Subject Inspection of Religious Education in the Junior Cycle
REPORT

Saint Paul’s College
Raheny, Dublin 5
Roll number: 60290B

Date of inspection: 06 May 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Paul’s College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Religious Education for junior cycle classes only 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 some 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

St. Paul’s College in Raheny, Dublin is a Catholic secondary school for boys, under the trusteeship of the Vincentian Fathers. It offers the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY) programme and the established Leaving Certificate programme to the 564 males currently enrolled. Religious Education (RE) is a core subject on the school’s curriculum and all students take this subject. This evaluation is concerned only with the preparation of students for Junior Certificate examinations in the subject, following study of the religious education syllabus prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The course is inclusive of students from all faith backgrounds and from none.

Mixed-ability class groups are formed for RE in each of the three years of the junior cycle. Three class periods per week in each of the first two years are allocated to the subject on the timetable. Lessons are well distributed across the timetable. This is very good provision. Currently, in third year, students are taught RE for one double period per week. While the constraints of timetabling are acknowledged, this provision is unsatisfactory given the workload associated with preparation for certificate examinations in third year, when students are completing their journal work for example. School management indicated that it is unlikely that this arrangement will be repeated next year. It is preferable that three periods of tuition in RE be timetabled for each of the three years. This would be in keeping both with the recommendations of the syllabus and with the Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students of Other Faiths in Catholic Secondary Schools, published by the Joint Managerial Board/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS).

One teacher with a specialist qualification in the subject has primary responsibility for teaching RE. Three other teachers teach RE, up to two class groups each. One of these teachers has been involved in the work of the RE department for a number of years and has had the opportunity to
develop and extend knowledge of the subject area. Regularly, other teachers are assigned to teach RE to a class group for one year of the course. Notwithstanding the positive and enthusiastic approach of the non-specialist teachers observed during this inspection, this pattern of deployment is not supportive of the subject. Where practicable, continuity of deployment to specific class groups from first year to third year is recommended, as it allows the teacher to build up a good picture of the abilities and support needs of students in the class. Consequently, it is strongly recommended that care should be taken by school management to reduce turnover among the RE teaching team, so that the same teachers are deployed from year to year, allowing them to build up their knowledge and skills in the subject. Where assignment to teach the subject for a single year only is necessary, the non-specialist teacher should be appropriately supported. The teacher should be provided with clear direction regarding the learning outcomes to be achieved within the year and the content which is to be covered. Prompt action on the recommendations made in the next section of this report, Planning and Preparation, is necessary, not least for this reason.

Resources to support the teaching and learning of RE in this school are very good. Audio/visual resources and information and communications technology (ICT) facilities are available to the RE teachers on a booking system. Additional resources can also be acquired, where school funds allow, on request to management. There is a school oratory or a place of quiet where para-liturgies and experiential learning activities can be facilitated. The school also benefits from the services of a part-time chaplain, who has a long association with St Paul’s. Para-liturgies and prayer services mark the Catholic liturgical year and other key moments in the life of the school. An evaluation of the work of the chaplain is outside the remit of this report. Nevertheless, the calendar of events facilitated by the chaplain is very supportive of many of the aims of the RE syllabus and this is acknowledged here.

School management provides good support to teachers to attend continuing professional development (CPD) training. The RE teachers have benefited both from whole-school in-service training and the advice provided by the local diocesan advisor for religious education.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The level of collaborative planning engaged in by the RE subject department is poor. Non-specialist teachers were reported to identify themselves as members of other subject departments. They attend planning meetings of those departments. Management provides time on a termly basis for this purpose. It was not clear whether the specialist teacher, who was absent on approved leave at the time of this evaluation, engages in any planning activity at that time. The principal indicated that the RE teachers do meet informally from time to time, though he was not in a position to say what agenda are adopted at RE meetings, as no minutes of discussions held are maintained. Subject department meetings should be a forum through which the knowledge of all RE teachers about the purposes, aims and most appropriate pedagogies for the subject can be developed. In this way, they can be an important support to non-specialist teachers and can contribute to the professional development of all involved. It is recommended that a core team of RE teachers, including those teachers who have experience in teaching the subject and those who express an interest in this area, should be formed. In this way, the co-ordination of the subject and the delivery of RE to the students can benefit from the wide range of teaching expertise currently available in the department. This team should work with school management to determine how team meetings can be facilitated, given commitments to other subject departments. All formal
meetings should be minuted and it is very good practice that copies of the minutes would be provided to the principal.

