

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Art**

**REPORT**

**St. Brendan's Community School,  
Birr,  
County Offaly.**

**Roll number: 91491L**

**Date of inspection: 16 October 2009**



# **REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ART**

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## **SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Brendan's Community School, Birr. 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. 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 art department has contributed valuably the students' educational wellbeing and to the school profile of St. Brendan's Community School since it was founded. There is a long history of support for the subject and it has been successfully embedded into the life of the school. Over the years, through the use of artist-in-residence programmes, the school has showcased the role of the artist and has amassed a collection of artefacts, on display in the public areas of the building, which add to the visual environment of the school. The school recently commissioned a series of stained-glass windows for its on-campus oratory. Continuing the tradition of providing contact with Art for students, a National Association of Principals and Deputy Principal's funded project was taking place at the time of the inspection. An artist in residence was working with students to produce ceramic sculptures specifically designed to be permanently exhibited in the many atria of the school building. Participation in art and design competitions has also been a strong feature of the school's engagement with visual art beyond the classroom. The art department has ongoing contact with the Birr Theatre and Arts Centre for art exhibitions.

There is good demand for the subject. A booklet is produced by the school for the information of students which includes a section about what Art as a subject entails. This is commendable as this detailed information supports students in making an informed choice of subjects from amongst the options available. There is good access to the subject in a mixed-ability context. All first-year students have a nine-week taster course, after which they may opt to study Art up to the Junior Certificate examination.

The art room is part of the original school building. In order to accommodate the popularity of Art with students, as an examination subject, this large studio-style room has now been divided into two large rooms and one small separate room by screens and storage presses. This division of the room has been successful for the practical aspects of the subject. However, it has not been ideal as a venue for the delivery of the history and appreciation of Art, the academic aspect of the senior cycle course. The sounds of normal teaching and learning activity in adjacent room-sections tend to make hearing and concentrating difficult. It is recommended that, at the start of each academic year, workable arrangements are put in place by management for the use of a conventional classroom by the art department for the delivery of the history and appreciation component, so that ambient sound will not

compromise the quality of teaching and learning. It is important that this classroom should be fitted with blackout blinds, to block out daylight, in order to effectively show images using projector and screen as part of the habitual delivery process for this core course component.

The art department comprises three people, all attuned to the ethos of the school, whose work is appreciated by management for the contribution it makes to the students' academic, personal and potential vocational development. Budget and timetable support the subject adequately.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

In order to build on the planning practice evident in the art department, a review of current planning documents is advised. There is a need for the good outline planning documents in existence already to be further elaborated by adding specific learning outcomes to learning activities planned. It is recommended that this be factored into planning activities in the short term. It is suggested that this focus on learning outcomes should be collaborative across the whole art department. **Initially**, a few learning outcomes in key areas should be elaborated, for example life drawing, or to expedite the use of primary sources in assignments and projects. **Then** the practice of clarifying learning outcomes should be built up in incremental stages for all areas of the planning document, for junior cycle, Transition Year and Leaving Certificate. It is also recommended that a more strongly focussed approach to differentiated learning be furthered through specific planning that extends and develops the current practice of these techniques in the delivery of courses and programmes. Differentiation strategies should be more pointedly added to the planning of learning experiences and to their assessment. It is recommended that planning for use of information and communication technology (ICT) by students, and for its further use in the delivery of art history and appreciation material, should also be scheduled.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The art department is effectively, collaboratively and enthusiastically run. The rooms are organised well as a learning environment and support students' practical activities in a wide range of materials. There is access to a good range of crafts and other media: this interests and motivates students by its variety. Ceramics and clay modelling, along with print-making, are among the many crafts available. On the walls were displays of students' work in 2-D, 3-D, craft and fine art, and an array of charts and diagrams, commendably including a history of art time line. Seating plans were available.

Great credit is due to the way courses are delivered. Due to the effort of the art department and the style of interaction employed in the delivery, students in general become engaged and motivated. Amongst the students' work on display were many excellent and creative artefacts. Some of these were strongly expressive, many encapsulated an idea in a clever or witty way, and many others were technically accomplished. This is as a result of the support students receive. It is recommended that, in order to build on this good practice, emphasis is placed on artistic expression and creativity, rather than overtly examination-driven activities, and procedures. It is possible to bring students to the same, or higher, state of examination-readiness by age-appropriate emphasis on artistic creativity and development rather than a formulaic, restricted experience which appears to favour examination success. A review should be undertaken to bring into focus areas of current practice that overemphasise examination driven activity at the expense of creativity and artistic development.

History of art delivery tends to be very focussed on SEC examination criteria. Several adjustments to the way the history and appreciation of art is taught are recommended, with a

view to helping students to engage, and to make them take ownership of their learning in this area. In order to further the development of senior cycle students' engagement with the history and appreciation of art component of their course, it is recommended that strategies which nurture some level of proactivity in their contact with the art history learning materials are put in place. It is important that the appreciation section is taught from the earliest stages of fifth year so that students develop skills of looking at art, design and architecture which will support their study of the more challenging overtly historical material.

