Subject Inspection of Art
REPORT

Saint Aidan’s Comprehensive School
Cootehill, County Cavan
Roll number: 81005Q

Date of inspection: 8 February 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ART

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Aidan’s Comprehensive School, Cootehill. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Art and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teacher, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teacher. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teacher’s written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teacher. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Aidan’s Comprehensive School has an enrolment of 55 male and 79 female students. The school offers the following programmes: the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. Art is an optional subject on all of these programmes except for the TY programme and the LCA programme for which Art is compulsory.

The art department is staffed by one specialist teacher. To enhance the level of provision available to students, this teacher engages in professional development events and activities in personal time. This good work includes subject-specific professional development as well as more general educational in-service.

The subject is well supported by school management. An example of this is the timetabling of Art which ensures that each class group is provided with adequate time to cover the relevant art programmes and syllabuses. Double periods are provided to support practical activities. This is good practice.

The school provides good arrangements for students to make informed subject choice decisions at both junior cycle and senior cycle. At appropriate times, students and their parents are invited to subject choice information evenings which include input from subject teachers and the school’s guidance counsellor. This year, the school implemented a subject sampling period as a result of a recommendation in a previous subject inspection report. Students in TY are provided with Art for one module and have the opportunity to take a second Art module in the third term if they wish. This is very supportive of student choice and interest. Students entering fifth year choose their subjects from an open menu. All of this reflects the school’s endeavours to provide the best range of options possible for students within the resources of the school.
The space provided by the school for Art is large and bright. Windows on both sides of the room facilitate an abundance of natural light. The room has a large store room with a window which has been recently transformed into a ceramics area. The art room is well-equipped, for example, with a desk top computer and a digital projector as well as new tables for students. Currently, the potential of the room as a learning environment is not optimised. The school should consider painting the room the industry standard white, to enhance the available light and to show students’ work to best effect. Consideration could also be given to the means by which students’ work and exemplars are displayed to best effect. The art room could also be somewhat improved by removing obsolete materials and re-organising the storage arrangements. Good long term planning for resources on the part of the art department and school management has resulted in the installation of a kiln with associated equipment and materials. This is a very significant addition to the range of learning experiences available to students at the school and is highly commended. Short term planning for resources however, is in need of development. During the evaluation it was clear that students would have benefited from the further availability of consumable materials such as pens, colouring pencils, water-based colouring pencils and a wider range of quality paper including coloured paper. It is recommended that these items be made available for use by students as soon as is possible. The use of the guillotine should be prioritised so as to enhance the presentation of students’ work.

Students of Art are very well supported in terms of extracurricular and co-curricular activities provided by the department. As well as visits to galleries and museums, students are taken on specific art trips to national and foreign sites of artistic and cultural importance. It is also noted that when appropriate, professional artists are invited to the school which is a very good way of helping students to discover how artists practise in contemporary society. In the recent past, activities also included students holding exhibitions of their own work and engaging in landscape painting. The generosity and commitment of the art department which enables students to engage in such a wide range of activities is noted here.

To support and better reflect the work of the art department in the school, it is suggested that senior management develop a designated display area for Art in a prominent area of the school. All work displayed here should be carefully presented and labelled.

**Planning and Preparation**

Evidence was provided to show that there are some good planning practices in the art department. Planning for the art-related co-curricular and extracurricular activities provided for students shows a commitment to providing a full and engaging experience of art for students. Planning for the long term development of the department is also good. The installation of the new kiln and clay facilities represents very sound strategic planning. In addition the decision to involve a professional ceramicist to support students’ learning in this area is a positive development.

A subject department plan was presented during the evaluation. This document evidenced planning since 2006. The plan comprises a number of documents relating to curricular planning for year groups. To further the use of the art department plan as a working document, it is recommended that all planning documentation be clearly dated. It is also suggested that information and communication technology (ICT) be used in the creation of all further plans to enable the use of templates and to facilitate the development of plans by for example, adding images where necessary and facilitating amendments.
Curricular planning is documented using lists of topics and activities generally set into a monthly time frame. The ideas for lessons are educationally sound and in line with syllabus requirements but would benefit from some development. Curricular planning should be framed using learning outcomes. Specific learning outcomes should be shared with students at the outset of every lesson. The use of learning outcomes makes it possible to specify exactly the nature of the learning intentions and to sequentially plan for skills acquisition. Learning outcomes also facilitate planning for differentiation and good assessment practices.

Wherever possible, plans should encourage students to choose subject matter that is meaningful for them. In this way students will have more reason to invest in their project work. This is particularly important where students find difficulty sustaining motivation over a long period. It is noted that the art department goes some way to foster students’ interest and motivation by supporting their choice of discipline in the certificate examinations. For example, students can opt to answer a question in the areas of set design, ceramics, print, and poster-making at senior cycle. This supports students individual strengths and is very good practice.

Planning documentation for Art in TY was available during the evaluation. These documents related to looking at and responding to contemporary art. This is a positive strategy and very much in line with the guidelines of the TY programme. While the principles of the plan were good, the application fell somewhat short in terms of implementation. The plan aimed to use an internet site as the main method of engaging with contemporary art. As the TY programme is specifically designed to facilitate ‘hands-on’ learning experiences for students and to encourage authentic engagement with art works, this should be reviewed.

A health and safety document was presented during the evaluation which in part related to the art department. It is recommended that this document be updated to specifically include all of the equipment in the art room. A full risk assessment should be carried out by the art department to identify specific issues and hazards. Signage and precautions should be put in place as appropriate. Risk assessments should then be carried out each year as part of a scheduled plan to ensure that the Health and Safety Statement remains current.

**Teaching and Learning**

Three lessons were evaluated: two in junior cycle and one in senior cycle. The quality of teaching and learning in Art, as observed during this inspection, was of a good standard.

