, incorporating all ten modules of the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework.*
- School management and relevant staff should document, implement and routinely review a common programme plan for senior cycle RSE in line with *RSE Interim Curriculum Guidelines.*
- All schools should adopt procedures on the use of external facilitators in keeping with the best practice guidelines in Department Circular 0023/2010.

4.1 OVERALL QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The overall quality of teaching was found to be very good in 46% of the lessons observed and good in a further 43% of lessons. Inspectors noted evident weaknesses in 11% of lessons. The overall judgements made by inspectors with regard to the quality of teaching in the 301 lessons observed are illustrated in Figure 4.1.

*Figure 4.1: % of SPHE lessons observed at each quality level*
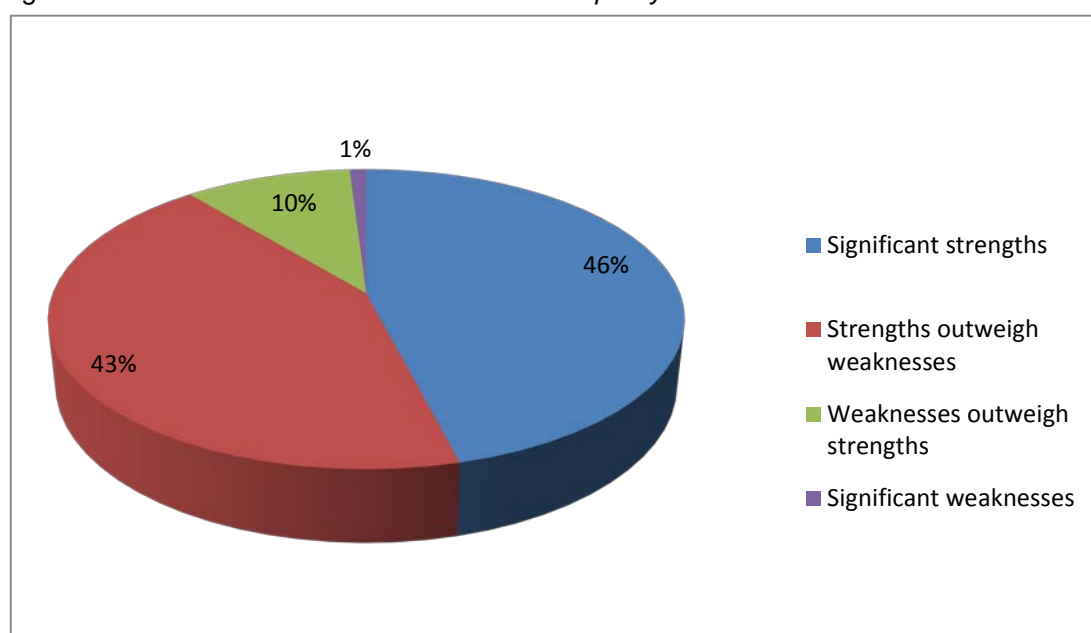
4.2 PREPAREDNESS FOR TEACHING

The quality of advance planning and preparation was good or very good in most of the lessons observed. In a small number of instances there was scope to adjust the pace or pitch of the lesson to a level more suited to students' needs or their stage in the programme. This finding underlines the need for teachers to implement a programme plan for SPHE that facilitates a spiral approach to student learning.

In 94% of schools an appropriate range of resources was selected for the majority of the lessons observed. Figure 4.2 shows the percentage of schools in which each of the most common resources was used.

In a small number of lessons there was an over-reliance on a class textbook as the main medium of student engagement. Inspectors often highlighted the importance of choosing a range of resources to support the active engagement of students and assist high quality learning.

Figure 4.2: % of schools in which particular resources were used during lessons observed[6]
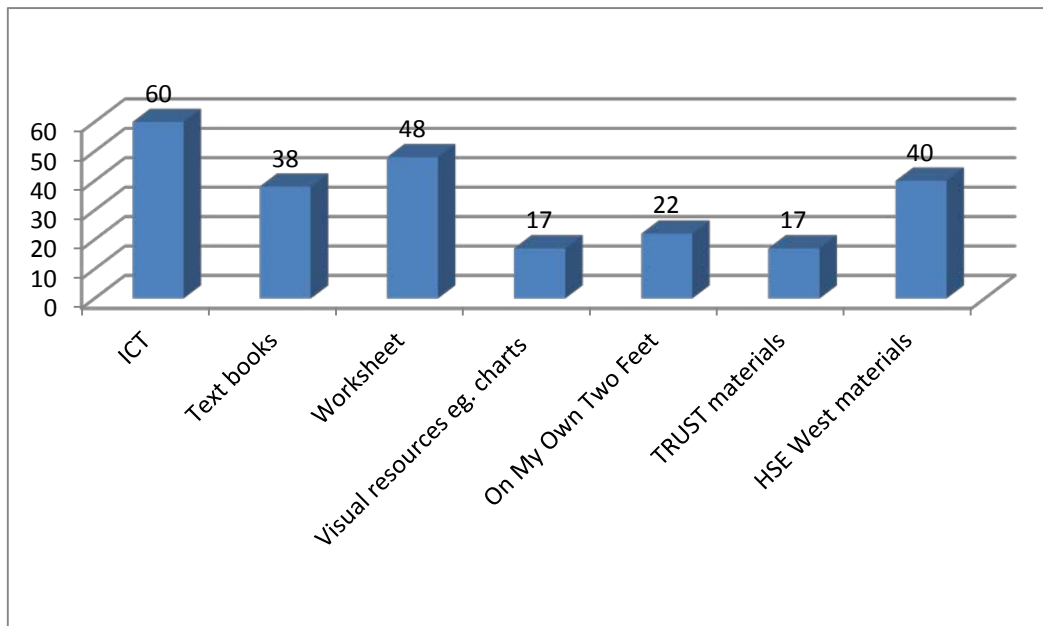
4.3   QUALITY OF TEACHING

Teaching strategies used in SPHE should support the acquisition of knowledge, and the development of attitudes and skills to enable students to make healthy choices and adopt a healthy lifestyle. To support high quality learning in lessons there is a need for balance between knowledge acquisition, concept formation, understanding, skills and attitudes.

