Subject Inspection of Art
REPORT

Errigal College
Letterkenny, County Donegal
Roll number: 71200I

Date of inspection: 11 November 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ART

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Errigal College. 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. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teachers. 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

Errigal College has an enrolment of 153 males and 117 females. The school offers the following programmes: the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) an optional Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme (LCVP). Art is an optional subject on all of these programmes with the exception of TY. The school also offers Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) courses leading to awards in Art, Craft and Design as well as Child Care. The Child Care course includes a specific module, Art and Craft for Childcare.

Two specialist teachers staff the art department and collaboration is a positive feature of their work. Senior management has facilitated relevant continuing professional development (CPD) for these teachers which is supportive of their practice. In addition, the art teachers regularly attend subject specific courses and events. All of this work results in positive supports for students. It is suggested that members of the art department should join the Art Teachers’ Association of Ireland to benefit from the subject specific supports available.

Class groups are mixed ability. The school makes very good arrangements for students at junior cycle to support them in making informed subject-choice decisions. This includes a subject sampling programme for all first-year students. The arrangements for students at senior cycle are also good. For example, students are offered optional subjects from an open menu. Parents are informed at all stages of the process to enable them support their children. The numbers of students taking Art at both junior cycle and senior cycle are good.

Timetabling for the subject is good with double periods being provided for all groups taking Art so that adequate time is provided for practical studies. This is indicative of good support from senior management at the school.
Two bright rooms are provided for Art. These rooms are largely reserved for teaching and learning in the subject which is good practice. As both rooms are frequently used, for example, to display students’ work, they require ongoing maintenance. The issues around displaying students’ work on the walls should also be explored so that work can be securely displayed with ease. The sinks in the rooms should be left clear and more storage space should be created nearby for jars and other pieces of equipment that require water access when in use.

The art department co-ordinator is allocated a budget each year from which the department purchases materials and equipment. There is a need to focus on obtaining more consumable materials for learners’ use in the classroom. In this way, students will have access to more media with which to enhance their work.

The art department has access to interactive whiteboards and information and communication technology (ICT) in the classroom. These were effectively used during the evaluation and are very useful resources in terms of teaching and learning in this visual subject. There is a very valuable skills bank available to the art department in terms of ICT and the manipulation of digital images. As funding presents, it is recommended that image manipulation software be obtained for the art department. Such a resource has the potential to support teaching and learning for all learners across the ability spectrum in all of the Art courses taught at the school.

The art department is recognised by the school as a thriving and vibrant department which uses its resources generously to support all relevant areas of school life. To date, the art department has been regularly involved with other agencies and organisations to bring a wide range of art opportunities to the school to enhance students’ experience of the subject. This involvement includes the design and execution of public art projects as well as the provision of art activities. Facilitating students in meeting and working with professional practising artists is very good practice. Students are also invited to hone their skills by visiting galleries and heritage sites, participating in local and national art competitions, designing and executing fashion shows and celebrating the work of other school departments and school events. The school organises an awards system in which students’ achievements in Art are rewarded. All of these supports combine to provide a very good environment for students of Art to flourish.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The art department meets on a regular basis to plan for long-term and shorter-term objectives. Minutes of subject department meetings were available which showed that a good level of review and forward planning takes place. These meetings deal with structural issues such as reinstating the school’s kiln as well as curricular issues such as the merits of using various methodologies in lessons. This is good work.

The art department has developed a very substantial subject plan. This plan follows the School Development Planning Initiative template and also includes curricular planning for lessons. Commendably, individual teachers plan specifically for their assigned class groups. Very good practice was observed where teachers made detailed plans for lessons and documented their reflections upon them to ensure best outcomes for students.

It was noted that teacher-generated tests with associated imagery have been prepared to test students’ knowledge and ability in the history and appreciation of art. This is good work. To support this further, it is recommended that the history and appreciation of art be taught to all students of Art from first year. In this way they should become familiar with the extent of the
canon of Western art as well as some specific examples. Introducing the history and appreciation of art early in students’ post-primary education should also promote the use of appropriate terminology and the development of informed opinions. The art department’s ICT facilities should be very useful in this regard.

Whilst a lot of good work has been completed in terms of curricular planning, a review of the art history and appreciation lesson plans is required at senior cycle. Topics in the history and appreciation of art should be divided out over time and taught sequentially. The appreciation of art should be addressed at the outset of fifth year as the skills learned from this part of the syllabus are required for the entire art history syllabus.

As planning in the department develops, it is recommended that lesson plans be framed around learning outcomes. In this way teachers can share the outcomes with students and subsequently use them for assessment purposes. It is also suggested that students in sixth year focus on the skills that are required for success in the certificate examinations rather than focusing too early on the requirements of the examination papers.

In some cases, teachers developed some very high quality visual aids. These served to inspire students and support their progress, and provide examples of very good work. There is a large library of art books available for students and this is also very supportive of their progress.

To benefit further from the skills and resources available in the department, it is suggested that further cross-sectoral collaboration be explored. One way of doing this might be if the Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programme students of Art could hold an exhibition towards the end of the academic year which the post-primary students of Art could attend. In this way, the good work being carried out by the PLC students could be celebrated and the art students from the post-primary school could have an opportunity to be inspired, to see art work created by their older peers and to see at first hand how an exhibition can be organised and produced.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Three lessons were observed as part of this evaluation. The quality of teaching and learning as observed in this evaluation was good.

