An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Art
REPORT

Saint Declan’s College
Nephin Road, Dublin 7
Roll number: 60491L

Date of inspection: 1 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 St Declan’s 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 teacher, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teacher. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and the teacher’s 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Declan’s College has an enrolment of 625 males. The school offers the following programmes: the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme (LCVP). Art is an optional subject on all of these programmes except for those students in first year and on the TY programme.

Art is a very well-established subject in the school and whole-school support for Art is very good. An example of this support is the provision of time once per term for subject department planning meetings. During the evaluation the principal described the work of the art department as making a very valued contribution to the daily life of the school.

The art department is staffed by one specialist art teacher. This department is very committed to providing a positive experience of art education for students at the school. To help maintain a personal enthusiasm and interest in the subject, this teacher engages in relevant courses and personal art work. Further support in terms of continuing professional development is obtained through active membership of the Art Teachers’ Association of Ireland. This is good.

Timetabling for Art is very good, with appropriate provision to facilitate practical lessons on all programmes. Students’ access to the subject is good. The school has recently developed a subject-sampling programme for first-year students. This was a recommendation made following a Whole-School Evaluation (WSE) in 2007 and its implementation is very good work. The subject sampling programme currently lasts for the whole of first year. The principal voiced intentions to review the organisation of the subject-sampling programme to ensure that it is of appropriate duration. Such a review is a good way to evaluate progress made and is very good practice.

Upon completion of the subject-sampling programme in first year, second-year students are asked to make their subject choices from an open menu of optional subjects. A similar system is in
place for students entering fifth year. Good arrangements are made by school management to ensure that students and their parents are fully informed of the consequences of subject choice decisions. The uptake of Art is healthy in both junior cycle and senior cycle.

Requests for consumable materials are made by the subject co-ordinator to senior management. This system appears to be working well. On the day of the evaluation sufficient materials were available to students. It was noted that the school supplies students with high quality sketch books. This good practice ensures that students have appropriate paper to work on and also helps students to develop pride in their sketches and working drawings.

The bright and spacious art room is purpose-built and very well maintained. It has been developed over time to extend its potential as a learning environment for students. For example, a large cage was built around the kiln to ensure safety and to provide a secure storage area for ceramics. The art room is used to display exemplars and students’ work. The presentation of these pieces was of a very high quality and showed that students are highly skilled in this area. This very good practice of exhibiting highly-finished students’ work promotes achievement and contributes very positively to students’ confidence in their abilities in the subject. The communal areas of the school are also used to display students’ work. Many of the students’ art pieces are displayed under glass which adds to their presentation. This serves to maintain the high profile of the subject in the school and is very good work.

Dedicated information and communications technology (ICT), in the form of a computer with internet access and a digital projector, is provided for the art department. This is very supportive of a predominantly visual subject such as Art and the provision of this resource is commended. A large body of evidence was provided to show that this equipment is being used effectively to enhance teaching and learning in the subject.

The commitment and enthusiasm of the art department is evident in the wide range of art projects and activities available in the school. These include large murals and projects in the school building and grounds. These offer students the opportunity to practise and enhance their artistic skills outside of the classroom context.

**Planning and Preparation**

Curricular planning and longer-term planning in the art department is very good. A variety of documents which outline in detail the philosophy and procedures under which the art department operates were provided during the evaluation. Of particular note was a planning document which evidenced good approaches to interpreting the syllabuses and implementing strategies to meet the needs of the students at the school. This is very good work.

The curricular documents for Art were very well organised and outlined the work planned for students. They provided a general list of topics as well as more detailed plans for each year group which identified learning outcomes, tasks, evaluation methods and subject matter. The spiral sequential development of skills planned for in this documentation is very good practice. It is clear that the ideas used to develop plans for lessons are very good. A notable feature of this planning is that students’ interests and motivations are considered for inclusion as subject matter in lessons. This is a very good strategy.
Teaching of the cultural and appreciative elements of art history is carefully planned for all students. Relevant images, concepts and ideas are carefully chosen for their appropriateness and integrated into lessons for students in practical lessons. This is entirely in the spirit of the various syllabuses and is good work.

The planning documentation included information for those students in senior-cycle who wish to develop a portfolio to support an application to study Art at third level. This is very good. It is recommended that some of the approaches used with these students for the development of portfolio work should be explored with all art students preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination. Specifically, an approach which emphasises careful visual research using drawing and mixed media, combined with a high level of experimentation and development, should be used by students when practising the creation of artefacts for the Leaving Certificate examinations.

The art department has designed a learning programme for TY students called ‘What is Art?’ that focuses on the critical appreciation of art. This is a very good approach to teaching Art in TY as it helps all students to learn about art history and to develop their evaluative skills regardless of whether they have studied the subject in junior cycle. Currently, the TY art programme is based on major artists from the canon of western art history. To give the programme a more contemporary relevance, it is suggested that elements from contemporary art practice and culture be introduced and explored with TY students.

The art department has prepared support documents on the examination project in third year for students and their parents. These include practical tips for parents so that they can help support and advise their children in appropriate ways. For example, parents are asked to discuss their children’s work with them and to help them to research the theme using a variety of means. This is very good work.

