Subject Inspection of Art
REPORT

Ard Scoil Rath Iomgháin,
Rathangan,
Co. Kildare.

Roll number: 70730J

Date of inspection: 9 December 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ART

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ardscoil Rath Iomgháin. 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 teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The principal is very supportive of Art and has affirmed its contribution to the academic, personal and vocational development of students, as well as to the cultural profile of the school. The efforts of the art department personnel in this regard are greatly valued by management. Art is a popular subject in Ardscoil Rath Iomgháin and there is sustained demand for it from students as an examination subject.

The art department is well run and students are generally well supported in their needs by the arrangements in place at present. The subject is well supported with space, information and communication technology (ICT), budget and personnel, and is adequately timetabled for effective delivery of the subject. The school has good facilities for ICT, both generally and within the art department.

There is a good programme of co-curricular and extracurricular activities for Art, which extends the in-class experience of visual culture. Given the rural location of the school, at a remove from easy access to galleries and museums, it would be valuable if local or national providers of art content and visual-culture experiences for students were contacted with a view to availing of their services. For example the local Arts Officer of the County Council, the education office of the National Gallery of Ireland or the National Museum could be contacted in order to source an input of visual culture for both students of the art department and the student body in general.

The art room is spacious with an en-suite storage room and good natural light. Wall and counter space for displaying artefacts is excellent. There is a customised area for ceramics and sculpture in the room, complete with kiln. The room has the space to accommodate most art activities. In addition, another general-subject classroom is used for Art and the school’s lecture theatre, with tiered seating, is also available for classes on history and appreciation of art.

In order that the art department develop in new ways in the future, referenced to the skills and specialisations of the personnel now available, and also to further reflect the learning possibilities implicit in art courses and programmes, it is recommended that the art
department and management collaborate on both long-term and short-term forward plans for the future development of art and design in the school.

Inservice release is allowed to the art department as required. Some members of the art department have attended quite extensive continuing professional development (CPD). This was apparent in the quality of the attention to detail in the lesson delivery and concomitantly in the students artefacts. It is recommended that management continues to further develop practice and provision in the art department, for example by supporting staff to add to the repertoire of media, materials and approaches available to students in their studies of art and design. New crafts could be added over time to what is currently available, as personnel at present have craft and design skills that are not yet available to students due to specialist equipment and facility requirements.

The visual arts have a good and still-developing profile in Ardscoil Rath Iomgháin. The school takes part in art competitions, locally and nationally, and has developed contact with the arts centre in Droichead Nua. A student and teacher are members of the school’s Percent for Art committee and they had a role in deciding how the funds available under this scheme were used. The school hosts the visual art exhibitions of Rathangan’s annual Lughnasa Festival. Artefacts by students and a local artist are exhibited together in the school’s front hall. Two years ago, the school started a photography club, encouraging students to develop a non-curricular engagement with visual art. Co-curricular and extracurricular activities support the in-class teaching and learning work of the art department.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Commendably, planning documents have been devised which support the delivery of the subject and are largely focussed on information concerning the pedagogic practicalities of presenting learning material. In general, these are presented in outline form and are a good foundation for a more detailed approach to planning that would have a stronger focus on students’ learning and attainment outcomes. It is recommended that the learning expectations and desired outcomes for lessons, activities and assignments are defined and added to the plan. In tandem with this, differentiated delivery strategies should be further developed in relation to the spectrum of aptitude and motivation that presents in the mixed ability class groups. A suggested approach to beginning the process of updating and enriching the art department planning process could be that a few essential areas of junior and senior cycle art programmes, for example life drawing, any craft, and appreciation of art and design, are developed to include the learning outcome and differentiation elements recommended above.

It is important to plan specifically for support studies and appreciation of art course components in junior cycle so that students become comfortable with and practised in formulating and expressing their own aesthetic opinions and reactions to art, design, craft, and architectural artefacts. It is recommended that skills necessary for competence and comfort are specified by the art department and that a programme of learning activities that develops these in students from first year onwards is planned around them.

The current history of art plan is a list of topics, methodologies, and approaches to delivery and should be further amplified in order to be more fully effective and useful. It is recommended that the delivery of the appreciation of art segment of the course at senior cycle commence very early in fifth year, in order to equip students with the perceptual skills, subject-specific concepts and vocabulary that will make the overtly historical information of the other two course sections easier to assimilate. It should be planned to be as broadly based as possible in order that students encounter art media and contemporary art and design, and it
should be taught as a developmental core of aesthetic education rather than being examination driven.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Classroom management and organisation was very good, and there was clear communication between teacher and students. A friendly and supportive learning ambience was apparent and students were on-task throughout the practical classes inspected.

Good student artwork was seen and it is commendable that, during the lessons inspected, a palpable sense of engagement and enjoyment was evident amongst the students. Good and engaging tasks and assignments had been set. It is recommended that, as a way of building on this established practice, a review of the type and nature of learning experiences is undertaken and that new approaches are added to current standard practice.