4.3.1   Intended learning outcomes

Inspectors noted that sharing the intended learning outcomes with students, as was done in 66% of the lessons observed, proved very effective in focusing students' attention and in ensuring that students understood the relevance of the content being studied. Particularly good practice was noted when students contributed to the learning outcomes chosen for the lesson. This helped to foster a sense of shared ownership of the lesson.

Specific learning outcomes that demonstrate an appropriate balance between knowledge acquisition, student reflection and skills development should be shared with students at the start of all lessons. Due attention should be given to reviewing learning outcomes near the end of a lesson to consolidate students' learning and to facilitate opportunities for student reflection, self-evaluation and affirmation of progress.

4.3.2   Experiential learning

Teaching approaches for SPHE should be open and facilitative in style to enable students to critically examine, analyse and evaluate the content presented. The experiential or active learning cycle is recognised as a very appropriate strategy for use in SPHE lessons. The experiential learning cycle allows students to actively participate in their own learning and consists of four stages: experiencing;

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[6] The HSE West materials comprise a set of lesson plans and student materials that have been developed from the original North Western Health Board *Lifeskills* series. Details of other named resources are provided in the references at the end of this report.

processing; generalizing; applying. In the experiencing stage, the teacher facilitates a specific experience or activity that illustrates a concept or skill. In the processing stage, students are facilitated to reflect on and share their reactions to the activity. The generalizing stage involves discussions and questions that enable students to extract generalisations and develop principles. The applying stage should allow students to apply their learning to other situations.

The general level of teacher competence in facilitative methodologies to support experiential learning was described as very good in 40% of schools while good practice was noted in a further 48% of schools.

Inspectors noted a good balance between teacher-led and student-led activity in most of the lessons observed, with evidence of experiential learning noted in 78% of lessons. The inclusion in lessons of a range of activities (e.g. group work, role play, project work, worksheets) supported students in structured experiential learning. The following extract from a school report describes very good practice.

> Exceptionally good facilitation of experiential learning was observed in a number of lessons. Students were carefully guided through the required steps of experiencing, processing, generalising and applying their learning. Appropriate use of such activities as brainstorming, reflection, and discussion, moving debate, pair work and group work was evident.

In the planning of lessons, care should be taken to ensure that students are facilitated through each of the four phases of experiential learning, where possible. The following extract from a school report describes a difficulty observed frequently by inspectors.

> In some lessons, too much time was spent on activities, which meant that insufficient time was provided for reflection, analysis and evaluation. In some cases, teachers tended to draw conclusions for students, as opposed to facilitating students in doing this for themselves.

Due consideration should be given to facilitating students in processing, generalising and applying their learning to support all four stages of the experiential learning cycle.

In many of the lessons observed, there was effective use of resources to engage students and support experiential learning. Some very effective use of information and communications technology (ICT) was noted. Inspectors also commented on the effective use of music, and video clips or other visual presentations to link lesson content to the life experiences of students and to guide students through the first two phases of the experiential learning cycle.

In 85% of the lessons observed, students were considered by inspectors to be active in their own learning. In a small number of lessons, inspectors noted a predominance of teacher-talk, which limited the amount of active experiential learning that could take place. Students' comments during focus-group interviews suggest that they prefer lessons in which they are given opportunities to participate actively in a variety of tasks. Active experiential learning is a key principle underpinning the teaching and learning of SPHE and all teachers should be mindful of incorporating a variety of strategies that allow for an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-led activity.

Group work or pair work was observed in 78% of lessons. In many cases students displayed a commendable ability to work together and were confident communicators. This fulfils a key aim of the SPHE curriculum framework. The following extract from a school report describes good practice in the use of group work.

Best practice was observed in group work when the activity was time bound, group members were nominated to key roles and there was an effective reporting-back phase, followed by effective processing of the feedback to ensure that learning occurred.

In over 90% of lessons where group work took place, inspectors found that the student task assigned was well paced and pitched. Particularly good practice was noted where teachers incorporated a range of higher-order questions into a plenary session to challenge students to think more deeply about the topics under discussion. In a small number of lessons, inspectors observed that there was insufficient processing and generalising of information. Adequate time should be allocated for plenary sessions to allow students to discuss their findings and enable the teacher to provide additional clarification on the points raised.

### 4.3.3   Students' perceptions of the teaching strategies used in SPHE lessons

A questionnaire was administered to third-year students to explore their typical learning experiences in SPHE. An analysis of the questionnaire responses provides important findings regarding students' perceptions of the usefulness of a range of active learning strategies in supporting their learning in SPHE. Figure 4.3 shows the percentage of students who reported that they had experienced each of a number of learning activities and resources in their SPHE lessons.