The atmosphere in the lessons observed was very good and conducive to learning. In all of the lessons students were very well behaved, engaged and content. The teacher had a good rapport with the groups visited and the interactions between students and the teacher were very pleasant and positive.

Routine was well used to keep students focussed, for example, roll call was used to begin each lesson. It was obvious that students were very familiar with the routine of working in a practical learning environment. Students were adept at setting up and clearing away their work area at the outset and at the end of lessons. During the lessons observed the teacher monitored students’ activities carefully so that all were engaged appropriately in the tasks assigned to them. This is good practice.

The management of students was good in all of the lessons observed. Students remained on task in all cases. In one of the lessons, three different groups of students were engaged in three discrete
activities. These students worked well in their groups and remained focussed. This approach to class management is good as it allows students to work at a pace that is appropriate and also encourages students to work independently.

Communication was good in all of the lessons observed. Teacher exposition was the main method of transmitting information. Recapitulation was well used to set the context for new ideas and concepts. Good use was made of a range of visual aids to communicate ideas and processes. Questioning techniques were also used to good effect. Good practice was observed where questions included prompts to direct students to answers. To help students become more familiar with voicing their opinions with confidence using the relevant terminology, it is recommended that individual students be targeted for questions. This supports differentiation.

A history and appreciation of art lesson was visited during the evaluation. Students’ notebooks showed that they are proceeding well through this part of the syllabus. The curricular plans integrate academic study with students’ practical work. This approach is in the spirit of the syllabuses and is good practice.

It was noted during lessons that there was a dearth of materials available to students, some of whom where working on submissions for the certificate examinations. As stated above, this needs to be addressed. It is further recommended that from early in first year, students be provided with further technical lessons for each medium available. The plans for these lessons should be recorded in the art department plan.

The absence of a guillotine in the art department makes the accurate cutting of paper difficult when students are trying to present their work to its best conclusion. A guillotine and a supply of good quality paper or card for presenting work should be available to students to ensure optimal learning. Students should be taught incrementally from first year how to use these materials and equipment to present their work. Specifically designed exemplars can be displayed in the classroom to show different presentation techniques.

In summary, from the evidence presented, students are progressing effectively through the various syllabuses. Some examples of good quality work were observed during the evaluation. In particular some good quality observational drawing was observed. It is also good to note that the ceramic work presented shows an emerging level of skill in terms of construction and design. There is scope however, across all levels and programmes, for students to develop their technical skills so that they can use their chosen media to best advantage. In addition, a pronounced emphasis on the finish of work will help students develop the skills to present their work to best effect.

ASSESSMENT

A good range of assessment methods is used in the art department. These include formal tests at Christmas, mid-term, Easter, and summer as well as continuous assessment throughout the year. The methods used to monitor students’ work are varied to maximise students’ potential for self-assessment. It is good to note that marking schemes are used with students at appropriate times. These marking schemes are adjusted to take account of the developmental stages of students to support their confidence and learning. At appropriate times, marking schemes are used with students during group critiques. This strategy provides very good learning opportunities for students. Students are also provided with individual assessment opportunities to allow for
Differentiation and to help students to reflect on the acquisition of key skills as well as levels of application. All of this is good work.

Good arrangements are in place so that students and their parents are informed of students’ progress and achievements. For example, students are kept informed of their progress via oral feedback, comments and marks on homework and classroom activities as well as school reports and on-going individual feedback. Parents are informed of their child’s progress via school reports, information evenings, parent-teacher meetings and their child’s student journal.

**Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Art is very well supported by senior management.
- Good long term planning has achieved the installation of a kiln and associated facilities in the art department.
- Students are very well supported in terms of art-related extracurricular and co-curricular activities.
- The ideas for lessons are educationally sound and in line with syllabus requirements.
- The atmosphere in the lessons observed was very good and conducive to learning.
- The management of students was good in all of the lessons observed and routine was used to maintain students’ focus.
- A good range of assessment methods is used in the art department and good arrangements are in place to communicate assessment results to students and their parents.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- The potential of the art room as a learning environment should be optimised.
- Curricular planning should be framed using learning outcomes.
- The TY plan should prioritise the provision of authentic learning experiences for students when engaging with contemporary art.
- The Health and Safety Statement should be updated to specifically include all of the equipment in the art room.
- Materials such as pens, colouring pencils, water colour pencils and a wider range of quality paper should be obtained for all students, in particular those taking certificate examinations.
- Use of the guillotine should be prioritised and a wider range of quality paper or card for presenting work should be made available to students as soon as is possible.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Art and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of St Aidan's Comprehensive School welcomes this report by the Inspectorate commending the excellence of the Art department.

We are particularly pleased with the acknowledgement by the Inspector of the high quality of teaching and learning within the Art Department. The report recognises the commitment of the school and the Art Department to the provision of a caring and supportive learning environment. The commendation of the high level and quality of planning within the Art Department gives justifiable recognition to the huge amount of time, effort and professional input by the Art teacher.

The Board of Management acknowledges and applauds the involvement and dedication of the Art teacher in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Our students are to be commended for their work ethic and ongoing contribution to the life of St Aidan’s and in the development of a stimulating and creative school environment through their work in Art.

Finally, the Board of Management places on record, our unanimous appreciation for the professionalism and courtesy of the visiting inspector and the collaborative and positive manner in which this inspection was carried out.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The Art Department and the Management of St Aidan's are fully committed to the continuing development of teaching and learning generally, and specifically the development of Art within St Aidan's.

Following a review of the Inspectors report the school management and Art department consider the recommendation as a means of building on our strengths and an opportunity to address areas for further development.

We have been assured by the affirmations given by the Inspectors Report and will continue to ensure the provision of a high quality learning and engaging Art department in St Aidan's.