A range of handouts and presentations had been prepared for students in all year groups. These include notes for art history, information about specific projects and a wide array of support documentation. These documents are attractive, focused and accessible for students. They provide a very good resource for teaching and learning in Art and are an example of the art departments’ commitment to a positive and successful experience of art education for all students of Art in the school.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning in Art, as observed during this inspection, was excellent. The atmosphere in lessons observed during the evaluation was very positive. Students were communicated with in a very pleasant manner by the teacher and during the lessons students were encouraged, affirmed and challenged as necessary. In response, students were very well-behaved and were interested in and absorbed by their work. A sense of fun was obvious at times as students and teacher engaged in tasks. This approach to lessons resulted in a supportive atmosphere where students were enthused about their work and were confident when asking and answering questions.

Communication during lessons was very clear and accessible. The terms, concepts and skills to be used were clearly explained to students using a variety of methods. These included images shown using ICT and teacher-generated exemplars as well as very good demonstrations and tuition from
the teacher. During the lessons observed, a range of questioning techniques was used to recapitulate previous lessons and to check students’ understanding of newly introduced information. Higher-order questioning was used to help students develop and envisage their practical work. Questions were carefully pitched so that they were appropriate to the abilities of the targeted student. This good practice helps to challenge students as well as build confidence.

The exemplars and visual aids used were carefully chosen for their appropriateness to the task at hand and were presented clearly and effectively. Some of these visual aids were collected from sources such as museums and contemporary culture whilst others were generated by the teacher specifically for the lesson. This careful matching of students’ learning requirements with appropriate demonstrations and visual aids to support students’ progress in lessons is excellent practice.

The pace and structure of lessons was good. Each lesson was divided into stages which helped students to remain focused and also facilitated a clear and definite sense of progression. Students were appropriately familiar with the responsibilities of working in a studio-type environment and were involved in the set up and tidying away of materials during lessons. All of this is very good practice.

The subject matter chosen to motivate students was a notable feature of the lessons visited. For example, in one of the lessons observed, students were asked to collect images of insects at home which were to be used as inspiration for toys. Researching and collecting imagery from which to develop an image is one of the key skills associated with project making and can often pose difficulties for students. In this case, students responded well to the task and they had collected good stimulus material. In addition, a box of books with relevant imagery was handed out to students for inspiration. As a result, students across the ability spectrum were able to produce very good designs.

The art teacher has identified a specific group of students who have difficulty with drawing and has developed a strategy to support them. Each student in this group has been assigned a sketchbook to help them to focus on this area. When appropriate during lessons, the teacher will sit with students and help them to develop their work thus encouraging their abilities and confidence. This practice was observed during one of the lessons. It was noted that students were proud of their sketchbooks. The work developed in their sketchbooks showed that this strategy is succeeding.

At the end of each of the lessons observed, a critical evaluation of the students’ work was carried out. The evaluation was conducted by the teacher and all students were encouraged to contribute. It is very positive to note that the lesson outcomes were used as success criteria during this process and that they were used as guides for the evaluation discussion. In this way all students could understand how some works were more successful than others. The discussion also gave rise to opportunities for students to suggest ways of improving their work and allowed students to plan how they might use the skills learned in the future. This is excellent practice.

The students’ work presented during the evaluation showed that a very good level of skill in terms of observational drawing and painting has been achieved across the ability spectrum in all year groups. This is a very important step in students’ artistic development. To further this very good work, it is suggested that students be encouraged to use their skills to explore the expressive qualities of the media and imagery being used.

Students’ work during lessons was found to be imaginative and accomplished, relative to their abilities and developmental stages. It is noted that very high quality students’ work in a wide
range of disciplines was observed in the art room. In discussions, students showed good knowledge of Art and displayed a positive attitude and enthusiasm towards the subject. It is obvious from the students’ work observed during the evaluation that students are benefiting from the provision of a very good art education.

ASSESSMENT

It was evident from the documents and the practices observed during this inspection that assessment is considered a priority in ensuring students’ progress. Homework was assigned and checked during each of the lessons observed. Each student’s progress was checked and discussed as necessary with the student during the lesson. The homework tasks set were achievable for all students in the group and were relevant to the topics being addressed in the lesson. Comments written on the homework were informative for students and very affirming of their efforts. Evidence was provided in the form of both written and visual work to show that homework is used effectively to support teaching and learning in the art room.

During the school year, summative and formative assessments take place in the art department. Formative assessment during practical assignments is used to encourage students to find routes to improve their work and performance. Some other assessment techniques have been developed to help students progress, for example, evaluating students’ presentations on art topics to their class group, peer-assessment and self-assessment. This is very good work. Formal summative tests take place at Christmas and at the end of the summer term. Students are also assessed on their work throughout the year. Records provided during the evaluation showed that good profiling of students’ work including homework takes place to ensure accurate tracking of their progress.

Students are informed of their progress through school reports, comments and marks on two-dimensional work and regular oral feedback. Parents are kept informed of their children’s progress through the school journal, school reports and parent-teacher meetings and information evenings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Art is a very well-established department in the school, whole-school support for Art is very good and Art enjoys a high profile in the school.
- Curricular planning and longer-term planning in the art department is very good.
- The quality of teaching and learning in Art, as observed during this inspection, was of an excellent standard.
- The atmosphere of lessons observed was very positive. Students were very well-behaved and were interested and absorbed by their work.
- Very good critical evaluation of the students’ work was carried out in each of the lessons observed.
- Students’ work during lessons was found to be imaginative and accomplished relative to their abilities and developmental stages. In discussions, students showed good knowledge of Art and displayed a positive attitude and enthusiasm towards the subject.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- An approach which emphasises careful visual research using drawing and mixed media, combined with a high level of experimentation and development, should be used by all art students when practising the creation of artefacts for the Leaving Certificate examinations.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teacher 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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