



**SOCIAL, PERSONAL  
AND HEALTH EDUCATION  
AT SENIOR CYCLE**

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

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# **Social, Personal and Health Education**

**At**

**Senior Cycle**

## **PREAMBLE**

Social, Personal and Health Education, (SPHE) is part of the educational experience of many students at first and second level. It will be part of the curriculum for primary schools from September 2003. The Department of Education and Science has advised that all second level schools must timetable SPHE at junior cycle by September 2003 (DES M11/03). Implementation of SPHE at junior cycle is supported by a partnership between the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children, and the Health Boards.

At present, at senior cycle, some schools provide for the social, personal and health education of students in Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied and to a lesser extent in the Leaving Certificate (established). However, many students at senior cycle do not have SPHE as part of their senior cycle education. This document sets out the issues that will inform the development of SPHE at senior cycle for all students.

It is intended to disseminate this document for wide consultation. The feedback from this process will inform the future planning for the development of SPHE at senior cycle.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a representative body and the course committee for SPHE reflects the representative structures of Council.

- Social, personal and health education at senior cycle -

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## **1. Introduction**

The growth and development of social, personal and health education, (SPHE) in Irish education has been influenced by factors from both inside and outside the educational sphere. The Education Act, 1998 identifies the important role of education in the development of all aspects of the individual. While teaching and learning across the whole curriculum has implications for personal and social development, SPHE is specifically concerned with the social, personal and health education of the student.

Health and well-being are fundamental to our ability to live life to the fullest. Throughout this document, the definition of 'health' underpinning the discussion is drawn from the World Health Organisation's definition of health:

'Health is a complete state of physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity... it is a resource for everyday life, not an object of living: it is a positive concept emphasising social and physical resources, as well as physical capacity.' (WHO 1986)

This discussion document will examine these factors in light of their implications for SPHE at senior cycle. In addition, the document will examine the following areas:

- current provision in SPHE at junior and senior cycle
- rationale for the development of SPHE at senior cycle
- suggested models for implementation of SPHE at senior cycle
- proposals for the content of SPHE at senior cycle
- assessment and certification in SPHE at senior cycle
- additional considerations for developments of SPHE at senior cycle.

### **Current provision**

Social, Personal and Health Education will be part of the curriculum at primary level from 2003. At post-primary level, SPHE is currently being introduced as a subject for all students at junior cycle. The Department of Education and Science has advised that all second-level schools are required to timetable SPHE at junior cycle from September 2003 (DES M11/03, M22/00).

Provision at senior cycle varies greatly. It is influenced by factors such as the culture and ethos of the school, and the curriculum offered at senior cycle. Where SPHE forms part of the senior cycle curriculum, a wide variety of approaches is employed. These include provision for SPHE as a discrete subject, using workshops or seminars throughout the senior cycle, through cross-curricular approaches, and through initiatives such as community placements in Transition Year, which include aims in the social and personal domain.

### **Rationale**

Social, personal and health education is concerned with advancing the holistic aims of education and health in tandem. These holistic aims are concerned with the development of all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, religious, social, and spiritual development of the person. The provision of a discrete time on the timetable for SPHE and a supportive whole school environment are the main enabling structures necessary for the pursuit of these goals.

Social and personal skills are central to the learning process. The ability to study and learn as an individual or as part of a group, and a willingness to take on and stay with new challenges are dependent on a positive sense of self-worth. The development of confidence, commitment and good communication skills are also vital for development as a young person. SPHE can contribute to the development of these skills.

Current health policies, reports and strategy documents raise concerns about the health behaviours being adopted by young people in a number of areas, including sexual health, physical activity, diet, drugs, and alcohol (Slán 1999), (ESPAD 1999). Parents and the community welcome support in addressing these issues with young people. The school as a setting, and young people as a specific population, have been identified as key targets for health education and health promotion in the National Health Promotion Strategy, 2000 – 2005.

The concept of ‘health literacy’ is important in considering SPHE for students of this age group. Health literacy is concerned with learning at three levels:

1. Knowledge and information on health and health related issues.
2. Developing the personal and social skills necessary to act on informed decisions.



3. Facilitating students in their understanding of the wider influences on health so that they can choose to adopt an advocacy role in support of health.

(Nutbeam 2000)

In the planning and implementation of the senior cycle SPHE curriculum, it will be important that gender and intercultural issues are addressed.

### **Framework for implementation**

There are a number of possible models for the implementation of the SPHE curriculum at senior cycle. These include:

- SPHE as a discrete timetabled subject in its own right: SPHE would have a dedicated time on the timetable for all students in senior cycle. It would be integral to the senior cycle curriculum with consideration being given to an appropriate duration for the course
- cross-curricular approach: all subject teachers would deliver the SPHE curriculum for senior cycle students through their own subject areas and plan accordingly
- workshop or seminar approach: SPHE would be catered for through a seminar or workshop approach organised at intervals throughout the senior cycle
- SPHE as an optional subject: SPHE would be offered as an optional subject alongside other subjects in Leaving Certificate (established), all of which are optional at present, with the exception of Irish.

Good practice would suggest that the provision of SPHE as a discrete timetabled subject on the curriculum, situated within a supportive whole school environment, is the most effective model of implementation for SPHE at senior cycle.

### **Content**

There is a strong emphasis in all areas of the curriculum on building continuity between junior and senior cycle. It would be reasonable that SPHE at senior cycle would build on the ten modules introduced at junior cycle. Additional content areas that are more pertinent to students at senior cycle could be included. These would build on modules already visited at junior cycle. The SPHE curriculum is spiral in design, where similar subject matter is revisited in greater

depth as students' needs change. This would be continued in the senior cycle to facilitate the diversity of needs and maturity levels of senior cycle students.