Students were supported in their learning and there was a positive and warm rapport between teachers and students in all of the lessons visited. This resulted in a good atmosphere which was very conducive to teaching and learning. Affirmation is regularly given to students which supported good engagement and focus. Students made progress in their learning during the lessons observed. It was particularly good to note that students’ ideas and intentions for progressing their work were very well supported by teachers. In all of the lessons visited, students displayed a very good attitude and disposition towards the subject.

Routine was well used to focus students on appropriate tasks and to emphasise an expectation of work during lessons. For example, roll call was used to settle students at the outset of lessons. It was good to note that students were very familiar with setting up their working areas and returning materials and equipment. This is good practice.

Differentiation was addressed in one case by assigning different tasks to two groups of students. This strategy facilitated both groups of students in working to their strengths. Teachers also wrote key terms on the board to help students focus on particular issues which is good practice.
A lesson in life drawing was observed which was very well pitched. The teacher used a number of resources such as schema to support students who were not very confident in recording their observations. It is suggested that as students develop, they be encouraged to trust their own observations rather than those described by schema or formulae.

A lesson on still life was observed in which an array of very interesting and aesthetically pleasing objects was composed by the teacher. However, the task was beyond the ability level of the group as there were too many objects to be drawn. It is recommended that students be encouraged to draw from their own still life compositions and that the still lives that they create be simple and relevant to their personal interests. To support learning, images from art history could be used to inspire the students’ own still lives. If there is an issue with students bringing in suitable objects, the objects gathered by teachers can be used by students to make their own compositions.

In one of the lessons, some students were making finished pieces from their own designs. The quality of the design and execution of these pieces was very high as were the levels of students’ enthusiasm for the topic. This harnessing of students’ interests and motivations is a good strategy and should be extended when possible.

The art department has a policy of displaying students’ work which is good practice. Where students were encouraged to focus on the finish and presentation of their work, the final quality of their presentations was very good. It is recommended that all students be encouraged to finish and present their completed work to best effect. The skills required for using the guillotine and coloured paper to mount completed two-dimensional work should be taught from first year.

It was noted in one of the lessons that students did not have sufficient materials to complete their work to the best of their abilities. It is recommended that more consumable materials such as pastels, colouring pencils and other mark-making materials be obtained for students as the opportunity presents. Some of the weaker students should also be encouraged to focus on the best way of using materials to complete their work to best advantage. Colour techniques should be emphasised such as colour blending with coloured pencil to ensure that students are aware of the potential of specific media and challenged to achieve a high level of finish in their work.

Generally, students are facilitated to achieve their potential across the ability spectrum in all programmes offered in the school. Some very high quality work was observed in the areas of fashion design and execution, drawing, still life, batik, felt-making and graphic design. The study of and the use of textured surfaces in students’ work was a particularly positive feature of their progress.

**Assessment**

A range of assessment methods is used in the art department. These methods include formal tests at Christmas 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. Students’ progress is recorded and formative comments are written on students’ work to help them progress further. To further this good work, it is recommended that more group critiques and peer assessment opportunities be provided for students so that they can practise their terminology and observation skills whilst examining their own and peers’ work in a structured fashion.

Assessment sheets are prepared for use by students to help them assess their progress in specific projects. This good practice should be extended in the future by using learning outcomes in the
documentation which match the learning outcomes addressed in the lessons. This will help to ensure clarity and reinforce learning.

Appropriate systems are used to ensure that students and their parents are kept informed of students’ progress. For example, in the classroom, students are informed during discussions with teachers and through written comments on work. Parents are informed of progress at parent-teacher meetings, through formal written school reports and through the student’s journals. This is good work.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Whole-school support for the subject is very good.
- The art department enjoys a very good reputation in the school and makes a significant contribution to the daily life of the whole school.
- Very good planning practices are in place in the department which include reflective practice.
- The atmosphere in each of the lessons observed was very positive and students’ ideas and intentions for progressing their work were very well supported by teachers.
- Students are being facilitated to reach their potential at all levels.
- Some very good assessment practices are in place such as the generation of assessment worksheets for students.

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

- As curricular planning develops lessons should be framed using learning outcomes for students and the history and appreciation of Art should be taught from first year.
- The variety and quantity of consumable materials available for students should be increased as the opportunity presents.
- Further group critiques and peer assessment opportunities should be provided for students so that they can practise their terminology and also examine their own and peers’ work in a structured fashion.

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 Art teacher is a member of the Art Teachers Association of Ireland (was on maternity leave at time of inspection). The report suggests a PLC Art exhibition to increase the cross-sectoral collaboration thus benefiting all students. We have in the past put on PLC exhibitions and held a very successful one in May 2011 at the local credit union. It is our intention to have exhibitions on a yearly basis.

It was discussed during the visit that the art room needed to be painted; this has been omitted from the report.

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

Art history has been introduced in 1st yr through a painting project and this will follow on to 2nd yr and beyond. The increased availability of consumable materials is being discussed with management and is subject to budget restrictions. The kiln is being put into working order.

Peer assessment and group critiques have been introduced for all year groups.

LC students are operating peer assessment based on the LC marking scheme, affirming their knowledge and understanding of the specific requirements of the LC Art examination.