An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Art
REPORT

Scoil Dara,
Kilcock, County Kildare.
Roll number: 61691B

Date of inspection: 22 May 2009
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ART

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Dara, Kilcock. 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 teacher. 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 teacher. The board of management of the school 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

The work of the art department is valued in Scoil Dara and the work done there over the years was praised by the principal. The art department contributes to many aspects of the school’s cultural and social life, collaborating on a range of events from which the whole school benefits. The art department has been long established and has good status in the school. Through its efforts over that time, students have benefited in their personal development and academic attainment.

The time allocation and the budget available are good and support the delivery of courses in art and design. The art department has access to a good range of materials, tools and equipment, including a kiln.

Due to sick leave, a part-time teacher was running the art department at the time of the inspection. The normal intense activity brought on by the end of the academic year and the imminence of the state examinations, and its demands in relation to materials for assessment, make takeover from another teacher particularly difficult at this juncture. Nonetheless, all these challenges were very capably dealt with and good continuity was maintained.

The uptake of Art, as an optional subject in the school’s curriculum, is healthy. Class groups are big relative to the size and layout of the art room. The demands this puts on space for art learning activities, and the requirement of retaining projects and artefacts for end-of-year assessment, is significant. It is recommended that the possibility of using storage areas elsewhere in the school for some of the art department’s quite considerable needs should be examined by management in order to help maximise the classroom space for student learning.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There is a good outline plan documented for teaching and learning activities of the art department, which would be greatly enhanced by the addition of more fully elaborated learning outcomes and a further emphasis on differentiated delivery. It is recommended that these two aspects be integrated into the existing plan, which should now be reviewed in the light of the current subject inspection report.

There needs to be a greater emphasis in the plan on equipping students to develop more extensive skills of art and design appreciation to allow them to engage with visual culture. This should be an important element of junior cycle, beginning in the earliest stages of first year, and continued in a planned integrated way throughout the whole second-level experience of art and design. It is recommended that a programme of teaching and learning for the appreciation of art design, architecture and craft be integrated with the practical work in a more defined way than at present.

The plan included an insightful statement of how the art department might approach the learning needs of students with special educational needs. This would benefit from being expanded, to include the most appropriate techniques whereby the delivery of learning might be modified. Where students with special educational needs who are studying Art have individual education plans (IEPs), some input from the art department into these is recommended.

Further art department planning to develop students’ use of the school’s available information and communications technology (ICT) resources for art and design learning is now strongly recommended, as a support to personal development through visual art, and to give breadth and balance to more examinations-focused activities.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The art room is well laid out and has adequate natural light, the brighter part of the room being the customised clay and sculpture area. At the time of the evaluation, this 3-D area appeared to be used mostly for storage. This may have been because the inspection happened at the end of the academic year when the room had filled up with student artefacts. It is recommended that retention of old projects and student artefact is kept to a few exemplars, to prevent a strain being put on the limited space available for teaching and learning activities. The practice of retaining projects and artefacts has limited educational value. The 3-D area should be made available for the actual learning purposes originally intended.

The students’ work on display, some of it dating from previous academic years, was good. Collectively, it summed up the tendencies and approaches prevalent in the art department to delivery of the courses, and to the type of art and design solutions students had developed for briefs and assignments in a range of media. There was a strong emphasis on graphic design, with lettering and illustrative approaches to image making to be seen in these displays. Many artefacts were particularly well thought out in terms of the expression of an idea in a visual way. The instruction and support of students to achieve this level of technical and compositional attainment is very highly commended. Commendably, some reference to and engagement with wider visual culture was seen in students’ work.

It was noted in the students’ portfolios that, overall, there was an over-reliance on pencil drawing. It is recognised that for some students this may be a default position or comfort
zone, the medium being a familiar, and therefore an unthreatening one. Nonetheless, it does limit students’ creative development and it is recommended that ways of developing students’ confidence enough to habitually use other media should be prioritised. This should include linear and tonal drawing in a range of colour materials. While such materials are available in the art department, habitual use of these should be given a lot more emphasis in planning and delivery of teaching and learning.

In general, very good work has been done with art elements and in the composition of images. There was a strong emphasis on a refined, well-worked finish in a significant number of the works, particularly from senior cycle. This was often apparent in junior cycle work too.

It is recommended, where students have the aptitude and motivation, that use of secondary sources for the generation of images should be kept to an absolute minimum. The emphasis should be focused more determinedly instead on imagination and observation as the source or starting points in projects and assignments. While it is to be expected that students who are very challenged by the requirements of the State Examinations Commission (SEC) assessment criteria for the subject will generally rely on secondary sources, students of higher aptitude and motivation can manage very well without recourse to these. It is important that first-year and second-year learning experiences emphasise independence from these materials for the majority of students, as a matter of course. It is recommended that delivery of learning experiences makes working from imagination and observation a priority.