A stronger culture of art and design appreciation and engagement in junior cycle should be further developed from that which currently exists, as this profoundly effects how students develop their creativity and insight into art. Therefore, it is recommended that the art department personnel collaborate to review current practices in the light of the need to further integrate the appreciation of art in an age-appropriate way into learning from first year onwards. It is important to conceptualise the Support Studies section of the Junior Certificate course as the appreciation of art design and architecture for very young students. Local Georgian architecture was successfully used as imagery on greeting cards by the special class. This is commendable and it is recommended that for both junior and senior cycles, the local architectural sources in Birr, and County Offaly generally, are more widely emphasised and used as a basis of helping students with appreciation skills development.

There is a good range of crafts practised in the art department and many artefacts of a good standard, by students, were seen during the inspection. Although there was good pottery using authentic pottery clay being done in the department, proprietary self-hardening clay was also being used. Self-hardening clay is not as responsive a modelling material to use for sculptural work as authentic clay and it is thus more difficult for students to work successfully. It is thus recommended that authentic clay, which supports student learning in 3-D more effectively, be used. It is also recommended that clay modelling be further developed and amplified in the department as a key 3-D experience during both junior and senior cycles and that figure modelling be intermeshed with the teaching of life drawing from first year onwards. To further develop current practice in the art department it is also recommended that additional craft and design learning opportunities be added over time to those currently available to ensure that the widest possible opportunities and creative challenges are given to students, especially those of higher aptitude and motivation.

In terms of developing the subject further, and as an enrichment of learning opportunities, it is recommended that the art department collaborate on practical rather than aspirational ways that students can make appropriate and varied use of ICT in their work.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Various effective assessment procedures are in use in the art department: continuous assessment based on class work, homework, and examinations. There are written examinations for the history and appreciation of art component of the Leaving Certificate programme. The students are monitored and advised during their Junior Certificate project. State Examinations Commission assessment criteria, and the associated practical requirements of the state examinations, inform and underpin the work of the art department in the area of assessment. There are systematic records of students' during-term, end-of-term, and end-of-year assessment and examination results maintained. End-of-term and end-of-year results are communicated to parents and guardians. Regular parent-teacher meetings are held in the school and the art department contributes discussion, feedback and advice at these.

It is recommended that the art department collectively become aware of the *Assessment for Learning* (Afl) section of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

website, and prepare a joint strategy for utilising some of the key principles enunciated there in habitual classroom practices. The use of some devices, such as self-report questionnaires, whereby students are facilitated to engage in some self-assessment that would enhance and extend the art departments already-established informal practices in this area, is also recommended.

Homework assignments are set and monitored. It is important that the type of homework set is challenging and that, for junior cycle, this goes beyond collecting materials and sources for the following day's lessons.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a long tradition of making visual art part of life in Birr Community School. An artist-in-residence project, at the time of the inspection, continues the school's previous successes in bringing visual art to the entire student community.
- There is good whole-school support for Art, as the principal appreciates the positive contribution it makes to students' academic, personal and vocational development.
- Students are well supported in their learning and there are many excellent student artefacts on display, the outcome of good visual-arts teaching.
- The art department is effectively, collaboratively and enthusiastically run.
- Due to the effort of the art department and the style of interaction employed in the delivery, students in general become engaged and motivated.
- There is a good range of crafts practised in the art department and many artefacts of a good standard, by students, were seen during the inspection.
- There is a good programme of co-curricular activities available for art.
- Students are well managed.

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

- It is recommended that a standard classroom is formally assigned by management, at the start of every new academic year, for regular use by the art department, for delivery of the history of art and design course.
- It is recommended that the outline planning documents in existence are further elaborated by adding specific learning outcomes to learning activities planned, and that this be factored into planning activities in the short term.
- It is recommended that, in order to build on current good practice, teaching emphasis is on artistic expression and creativity, rather than overtly examination-driven activities and procedures.
- In order to further the development of senior cycle students' engagement with the history and appreciation of art component of their courses, it is recommended that strategies which nurture some level of proactivity in their contact with the art history learning materials are devised and implemented.
- It is recommended that clay modelling in the department be further developed and amplified as a key 3-D experience during both junior and senior cycles. It is also recommended that figure modelling be intermeshed with the teaching of life drawing from first year onwards
- In terms of developing the subject further, and as an enrichment of learning opportunities, it is recommended that the art department collaborate on practical

rather than aspirational ways that students can make appropriate and varied use of ICT in their work.

No formal post-evaluation meetings were held at the conclusion of the evaluation.

# **Appendix**

**School response to the report**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

**Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report**

The Board of Management is pleased that the high quality of Art, Craft & Design provision in the school, the high profile of the subject in school and community and the commitment and initiative of teaching staff are acknowledged and affirmed in the report.

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

The recommendations of the report are now incorporated in the on-going process of Subject Department planning, evaluation and review.