Figure 4.3: % of students with experience of particular activities and resources in SPHE lessons
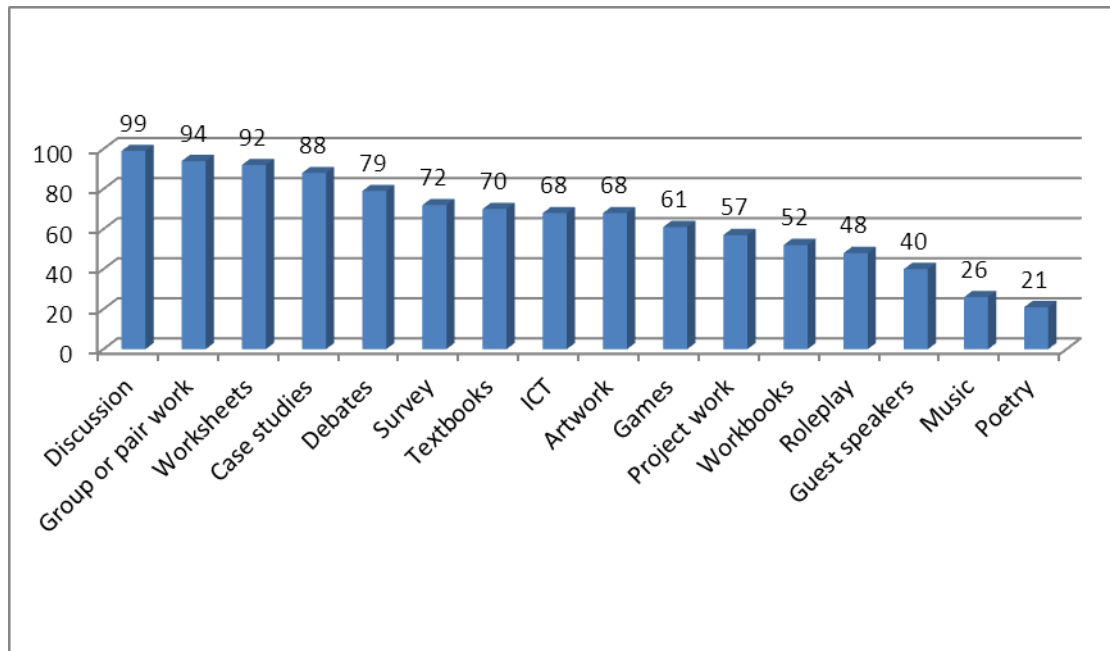
Questionnaire responses indicate that active-teaching methods such as discussion, group work or pair work were very widely used. ICT, debates, and various types of project work were also regularly used in lessons. Resources such as worksheets, case studies, surveys and class textbook were commonly used to support learning. These findings are in line with the practices noted by inspectors in the SPHE lessons observed. Figure 4.4 shows students' perceptions of the effectiveness of these activities and resources in supporting their learning in SPHE.

Figure 4.4: % of students who agreed/strongly agreed that each activity/resource was effective in supporting learning in SPHE
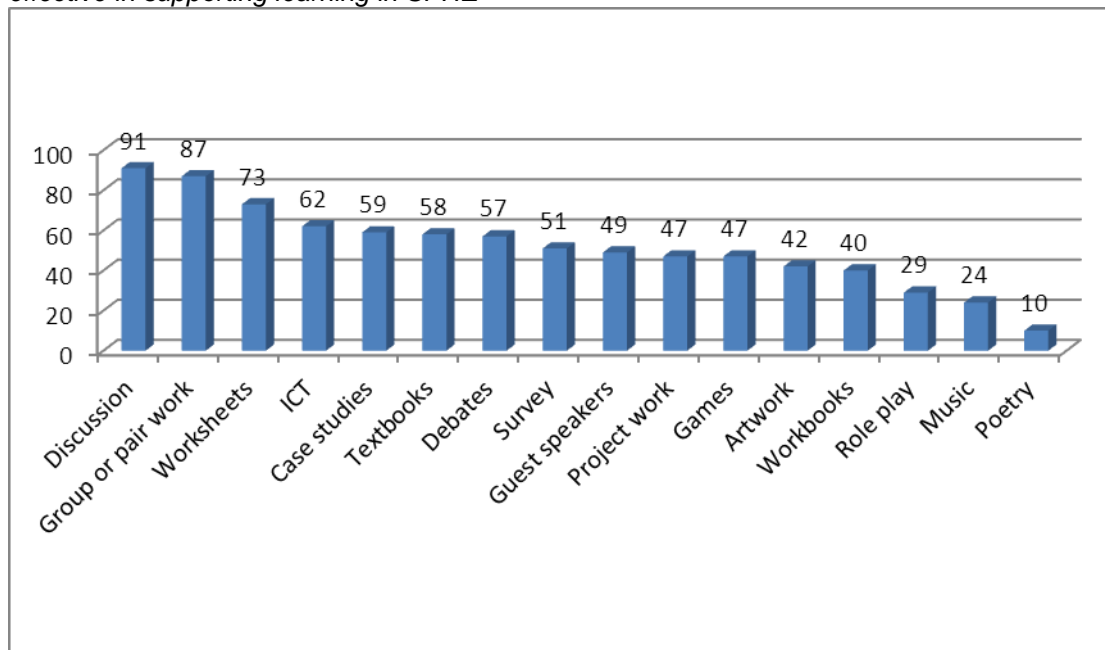
Questionnaire findings indicate that students value opportunities to actively participate in lessons. 91% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that classroom discussions are useful to their learning while 81% of students agreed or strongly agreed that group work and pair work are useful. One student in a focus-group interview observed that "*SPHE provides the mental space to discuss issues in a secure setting*" while another student noted that he/she "*preferred it when teachers and guest speakers did not lecture.*"

73% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that worksheets were useful to their learning. 62% agreed or strongly agreed that ICT supported their learning in SPHE. The effective use of ICT was also noted by inspectors in some of the classrooms visited. The majority of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the use of case studies, textbooks and debate were useful to their learning. Project work and the use of external facilitators were noted as useful by just under half of the student respondents.

4.4   THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

A positive classroom environment is a pre-requisite to high-quality learning in SPHE. The quality of the classroom atmosphere was described as very good in 67% and as good in a further 32% of the lessons observed. The practices noted in the following extract from a school report were typical of highly effective practice.

> Teaching was characterised by skilful verbal use of tone, posture and movement to create an enthusiastic and purposeful setting that encouraged students to engage with the topic and participate appropriately. Factual information was dealt with in an age-appropriate way and in line with the syllabus. Commendable concern was shown for students' personal development and safety and a commitment was evident to mould responsible citizens for the future.

Inspectors noted that practice was particularly effective when close attention was paid to agreeing, displaying and implementing the ground rules for SPHE. This

ensured that a climate of trust and respect was strongly in evidence and a secure environment for dialogue and discussion around the topic was well developed.

In a few of the lessons observed, there was scope for development in classroom-management strategies. Practices that had a negative impact on students' learning included inadequate supervision of class activities, including failure by the teacher to address low-level disruptive behaviour. Where teachers retained their SPHE class group from one year to the next, this greatly facilitated continuity of learning and the cultivation of positive relationships.

