

Social, Personal and Health Education is fundamental in supporting children to reach their full potential as happy, healthy, autonomous adults. By its nature, SPHE is quite a broad and open topic. Core issues such as self-confidence and self-worth cannot be taught from a text book. Likewise, SPHE can be challenging to plan for and assess. Here is a story of how one school leads and supports the SPHE curriculum.

Making SPHE happen: One school's story

School planning for SPHE

The Divine Word is a South Dublin primary school for boys and girls from junior infants to sixth class. There are two classes in each year group with an administrative principal and three learning support positions.

The school has chosen to share its story with us with reference to the three approaches to teaching SPHE as recommended in the curriculum. These approaches are creating *a positive school climate and atmosphere*; assigning *discrete SPHE time*; and developing *an integrated approach*.

Creating a positive school climate and atmosphere

In planning for SPHE it was agreed that collaborative preparation and planning were the necessary requisites for developing a curriculum that would promote *a positive school climate and atmosphere*, the effectiveness of which could then be evaluated across the school. A senior member of staff holds a post of responsibility for SPHE and the assistant principal has the responsibility for behaviour management in the school. Together, drawing on the NEWB guidelines, the school community has agreed a behaviour policy, the emphasis of which is on positive reinforcement of desirable behaviour.

In keeping with the SPHE curriculum and mindful of the NEWB guidelines, the school merit award system nurtures *self-confidence* and *self-worth* and promotes *respectful and caring relationships* throughout the school. The merits focus on lifelong skills and are awarded by adults in the school, other than the child's class teacher. There are agreed criteria for which a merit can be awarded. For example, an individual can

receive a merit for behaviour such as helping a friend in yard. Merits can also be awarded to each member of a group or class when for example; they are well behaved on rainy days. Silver and gold badges along with a prize are presented at assembly to children on completion of their merit card.

The school has developed a school council comprising of three teachers and two representatives from each class from third through to sixth class. The councillors are elected by their classmates on the basis of the attributes each candidate has to offer. The school council gives children the opportunity to *work together, solve problems, engage in dialogue and reflect critically*. It is part of the democratic process where there is *a sense of commitment to a common purpose is developed and understood*. It helps to involve the children in school planning and organisation. Proposals made by the school council are presented to the Parents' Association (PA). The PA then works with the school staff to support the implementation of selected agreed plans and ideas. The theme for the school council during 2008-2009 was "Friendship".

In addressing the theme of 'Friendship' the school council organised a buddy system where older children were paired with younger children in the school. A number of 'buddy activities' took place during the year to help promote friendships. For example, to round the year off, the school council organised a 'buddy and teddy picnic' day when the entire school spent the day in Marley Park. The success of the day epitomised one of the school's achievements in bringing the SPHE curriculum to life.

Assigning discrete SPHE time

The school undertakes a number of initiatives to support and complement the discrete teaching of SPHE by the class teacher. For example, the school council organised a 'buddy lunch'. Children were assigned to various classrooms to share lunch time with their buddies. In each classroom there were children from across all year groups reinforcing children's *sense of belonging* to the school.

Celebrating achievements is an important part of Fridays' morning assembly when trophies are awarded for 'Pupil of the Week'. This is presented by the child's class teacher to mark a personal achievement. This could be an improvement or notable success in any area of the child's social, personal or academic development. Sometimes the award can be shared by a number of children. The trophies are sent home for a week so that the child can share the achievement with his or her family.

There are a variety of ways explored for children to work and interact positively with each other within the classroom. Class rules are decided upon together. Goals are set for the day or week and success is reinforced through the use of star charts, best group awards, pupil of the week and golden time.

Developing an integrated approach

The school has continuously considered ways to extend the buddy approach in order to integrate SPHE with other areas of the curriculum. One specific idea was 'buddy reading time'. This was also organised by the school council and the approach taken was similar to that of the 'buddy lunch', but in this case, the older children read to the younger children in the 'buddy group settings'.

In developing *a sense of competence*, SPHE has been integrated with music and drama. Once a year there is a day long event called 'Marley's got Talent'. Children from third class upwards are encouraged to be involved where the winning is in the taking part. It is unlike a school concert as the event is not open to parents and others outside of the school. The children organise and plan their own contributions in their own time outside of school hours. As there is no direct involvement of adults for guidance, advice or help, children from the junior classes are not expected to take part. Individuals and groups sing, dance and play musical instruments. Even the teachers get involved and perform. This event celebrates the different talents in the school.

SPHE has also been integrated with science and the Visual arts. Evening events have been organised for children to show case their art work and experiments. Invitations are extended to all families so that the whole school community can enjoy their work.

The integration of SPHE with Gaeilge has occurred during Seachtain na Gaeilge For example, this year, children from the entire school joined in a fun filled occasion of Irish céilí dance in the school yard. Again this promoted *a sense of belonging* to the school community.

A school approach to assessment

Planning for SPHE is informed by the ethos of the school and developed within the context of the school plan. As a first step, regular staff meetings have helped to identify the needs of the school and to develop whole school policies in relation to ascertaining how issues raised are to be addressed.

One such issue is that of assessment. The evaluation of a child's progress in SPHE raises many challenges as there are no definite right or wrong answers making it difficult to quantify, grade and record on a report card. The SPHE school plan is reviewed during staff meetings. The review is informed by the observations and assessment of the teachers. This process ensures a whole school approach to teaching of the SPHE programme – a programme that reflects a spiral approach where concepts are revisited year-on-year in age and developmental appropriate ways.

And to next year...

In September a new school council will be elected. It is anticipated that the new school council will build on the successes already achieved and hopefully come up with new ideas for ways to move the school forward in unison with the whole school community.

Thanks to the principal, John Williams, and the teaching staff the Divine Word N.S., Marley Grange, Dublin 14 for sharing their story with us of leading and supporting the SPHE curriculum in
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