An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Art
REPORT

Coláiste Mhuire
Mullingar, Co. Westmeath
Roll number: 63270K

Date of inspection: 25 March 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ART

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Mhuire, Mullingar, carried out as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The principal is strongly aware of the advantage for students of having an aesthetic education and introduced Art and Music as creative cultural subjects to balance the school’s strongly academic curriculum. Since establishing Art as a mainstream subject, the principal has aspired to develop it further but reports that cooperation that would provide the necessary specialist advice needed to develop the department has not been forthcoming. As a result the aspiration for improvement has not been furthered in reality.

Management expressed its disappointment with the organisation and running of the art department, over a considerable period, contending that, as a result, student outcomes and opportunities in Art have not been maximised. It is recommended that delivery of courses and student outcomes in Art are monitored until across-the-board improvement occurs.

Regrettably, Art is no longer available as a mainstream subject at senior cycle. Those students who wish to pursue Art have been provided with a Saturday morning class taught by a non-staff member for whom students have to pay privately. In terms of full coverage of the Leaving Certificate course, the time available on Saturdays is inadequate and it is desirable that senior cycle art classes would take place in the normal way during the school day.

The art department is staffed through a part-time hours’ contract. However, five periods of this allocation for class contact tuition is at present being used for the supervision of a Leaving Certificate study period. It is not acceptable that the allocation is used in this way. Neither is it acceptable that, with a fully trained and qualified teacher being employed, students who wish to study Art in senior cycle have to do it outside their normal weekly timetable. It is recommended that management becomes pro-active in resolving this anomaly, as the needs of students in senior cycle are not well served by it.

An effective art department should provide breadth and balance in student learning opportunities. In order to set up such a department and to develop teaching and learning activities, much co-operation and collaboration between staff and management will be necessary. Access to the specialist knowledge that is required to bring the art room up to the necessary standard, especially in its equipment and materials, which will empower students to attain as the school would wish, is needed. Pro-active management initiatives to ensure
improved procedures for the delivery of courses and ongoing assessment of students’ learning in visual art are required.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Planning documentation made available for the inspection was minimal, consisting of a list of topics, with some progression and connection indicated. None of the main ingredients of a descriptive and practical plan were included in these very short documented notes.

Timeframes for learning activities, even of the most cursory nature, were absent in what had been written up, and there was no planning on a term-by-term or week-by-week basis. The duration of assignments was not indicated. There were some aims indicated, but no information on the teaching methods that would allow these aims to be attained. There was no delineation of student learning outcomes. Without these facets, it is difficult to ensure that the many strands of the Junior Certificate course are taught properly, that the development of technical, perceptual and aesthetic skills are facilitated, and that planned lessons are effectively executed.

In effect, planning falls far short of what is needed in a developing art department, not amounting to much more than a bare indication of topics. This planning shortfall is not at all to the advantage of students’ learning opportunities or to the establishment and maintenance of generally high standards in the art department.

The planning sheets seen during the inspection were generic rather than specific in character and were not an adequate tool for effective and efficient delineation of course activities or as a guide for day-to-day teaching procedures. To address this shortfall, tailored assignments and learning content sequences should be planned in advance for each year of the junior cycle. It is strongly recommended that the generic planning embodied in documents seen during the inspection be discontinued on the grounds that it is not effective in preparing to meet students’ extensive learning needs. Careful attention to the level of challenge, as well as varied, interesting and balanced course content, should be the target in planning. A level of detail in relation to teaching techniques to support the needs of differentiated learners should be included. Comprehensive planning across all dimensions of the Junior Certificate course should be undertaken to ensure complete course delivery.

Course delivery should be more rigorous in the construction of assignments, in the methodologies used in teaching and in the management of students’ learning experiences to optimise positive learning and assessment outcomes and to fulfil the breadth and balance required by the Junior Certificate syllabus. It is recommended that the key learning aims for students, at middle and end points of every school term should be formulated and that activities and assignments should be devised to make the attainment of these aims into plausible reality for all students, according to their innate ability and motivation.

The planning process in the art department needs to be activated and updated. Extreme shortfall in subject department planning for Art should be countered by pro-active intervention by the principal. It is recommended that detailed monthly plans for each class be prepared in advance and that this process is monitored by school management.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was a pleasant learning atmosphere in the art department, communication was good, and students were given individual attention.

Some good examples of three-dimensional artefacts were seen during the inspection, particularly by students in third year, who were developing their Junior Certificate examination projects. There was a varied and personal approach to the work produced by this group, and they were enthusiastic and engaged. Many of them appeared to be at the higher end of mixed ability and their ideas, vocabulary and ability to describe and engage in discourse about their work was impressive.

PowerPoint was used to give short presentations, at the end of every class period, that focused on imagery drawn from a wide range of sources. This was stimulating and was good practice as it generated engagement with the world of art, design and architecture. Wall-displayed articles and photographic reproductions of artworks, that are a good resource for teaching and learning, enhanced the learning environment and reflected the wide interests of the teacher.

It was noted during the inspection that while the approach to in-class activity was well-meaning, the ground work for effective delivery of courses was not strongly evident. While students are facilitated to be expressive, there is not a strong enough culture of effective, reflective, up-to-date pedagogy in the art department. This is evident in the narrow range of student artefacts seen, and in a lack of basic skills. While there is a desire in the art department for students to cultivate creativity, there is little evidence of a scheme of work that supports the development of students in the range of technical, artistic and perceptual skills that they should be empowered to acquire.