Inspectors noted that the choice of classroom for SPHE lessons needs careful consideration. Some of the lessons observed took place in rooms in which the layout was unsuitable for SPHE lessons. These included a science laboratory and a woodwork room. Where feasible, SPHE lessons should be held in classrooms where furniture can be easily re-arranged to facilitate activities such as circle time or group work.

In most of schools visited good efforts were made to create a stimulating learning environment for SPHE. Dedicated notice boards were used to raise awareness and support the development of positive attitudes in SPHE-related areas. The use of colourful wall displays to provide a stimulating learning environment was among the good practices noted by inspectors.

4.5   QUALITY OF STUDENTS' LEARNING

Inspectors identified significant strengths in student learning in 43% of the lessons observed while strengths outweighed weaknesses in a further 40% of the lessons. However evident weaknesses that impacted significantly on student learning were noted in 17% of lessons. The overall judgements made by inspectors with regard to the quality of student learning in the lessons observed are illustrated in figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5: % of lessons in which learning was at each quality level
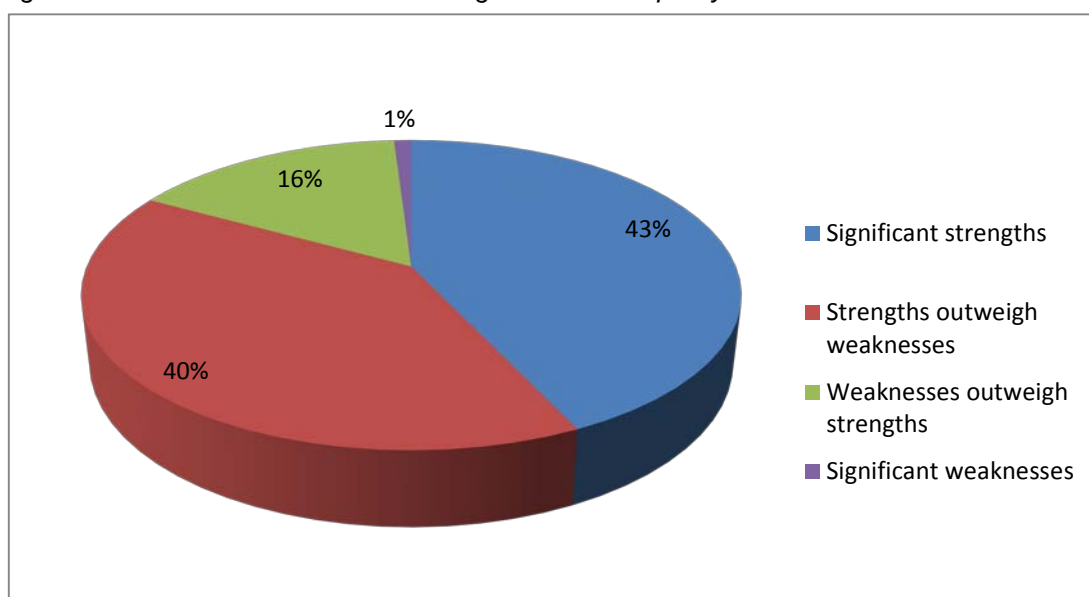
4.5.1   Student progress in lessons

In almost all of the lessons observed, students demonstrated a good understanding of the material covered and indicated a willingness to participate. In the majority of lessons opportunities were provided for students to reflect on the work covered in

that lesson. This is very good practice. Inspectors highlighted the importance of SPHE teachers adopting a facilitative role in lessons. This is exemplified in the following extract from a school report.

> At all phases of lessons, students were challenged to contribute productively. Teachers adopted an open and facilitative teaching style that enabled students to learn facts, explore their own values and develop their decision-making skills.

Inspectors observed that the learning outcomes for a small number of lessons placed too much emphasis on passing on information, at the expense of developing associated skills, attitudes and values. In keeping with the objectives of the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework,* the learning outcomes chosen should incorporate an appropriate balance between knowledge acquisition, student reflection and skills development. As noted in 4.3.1, learning outcomes should be shared with students at the start of all lessons.

There was scope to further consolidate students' learning in one third of the lessons observed. The following extract from a school report provides a recommendation that would enhance students' learning considerably if it were implemented in all lessons.

> It is suggested that time be provided as each lesson draws to a close to summarise the key points and to evaluate students' levels of understanding and learning. As students' contact with SPHE is limited to once a week, it is also suggested that students be provided with a short preview of the work planned for the next lesson.

4.5.2 Students' written work
In 80% of the lessons observed, examination of students' folders and copybooks showed evidence of progression in knowledge, understanding and skills in the period prior to the visit. However, in a significant minority of lessons the quantity and quality of work in students' folders and copybooks did not demonstrate a level of progression that was commensurate with the students' stage in the programme. Inspectors noted that students had insufficient written work in their SPHE copybook or folder and that greater use could have been made of workbook activities in students' textbooks. In a small number of lessons there was little evidence of any written work.

The aims of the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework* and the experiential learning cycle highlight the need for students to be provided with opportunities for review and reflection. Therefore, students should be provided with regular opportunities to complete written activities that are linked to the planned learning outcomes and assessment strategies for the lesson. Activities such as worksheets, quizzes, case studies or personal-reflection activities should be used to enable students to reflect on, generalise and apply the topics under discussion, challenge their own ideas and reflect on their learning. Such strategies also provide opportunities for teachers to consolidate and assess students' learning.

4.5.3 Student folders
In 36% of lessons, inspectors noted that students did not have an appropriate system for recording their work and learning in SPHE. Due to the integrated and holistic nature of the SPHE programme, students should maintain an SPHE folder from first year to third year. This would allow students to build up a body of work over the years, to which they could refer, and would facilitate safe storage of personal information.