### **Assessment and certification**

The type of formal terminal assessment used for the majority of subjects in Leaving Certificate (established) is inappropriate in SPHE. Assessment ought to form an integral part of the teaching and learning experience. It can both inform the learning process and identify what has been learned. Assessment in SPHE at junior cycle is based on this approach. Developments at senior cycle can build on these practices.

### **Issues for implementing and supporting SPHE at senior cycle**

SPHE at senior cycle presents many challenges. These include:

- supporting teaching and learning in SPHE
- working in partnership with parents and the wider school community on the planning and implementation of SPHE
- including the voice of students at senior cycle in the planning and implementation of SPHE at senior cycle.

## 2. SPHE in the curriculum —current provision

Social, Personal and Health Education has been part of the curriculum, at primary and second level, in various forms over the past thirty years. Resources have been developed by Health Boards, the Department of Health and Children, and the Department of Education and Science in support of aspects of SPHE and its implementation in schools during this time.

These include

- Walk Tall
- On My Own Two Feet
- North Western Health Board's Lifeskills Programme
- Cork Social and Health Programme in support of SPHE at senior cycle
- Relationships and Sexuality Resource Materials.

All of these materials continue to be a valuable resource for schools today.

The *Health Promoting School* project, which worked with a network of forty schools at primary and second level, established that whole school issues are important for the support and implementation of SPHE. All of these initiatives in their turn have provided valuable insights and experience to inform current developments in SPHE.

### 2.1 SPHE in the Primary School Curriculum

SPHE is now part of the curriculum for all children at primary level. The curriculum is presented in three strands:

- *Myself*—personal development for the individual child
- *Myself and others*—developing a sense of care and respect for other people
- *Myself and the wider world*—exploring the various communities to which children belong.

The primary school curriculum is spiral and developmental in nature. It allows the three themes to be re-visited throughout the education of the child. Approaches to teaching and learning, and the knowledge and skills emphasised, reflect the needs and maturity of the children at the particular time. The subject is delivered both as a discrete subject and also in a cross-curricular

manner, with age appropriate materials being used. Teachers are encouraged to use active methodologies, where students are active participants in their own learning, making informed judgments and constructing new meaning. This emphasis becomes greater as the child moves through primary education. SPHE at primary level provides the basis for SPHE and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) at post-primary level.

## **2.2 SPHE in post-primary curriculum**

### **2.2.1 SPHE in junior cycle**

The junior cycle SPHE curriculum seeks to support the holistic aims of education. While many aspects of the school setting can support the aims of education and health, SPHE provides students with a dedicated time and space to develop the skills and competencies to learn about themselves, care for themselves and others and make informed decisions about their health, personal lives, and social development. At junior cycle, the SPHE curriculum is situated within a flexible framework, in which individual schools can plan their own curriculum.

Junior cycle SPHE aims to:

- enable the students to develop personal and social skills
- promote self-esteem and self-confidence
- enable the students to develop a framework for responsible decision-making
- provide opportunities for reflection and discussion
- promote physical, mental and emotional health and well-being.

The ten modules are:

- Belonging and Integrating
- Communication Skills
- Friendship
- Self-Management
- Influences and Decisions
- Substance Abuse
- Emotional Health
- Relationships and Sexuality

- Physical Health
- Personal Safety.

Schools are being enabled to introduce and implement SPHE through the Post-Primary SPHE Support Service, which is managed by a partnership between the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Education and Science, and the Health Boards. Through this partnership, teachers and schools have been able to access professional expertise located in the Health Boards. Ten regional teams have been established, each comprising of a regional development officer appointed to the Post-Primary SPHE Support Service by the Department of Education and Science, and a health promotion officer from the respective Health Board. These regional teams meet the in-service needs of teachers and schools in their implementation of the new junior cycle SPHE syllabus. There is an expectation that all schools will have introduced SPHE in their junior-cycle curriculum with effect from September 2003 (DES M11/03). To date, 85% of post-primary schools have links with the support services, while 70% have timetabled SPHE at junior cycle. (Social, Personal and Health Education Support Service: Post-Primary, May 2003).

### **2.2.2 SPHE in Transition Year**

The aim of the Transition Year (TY) is to promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of students and to prepare them for their role as independent, participative and responsible members of society. Many of the aims of the Transition Year programme refer explicitly to the personal and social development of the student.

Transition Year can help students to:

- discover their personal strengths
- develop maturity and self-confidence
- improve self-esteem
- build interpersonal and team skills

(Transition Year Support Materials).

Schools take responsibility for the design of their Transition Year programme within the guidelines offered by the Department of Education and Science. Provision for SPHE in Transition Year is at the discretion of the school. Provision is varied and may take the following formats:

- discrete subject provision
- modular approach
- cross-curricular approach
- student experience in a variety of events designed to foster personal and social development.

In addition, self-assessment and personal journaling are recommended as an integral part of assessment and evaluation in the Transition Year programme.

Whilst the culture and ethos of Transition Year supports the social, personal and health education of students, it is an optional programme and is not followed by all students. In 2000, 61,000 students sat for the Junior Certificate examinations. In 2001, 23,303 students opted for Transition Year (Department of Education and Science 2002).

