



Beyond the Jigsaw Approach: Problems and Possibilities for SPHE

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INTRODUCTION

As Rapporteur for the conference, 'The Future of SPHE: Problems and Possibilities', my task was to listen to as many presentations as possible and contribute a reflection by way of a summing up. In this paper, I recall my thoughts at that time and share my ideas on reading the papers in this volume, one year on. In doing so I am aware that my listening and reading are shaped by my own experiences, values, knowledge and biases and that anyone else charged with this task might well have identified different themes. It is not my aim to offer a comprehensive summary but rather a situated reflection, which I hope might raise some questions about the way forward for SPHE.

I must begin, however, by recalling that there was a powerful energy present on that day in Limerick in September 2012; a spirit of sharing, of curiosity and of hope. While critique was present, it was there in the spirit of collaboration. It was the first Irish SPHE Network conference and the seventy-five people who attended were clearly very committed. This in itself offered a sense of possibility.

In this reflection I offer some of the thoughts and questions which emerged for me during the day and on reading the papers. In this way, I hope to support continuing reflection, conversation and energy in the future development of SPHE.

SPHE - PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

I will suggest three challenges for SPHE, using the metaphor of a jigsaw to explain how its role has been seen in the past and how it might be redefined. The first challenge then in attempting this redefinition is to overcome a certain mismatch between how society understands SPHE and how SPHE understands itself. The second challenge concerns the value given to SPHE in a culture of competition, performativity and measurement, which poses challenges of visibility for the affective domain. The third challenge relates to the need for further practitioner skill development in order to carry out the work.

I also see three possibilities for the future of SPHE. One involves the development of theoretical frameworks to support the field in a way that includes all, but does not demand consensus: a framework which might offer a metaperspective on the work. The second possibility is to commit to a radical approach of consulting the children we work with and to continually question the dynamics of power in this consultation. Thirdly, I suggest we 'walk the walk' in teacher education, offering our students an experiential education and a continual invitation to critical consciousness.

PROBLEMS

A well-intentioned jigsaw

Carol O'Sullivan explains how our national SPHE programmes, several of which were in place before the official inclusion of SPHE in the curriculum, were developed in response to concerns in society at large;

child abuse, substance misuse and sexual health issues in particular. If these were the concerns of the 90's, childhood obesity, homophobia, racism and cyberbullying are joining the list in more recent years. Carol suggested that SPHE is often seen as the site where these problems might be addressed and where children might be provided with the understandings and skills to prepare them to cope with societal challenges.

I was struck by the number of presentations at this conference which specifically addressed these social concerns. We heard passionate presentations about hunger and obesity, food and nutrition, sexual health and parenting, meditation, homophobia and cyberbullying. I have an impression of many initiatives being rolled out around the country with commitment and zeal, involving parallel research examining the effectiveness of these approaches, with students ready to participate and value the programmes. These initiatives seem to me like separate parts of a jigsaw, fitting together very well and valuing each other, but perhaps only aware of the pieces beside them in the jigsaw.

In the call from society to the teaching profession to address these social issues, I fear there is an assumption that children can be equipped with certain knowledge, which will prevent them from falling prey to these problems in society. Teachers know that SPHE is more complex than imparting good advice; that learning is not simply about accessing information but exploring attitudes and values, developing interpersonal skills and living life in keeping with the values we choose. As long as the complexity of that task is misunderstood in society at large, the work itself will be devalued.

Paulo Freire (1970) understood education as a call to transform our lives, community, environment and society. Education is rooted in dialogue around the themes about which a community care. Freire rejected the "banking" concept of education; the idea that knowledge can be passed from the well-informed teacher to the passive pupil. Instead he suggested a "problem-posing" model where participants are active in describing, analysing, suggesting, deciding and planning and therefore actively involved in the construction of knowledge. His method involved conducting surveys to identify the themes which concern communities, devising "codes" or stimuli to begin dialogue around the themes and facilitating people to work together to connect the issues in the codes to their lives, trace their roots and take action to improve their lives (ibid). Action and reflection continually inform each other.

The teacher is never neutral and needs to check if his/her work is liberating participants to be critical, active members of society or domesticating them to fit into the roles of the dominant culture (Hope and Timmel, 1995). This approach offers a lot to SPHE, as the pupils are empowered by constructing knowledge together, by questioning at a deep level and taking actions which have been informed by and further inform critical thought.

Facilitating the work, however, demands critical reflection on one's styles of leadership, skills for creating a safe learning space, time to develop good codes and skills for evaluating one's work. This is the complexity which is not always understood by those who charge teachers with addressing concerns in society.

