An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Art
REPORT

O'Carolan College
Nobber, County Meath
Roll number: 71980O

Date of inspection: 10 November 2009

AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ART

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in O'Carolan 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 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 subject teachers. 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

O'Carolan College has an enrolment of 297 males and 165 females. The school offers the full range of curricular programmes available: the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. Art is an optional subject on all of these programmes.

The art department was established in the school approximately five years ago. The vision of the teachers involved, together with senior management, is highly commended.

Currently, the art department is staffed by two members of staff whose enduring and high levels of commitment to the development of the subject in the school helps to ensure that students' experience of Art is positive and rewarding. To help maintain a personal enthusiasm and interest in the subject, members of the art department engage in personal art work and regularly attend relevant courses to enhance teaching and learning in the subject. These teachers also avail of membership of the Art Teachers' Association of Ireland in order to benefit from the continuing professional development opportunities available for art educators at post-primary level. All of this is good practice.

Timetabling for Art is good, with appropriate time periods being provided to facilitate practical lessons. TY students are provided with a double period for Art for the duration of the TY programme which gives them a very good opportunity to experience the subject.

Students' access to the subject is also good. At the beginning of both junior cycle and senior cycle, students are asked to make their subject choices from an open menu of optional subjects. Arrangements are made by school management to ensure that students and their parents are fully informed of the implications of their subject choice decisions. Students who have not studied Art

for junior cycle and who wish to study Art at senior cycle are accommodated. This is good practice. The uptake of Art is above the national averages at both junior cycle and senior cycle and the trends emerging indicate that the subject is growing in popularity. Considering the fact that Art is a relatively recent addition to the school's curriculum, this is a very positive achievement. To help students and their parents fully appreciate the type of work carried out in the art department, it is suggested that the work of students should be available for viewing at relevant open evenings and information nights.

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. The art department has also developed a significant bank of resources such as a library of art specific books to enhance teaching and learning. This is very good.

The art department is accommodated in what was formerly a purpose-built materials technology (wood) room. This classroom is bright and reasonably sized with secure storage attached. The art department with the support of school management has developed this room in as much as is possible to create a good environment for the teaching of and learning in Art. For example sinks have been installed and the department has been proactive in obtaining materials and equipment. However, the art room is situated in a group of buildings away from the main school building. This poses logistical problems for both teachers and students who have to carry materials and work from one area to another. At the time of the evaluation the school was hopeful that new accommodation for the art department would be forthcoming in the near future. The relocation of the art department to a new purpose-built unit would be a most welcome development for the department and of much benefit to the students of Art in the school.

Information and communications technology (ICT) in the form of an interactive whiteboard has been installed in the art room. This is a very useful resource for the teaching of a visual subject such as Art. During the evaluation, the whiteboard was used in lessons to good effect. The art department indicated plans to further develop their use of this resource for teaching and learning. This approach of investing in equipment and developing its potential to enhance teaching and learning is very good.

The art department has developed a strategy of regularly displaying high quality exemplars and students' work in order to develop a culture of art and design in the school. This encourages students to have high aspirations and to develop confidence in their abilities in Art. This strategy has been very successful to date and has helped to develop the high profile of the subject in the school. During the evaluation a very large exhibition of students' work was on display in a number of rooms at the school. The images and artefacts on show were well-presented and of a very good standard relative to the abilities and developmental stages of the students. In summary, the art department is to be commended for providing a positive and visually stimulating environment for teaching and learning in Art for students, one where their confidence and their abilities are nurtured and celebrated.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The art department's strong commitment to the development of teaching and learning in Art in O'Carolan College has resulted in the formation of a good art department. The approaches and strategies undertaken by the art teachers to develop the subject have been well-informed, far-sighted and based on a very good interpretation of art education at second level. The mission of

the department is to develop 'a love for Art' through careful interpretation and implementation of the various syllabuses. Evidence was found during the evaluation that this approach is working well.

Planning for development of the department and for the implementation of the various syllabuses is a priority for the art department. To progress this priority, members of the art department are involved in a high degree of collaboration. This collaboration is facilitated by senior management through formal meetings each term and occurs on a very regular, informal, basis as work in the department progresses. The quality of administration in the art department is good. For example, all decisions are recorded so as to be able to track the department's progress. The position of co-ordinator of the department is rotated each year which facilitates shared responsibility. All of this work is commended and encouraged.

The curricular work planned for students is of a good standard. It is well pitched and covers a wide range of disciplines appropriate to the syllabuses. Currently these plans are laid out using a list of topics. To develop planning further, it is recommended that learning outcomes, rather than topics, should be used to frame learning targets for students. In this way the learning activities planned for students could be more accurately specified and therefore more tailored to the needs of the students. This could also help progress the incremental approach to skills development evident in the department's current planning documentation.

Evidence was provided to show that in general students have developed very good observational drawing skills. This is very good work. The department is now at a stage where it can take on the challenge of focussing on developing students' drawing skills and visual research abilities in other crafts and disciplines.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three lessons were evaluated, two in junior cycle and one in senior cycle. The quality of teaching and learning in Art, as observed during this inspection, was of a good standard.

The atmosphere in lessons during the evaluation was very good. Students' behaviour during the lessons observed was positive and friendly. Encouragement and affirmation were regularly given to students. During these lessons students were industrious and diligent and it was obvious that a large number of students were really enjoying their work. In summary, the rapport between teachers and students was found to be very positive and conducive to a supportive learning environment.