### **2.2.3 SPHE in Leaving Certificate Applied**

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a two-year pre-vocational programme at senior cycle. In 1999/2000, 6,890 students were enrolled in the Leaving Certificate Applied (DES 2001). The fundamental goal of LCA is to prepare students for transition from the world of the school or centre, to that of adult and working life.

Two of the underlying principles of the programme are as follows:

- LCA places a premium on the personal and social development of participants
- LCA aims to develop active citizens who have a sense of belonging in the community, locally, nationally and internationally.

The Social Education course is a compulsory component of the LCA programme. *Social and Health Education 1 & 2* account for two of the six modules of the Social Education course. *Community/Contemporary Issues* and *Taking Charge* make up the remaining four modules. The students have an opportunity to examine and explore issues and topics relating to self-awareness, interpersonal relationships, health care and contemporary social, economic, political and cultural issues. In addition, Social Education aims to prepare students for the transition from dependent to independent living. Teachers and students have received the Social Education course very positively. There is a growing core of teachers skilled in the teaching and

facilitation of the Social Education course. However, challenges remain. Teachers require ongoing support and training to enable them to remain committed to, and feel supported in, teaching these modules.

#### **2.2.4 SPHE in Leaving Certificate (established)**

SPHE is offered by a number of schools as part of the senior cycle curriculum under a range of subject titles. In 1999/2000, out of 116,000 students taking subjects in the Leaving Certificate programme, 3,273 students were recorded as taking subjects such as Health Education, SPHE and Pastoral Care (DES 2001). However, these figures would not accurately reflect provision made for social, personal and health education in a cross-curricular manner or in a workshop or seminar approach.

Timetabled provision in this area is varied. It may be part of the curriculum for both years, or it may be offered as part of the fifth year curriculum only. It can be included on the timetable as a single or double period for the entire year. Alternatively, it may be offered as a module over a shorter period of time. Its inclusion is at the discretion of the individual school.

SPHE, as part of the Leaving Certificate Applied, Transition Year, and Leaving Certificate (established) currently provides opportunities for some students that specifically foster learning in the social, personal and health domains. However, there is a gap in the reality of the educational experience of many students and the expressed sentiments of the Education Act, 1998. Research has found that students saw personal and social development as a priority, but they did not feel that their educational experience had been very successful in achieving this goal. (Hannan et al 1991) The development of an SPHE curriculum for all students at senior cycle could help to address this disparity.

### **3. Rationale for SPHE at senior cycle**

#### **3.1. Senior cycle education**

The White Paper on Education, *Charting our Educational Future* (1995) provided the framework for discussion on future developments in Irish education. The fundamental aim of education was described as being

*to serve individual, social and economic well-being and to enhance the quality of life.*

The discussion explored the pursuit of this aim through ten specific educational aims, a number of which were committed to learning in the personal and social domains.

The Education Act, 1998 endorses this vision, stating that schools shall

‘promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school.’ (Section 9, Subsection (d))

Implicit in this vision is a commitment to the development of the whole person, a multi-dimensional vision of society, and recognition of the complexity and richness of the relationship between the individual and his or her local, national and global community.

SPHE at junior cycle is committed to the holistic development of the individual within the broader social context. The SPHE syllabus notes that one of the general aims of education is to

‘contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including the aesthetic, creative, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, religious, social and spiritual development, for personal and family life, for living in the community and for leisure.’ (SPHE Syllabus - junior cycle)

SPHE at senior cycle would support continued learning in the personal, social and health domains. Students could continue to deepen their understanding of the factors, which enable and disable the pursuit of personal health and well-being in the wider context.



However, it is important to note that while the aims and purposes of education endorse a broad and balanced view of education, Developing Senior Cycle Education: *Consultative Paper on Issues and Options* (2002) notes that there are gaps in current provision, including gaps in social and health education (pg.48). The inclusion of SPHE in the senior cycle curriculum can address this deficit, providing students with opportunities to continue learning in these areas.

It is important that SPHE at senior cycle continues to build on the partnership with parents and the community that has been an integral part of the subject at junior cycle. Parents and the community are significant influences in the wider social setting. Social and personal health is defined and contextualised by the individual and their life experience inside and outside the school setting. In turn, the level of support they receive from their school, family and community influences students' experience of well-being. SPHE, situated within a supportive whole school environment, and cognisant of the importance of a holistic understanding of health and effective home/school/community links, can enhance the pursuit of the general aims of education. Such an integrated approach is accepted as the most effective approach to SPHE (Denman et al 2002).

Hannan et al (1996) maintain that:

‘such formal programmes dealing with pupil development should be integrated into a “whole school” approach to educational development, underpinned by supportive teacher attitudes, expectations and practice.’

### **3.2 SPHE: providing a broader educational experience?**

SPHE is specifically concerned with guiding the students towards greater self-knowledge and developing skills of social competence. Gardner (1993) argues that intelligence is more than a general capacity which differs from person to person. He outlines seven different intelligences, two of which are the interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences:

- interpersonal intelligence: relating to other people, social skills, social awareness, oral communication, expression of feelings, relationships and sexuality
- intrapersonal intelligence: emotional development, personal development, self-concept, self-esteem, self-dialogue and reflection, self-awareness.

While senior cycle education generally has the potential to enhance these intelligences, SPHE would provide specific opportunities for students to develop their self-awareness, to understand and manage feelings, to set realistic goals, to learn assertiveness skills, group management skills, and team work. SPHE would provide the context within which the messages of self-esteem and the importance of every individual within the school community would be reinforced.