Our first challenge then might be to signal in a more public way the complexity of good SPHE; the nature of transformative education with its demand for critical consciousness and community focus, with all its Freirian roots. Perhaps the recent raising of the professional status of teaching, offers possibilities for teachers to be heard with more authority.

The challenges of the affective domain in a culture of performativity

Moynihan has clearly outlined the barriers to SPHE achieving high status. SPHE involves situated learning rather than abstract and theoretical knowledge. It is not easily measurable in exams and so tends to be dismissed in a second-level system focussed on points. It does not generate statistics of success for a school, or for the nation. It is not subject-specific, as it involves relationships across all areas of life. Therefore SPHE finds it difficult to be placed in a system where teachers develop subject specialisms. It

is orientated towards collaborative learning, though we live in a culture of competition. The link between health and education has not been taken seriously in many schools, where cognitive development is prioritised without account of the whole ecology of a child's life that supports it.

However there are signs of change. Several chapters in this volume speak to holistic and health-based models. The breakfast clubs described by Flaherty, addressing not only nutrition but also nurture, are becoming popular. Meditation and Mindfulness are being taught to children (Ó hAonghusa). Schools are eagerly embracing resources to teach about diet (Kelleher) and whole school approaches to health promotion are developing (O'Beirne).

Morgan's article reports that specific, sustained teaching which focusses on self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management and emotional regulation has significant impact on learning in both the short and long term. These can have as much impact on academic outcomes as academic interventions themselves. Specific learning in self-regulation offers a way of 'learning to learn'. This impact depends on active, sequenced and coordinated learning. It involves the development of personal and social skills but also requires a consistent supportive environment. Morgan cites the work of Roorda *et al.* (2011), which shows that a teacher/pupil relationship where social and emotional skills are modelled and a supportive environment is sustained, has a positive impact on student achievement. This impact is more apparent at second level, with boys and with students from lower socio-economic groups.

Zita Lysaght writes about the continuum of support for children with a diagnosis of EBD/SEBD and claims that if we adopt an eco-systemic interpretation of the causes, the style of management and communication in the classroom is crucial. I have seen teachers who are skilled in creating good relationships, and in supporting emotional regulation and self-management. Such teachers can be critical partners in the child's support system, retain children in a mainstream classroom and halt the escalation of antisocial behaviour and the need for further specialised teaching interventions.

The work demands of the teacher are more than cognitive competence and learning; they require advanced skills in self-awareness, social awareness, relational management and professional decision-making. Teachers need advanced SPHE skills themselves and a language and ability to reflect critically on the process of their work.

The need for further practitioner skill development

Several papers in this volume suggest that SPHE is transformative (O'Sullivan, Collins, Kavanagh, Moynihan). I suggest that teachers need to have experienced such education themselves to be convinced of its value and only then can they draw on these methodologies with skill and commitment to accomplish transformative education in schools. This is not always the reality on the ground.

The commitment is present in many schools, as was attested to by the participants of the conference. However both DES (2009) and NCCA (2008) studies and many papers in this volume report that SPHE is not consistently offered nationally. In many schools it is not offered at Senior Cycle. It may even be dropped from some second level schools, as Moynihan warns, in the restructuring of the Junior Certificate.

At the conference there was general agreement that that SPHE is process-orientated and is best delivered as participative workshops. This approach demands of teachers that they mediate the discussion, so that children and young people make meaning of their dilemmas in ways that clarify values and support agency. They can then take action in the sense that Freire intended.

There are questions which need to be asked about the nature of these mediated conversations. Firstly they demand of us that we think about the role of the school within society; to what extent school should

transmit cultural norms and to what extent it should challenge and transform them. Secondly, we need to ask ourselves how we view children and young people; to what extent do we see them as preparing for adult life or to what extent as active democratic citizens in the present? Finally we need to be accountable to the children and young people in the way we structure these discussions. We need to ask ourselves how knowledge is constructed, who is allowed to raise questions, if we can disagree or if we must seek consensus. We need to challenge ourselves to create the safety for all to participate, and to develop our cultural competence so we can really hear what every child is saying. We need to evaluate the quality of the education we are offering.

I raise these questions because there are, I believe, tensions and dilemmas that frequently present themselves to the educator. If I introduce a school council in my primary school and then limit the issues the children can raise, I must ask myself where and why I draw those boundaries, so that I empower pupils and avoid disillusionment. If I introduce discussions on safe food and nutrition in a class where obesity is clearly present it is a huge task to keep the discussion inclusive and safe in a way that will prevent insensitive comments flying on the school bus or on Facebook afterwards. Marion Flanagan's paper alerts us to the prevalence of cyberbullying and the damage that interactions between our pupils can have in spaces where we have no control. This adds complexity to the decisions we make about mediating discussions.