4.5.4 Importance of SPHE to students' learning
The questionnaire administered to students asked for their views on how SPHE lessons supported their learning in various aspects of the *Junior Certificate SPHE Curriculum Framework.* Students reported high levels of satisfaction with their learning in modules such as *Substance use, Communication skills, Personal safety,*

Physical health, *Friendship* and *RSE*. There were lower levels of satisfaction with learning in aspects of modules such as *Self-management*, *Belonging and integrating* and *Emotional health*. Table 4.1 shows the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed that SPHE lessons had provided them with opportunities to develop skills and understanding in certain areas.

Table 4.1: Students' perceptions of the effectiveness of SPHE lessons in developing their skills and understanding in certain areas

Area of learning	% of students who agreed or strongly agreed
Belonging and integrating, Self-management, Influences and decisions	
SPHE has helped me to:	
• Set personal goals	69
• Develop organisational skills	67
• Develop effective study habits	56
• Make informed decisions	61
Communication skills	
SPHE has helped me to:	
• Listen to others	71
• Express my opinion	71
• Respect others and their opinions	82
• Work in a team	74
Emotional health	
SPHE has helped me to	
• Develop a positive self-image	54
• Cope with changes and loss	43
• Understand feelings and emotions	53
• Know when and where to seek the help and support of others	68
Substance use	
SPHE has helped me to	
• Understand reasons for substance use/misuse	84
• Understand effects of substance abuse on individuals	90
• Understand effects of substance abuse on families	86
• Understand effects of substance abuse on society	79
Friendship	
SPHE has helped me to	
• Cope with peer pressure	56
• Recognise bullying behaviour	83
• Develop skills to respond to bullying	68
• Understand school procedures for dealing with bullying	71
Personal safety and physical health	
SPHE has helped me to	
• Stay safe	66
• Recognise dangerous situations	67
• Be cyber-safe	68
• Be healthy	84

Relationships and sexuality	
SPHE has helped me to	
• Understand relationships	73
• Understand rights and responsibilities within personal relationships	68
• Understand puberty	76
• Understand human reproduction	70
• Understand my sexuality and the sexuality of others	65

These findings suggest that SPHE lessons are very effective in enabling students to acquire knowledge but are less effective in supporting the development of some skills. For instance, most students agreed that their SPHE lessons were useful in helping them to acquire factual knowledge about issues such as substance use, physical health, puberty and human reproduction. Most students agree that SPHE facilitates the development of a range of communication skills. However, findings in relation to the effectiveness of lessons in supporting students to develop or enhance skills such as coping with change, developing effective study habits, developing a positive self image and dealing with feelings and emotions are less favourable.

These findings suggest that there are modules or aspects of some modules that require greater attention in SPHE lessons in some of the schools visited. This concurs with the inspectors' finding noted elsewhere in this report, that aspects of the *Self-management* module as well as topics from the *Emotional health*, and *Belonging and integrating* modules were often omitted from programme plans. It is a matter of concern that those topics which facilitate the development of understanding and skills in relation to emotional and mental health are the ones which students report are least likely to have been effective. The finding also supports inspectors' judgement that in a small number of lessons observed the learning outcomes focused on passing on information, at the expense of developing associated skills, attitudes and values.

SPHE teaching teams should ensure that the SPHE programme implemented in their school incorporates all ten SPHE modules. In keeping with the rationale underpinning SPHE, the learning objectives chosen for each module should demonstrate an appropriate balance between the knowledge that students should acquire, the skills that should be developed and the positive behaviours that are being promoted. The intended learning outcomes should be carefully sequenced to support an incremental approach to students' learning.

The majority of senior cycle students who met with the inspectors recognised the value of SPHE as a means of supporting their learning in a broad range of areas. Senior cycle students often commented that the quality of learning experiences in SPHE was dependent on the quality of their classroom experience and that practices varied among teachers. This highlights the need for each school to develop an agreed programme plan for SPHE and RSE and implement it across all class groups. It also emphasises the importance of establishing a core team of teachers who have sufficient interest and expertise in SPHE to teach the subject. School management should take cognisance of the need to deploy only those teachers who have the necessary interest and expertise in the subject to deliver a high quality programme.

Students recognised the importance of having access to SPHE in each year of the junior cycle. In one instance where SPHE was not available in third year, students stated that they missed the chance to ask the questions that they felt uncomfortable asking elsewhere and that they would like to have the chance to study topics like alcohol and drugs as the topics were more relevant to their stage in development.

4.6 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING TEACHING AND LEARNING

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- The quality of advance planning and preparation was good or very good in most of the lessons observed.
- A good balance between teacher-led and student-led activity was noted in most of the lessons observed, with evidence of experiential learning in 78% of lessons.
- There was a positive classroom environment in evidence during almost all lessons.
- The overall quality of student learning was good or very good in 83% of lessons observed.
- The majority of senior cycle students who met with the inspectors recognise the value of SPHE as a means of supporting their learning in a broad range of areas.

CONCERNS

- There were evident weaknesses in the strategies used to consolidate students' learning in one third of the lessons observed.
- Students had insufficient written work in their SPHE copybook or folder and greater use could have been made of workbook activities in students' textbooks in a significant minority of lessons.
- Questionnaire findings suggest that SPHE lessons are more effective in enabling students to acquire knowledge than in supporting the development of some skills. Inspectors noted that the learning outcomes chosen in a small number of lessons focused on passing on information, at the expense of developing associated skills, attitudes and values.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Learning outcomes should be shared with students at the start of all lessons and used to consolidate learning at the end of lessons. The learning outcomes chosen should demonstrate an appropriate balance between the knowledge that students should acquire, the skills that should be developed and the positive behaviours that are being promoted.
- The teaching strategies chosen for all SPHE lessons should allow for an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-led activity and enable students to participate actively in their own learning.
- Written activities that are linked to the planned learning outcomes and assessment strategies for the lesson should be regularly completed by students.
- A system of folders that enables students to store and file information from their SPHE class from first year to third year should be agreed in the SPHE department and implemented by all teachers.