### **3.3 Students' social and personal health in the education setting**

It is now recognised that personal and social skills are central to the learning process (McLaughlin, 1995). The capacity to tolerate difficulty and uncertainty for a while, until new learning has been assimilated, is the key to successful learning. Social, personal and health education can facilitate the individual in this process. Young people who have a high degree of self-worth, a sense of security and a positive self-image will be more positively disposed to school life and the variety of learning situations it offers. While addressing this area will not result in all students obtaining top grades, it can support the development of self-esteem and confidence as foundations for good academic performance.

### **3.4 Health behaviours in adolescence**

Current research on the lifestyle habits of young Irish people gives rise for concern. The evidence suggests that young peoples' lifestyle choices are often not health promoting, particularly in the area of diet, exercise, drugs and alcohol, smoking, injuries and sexual health and behaviour (Slán 1999), (ESPAD, 1999), (National Drugs Strategy 2001 – 2008), (Southern Health Board Sexual Health Strategy 2001 –2011), (Alliance for Sexual Health 1997), (Interim Report of the Strategic Task Force on Alcohol, 2002). The inclusion of SPHE across the educational experience of students is proposed as one of the possible approaches to addressing these issues. Young people have been identified as key targets, and schools and colleges as key settings for health promotion and health education in the National Health Promotion Strategy, 2000 – 2005. Working in partnership is at the core of these policies and strategies. The Department of Education and Science is committed to partnership with the Department of Health and Children in support of the implementation of SPHE in all schools at junior cycle. Senior cycle SPHE can build on this partnership, which is already in place in relation to SPHE at junior cycle. Parents of adolescents and community leaders can be supported in addressing

young peoples' lifestyle patterns through an SPHE curriculum that engages with students on the relevant issues.

### **3.5 Health literacy**

Students are a diverse group in all respects. Their uniqueness as individuals means that students embark on senior cycle education from a range of starting points, some of which guarantee a successful experience at school. Other students start from a place of confusion, uncertainty and change. Throughout this period, young people adopt behaviours and make lifestyle choices, all of which have implications for the quality of their lives in school and in the future. These decisions and choices are part of the health journey that all students undertake. The process is influenced by how well one is able to make informed decisions and act on them. Nutbeam, (2000) refers to this as being 'health literate'. Schools can play a key role in educating students to become health literate. Health literacy involves three levels of learning:

- **Basic or functional health literacy:**
  - having the knowledge and factual information on which to base informed decisions
  
- **Communicative or interactive health literacy:**
  - providing opportunities to develop skills and examine attitudes in a supportive environment
  
- **Critical health literacy:**
  - understanding community and wider influences on well-being and the promotion of advocacy in pursuit of health and well-being.

Students in SPHE at junior cycle have begun this journey towards health literacy. At senior cycle, students can move closer to achieving 'critical health literacy'. Being health literate requires that the student continues to acquire basic knowledge about their personal, social and health concerns, to develop the necessary skills and to reflect on the attitudes necessary to make

informed decisions. Critical health literacy aims to develop an appreciation of the wider influences on health, such as policy and environmental influences. Greater understanding of the influences on well-being would enable students to appreciate their potential role as advocates for health in its most holistic sense. Personal growth always has a critical social dimension. If one of the guiding principles of education is the fostering of self-determination, then it is important that students pursue personal growth and well being whilst also becoming aware of the wider context of health and personal well-being. SPHE has the possibility to shift one's understanding of health and well being into a more dynamic and political domain, providing young people with opportunities to develop skills of advocacy in support of personal, social and health promoting policies.

### **3.6 Education needs of senior-cycle students in the twenty first century**

We live in a world characterised by a rapid pace of change, much of which is complex and has implications for how we live our lives. Students at senior cycle are in the midst of these changes. Students need an opportunity to examine the plethora of demands and influences on their lifestyle choices from a personal and group perspective. This is important for their journey onward. Senior cycle education is poised at the interface between education and society, between the close of formal compulsory schooling and the world of work, further education, and independent living. The development of personal qualities such as personal identity, self-esteem, awareness of abilities, aptitudes and limitations, self-reliance, a spirit of enquiry, motivation, and personal initiative can facilitate students in making a successful transition between these two places. Some critics of the education system, particularly of schooling, suggest that the potential of senior cycle education is currently not being exploited. The NCCA senior cycle discussion document refers to the work of Bentley, (1998). He suggests that the education system is currently failing to prepare young people to meet the following challenges:

- relationships: increasing evidence that many young people are failing to sustain long-term relationships
- employability: some young people are lacking in the personal qualities necessary for success
- well-being: young people are experiencing increasing difficulty coping with the stresses of life, evidenced by increased incidence of mental health problems and suicide among young people

- educational success: despite educational qualifications, young people appear to lack the self-awareness, mental discipline and depth of understanding needed to use their knowledge to best effect
- citizenship: young people appear to have sustained their interest in social, environmental, and political issues but appear to have lost interest in formal politics and institutions.

One of the questions that Bentley suggests ought to be addressed by the education system is whether education can motivate young people to commit themselves to the process of continuous learning on the understanding that what is learnt will prepare them for real life and can be applied to real situations (Developing Senior Cycle Education: *Consultative Paper on Issues and Options*, 2002). The inclusion of Social, Personal and Health Education in the senior cycle curriculum could help young people's experience of education be more relevant by addressing the social, personal and health issues pertinent to their lives now and for the future.