This is the reality for teachers on the ground. They are conscientious professionals who do not want to make things worse and are very aware of the sensitivity of the work of SPHE and their own lack of clarity or competence. Among the questions I heard asked during the day of the conference were;

- " Will I be able to cope with the reactions of children?"
- " What do I do when children respond inappropriately to each other?"
- " Am I asking children to go against the culture of their home?"
- " Can I teach RSE if I am uncomfortable talking about it myself?"
- " Can I tell my colleagues I am gay?"

These concerns of teachers are valid. When teachers shy away from aspects of SPHE, however, it may well be more motivated by a refusal to offer a less than quality experience for students than a questioning of the relevance of the subject. Perhaps we should recognise their caution. Perhaps we should develop more compassion for the very junior teacher at second level doing her/his best in this challenging area, sometimes without adequate support. Perhaps we could think about the training and the support such teachers need in order to enable them to follow through on what they know is important and commit to asking them to identify their training needs on a regular basis.

Smith's paper takes us into the territory of dilemma when she describes some of the unhelpful ideas and sensitivities that can emerge when exploring the lives of migrants and how stereotypes may be reinforced if the teacher is not culturally competent and skilled in creating safety. In her paper the complexity is named; teachers work out an approach and continue to learn. Many teachers, however, avoid these subjects because they anticipate these dilemmas and are afraid they will offend.

Devaney's paper is instructive here. Her research indicates that 58% of student teachers worry about the responses of their pupils during RSE and 75% are concerned about conflict between their teaching and the culture of the home. I understand this concern of teachers as arising from care and accountability. Eva's proposal is that teachers need "pedagogical content knowledge"(Shulman 1986) . This blend of subject content knowledge and pedagogical skills is reflected in the design of the module she presented at the conference. The module combined significant content in the area of RSE, which may be instructive in their own lives, exercises in values clarification and specific methodologies for the classroom. I suspect that if the subject of the module had been substance misuse prevention, health promotion, anti-bullying, human rights education, or any other theme within SPHE, her findings might have been similar.

Where in teacher education in Ireland have students developed this pedagogical content knowledge? There is no subject specialism in SPHE for second level teaching. Rather there is an assumption that any teacher can do it. Before the revised BEd programme at primary level was introduced, student teachers received less than 20 hours training in SPHE. We cannot say that there is a highly skilled teaching profession offering transformative SPHE, because that only exists in some places. And where the dilemmas I have raised earlier are not addressed, teachers may return to the 'banking' method.

However there are reasons to be optimistic. The demands for Continuous Professional Development on the Second Level SPHE Support Service are great, and the demand is often for a whole school approach to learning and developing practice. Revised B Ed courses at primary level are giving more time to SPHE and its status is increasing. Undergraduate students taking SPHE topics as a focus for their research is increasing. So change is upon us.

POSSIBILITIES

Articulating theoretical frameworks

As SPHE has developed in response to societal problems and has been fragmented at times, the opportunity now exists to further develop the theoretical framework for the work. Some papers in this volume (Collins, Kavanagh, Morgan) call for more of a metaperspective on the nature and role of SPHE and theoretical frameworks, which could bring unity to the field.

One way forward would be to take a critical look at the discourses which permeate SPHE: to deconstruct some of the assumptions under which teachers operate, and seek to understand the effects of these assumptions. We could look at competing discourses in education, all of which make demands on teachers and shape their identity. We could interrogate how these competing demands impact on SPHE. We could commit to talking together about our practice without a need for consensus but rather with a recognition that there are differences in approach, all of which have their histories and contexts and underlying values. We could seek to make those values more explicit.

Underlying our work are theories about personhood and identity. We might benefit from paying attention to those theories and allow them more articulation. Schön, (1983) argues that in times of dilemma, what he calls the "swampy lowlands", the practitioner always draws on theory. As SPHE often finds itself in the "swampy lowlands", sharing experience, negotiating dilemmas and clarifying values, a greater awareness on the theories that inform us might be instructive.

A focus on power relations might also offer us a lens through which to view the social aspect of the work. An exploration of the tensions between societal norms and the agency of children might offer a critical lens through which we evaluate our work.

How we understand and respond to the health problems, including mental health problems of pupils, is also guided by our understanding of health. It shapes how we conduct relationships and what counts as SPHE. Schools can examine their structures to see in what ways they are promoting health as several papers in this volume suggest. (O'Beirne, Moynihan, Kelleher).

So without losing the situated nature of SPHE explorations and our reliance on the local knowledge of our pupils to construct knowledge, we can also engage with some theoretical questions and ask ourselves 'what are we about?'. We do not need to demand that we all agree. We can engage in reflection, in the same spirit that we expect of our pupils.