5.1 OVERALL QUALITY OF ASSESSMENT

Inspectors described the quality of assessment practice in SPHE as having more weaknesses than strengths in 56% of the schools visited. While some good practice was noted in 38% of schools, practice was highly effective in only 6% of these schools. This highlights the need for SPHE subject departments to give further consideration to how students' participation and progress is measured in SPHE and how quality feedback can be provided to students and parents. The overall judgements made by inspectors with regard to the quality of assessment practice are illustrated in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: % of schools in which assessment of SPHE was at each quality level
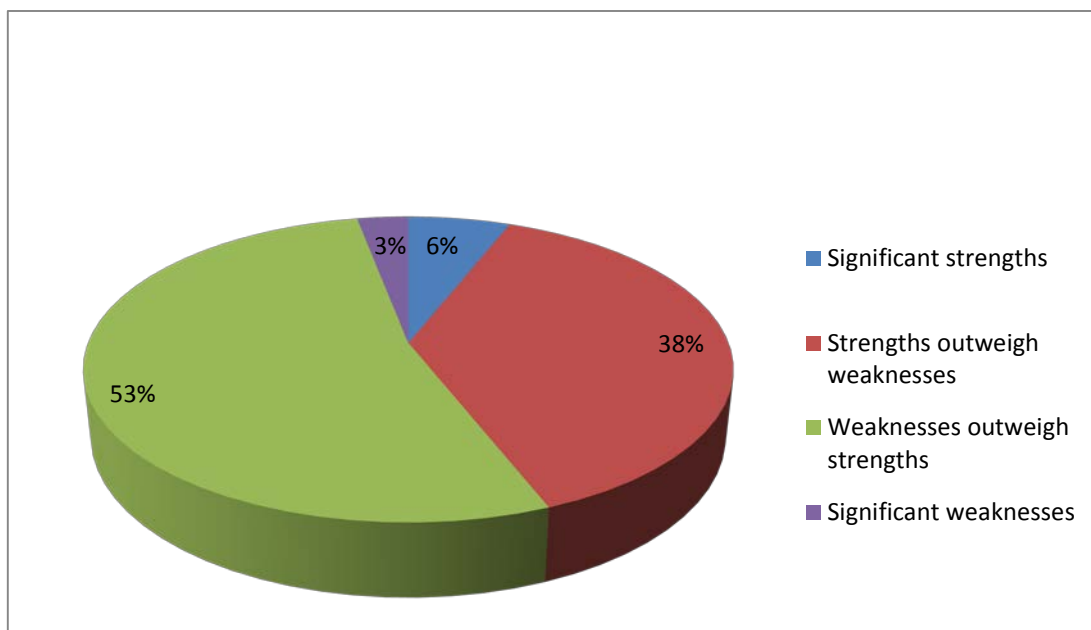
5.2 SPHE ASSESSMENT POLICY

In 81% of the schools visited, inspectors found that SPHE departments had not agreed or implemented a common assessment policy for SPHE. Inspectors often noted that in schools where some good assessment strategies were observed, these strategies were not implemented consistently with all class groups. The following extract from a school report is typical of inspectors' comments in this regard.

> Assessment of students' learning in SPHE is poorly developed at present. There is a need for an agreed and consistent approach to the assessment process, the recording and retention of students' work and the reporting of students' learning and progress to parents.

In reviewing planning documentation, inspectors found that assessment practices in SPHE were rarely discussed at subject-planning meetings. Furthermore, in most of the schools visited, students who met with the inspectors did not demonstrate an awareness of how their progress in SPHE was assessed and were often unaware of the purpose, relevance or value of assessment in SPHE. Inspectors frequently advised schools that there was a need for an agreed and consistent approach to the

assessment process, the recording and retention of students' work and the reporting of students' learning and progress to parents.

These findings highlight the pressing need for schools to develop a common assessment policy for SPHE. To optimise students' learning, SPHE teams should collectively agree the assessment tools to be used with all class groups. It is important that these assessment tools are fully compatible with the aims and objectives of the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework* and with the learning outcomes for each module. Further information and advice on assessment in SPHE is available in *Social, Personal and Health Education Junior Certificate Guidelines for Teachers* (NCCA, 2001). As the new *Framework for Junior Cycle* is implemented from 2014, on-going assessment for and of learning must become a key support for teaching and learning across the three years of junior cycle.

5.3   MODES OF ASSESSMENT

A variety of assessment modes was observed by inspectors during the evaluations. This is shown in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2: % of schools in which particular modes of assessment were used during lessons observed
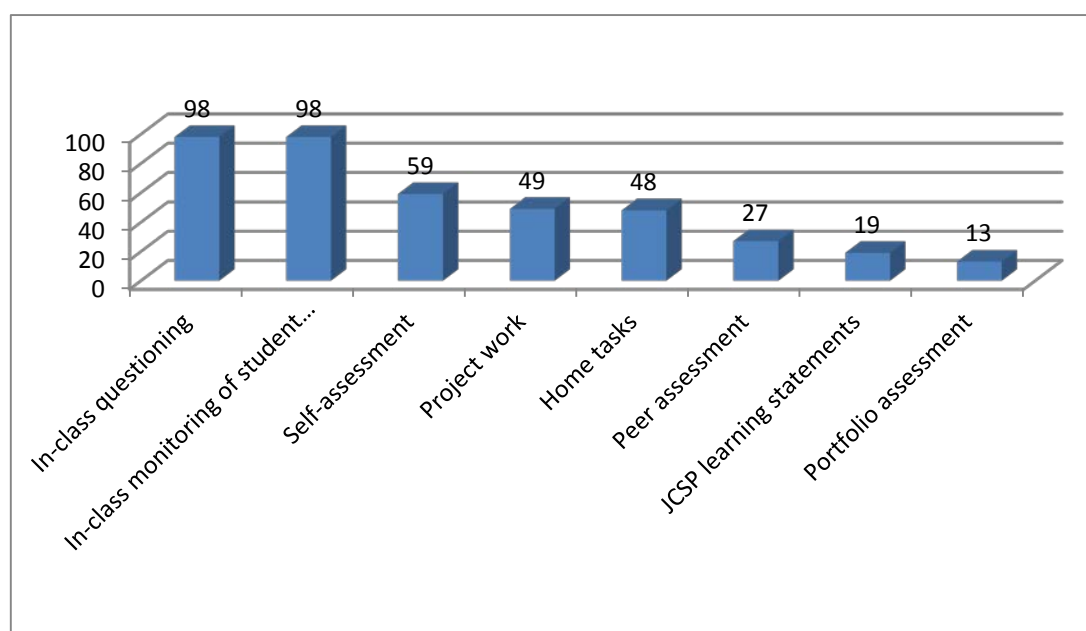
Assessment was an integral component of 68% of the lessons observed. However, inspectors considered in-class assessment practice to be ineffective in over one third of these lessons.