### **3.7 Developing Senior Cycle Education: Consultative Paper on Issues and Options. NCCA (2002)**

The NCCA discussion paper on the future of senior cycle education proposes that

‘the fundamental purpose of education is to enable learners to live their lives to their fullest potential as individuals within a democratic society.’ (Senior Cycle Education: Consultative Paper on Issues and Option 2002)

Success in education ought to be measured not only by the quality of the individual learners it develops, but by their ability to apply that learning on a continuous basis to the challenges which life presents them as individuals, family members, parents, workers and citizens.

Senior cycle education aims to:

- provide continuity with junior cycle of post-primary education and to allow progression to further education, the world of work and higher education
- provide a curriculum characterised by breadth and balance, while allowing some degree of specialisation

- contribute to equality of opportunity and outcome within the context of lifelong learning
- contribute to the development of each individual's moral, social, cultural, and economic life and to enhance their quality of life
- educate for participative citizenship at local, national, European and global levels
- ensure that every person obtains the highest standards of achievements, appropriate to their ability.

*(Developing Senior Cycle Education: NCCA 2002).*

Four options for the way forward are presented in the NCCA review of senior cycle education:

- option one – status quo: the four senior-cycle programmes retain their independence and maintain their current relationship with each other
- option two – Leaving Certificate (established) and LCVP merge: a combination of the best features of both of these programmes
- option three – a three-year senior cycle: a combination of the best features of Transition Year, Leaving Certificate (established) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
- option four – a unified senior-cycle programme: a combination of the best features of all existing programmes at senior cycle.

These four options speculate on possible directions for senior cycle education and how it might be restructured in the future. It is essential however, to consider how SPHE at senior cycle would be influenced under these various proposals.

Firstly, the NCCA discussion paper on senior cycle education suggests that policy development around any of the four options could facilitate the introduction of alternative versions of courses and programmes. This would allow for SPHE to be included as part of senior cycle education for all students. Secondly, such policy development would necessitate engagement with the following issues:

- comprehensive provision for key skills: education for key skills in senior cycle must give due consideration to personal and social skills.

- the review of assessment procedures to achieve a better balance between assessment for learning and assessment for certification and selection: assessment in SPHE is concerned with the student engaging in ongoing reflection about what it is that they are learning and need to learn. This approach to assessment in SPHE at senior cycle would allow students to take more responsibility for their own learning
- the broadening of the basis for certification: this could allow for participation in SPHE at senior cycle to be formally recognised
- the modularisation of learning: SPHE could be included as part of the core educational experience and could also be included through various modules throughout senior cycle education.

Whatever the future direction of senior cycle education, the inclusion of SPHE on the senior cycle curriculum is central to the pursuit of the holistic aims of education.

In conclusion, due consideration for gender and intercultural issues ought to be given to all aspects of the SPHE curriculum to facilitate growth and understanding and the development of positive attitudes in these important areas.

## **4. Framework for implementation**

### **4.1 Models for SPHE in the curriculum**

The inclusion of SPHE at senior cycle for all students ought to build on the existing base of good practice in senior cycle, which exists in many schools. Some schools do provide SPHE in Transition Year, in Leaving Certificate Applied and as part of the Leaving Certificate (established). Current developments in the subject could allow these initiatives to be included in a broad curriculum framework, which would support SPHE for all students in the final phase of their second-level education.

A number of models for the structure of SPHE curriculum at senior cycle might be considered.

#### **4.1.1 SPHE—a subject for all senior cycle students, which would be allocated adequate time on the timetable**

SPHE would be a discrete timetabled subject that all students at senior cycle would experience. Such a model for senior cycle SPHE would allow all students to acquire:

- the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that promote and support positive mental, emotional, social and physical health
- health literacy skills
- a range of personal and social skills for personal, social, community and working life.

Such curriculum provision would ensure that all senior cycle students have the opportunity to specifically focus on their individual personal and social development. It would represent a very clear message from the school that this part of the student's development is valued and important.

Key questions for consideration:

- how would schools accommodate another subject in an already overcrowded timetable?
- how could schools ensure that the optimum time needed would be provided, given the nature of the content and learning involved and the importance of using experiential methodologies?
- what would be the optimum class size to facilitate effective teaching and learning be facilitated?
- would SPHE be offered in both years of Leaving Certificate (established)?



#### **4.1.2 Cross-curricular approach to SPHE**

In this model, senior cycle SPHE would not be addressed as a subject in its own right. Rather, it would be supported by the overarching educational aims for which all subjects are responsible. Inman (1998) suggests that SPHE permeates all subjects, and that all subjects ought to be defined partly in terms of how they can contribute to the development of the whole person. It would become the responsibility of all teachers to consider how their particular discipline would facilitate the Social, Personal and Health Education curriculum.

Key questions for consideration:

- in an already pressurised environment, would the provision of SPHE in an integrated model be realistic and workable?
- how would the development of a wider responsibility for SPHE be encouraged among all senior cycle teachers?
- when would teachers plan for such a focus?
- how would the effectiveness of such a model be monitored and evaluated?

#### **4.1.3 Seminar approach to SPHE at senior cycle**

Such a model would require that SPHE be facilitated through a series of workshops and seminars throughout the senior cycle experience. Teachers would facilitate the learning and they might also avail of expertise in the community. The workshop model would allow larger blocks of time to be given occasionally, to engage with the various topics.

However, this model could be difficult to implement. It may be difficult to release Leaving Certificate students from class because of pressure of work, and the timetabling of various subject options could make student release from class more complicated.

The potential to rely on outside agencies to facilitate such a model would deprive the school of the learning from this input and its subsequent potential influence on the management of the school as a whole. Input from outside agencies works best when it is situated within the context of school-based SPHE.