A time to radically consult our students

Several of the papers here express a satisfaction with SPHE, as a place where children's voices are privileged. However there is also a question of the extent to which this is true. Kavanagh reports that in Rushgreen school, where a very conscientious effort is made to give children a voice, there are still limits to the range of topics that emerge or the extent to which that voice challenges the structures of the school.

Collins cites Holden's (2007) research which shows that while Circle Time offers a beginning for personal and skills development, it does not develop into citizenship education or a focus on global issues. I do understand it however as a consistent attempt to live up to the democratic ideal of participation and freedom of expression. I wonder if teachers underestimate children's ability to question and articulate concerns; particularly on global issues. Holden's own research demonstrates that children have a keen engagement with global issues (Holden 2007).

Before children use their voice they must trust that it will be heard and valued and that there is no expected right answer. They must also know that there will be consistent time allowed for the hearing of their ideas. In this regard Circle Time functions well in many classrooms. Teachers need to listen in a radically child-centred way, which, at times, will challenge their practice. The responses to Circle Time questions can function as an ongoing assessment of the concerns of children and can invite teachers into real dialogue.

Children need to experience active citizenship in schools, as schools may be their first meaningful encounter with democracy. Not all schools have a Student Council or Students' Union. More can be done to support school communities in this regard. The Green Schools project has demonstrated the capacity of students to assume leadership and responsibility. It has also demonstrated that students can use questionnaires and other research methods to make space for the opinions of their peers.

The classroom is not the only place where the voice of children can be heard. Dáil na nÓg (2010) is another conduit through which children's views are heard. The "Growing Up in Ireland" (2009) research is also instructive. Perhaps teachers have to engage more with social media to take the pulse of what is happening for children around the country.

We must acknowledge that in the school, teachers are in a position of power. Part of our reflective practice then has to involve an interrogation of how we use that power and how the effects of our actions open up space or close down space for children to tell us about their lives and their concerns.

A new place in Initial Teacher Education

I have suggested that we need a theory for SPHE; one that includes questions of personhood and identity, childhood, society and norms, relationships and justice. Those of us working in Teacher Education might link more with our colleagues in the foundation subjects of Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, and History of Education in order to support a dialogue between theory and the lived experience of children. Such collaboration could deepen our reflections in SPHE, open up multiple perspectives and ultimately afford SPHE a greater status.

We could commit to transformative education in our own work with students, returning to Freire and continually invite our students to critical consciousness. We can keep a global focus in our work, as both NCCA (2008) and DES (2009) reports show that the Myself and the Wider World strand is neglected nationally in SPHE.

We can look at our own practices of power within teacher education and ask ourselves how often we radically consult our students. We can ask ourselves how we understand health in initial teacher education and how we are inviting students to co-create a health promoting college experience. Mindfulness and

meditation could be part of the journey in self-awareness. We need to consider how we explore substance use and sexual relationships in lectures as these are significant sites for decision making in students' own lives. Surely our colleges should aim to model the good practice we are asking students to develop in their own careers.

The SPHE network has developed a real collaboration across the providers of initial teacher education (ITE). While its brief is wider than ITE, it is a forum where ongoing reflection on ITE provision can be facilitated.

CONCLUSION LEARNING FROM THE BEES

There was a sense of possibility in Limerick in September 2012: a sense of community or emerging community. Let us nurture each other in that community.

Perhaps it could be understood as a complex adaptive system (see O'Beirne). It certainly has 'fuzzy boundaries'. A challenge would be to remain non-hierarchical and non-linear. Another would be to make community central to the operations of the colony and resist a focus on the individual. We will need to develop systems of communication and feedback so that we can continually learn and adapt to a changing environment. Perhaps the tensions and paradoxes we encounter could produce novel behaviour. We will survive by orientating ourselves to the future.

In his address to the conference the President of Mary Immaculate College, Professor Michael Hayes, left us with the words;

"I hope that you will leave this conference today as champions of SPHE."

In this article I have tried to imagine aspects of that task. I have suggested that we define SPHE assertively as transformative. I suggest we seek to raise its status. The same pupils who come to SPHE class in schools around the country are negotiating identity, friendships, stress, sexuality and prejudice on a day to day basis. I have suggested we embrace theory and unify the field yet commit to radically consulting our students and pupils. I argue for greater education and support for teachers on the ground.

Everyone who reads this volume will imagine something different. We can continue to share these imaginings. If the task seems daunting we might remember that there was a lot of commitment evident in Limerick in September 2012. We might also remember the words of Margaret Mead.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." ®

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