5.3.1   Questioning
In-class questioning and monitoring of class activities were the methods of assessment noted most frequently in the lessons observed. These practices provided opportunities for teachers to monitor and assess actual progress in the lesson and to provide immediate feedback and affirmation to students. They also provided a basis for further teaching, as illustrated by the following extract from a school report.

> In one instance, teacher's monitoring of the student task revealed some important deficits in students' prior knowledge and resulted in the teacher effectively clarifying the concepts central to the topic in question.

Inspectors noted that higher-order questioning proved particularly effective at the conclusion of group work or pair work to allow students to process information and to provide opportunities to clarify misunderstandings. Particularly good practice was noted when the questions challenged students to apply information and make links with previously taught material. However, inspectors found that there was some scope for teachers to develop the questioning techniques used. In particular, they noted a need for teachers to distribute questions more evenly among students, give more careful consideration to the framing of questions, allow more time for students to answer and allow students to share answers in pairs or small groups before sharing with the rest of the class.

5.3.2   Assigning home tasks
Setting home tasks is a valuable assessment tool as it facilitates continuity between lessons and provides opportunities for students to generalise and apply learning. However this mode of assessment was underdeveloped in 52% of schools. Best practice was noted in instances where students' homework and written class work was regularly monitored and where regular use was made of comment-only marking.

5.3.3   Self-assessment
Inspectors found that self-assessment practices were used in SPHE lessons in over half of the schools visited. One particularly good strategy noted is described in the following extract from a school report.

> Students have been encouraged to compose personal reflections on their work as a form of assessment. This technique illustrates the great value of assessment at the time of learning and provides good evidence of students' learning and should be further developed by all teachers.

Some of the schools visited provided the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). This programme includes a profiling system that consists of a series of statements, each of which provides for students to engage in self assessment. Inspectors found evidence that SPHE learning statements were being used in only 60% of eligible schools, indicating that there is further scope to integrate JCSP learning targets into assessment practices in SPHE.

5.3.4   Project work
Project work was used as a mode of assessment in 49% of lessons observed. However, in many cases assessment criteria that would form the basis of feedback to students had not been developed. Inspectors found that this limited the learning potential of this activity and frequently recommended that assessment criteria that are clearly linked to the intended learning outcomes for the task be devised for all project work. This would also provide a basis for useful feedback to students and parents.

5.3.5   The SPHE portfolio
In 13% of schools visited a system of portfolio assessment was in place for SPHE by which students selected key pieces of work for inclusion in a portfolio, using clearly specified and agreed criteria. The portfolio then served as a record of a student's learning in key areas and was used as the basis for student self-assessment and reporting to parents. SPHE portfolios should be further considered as a means of assessing student progress.

A small number of schools issued school-based certificates to acknowledge students' completion of the junior cycle SPHE programme. This was commended by inspectors as a very good strategy for recognising student achievement. In the new *Framework for Junior Cycle* schools will have the opportunity to certify achievement in SPHE.

5.4   RECORD-KEEPING

Inspectors found that there was scope to improve the quality of teachers' record-keeping for SPHE classes in the majority of schools visited. While teachers maintained good records of students' attendance in lessons, there was considerable scope to enhance the quality of the records kept in relation to students' class participation and progress in SPHE. Inspectors often recommended that teachers retain records of students' attendance, progress and participation in class. Records of the programme of work covered with each class should also be retained to inform ongoing planning.

5.5   USE OF ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

There is significant scope for development in how SPHE subject departments and teachers use assessment outcomes to inform teaching and learning. There was evidence that assessment outcomes were used effectively to consolidate students' learning in half of the schools visited. However, assessment outcomes were used to inform programme planning in only 28% of schools.

Very good practice was noted by inspectors in a small number of schools where, on completion of a module of work and as part of a reflective exercise, students completed end-of-topic review forms. The forms sought to ascertain students' views on the knowledge acquired and skills developed during the module. Students' opinions on the effectiveness of the teaching strategies used were also sought. The information was then collated for each year group, discussed at the subject-planning meetings and used to inform the continued development of the SPHE programme in the school. This exceptionally good practice should be implemented in all schools.

5.6   FEEDBACK TO PARENTS AND STUDENTS

In a few schools, inspectors noted some very good collaboration with parents in relation to SPHE, as illustrated in the following extract from a school report.

> Communication with parents in relation to SPHE is quite well developed. This can be seen, for example, in a series of parent/student leaflets prepared by the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) local committee.

> Parents are consulted about aspects of delivery of SPHE and RSE. It also is practice to provide written information for parents about the programmes, including the RSE topics presented by guest speakers.

It is very important that all schools make parents aware of their RSE programme and that the school's RSE policy includes clear procedures for informing and involving parents. Inspectors noted that some schools hosted seminars for parents in collaboration with the parents' association, to complement the SPHE programme. This is highly commendable practice.

In 81% of schools, feedback regarding students' progress in SPHE was provided at parent-teacher meetings. 60% of schools also provided feedback in the form of a student report. However, due to the absence of clearly defined assessment criteria and procedures, feedback was often confined to comments on students' class participation. This further highlights the need to extend and formalise the range of assessment strategies used in SPHE to enhance the evidence base that informs feedback to parents and students.