There was no subject department plan available for inspection and observation of practice in the school indicates that no plan has been developed. This is not satisfactory. Whilst it is reasonable that primary responsibility for the organisation, planning and delivery of the subject is given to the subject specialist teacher, collaborative engagement by all RE teachers in this process is recommended as a priority. Good planning facilitates a consistent learning experience for students in each year group. As a first step an outline curriculum plan for RE should be developed. This should provide clear details of the learning outcomes to be achieved by students on completion of each section of the course. The syllabus documentation provides an indicative list for each section and it should be consulted. When this level of general planning is completed, common schemes of work should be developed to interpret the curriculum plan for class groups in each year of the junior cycle. These schemes should provide information on teaching and learning methods as well as possible resources, homework tasks and opportunities for assessment, linked with the learning outcomes identified in the curriculum plan. Care should be taken to ensure that the syllabus and the needs of the students, rather than the textbooks used in class, should be the deciding factor in determining the order in which sections are taught. Advice on subject planning is provided in the Religious Education Guidelines For Teachers publication, available on the Religious Education Support Service website, www.ress.ie The School Development Planning Initiative website www.sdpi.ie provides templates to support subject planning.

A draft religious education policy was presented. The development of such a policy is very positive as it contextualises the teaching and learning of RE in the school’s mission statement. It also specifies the place of RE in the school’s pastoral programme. It was evident that the policy is at a very early stage of development. Information provided during this inspection suggested that it had been written by the RE co-ordinator only. The benefits of collaboration, described above for subject planning, are equally applicable for policy development. As this policy progresses, it is important that all those whose roles and responsibilities are covered by the policy work together in determining its content. The sharing of expertise and experience which would result can be a valuable contribution to the development of a meaningful, agreed, policy document.

Teachers’ individual planning for the lessons observed was of a high standard. It provided a very good outline of the work planned on a weekly basis, resulting in thorough preparation for lessons and the selection of apt resources to support learning.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was good. Very good routines have been established to signal the beginning of lessons, including roll call and a review of homework. In two classrooms, the purpose of the lesson was established from the outset so that all students were aware of what was expected of them. Teachers revisited what students already knew about the topics before introducing new material. Very good questioning at this stage of the lessons identified and addressed any student misunderstandings. This is an excellent way to focus students’ attention and to prepare them for new learning. Lesson activities matched the range of abilities in the classes and engaged students’ interest.

In all of the lessons observed the teachers employed methodologies which engaged students as active participants. For example, in one lesson, students were involved in determining the key
events in the story of the Prodigal Son through the development of a radio script. The learning achieved was further reinforced through the use of a worksheet. This allowed students to work independently of the teacher, who circulated to offer help as needed. The level of differentiation in the tasks set was appropriate given the range of abilities demonstrated by students in this classroom. In another lesson, students formed ‘schools’ and discussed the issues which are important in establishing a sense of community. Their discussion was grounded in their own ideas about what mattered to them, for example, sports as a shared experience. The plenary discussion generated some very interesting ideas. Very good whole-class discussion was used in the other two lessons observed. In both these lessons, excellent use was made of the whiteboard to build up concept-maps of the topics being explored. The teacher asked challenging questions, matching them to the students’ abilities and encouraged reflective answers. In one class group, the students demonstrated the ability to think symbolically and to apply the ideas being discussed to a variety of contexts. In the other class group, students were more reticent and the teacher switched tactics to allow them write their ideas rather than talk about them. The flexibility which this demonstrated indicated the learner-centred focus of the teacher’s approach.

Discipline was maintained in all classes by appropriate lesson content and through the skilled use of questioning as well as by giving clear direction and specific instruction. In all classes, teachers gave varied and appropriate encouragement to students. In some lessons observed, a small number of students were distracted and engaged in off-task chatting. However, this was managed firmly and fairly so that lessons were not significantly disrupted. On the whole, students readily engaged in class activities and were purposeful in their work.