Communication with students was clear and unambiguous. Concepts were introduced to students using a variety of appropriate methods. These included very high-quality, teacher-generated, visual aids displayed on the board. The handouts used in lessons were of a very good standard. These included handouts to help explore briefs as well as handouts to evaluate learning. To keep students engaged, teachers used motivational subject matter, for example, collections of inspiring images and material from popular culture to show how imagery can be used to convey emotion. This is very good work.

The structure of lessons was good and helped to keep students focussed. Lessons generally began with roll call and a recapitulation of previous material before the introduction of a new concept or task. Students were familiar with the responsibilities of working in a studio environment and

helped with the clean up process. This good practice ensures that students can retrieve and put away materials as necessary thus supporting progress.

In two of the lessons observed an evaluation of the work completed was carried out with students at the end of the lessons. This is a very good way of helping students to identify areas where they have been successful and also to identify ways of improving. It is recommended that this good practice be carried out regularly with students and that over time all students should be challenged to discuss the merits of their work.

During the lessons evaluated a number of questioning techniques were used. These techniques helped students to remember previous material and to understand the concepts being addressed. For example, students were asked to remember the results of previous experimentation, *'how do you make purple?', 'what is texture?*' This is good practice. To help further challenge students it is recommended that a range of higher-order questioning techniques be used. It is further suggested that these questions be specifically targeted so that all students have the opportunity to successfully apply their knowledge.

It was noted in one of the junior-cycle lessons evaluated that the group were being taught individually as opposed to being taught by the teacher as a whole group. As these students were developing individual projects it is understandable how this technique has evolved. However, giving each individual student instruction is not efficient and leads to a situation where students can develop an over-reliance on the instructions of the teacher. It is recommended that even where students are working on diverse projects some tuition should be given to the whole group. Students may be working on different themes but the skills being employed are the same. This approach to project work helps to better promote independent learning and pace. It should be used from first year.

Students' project work showed that, in general, students had very good drawing skills relative to their abilities. Some students had excellent drawing skills. The focus on the development of these skills is very good work. However, these skills are not being sufficiently used as a basis for developing project work. There was evidence that an over-dependence on secondary sources on which to base students' work has developed in junior cycle and senior cycle. This can easily happen; especially in a relatively new art department. It is recommended that the development of work from primary sources be prioritised especially amongst better able and motivated students. In this way the good practice of relying on students' observation skills to produce more developed artefacts can be promoted.

In one of the lessons observed differentiated tasks were set for students in a very positive way. Students of varying abilities were asked to reproduce an image using oil pastels. To ensure that students were appropriately challenged images were assigned by the teacher to each student relative to their abilities. This strategy for differentiation supports the progress of individuals and also helps students to achieve. This is good work.

In the lessons visited, highly effective demonstrations were used to communicate processes and concepts. Very good practice was observed when the teacher involved carried out a drawing task showing each stage clearly. This demonstration were logically organised and delivered in a way which stimulated students' curiosity and motivation. This is good work.

During the evaluation, evidence was presented to show that students are progressing very well in a number of areas. The wide variety of crafts and disciplines offered to students is to be commended. The amount of work completed by students is a very positive indication of their

commitment and motivation. In particular the extent of the work completed by first-year students indicates high levels of energy and enthusiasm.

ASSESSMENT

Homework was given in the lessons evaluated. This homework was of appropriate duration and supportive of the topics being addressed in the lessons. Of particular note, in one lesson a work sheet designed to help students evaluate their work was used. This sheet was explained to students during the lessons so that they would be better able to complete the task successfully at home. It is recommended that the good practice of involving students in the assessment process be extended to all groups. During the lessons observed, previous homework exercises were returned to students. Comments written on the homework were informative for students and very affirming of their efforts.

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 ways of improving their work and performance. Formal summative tests take place at mid-term, Christmas, Easter and at the end of the summer term. Students are also assessed on their work throughout the year. Good profiling of students' work including homework ensures that accurate tracking of students' progress is maintained.

A variety of assessment methods is used, including class room activities, self-assessment, portfolio assessment and assessment of practical work, and homework. Students are informed of their progress through school reports, and oral and written feedback on two-dimensional work and written work. Parents are kept informed of their children's progress through school reports, school website, student journal, information evenings and parent-teacher meetings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The art department was established in the school approximately five years ago and the very significant efforts of the teachers involved and of senior management are highly commended.
- The resources available have been developed to create a good environment for the teaching of and learning in Art.
- The strategies used by the department to promote a culture of art and design in the school have been very successful to date.
- The mission of the department is to develop 'a love for Art' through careful interpretation and implementation of the various syllabuses. Evidence was found during the evaluation to suggest that this approach was working well.
- The rapport between teachers and students is very positive and conducive to a supportive learning environment.
- Communication with students was clear and unambiguous and the structure of lessons was good and helped to keep students focussed.
- During the evaluation, evidence was presented to show that students are progressing very well in a number of areas.

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

- Learning outcomes should be used to frame learning targets for students.
- To further challenge students, a range of higher-order questioning techniques should be used in lessons.
- Tuition should be given to the group as a whole as a more efficient way of communicating information.
- The development of work from primary sources should be prioritised especially amongst better able and motivated students.
- The good practice of involving students in the assessment process should be extended to all groups.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers 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.

Published November 2010