5.7   FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING ASSESSMENT

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- In lessons where questioning was observed, the questioning strategies used were generally effective in 90% of cases.
- Student self-assessment practices were noted in SPHE lessons in over half of the schools visited.
- In most schools, feedback regarding students' progress in SPHE was available at parent-teacher meetings.

CONCERNS

- SPHE departments in 81% of schools had not agreed or implemented a common assessment policy for SPHE.
- In-class assessment practice was ineffective in over one third of the lessons observed.
- There was considerable scope to enhance the quality of teachers' record-keeping in relation to students' class participation and progress in SPHE.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- SPHE teams should collectively agree a range of assessment tools to be used with all class groups in their school.
- Assessment criteria, linked to intended learning outcomes, should be clearly defined.
- Students' progress should be assessed and monitored as an integral component of lessons.
- Accurate records of students' progress and participation in class should be retained to inform ongoing planning and provide a useful evidence base for reporting to parents.

6.1 QUALITY OF SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE-SCHOOL SUPPORT

FINDINGS

All of the schools inspected provided junior cycle SPHE. However in 13% of cases there was scope to improve students' access to the subject.

96% of the schools inspected provided RSE for senior cycle students but there was significant variation in the quality of this provision. Only 56% of schools had an RSE policy in place.

The practice of assigning staff to SPHE was good or very good in 82% of schools. In a significant minority of schools there was scope for more effective deployment of teachers to senior cycle RSE.

Systematic engagement by school management and teachers with SPHE-related continuous development activities was observed to have a positive impact on the quality of programme delivery at school level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In the context of the current junior cycle programme, school management should ensure that SPHE is provided for all students in accordance with the requirements of circular M11/03. As the new *Framework for Junior Cycle* is introduced from 2014, schools should ensure that the junior cycle programme that they design addresses the principles, statements of learning and key skills that relate to the areas currently covered in SPHE.

- A broad and balanced RSE programme, as outlined in *RSE Interim Curriculum and Guidelines,* should be taught to all senior cycle students, even in the absence of a timetabled SPHE class. This programme should be underpinned by a whole-school RSE policy developed in accordance with Department Circular 0037/2010 *Relationships and Sexuality Education*.

- Core teaching teams, led by a subject co-ordinator, should be established for junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle RSE. School management should facilitate a systematic and incremental CPD programme to support the work of these teams.

6.2 QUALITY OF SUBJECT PLANNING AND PREPARATION

FINDINGS

School practices and procedures to support subject planning for SPHE were found to be effective in 75% of schools. However, practices and procedures to support planning for senior cycle RSE were not effective in the majority of schools.

83% of the schools inspected had developed a programme plan for SPHE but some modules of the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework* were not adequately

emphasised in 21% of programme plans. There were evident weaknesses in programme planning for senior cycle RSE in 62% of the schools inspected.

Inspectors observed some exemplary reflective practice among teachers, which supported on-going improvements in planning for SPHE and RSE. In these instances the subject co-ordinator played a key role in leading a school-improvement agenda that enhanced teaching and learning in SPHE and RSE.

The general quality of planning for resources at subject-department level was good or very good in 85% of schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- School management should schedule subject-planning meetings for SPHE and RSE in a manner that facilitates the attendance of all staff members who teach the subjects.

- Programme plans for junior cycle SPHE and senior cycle RSE should encompass all modules of the *Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework* and be in accordance with the *RSE Interim Curriculum and Guidelines*.

6.3 QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SPHE

FINDINGS

The quality of advance planning and preparation for the lessons observed was good or very good in most of the classes visited.

The general level of teacher competence in facilitative methodologies to support experiential learning was described as very good in 40% of schools while good practice was noted in a further 48% of schools. Questionnaire findings indicate that students value opportunities to participate actively in lessons.

In almost all of the lessons observed, students demonstrated a good understanding of the material covered and indicated a willingness to participate. However, questionnaire findings suggest that, while SPHE lessons were effective in enabling students to acquire knowledge, they were less successful in supporting the development of skills.

The classroom atmosphere was described as good or very good in almost all instances.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The learning outcomes chosen for lessons should demonstrate an appropriate balance between the knowledge that students should acquire, the skills that should be developed and the positive behaviours that are being promoted.

- Due consideration should be given in all lessons to incorporating teaching strategies that guide students through all four stages of the experiential learning cycle.

- Students should be regularly required to complete written activities that are linked to the planned learning outcomes and assessment strategies for the lesson.

6.4 QUALITY OF ASSESSMENT IN SPHE

FINDINGS

Weaknesses outweighed strengths in the assessment practices used in SPHE in 56% of schools.

SPHE departments had not agreed a common assessment policy for SPHE in 81% of the schools visited.

In-class questioning and monitoring of class activities were the methods of assessment most commonly observed. Some very effective use of questioning was observed. However, there was scope to develop strategies to consolidate students' learning in one third of the lessons observed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- SPHE teams should collectively agree a range of assessment tools to be used with all class groups in their school.

- Assessment criteria, linked to intended learning outcomes, should be clearly defined.

- Students' progress should be assessed and monitored as an integral component of lessons.

- Accurate records of students' progress and participation in class should be retained to inform ongoing planning and provide a useful evidence base for reporting to parents.

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www.education.ie	Department of Education and Skills
www.ncca.ie	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
www.pdst.ie	Professional Development Service for Teachers
www.sphe.ie	SPHE Support Service (Post-Primary)
www.healthpromotion.ie	Health Promotion Services
www.hse.ie	Health Service Executive
www.dohc.ie	Department of Health and Children
www.dcya.gov.ie	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
www.nosp.ie	National Office for Suicide Prevention
www.mentalhealthireland.ie	Mental Health Ireland
www.headstrong.ie	National Centre for Youth Mental Health
www.reachout.com	Mental Health Information Service
www.crisispregnancy.ie	HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme
www.glen.ie	Gay and Lesbian Equality Network
www.belongto.org	Organisation for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender young people aged 14-23
www.webwise.ie	Internet safety information
www.drugs.ie	Information regarding drugs and alcohol