The quality of students’ contributions in class reflected the range of ability in the subject. Generally, students were comfortable answering questions asked and they demonstrated a good knowledge of the key concepts underpinning the RE courses at both higher and ordinary levels. In all lessons observed, opportunities to support opinions and to develop ideas independently of the teacher were provided and, with few exceptions, students rose to the challenge. Their oral work indicated that they could evaluate ideas, compare practices and both develop and sustain an argument, relative to their general abilities. However, an examination of their copybooks did not find the same level of achievement in their written work across all class groups. In two of the classes, homework tasks set were based primarily on the textbook which provided short-answer questions designed to check students’ recall of what was learned in class. Exercises which required students to give their personal views, supported by reasons and examples and to compare or to make a connection between ideas were not set. Attention to the level of challenge posed by written tasks is recommended so that students have sufficient opportunities to acquire more practice in addressing picture questions, comprehension and essay type questions. Questions from past examination papers should be assigned for third-year students in order to teach them how to interpret questions. It is equally important that they become familiar with the answering of various styles of examination questions. This is an area for development which should be addressed promptly. The practice of assigning transcription of passages from the textbook and other sources is of very limited educational value and should be avoided.

In the copies examined from each of the other two class groups, it was clear that thought had been given to the tasks set so that they complemented the work carried out in lessons. Students are encouraged, as appropriate, to develop their understanding and their critical thinking skills by the setting of written work which facilitates critical reflection and developed thought. The standard of answering was good and there was good evidence of progression in the quality of the work completed by the students.
ASSESSMENT

Teachers used oral questioning and a variety of worksheets to check students’ knowledge and understanding of the content of the lessons observed. Students were encouraged to make notes in all lessons. An examination of students’ copies and notebooks indicated that homework is set regularly in the majority of cases; however, the quality of feedback provided to students on work completed is inconsistent across the class groups. In some copies, this took the form of useful teacher comments which affirmed work well done and indicated areas for development. This good practice is commended. In two class groups, it was not clear that work was regularly monitored. Where it had been monitored, generally a tick mark acknowledged completion of the exercise set and detailed, developmental, feedback is not provided. Homework has the potential to make a significant contribution to the development of independent learning skills. That potential is not being fully realised in these cases. This should be addressed immediately. In the context of subject department planning, an agreed homework strategy should be adopted by the full RE department. This should include guidance on the volume of homework to be set and the quality of feedback to be provided by the teachers.

Students’ progress is assessed through class tests on completion of each unit of the syllabus. Formal tests in RE are set for all students at the end of the first term. Students in first year and second year are assessed again at the end of the summer term. In drawing up these tests, consideration should be given to the setting of common examination papers for classes within a year group. These should measure students’ achievement of the planned outcomes for each year group. In this way, formal assessments can be a solid basis on which to make recommendations about the level at which a student should take certificate examinations in Religious Education. Third-year students sit a ‘mock’ examination during the spring term. Parents are kept informed of students’ progress through reports which issue twice during the year. Parent-teacher meetings are held annually for each year group.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Mixed-ability class groups are formed for RE in each of the three years of the junior cycle.
- Resources to support the teaching and learning of RE in this school are very good.
- A draft religious education policy is at an early stage of development.
- The lessons observed were very well planned and delivered. Students readily engaged in class activities and were purposeful in their work.
- In all of the lessons observed the teachers employed methodologies which engaged students as active participants.
- In many cases, students are making good progress in the subject, relative to their abilities.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• A core team of RE teachers should be formed. Turnover in this team should be reduced so that the same teachers are deployed from year to year, allowing them to build up their knowledge and skills in the subject.

• Work on developing a subject department plan should begin immediately. This should be led by the RE co-ordinator and should engage all members of the RE department.

• An agreed homework strategy should be adopted by the full department. This should include guidance on the level of challenge which homework should pose, the recommended volume of homework to be set and the quality of feedback to be provided by the teachers.

A post-evaluation meeting was held 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

A subject plan does exist but was not available for presentation to the inspector on the day.

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

Faculty meetings have taken place with minutes taken.

Common schemes of work are now available.

An agreed homework policy is now available.