Life drawing encompasses key perceptual and technical skills and requires a range of specific aims and objectives related to age, previous experience and aptitude. Though life drawing was not consistently taught throughout the course and there was little evidence in the wall displays or in portfolios of much life drawing activity, students reported that they still liked it as an activity. Frequent engagement and increasing levels of challenge are necessary if students are to become competent in drawing from the figure. Students’ lack of skills in life drawing is apparent, and this is likely to be as a result of insufficient structured teaching or of consistent supported practice opportunities throughout the year. A strong teaching programme of skills building for life drawing needs to be conceptualised and delivered. For third years, blocks of life drawing instruction and practice should be interspersed on a regular basis into the time assigned to the Junior Certificate project.

It is very positive that students are allowed freedom to express themselves and to choose for themselves what directions, media and subject matter they will engage with and use. This demonstrates that the basic premises of a visual art education are recognised by the art department. It is not however enough that students are given freedom, time and materials; more direction is necessary.

While a level of pedagogic insight is apparent by the freedom students have been given to explore and be imaginative, this was not paralleled by the required program of skill building that is necessary if students are to be able to take advantage of and benefit from this liberty. Development of the expressive and imaginative dimension of art-making practice needs to be much more strongly supported by a parallel systematic development of the technical skills of drawing, composition and of the design process.

At present the visual art learning experience for students is neither complete nor balanced. It is recommended that a re-conceptualisation of the learning that students need to do, and an
extensive re-think of current teaching methods, be undertaken in the art department. In rethinking the way courses are delivered and teaching is done, there must be a stronger emphasis on appropriateness, particularly to the age and previous art experience of the students, and most importantly to the actual requirements of the Junior Certificate syllabus. It is recommended that the syllabus document is the basis of all junior cycle learning and that the breadth and balance envisaged and required therein is made actual in student learning experiences.

Students are being poorly served by the fact that the basic infrastructure of the art-learning space has not been developed and customised for the various facets of the subject, for example for crafts and design. The physical environment for learning needs improvement if the potential advantages of the large space are to be exploited. Furthermore, a fundamental reorganisation of the way the room is utilised for different art activities is suggested. Customisation of the ample space for specific sorts of art media (3-D/wet, 2-D/dry, ICT/dust free) will allow students to participate in these activities without impediments.

The cleanliness and tidiness of the art room was not satisfactory. Storage facilities need to be organised and managed properly. The levels of dust from plaster and pottery clay was unacceptable on health and safety grounds. Student learning activities were impeded by the fact that the sturdy tables in use as desks were caked with plaster and pottery clay and this rendered them unsuitable for graphics, drawing or other detailed work where cleanliness and precision are required. It is recommended that issues around cleanliness and maintenance of the room are addressed immediately.

Worksheets were seen during the inspection. These appeared to take the place of a planned curriculum for students, and outlined procedures for art activities rather than being carefully considered vehicles for furthering learning aims and objectives. While some art learning is taking place, syllabus requirements are not being comprehensively implemented in the art department. It is recommended that more attention is given immediately to the practicalities of course delivery, teaching and management of students learning. The lack of documentation, the absence of any archived artefacts for recent and current work by students and the lack of any homework indicated that patchiness and incompleteness exist in the delivery of a basic programme of art education. The clarification of learning outcomes, recommended above, for students for all learning activities and assignments should now be the basis of the necessary development of focussed and effective student-centred teaching and learning in the art department. It is recommended that learning outcomes are differentiated for students of high aptitude and motivation and for students who find the work required challenging.

**ASSESSMENT**

The inspection took place just prior to the Easter holidays. Students had already been given tests and, during the inspection, a group of students were each individually given the results of these tests verbally by the teacher, along with comment and some discussion. The tone of this feedback was supportive and featured advice and encouragement. This was very good practice.

End-of-term and end-of-year tests are administered by the art department and results of these are made known in the formal school report to parents and guardians. Records are kept of student marks and grades.

One group of junior cycle students was given a homework task for the Easter holidays. While this is in itself laudable, the way they were instructed about this at the end of a lesson was too...
haphazard and vague for most students, and particularly those of lower aptitude or motivation, to really understand what they were required to do. The task itself presupposed a level of knowledge and artistic sophistication that was un-realistic for students of their age and previous experience. It was too challenging a task for students to do unsupported over the holidays and, if it were to be given at all, it would have been more appropriate as a class assignment where support and guidance could be given. Ultimately the task was more suitable for senior cycle. It is recommended that such homework assignments, that do not necessarily link clearly with previous learning, or where the aim is not altogether fully thought out, are not given but that more carefully considered homework is devised. These tasks should be strongly referenced to the age and aptitude and previous attainment of the students and should be planned and defined in a systematic way, taking syllabus requirements into account.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The principal is aware of the academic and personal development advantages of a good visual art education for students.
- A large and suitable space has been assigned for the art department’s use.
- There is a good deal of artistic knowledge and insight potentially available to the art department.
- There was a good mix of ability and aptitude evident in the classes inspected and students were enthusiastic and well behaved.

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

- It is recommended that strong and effective measures are put in place immediately to resolve issues of effectiveness in the art department.
- It is recommended that, in the long and short term, steps are taken so that planning, course delivery and provision of resources are improved with a view to increasing students’ learning opportunities.
- It is recommended that the principal monitors the planning process to ensure the effective delivery of courses and to improve student outcomes in Art.
- It is recommended that the practice of using hours allocated for art tuition as study periods is discontinued and that these hours are used to facilitate the establishment of senior cycle classes as a mainstream subject during the timetabled school week. It is also recommended that the Saturday art class be discontinued and the subject be properly mainstreamed, as resources are available for this in the teacher allocation.
- It is recommended that serious cleanliness and maintenance issues that impact on health and safety in the art room are addressed immediately.
- It is recommended that the art room is re-organised into dedicated 2D, 3D and ICT areas, so that students’ learning opportunities are maximised.

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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