The standard of ceramic work was good and many examples of well-realised ideas and good technique were on display. This is a strong aspect of the art department’s practice. Linking this practical work in pottery and modelling with a strong integrated strand of appreciation of ceramics artefacts, from contemporary and historic sources, is a desirable development of the good work achieved in this area. It is recommended that some element of this is developed and included in students learning in the coming academic year.

Overall, the work being done in class around the time of and during the inspection had a suitable degree of challenge in it for students, who remained on task throughout the classes. The high levels of effective classroom management seen are praiseworthy. The class materials were well presented and communicated. The vast majority of students were highly engaged. They were well supported in their learning and were articulate and confident in their use of technical language and appropriate vocabulary. A specific example of this is the excellent lesson given on the work of Francis Bacon. The level of student participation was high. The class was lively and productive, strong on both visual materials and historical content, with the added value of students expressing and discussing their own opinions and reactions to the artist’s work. As a revision class very close to the Leaving Certificate examinations, the approach taken to reviewing previous learning and adding to it was excellent as it ensured engagement and challenge, as well as security. With the state examinations imminent, this very good direct and practical pedagogic approach made this, and other lessons seen, a highly worthwhile use of students' remaining class time.

Students have access to ICT in the school. Use of the internet and CD-ROM materials opens up the wider world of visual art culture to students. ICT has been used in the art department and it is recommended that further, more extensive, use of this resource be included in the students’ art learning opportunities in future. Ways of introducing and integrating ICT, as one of the habitual tools and familiar modes students use, should be integrated with assignments, topics and media normally in use in the delivery of courses and programmes. It is recommended also that ways of developing a culture of self-directed engagement with visual art through the computer is developed over time. Students of higher aptitude and motivation should be particularly targeted in this, as it is a way of extending and differentiating their learning.
ASSESSMENT

A variety of assessment procedures are in use and these combine to determine levels of student attainment, of which good records are kept. Annual parent-teacher meetings for each year group ensure that the art department can communicate directly about aptitude, application and attainment, providing valuable information, advice and direction on these occasions. Well informed about the requirements of the SEC examinations in art, craft and design, the art department provides practical support for students at Junior and Leaving Certificate.

As summer-term house examinations were imminent, first-year students were being briefed for the assessment of object and observational drawing. This information giving was very well handled, helping students to utilise the remaining class time in focused preparation for the tests. Students asked questions and clarifications were given about what the expectations were for the assessment process. All this was good practice and students were helped to become motivated in an unthreatening, stress-free context.

Homework is used to support the development of students’ skills and is monitored appropriately. It is recommended that, in first and second year, more long-term assignments are given every term, in addition to specific nightly ones. Thus, a time-consuming activity like calligraphy can be introduced in class but an elaborate exercise can be completed over an extended time frame (four to eight weeks) at home, so that the class time necessary for extensive development of perceptual and technical skills is not monopolised by slow-moving and repetitive learning activity linked to the making and finishing of artefacts. Such long-term homework assignments should be monitored every few weeks and the completed work assessed, with the mark given added to students' end of year grades. In this way, students of higher aptitude and motivation have an enhanced opportunity to develop artistic individuality, and others who are challenged in varying degrees by the subject's basic requirements, have time to work at their own pace.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Students are well supported in their art learning, in a pleasant atmosphere and a well-managed classroom environment.
- Artefacts which demonstrated the high-level attainment of many students were on display in the art department, revealing very good approaches to composition, ideation and technique that have been developed in the department.
- Students were being well prepared and advised for end-of-year assessments and SEC examinations.

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

- It is recommended that the possibility of using storage areas elsewhere in the school for some of the art department’s quite considerable needs should be examined by management in order to help maximise the classroom space for student learning.
- It is recommended that a fuller programme of teaching and learning for the appreciation of art design and craft should be integrated with the practical work as habitual practice.
• Further art department planning to develop students’ use of the school’s available ICT resources for art and design learning is now strongly recommended, establishing it as one of the habitual tools integrated with assignments, topics and media normally used for delivery of courses and programmes.

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

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

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

At the time of the inspection the ‘3D’ area of the room was out of bounds to students due to a problem with the floor tiles. It was convenient to use this out of bounds area temporarily for storage. The required repairs have now been carried out and the area is again being used as a ‘3D’ area.

The recommended further, more extensive, use of ICT has now become possible due to the recent DES ICT grants.

The Board notes our Art Department’s observation that as a fundamental tool of expression in visual art, the pencil challenges the skills and confidence of all users and that the value placed on the use of pencil is one of emphasis rather than reliance.

The report commends the engagement with wider visual culture evident in students’ work. The Board welcomes this commendation along with the Art Department’s recommendation that some reference to the need for this engagement be added to the Subject Plan.