Key questions for consideration:

- how would the whole school environment maximize the ‘learning’ in such an approach?
- how would such an approach be timetabled?
- Would students’ experience of SPHE become fragmented or topic specific?
- how would such a model provide continuity of ongoing support for students and their needs in personal and social development?

#### **4.1.4 SPHE - an optional subject in Leaving Certificate (established)**

SPHE could be offered as an optional non-examinable subject in the leaving certificate established course. This model would guarantee the programme a status and a place on the timetable. It would ensure that only students who were interested and committed would be involved.

Key questions for consideration:

- if SPHE is valuable for all students at senior cycle, what about the social, personal and health education of students who do not choose to follow such a programme?
- might SPHE become the preserve of the less able academically, for whom time might not be such a concern?
- as a non-examinable optional subject, how would SPHE be assessed and certified in line with other subjects at Leaving Certificate level?

#### **4.2 Good practice in SPHE**

The provision of SPHE as a discrete subject, situated within a supportive whole school environment, is proposed by some as the most appropriate method of delivery (Denman et al 2002). SPHE becomes part of the weekly timetable, is given adequate time allocation, and is offered to all senior-cycle students. The culture and ethos of the school is one where a climate of respect would prevail. Staff, students, parents and the wider school community becomes actively involved in developments within the school. Continuing evaluation of the whole school environment facilitates ongoing planning in all areas of school life, in support of maximizing a positive experience for all involved.

The Health Promoting Schools concept provides a framework that can ensure effective social, personal and health education within the school environment (HPS Conference Report 1999). The Health Promoting School is one that encourages the school to foster health and learning with all the measures at its disposal. Schools are encouraged to consider four areas:

- the school environment –physical and social
- the SPHE programme
- the involvement of parents and community
- policies that address health issues.

There is little doubt that such an approach has much to offer to the entire school community. The subject of SPHE could be supported and promoted by the wider educational context. The whole school community would share responsibility in implementing policies and practices that promote an individual's self-esteem and sense of self-worth. The Health Promoting School concept supports the notion that the responsibility for health and well-being is not solely that of the individual. The provision of a supportive environment is critical (HPS Conference Report 1999). This approach requires committed educational leadership. It relies on the commitment of the whole school staff. It requires the support of the wider community and outside agencies.

Key questions for consideration:

- what supports would schools require to provide SPHE within a supportive whole school environment?
- what would the training needs of teachers be?
- what role could outside agencies play in supporting schools?

## **5. What content might be included in SPHE at senior cycle?**

At senior cycle, SPHE can build on the primary and junior cycle curricula. Both curricula are spiral in design, with key issues being revisited and explored from different aspects and at varying levels of complexity, with an emphasis on material being age-appropriate. The continuation of learning in these areas could be central to SPHE at senior cycle. All of the modules continue to be relevant for students throughout senior cycle and into adult life. In senior cycle, these content areas become more complex for students and in turn, more challenging for schools. Students' lifestyle habits are becoming established and the choices they make have implications for personal and social well being, both now and in the future. Students have more discretion over their choices and many have the independent financial means to support these choices, particularly in relation to drugs, alcohol and relationships.

The content of the SPHE curriculum ought to facilitate the development of young people's skills to deal with the world as they find it, rather than the world as adults wish it to be. Such an approach would encourage critical engagement and reflection with a range of content areas. The content and methodology should encompass the development of responsibility and maturity in the students. An effective programme might include opportunities to develop self-awareness and self-esteem, explore attitudes and values, develop personal and inter-personal skills and increase knowledge and understanding of personal, social and health matters.

*Creating Healthy Citizens* (2000), a report based on consultation with students, suggests that the content of the SPHE curriculum ought to be:

- positive and progressive, taking into account changing Irish culture, providing students with opportunities to identify, explore and validate choices
- based on content and methods, which are age-appropriate and are grounded in the students' everyday health reality, health experiences, problems and choices.

SPHE at senior cycle can build on the ten modules included in the junior cycle:

- Belonging and Integrating
- Communication Skills
- Friendship
- Self-Management
- Influences and Decisions

- Substance Abuse
- Emotional Health
- Relationships and Sexuality
- Physical Health
- Personal Safety.

Special emphasis might be placed on the following themes:

- Mental Health
- Parenting
- Gender Studies
- Health and Safety
- Independent Living
- Study Skills
- Stress Management
- Road Safety.

This list is not exhaustive. Many of these content areas are interlinked and build on modules addressed in junior cycle. In the planning and implementation of SPHE in the school setting, due regard needs to be given to the developmental stage and level of sophistication of students. Finally, it is important to note that SPHE ought not to be seen as the panacea for all health-related issues. The school is only one of the many influences on young people, and is not the only place where social problems are addressed.

Such content areas require the support of a range of appropriate methodologies. The various areas are only 'content' until they are situated within a supportive learning environment. Students themselves have recommended that social, personal and health education ought to take place in small groups to facilitate discussion and that such spaces ought to be informal and relaxed, setting the tone for meaningful discussion. Students suggested that the learning environment could be, in turn, single sex and mixed, allowing opportunities to explore topics relevant to one and both sexes separately (*Creating Healthy Citizens*, 2000).

## **6. Assessment of SPHE at senior cycle**

Assessment should not be simply a measurement of learning, but ought to promote learning.

This new understanding of assessment has a number of key features:

- assessment should be a continuous part of the teaching and learning process, involving students and teachers in reflecting on what has been taught and learned, and in designing the next steps in the learning process
- the most valuable learning takes place at the site and time of learning
- assessment ought to enhance effective communication between pupils, students and parents, and all the partners in the learning process.