In order to further the development of senior cycle students’ engagement with the history and appreciation of art material of their course, it is recommended that age-appropriate ways of nurturing and increasing levels of proactivity are found which suit the abilities and motivation levels of the various class groups. These could include: curating wall-mounted displays of reproductions of imagery on themes, artists, designers and architects; and nominating individuals as the class researcher on personally chosen topics or art styles with a view to sharing the findings as a presentation or photocopied handout. Assigning students to research artists, designers and architects, and then to follow-up with a PowerPoint presentation to their class group, is also a motivating tool in encouraging proactive engagement.

The lesson content of the history of art class inspected was good and a great effort was made to ensure that the topic was comprehensively covered. This is commendable. However, in the mixed-ability class groups, the lecture-style approach could valuably have been extended to include different methodologies which bring student engagement and learning more into focus. In general, the teaching methodology required students to be passive. Some active-learning and student-centred approaches, to include techniques of differentiation, should be grafted onto the lecture-style delivery as a means of getting students to engage effectively with, and take ownership of, their own learning of art history.

There was an over-reliance on the use of secondary sources in students’ Junior Certificate project artefacts which were often derivative, featuring copying and enlargement of photographic or graphic materials. Teaching should address this tendency in students and devise strategies that unambiguously place art learning in the domains of observation, expression and imagination rather than mechanical and derivative manipulation of secondary sources. Teaching students to visualise rather than copy is what a visual arts education that values the development of students’ individual creative responses should be about, in the case of all but the most challenged students. It is recommended that, from early days of first year, teaching strategies for students of high and average aptitude and motivation should aspire to deliver this empowering approach to artistic skills development. At the beginning of third year students need strong direction, to ensure that they do not depend on the internet and print media for imagery that appears to solve the problems posed by their choice of project theme. It is understandable that such young artists, when confronted by the rigours of the state examination, start to do this in the name of research. But it is the role of an art department to prepare students to treat the theme as a starting point, not as an illustration, and, with this in mind, to set up learning situations during the previous two years to ensure that students develop skills and attitudes that allow them to be confident in their own observation, imagination and expressiveness. It is recommended that such learning situations are planned for and delivered, and thereafter frequently reviewed and revised as to their effectiveness in reduction of the dependence on secondary sources.
In junior cycle, the criteria for appropriate learning content and outcomes of support studies, in artistic terms, should be skilling and empowering students so that they can confidently progress towards fuller personal engagement with and appreciation of art, design and architecture. A review of the art department’s previous and existing practice of support studies is now strongly recommended, particularly where students have higher levels of motivation and aptitude.

A design-and-make class in ceramics, which challenged students, was a notably strong learning situation seen during the inspection. Well-made artefacts, many beautifully glazed, revealed the strong and creative attainment in pottery of students. It is recommended that clay modelling is developed in tandem with pottery, and that this be linked, in an age and aptitude appropriate way, to the study of the figure in life drawing.

**ASSESSMENT**

A variety of assessment procedures is in use in the art department: continuous assessment based on class work, and examinations. There are written examinations for the history and appreciation of art component of the leaving certificate programme. Students are monitored closely during the Junior Certificate project. Continual assessment is carried out throughout the year on practical and written work. There are systematic records of students’ assessment and examination results. End-of-term and end-of-year results are communicated to parents and guardians. Regular parent-teacher meetings are held and the art department provides discussion, feedback and advice at these.

It is recommended that some element of self-assessment for students, such as a self-report questionnaire, be included during the teaching and learning of specific technical, artistic and perceptual skills. This would be useful and practical in order that learners can give feedback to their teacher on particular issues they encounter as individuals which are a barrier to their attainment and to encourage them to take increased responsibility for their own learning.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The work of the art department is insightfully supported by the principal. The subject is popular with students, has a strong whole-school profile, and is valued for its contribution to the personal, academic and vocational development of individuals across a wide range of aptitudes and motivation levels.
- Enthusiastic and well-informed course delivery is strongly evident in the art department.
- The art department is well run and students are generally well supported in their needs by the arrangements in place at present.
- There is a good programme of co-curricular and extracurricular activities for Art, which extends the in-class experience of visual culture.
- Engagement and progression in art and design by students of differing aptitudes and motivations were apparent in the artefacts on display in the art department and the public areas of the school building.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• It is recommended that techniques of differentiation and of assessment for learning are integrated in current practices of lesson delivery.

• It is recommended that a programme of learning situations are planned for and delivered to reduce the overdependence on secondary sources in the Junior Certificate art, craft and design project.

• It is recommended that consideration should now be given to the way that art history is planned and delivered and that a review of the art department’s previous and existing practice of support studies, particularly where students have high levels of motivation and aptitude, should be undertaken.

• It is recommended that clay modelling is developed in tandem with pottery, and that this be linked, in an age and aptitude appropriate way, to the study of the figure in life drawing.

• It is recommended that an element of self-assessment for students, such as a self-report questionnaire, be included during the teaching and learning of specific technical, artistic or perceptual skills.

No formal post-evaluation meetings were held at the conclusion of the evaluation.

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