Subject Inspection of Civic, Social and Political Education
REPORT

Ballyhaunis Community School
Ballyhaunis, County Mayo
Roll number: 91461C

Date of inspection: 14 February 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN CIVIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EDUCATION

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ballyhaunis Community School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Civic, Social and Political Education and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days 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, deputy principal and subject teachers. 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

CSPE is part of the compulsory curriculum in junior cycle in this school. Time allocated to the subject is appropriate in second year and third year and consists of one class period per week for each class group. In first year, each class group is assigned a single teaching period per week for half of the academic year. This time provision is inadequate. It is recommended that the time allocated to the subject in first year should be brought in line with syllabus recommendations. All classes are of mixed ability and this is appropriate to the delivery of the syllabus.

The school’s ethos is very supportive of CSPE and a range of activities is organised to promote social awareness and active citizenship. These include: the organisation of multi-cultural days and an anti-bullying day, the establishment of a student council, involvement in the Green School programme and a number of fundraising activities. As part of the CSPE teaching programme the concept of stewardship is actively reinforced through students’ involvement in the ‘One Good Idea’ project organised by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). At the time of the evaluation students were undertaking projects based on the themes of energy efficiency and climate change in preparation for a national competition organised by SEAI. In Transition Year (TY), the Young Social Innovators (YSI) project also facilitates the continued development of citizenship education. These initiatives are commended and give practical expression to the aims of the CSPE syllabus.

School management tries to ensure, as far as is possible, the continuity of teachers with classes throughout the junior cycle. In the majority of cases teachers of CSPE do not have their class group for another subject. This makes planning for the management and completion of action projects more difficult. It is recommended in line with the recommendations of Circular Letter M13/05 that teachers assigned to CSPE should also have that class group for another subject. This is particularly important in second year and third year so that teachers can arrange flexible contact time with their class groups when undertaking action projects.
There is a good range of subject-specific resources available to the CSPE department. Resources are centrally stored and filed under the different concepts of the syllabus. This is good practice. There is also easy access to audio visual equipment. The current availability of information and communication technology (ICT) facilities in the school has had a limiting impact on the integration of ICT to support teaching and learning in the subject. However, it was reported that the school is in the process of developing its ICT infrastructure and all classrooms will be presently equipped with a laptop and data projector. This is a welcome development and will greatly facilitate teachers in the increased use of ICT in the classroom.

There are currently five teachers involved in delivering the CSPE programme. The CSPE teachers are committed to their work, all expressed interest in the subject and some have considerable experience in teaching CSPE. School management is very supportive of teachers’ continuous professional development. The Citizenship Education Support Team provided an in-school presentation on the CSPE programme. The CSPE teachers have attended various in-service courses on an ongoing basis in the subject and the co-ordinator is a member of the Association of Citizenship Teachers (ACT). This is commended as it enables the CSPE teaching team to remain informed of ongoing developments in the subject.

**Planning and Preparation**

The CSPE teachers form a cohesive team and have actively embraced a collaborative planning process. Formal department meetings are held twice a year and teachers communicate on a continuous basis to discuss planning matters. The department is co-ordinated in a professional and competent manner by one of the more experienced teachers. This position should be rotated, when considered appropriate, so that all members of the department will get a chance to lead the team.

A good quality subject department plan is in place. The department’s mission statement and the aims and objectives for teaching the subject are in line with the CSPE syllabus and reflect the practices operational in the school. The CSPE team have collectively decided to adopt a concept-based approach to the delivery of the syllabus. An agreed teaching programme for each of the three years of the junior cycle based on this approach is included in the subject plan. These programmes detail the key learning outcomes for each of the seven key concepts of the syllabus. This is commended as it gives a clear focus to teaching and learning. To further enhance the efficacy of these teaching programmes they should set out appropriate timeframes in terms of weeks or months to cover each concept. The methodologies employed to achieve the expected learning outcomes and the types and frequency of assessment modes should also be detailed in these teaching plans.

There is a very good level of co-operation among the CSPE teachers in relation to the development and sharing of resources. This practice is commended and further encouraged for the development of electronic resources. Action projects are planned as part of the teaching programme. It was reported that students undertake two action projects over the three years of the junior cycle. In line with good practice action projects involve students in the choice of topic and a good range of activities have been organised which enrich students’ knowledge and understanding of the civic, social and political dimensions of their lives. Students should write a report on the mini-action project undertaken in preparation for writing up the Report on the Action Project (RAP) for the Junior Certificate.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

A high standard of individual planning was evident in the lessons observed. All lessons were in line with the agreed teaching programme and were clearly anchored to one of the key concepts of the CSPE syllabus. Teachers had prepared good quality resources and these were effectively integrated to the topic under study and support students’ learning. Handouts provided a good focus on the key learning points and worksheet activities were carefully designed and easy to read.