The choice of assessment tools should be based on the nature of the learning it is designed to assess, and the purpose of any information collected (*Junior cycle SPHE: Guidelines for teachers* Department of Education and Science).

It is important that criteria for selecting what is significant in the students' learning are agreed. If there are no criteria, then anything counts as development, and there is little point in teaching or fostering one kind of development rather than another. Assessment in SPHE ought not to be simply a measurement of learning, confined solely to the cognitive aspects of the subject. For example, one outcome might be knowledge about the dangers of alcohol, while a different outcome might be the skills, attitudes and values that enable decisions that support health and well being around alcohol use.

Assessment of both the learning process, (formative assessment) and the outcomes, (summative assessment) will be important. Formative assessment is ongoing, throughout the learning process. It can happen as part of the learning experience and has the potential to enhance the relationship between teacher and learner. It can also support the teacher in planning and the student in taking responsibility for their own learning. Restricting assessment to self-assessment only could, however, be problematic. If students only describe their attitudes to the topics and the learning experience, this may not clarify sufficiently whether the students have moved closer to health promoting choices, based on accurate information and more positive attitudes and values. Assessment would clarify this information and so facilitate the next stage in the teaching and learning process.

It is important that whatever assessment procedures are adopted, they should be in harmony with the teaching and learning methodologies used. For example, if student self-evaluation is part of the learning to foster self-determination, then honesty in the outcomes must not impinge negatively on the student.

Summative assessment, which takes place at the completion of a module or course, should offer students an opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned. Creative methods of assessment would provide students with a variety of ways to demonstrate what they have learned. These could include assessment components such as journal keeping, interviews, and peer assessment.

LCVP and LCA have developed a variety of assessment components, including portfolio assessment, in addition to the formal, terminal examination. Such a broadening of the range of assessment components is essential to improving the quality of the Leaving Certificate (established) (Developing Senior Cycle Education: *Consultative Paper on Issues and Options* 2002). It is argued that such developments can achieve the desired congruence between the course objectives and assessment components. Assessment in SPHE must address this particular challenge, so that the assessment components adopted will serve to enhance the teaching and learning experience, and provide feedback to the different partners involved in SPHE at senior cycle. In particular, the use of portfolio assessment ought to be explored.

‘Portfolio assessment is based on two very simple ideas – that students can demonstrate what they are learning and what they understand through organised collections of their work and that their learning can be assessed through those collections.’

(Seidel et al 1997)

The use of portfolio assessment as evidence of learning would be more congruent with the teaching and learning environment in SPHE than the more traditional formal assessment. SPHE is more than a clearly defined body of knowledge. It is a journey on which students embark, having started from many different places. The challenge of summative assessment is to establish the progress made by the individual student. Catering for individual difference in the assessment process could provide significant feedback, both for the teacher and the student. Such an approach is concerned with assessment that is devised alongside and is integral to the curriculum.

However it must be acknowledged that assessment in Leaving Certificate (established) is predominantly based on formal, externally based assessment procedures:

‘a premium is placed on tried and trusted assessment modes and methods characterised by rigor, yielding results with high level of reliability.’  
(Developing Senior Cycle Education: *Consultative paper on Issues and Options* 2002)

Assessment in SPHE at senior cycle will be required to be cognisant of this reality but ought not to be restricted by it. SPHE cannot be assessed in this singular way. It will require the use of a range of assessment components to evaluate learning in the cognitive, behavioural and affective domains. Such developments in assessment components are crucial to improved teaching and learning and the educational experience offered to the students (*Commission of the Points System: Final Report and Recommendations* (1999). It is essential to consider which assessment components will reflect learning in SPHE most effectively, particularly if the results are to contribute to students’ passage into employment or further education.



## **7. Certification**

Currently the Leaving Certificate (established) programme provides only one path to certification through the formal examination process. This approach will not be appropriate for SPHE. Each student will engage with social, personal and health issues in the context of their personal experiences. Assessment in this area will require that students can demonstrate what they have learned in all the dimensions and the progressions they have made. The adoption of more innovative forms of assessment ought not to adversely influence the possibility of certification.

*The Commission on the Points System: Final Report and Recommendations* (1999, P.61) notes that

‘the Commission is of the opinion that while a broad senior cycle education should be provided and students’ attainment in that senior cycle assessed and certified, in some instances the certification might be of the nature of a record of participation and involvement rather than a grading of achievement. Some element of certification might not count for points purposes, but would be a prerequisite for entry to third-level education.’

Senior-cycle students who participate fully in senior cycle SPHE ought to receive some form of formal recognition. If the contention is that the content covered, the methodologies used and the assessment procedures followed do contribute to the development of greater autonomy, self-reliance and more responsible behaviour, these attributes should be formally recognised.

There are models for certification currently in place that could be considered. For example, in the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, students receive certification having completed a number of key assignments. Using such a model as a guide, consideration could be given to the inclusion of a statement of participation in SPHE on the Leaving Certificate.

## **8. Issues for implementing SPHE at senior cycle**

### **8.1 Supporting the teacher of SPHE**

The experiential learning methodologies favoured in SPHE involve the student exploring issues as they experience them, rather than learning through depersonalised knowledge or analysis based on the experience of others (Fitzgerald 1998). The teacher is concerned with the personal growth of students. The students are facilitated to discover their own knowledge and understanding of themselves as individuals and how it affects the way they live their lives. Such personal exploration and communication requires that the teacher can create a trusting, safe environment where students feel accepted and understood. It is essential that SPHE teachers have the personal disposition and professional skills to support them in such an open and challenging learning environment. Teachers will require a thorough understanding of the rationale behind the programme and the theory underpinning experiential and active methodologies. Teachers will need training and support to develop the facilitation skills used in experiential learning. They will also need support in recognising when students ought to be referred for particular support or counselling. Supporting teachers of SPHE at senior cycle can build on the existing professionalism and commitment of teachers at junior cycle and those teachers who have already provided SPHE at senior cycle for many years.

Teaching SPHE is a demanding, high-energy engagement. It requires both personal and professional commitment. It is critical therefore, that teachers are supported and that the practice of allocating SPHE to untrained and unwilling teachers is avoided. Continuity of teachers in senior cycle would also be ideal practice. This has been the experience of social studies teachers in the Leaving Certificate Applied. An effective teaching and learning environment in SPHE is contingent on the building of a trusting relationship within the group.

### **8.2 Class size and time allocation**

Experiential learning requires that students engage in four particular phases of a learning cycle: the experience (activity section), processing (reflecting and sharing on what has been learned), generalising, and applying (application of learning to other situations). It will be important to consider the optimum size group in which this type of individual and group learning can take place. In the larger groups, it is more difficult to achieve group cohesion, and teachers may find it difficult to relate to individual students. These considerations can also apply to the length of

the class. The experiential learning cycle requires adequate class time to allow for reflection, discussion and application of the learning to the students' lives in the wider context.

### **8.3 Pre-service training of teachers**

SPHE as part of teacher training could provide student teachers with a greater appreciation of the holistic nature of education. The definition of 'teacher' as being solely a subject specialist has been somewhat redefined in recent years with the introduction of Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied. Student teachers could participate in training in personal development, facilitation skills, conflict resolution skills and approaches to being a reflective practitioner. Such input would not only benefit their own professional development but it would also provide teachers of the future with a better understanding of the role of SPHE in education.

All students at junior cycle are required to have SPHE from September 2003. This development and the proposed introduction of SPHE at senior cycle will create the need for trained teachers in this area.

### **8.4 The role of parents**

The importance of partnership with parents has been an important component of developments in SPHE at junior cycle. In considering any new developments at senior cycle, the involvement of parents and communities is essential, both in the development of the curriculum and in the design and delivery at school level. The home/school partnership is critical for the effective delivery of SPHE. Parents need to be informed about the SPHE programme. Their active participation in planning for SPHE, in identifying the key messages and in the ongoing evaluation of the programme needs to be encouraged and facilitated.

### **8.5 Gender balance in the teaching of SPHE**

As part of ongoing support for SPHE at senior cycle, it is important that the underlying reasons for the low numbers of male teachers involved in SPHE teaching and in-service be examined (SPHE Support Service: Junior Cycle). It is imperative that the perception would not be that SPHE is 'women's work'. Support and encouragement needs to be provided to promote greater involvement by male teachers in SPHE.

## **8.6 Partnership in SPHE**

Partnership between the Department of Health and Children and Department of Education and Science and the Health Boards supports the implementation of SPHE at junior cycle. Such a partnership would further enhance the development and implementation of SPHE at senior cycle.

## **8.7 The student voice**

Senior cycle students can inform the development of SPHE at senior cycle. In order to design a curriculum that is relevant, interesting and attractive for this group, it is essential that students are given opportunities to identify their needs and concerns in the areas of social, personal and health education. Consideration must be given to ways in which the students' voice can inform this process, for example through their inclusion in the planning and reviewing / evaluation process, and through existing mechanisms such as Student Councils, and the second level students' representative body.

## 9. Summary

Social, personal and health education is a central part of the education of the 'whole person'. SPHE has a valuable contribution to make, both in supporting students at this formative stage of their lives, and in providing them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can support them in their adult lives.

SPHE at senior cycle would complete the cycle of social, personal and health education that starts in the primary school and continues throughout the junior cycle. While there is currently some provision at senior cycle, many students do not have access to social, personal and health education, particularly those students who are following the Leaving Certificate (established) curriculum.

SPHE has much to offer in the promotion of health in its broadest sense as defined by World Health Organisation:

'a resource for everyday life, a positive concept emphasising social and personal resources as well as physical and mental capacities' (WHO 1986).

Finally, one young person made the following comments in relation to SPHE as part of the junior-cycle curriculum:

'This class was different to other classes because we got to focus on ourselves and learnt how to listen to one another. This class was excellent as we learned that smoking and alcohol caused health problems. I enjoyed learning about health and making posters. It was a very educational class. The advantages of a subject like SPHE are that you get to focus on yourself and learn about your health. The subject has helped me in many ways because you learn to listen to people and it helped me to become more friendly with my classmates. I would like to see more classes of SPHE. These classes are very much worthwhile and everyone has a chance to talk.' (*SPHE: Student Survey 2001*)

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## **Appendix**

### **Key Reports and Strategy Documents on Adolescent Health and Well Being**

**Alliance for Sexual Health 1997** *What on earth are they doing?*

**Best Health for Adolescence 2000** (National Conjoint Child Health Committee).

**Building on Experience:** National Drugs Strategy 2001 – 2008 Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation.

**Creating Healthy Citizens 2000.** Area Health Boards: Dublin.

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**Smoking, Alcohol and Drug Use in Cork and Kerry,** (S.H.B. Dr. Tim Jackson, Dept. of Public Health 1997).

**Suicide Prevention in Schools:** Best Practice Guidelines.

**Youth as a Resource** – (Promoting the health of young people at risk).