The quality of teaching and learning was very good. The learning objectives were communicated to students at the outset and all lessons were well structured and sequenced in accordance with these objectives. A variety of methodologies, including whole-class teaching, question and answer sessions, individual tasks and pair and group work activities were used to engage students in the learning process. There was a prominent focus on facilitating student participation in lessons and a good level of teacher-student interaction characterised lessons. However, in some cases it is recommended that directed questions to named individual be distributed more regularly across the class to ensure the engagement of all students.

The teaching strategies employed in lessons provided good opportunities for the development of a range of skills in line with syllabus recommendations. Pair and group work facilitated cooperative learning and students worked well together in completing assignments. There was very good discussion of topics such as the concept of democratic government versus authoritarianism, the reasons for voting, election campaigns and the qualities of candidates. There were many examples of higher order questions leading to reflection and analysis, which challenged students to offer explanations for their views. Students engaged very well with these discussions and were confident in expressing their opinions and defending their views.

The whiteboard was used well to present the key points of the lesson and to record feedback from exercises and discussions. It is recommended that students should record these main points in their copybooks as a summary of the work done and to assist them at times of revision.

Lessons were purposefully paced and pitched at a level appropriate to the needs and abilities of students. Teachers taught with competence and students’ learning was well supported by linking concepts to experiences that would directly impact on their lives. There was also appropriate reference to topical events such as the upcoming election, all of which served to engage students and clarify points.

Teachers are aware of students with additional educational needs. Links have been established with the learning-support department in relation to extra support provided to students when completing the RAP. Attention was paid to students’ literacy development and subject terminology was explained and integrated throughout the lesson. Students also maintain word banks in their folders. Support to individual students was also evident as students completed tasks.

Classroom management was excellent in all lessons. Teachers encouraged students to offer opinions and affirmed them for their contributions. Students responded positively to this approach and engaged enthusiastically in the planned learning activities. It was clear that learning was taking place in an open and relaxed yet diligent environment.
ASSESSMENT

Student progress is assessed in a number of ways including question and answer sessions, correcting homework and by holding class tests. Homework is appropriately varied and includes designing posters, question and answer type tasks, word searches and crosswords. It is suggested that tracking and recording news items be included in homework activities so that students are informed on topical issues and current affairs. In view of the fact that CSPE is allocated just one period per week it is recommended that a relatively substantial homework assignment should be set in all lessons.

Formal class tests in CSPE are held at Christmas and at the end of the third term. It is recommended that an examination period longer than a class period should be timetabled for second year and third year students in preparation for mock and state examinations. Students in third-year sit mock examinations in the spring. Parents are informed of students’ progress through school reports, the student journal and the annual parent-teacher meetings held for all year groups.

To date students have been using the Report on the Action Projects (RAPs) proforma booklets. It was reported that some students find the writing of the RAP challenging. In the context of the mixed-ability composition of classes, the CSPE teachers should give consideration to using the Course-Work Assessment Book (CWAB) for some students. This may be more suited to the learning needs of some students as it covers a module of work and requires a less detailed account of the action project.

Students’ performance in the Junior Certificate is analysed and compared with national norms on an annual basis. Students achieve well in state examinations and this reflects the high expectations set for learning by the CSPE teachers.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school’s ethos is very supportive of CSPE and students engage in a range of initiatives which facilitate active participatory citizenship.
- There is a good level of resources available to the CSPE department and teachers are supported by management in availing of appropriate professional development.
- Good quality planning for the organisation and delivery of the subject is underpinned by very effective co-ordination of the CSPE department and the high level of collaboration among the teaching team.
- A high standard of individual planning and preparation was evident in the lessons observed.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good.
- A positive and affirming classroom environment that facilitated student active engagement in learning was evident in all lessons.
- High expectations are set for learning as is evidenced by students’ attainment in state examinations.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• Timetabled provision for CSPE should be brought in line with syllabus recommendations.
• Teachers should have their class group for another subject particularly in second year and third year.
• End-of-term examinations in CSPE should be longer than a class period.
• Consideration should be given to introducing the Course-Work Assessment Book for some students.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Civic, Social and Political Education and with the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.