An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection
of
Civic, Social and Political Education
REPORT

Patrician Presentation Secondary School
Fethard, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65350S

Date of inspection: 9 December 2010

AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN CIVIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EDUCATION (CSPE)

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Patrician Presentation Secondary School, Fethard. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in CSPE and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two half-days 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 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 evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision for CSPE in Patrician Presentation Secondary School is good. The subject is appropriately offered as a compulsory element of the curriculum in all junior cycle classes, and the timetable provision of one period per week across the three years of the course is in line with the recommended time for the subject. There are two teachers of CSPE at present, sharing five class groups between them. It is good to note that both of these teachers are experienced in delivering the subject and that they are timetabled for at least one other subject as well as CSPE with almost all students. This is an important aspect of CSPE provision, helping teachers and students to get to know each other, allowing for cross-curricular approaches and references when appropriate, and offering flexibility if events or projects need to be organised on a day other than the one designated for CSPE. The fact that teachers have their own base rooms is also helpful to CSPE, allowing for access to resources as required and there were some very good displays relevant to CSPE on the walls. Further supports to the subject include a strong tradition of teachers maintaining their CSPE classes throughout the three years of junior cycle, where possible, and also the fact that class sizes are very manageable and support discussion and activity where desired.

Turning to support for the subject outside the classroom, management has provided a number of valuable in-service training sessions on differentiation, information and communication technology (ICT) and other matters relevant to teaching and learning. Attendance at CSPE-specific in-service training is an area in need of development, however, and it is recommended that teachers consider attending at least one CSPE in-service in the coming year, and perhaps on a rotational basis thereafter. This could be valuable, especially if training in the use of ICT in CSPE

is available, given the imminent roll-out of computers and data projectors in classrooms across the school. The school is very supportive of highlighting students' work and achievements on wall displays and in the annual magazine. In this regard, the development of displays of CSPE activities, such as action projects, around the school and perhaps the use of the magazine to promote wider awareness of what goes on in CSPE are very worthy of consideration.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

As previously intimated, there is no formal departmental structure in CSPE at the school. Given that there are just two teachers involved in subject delivery normally, the emphasis on informal planning is understandable, especially as each teacher is teaching a number of other subjects to a more substantive degree. In many instances, informal planning is working well, with good cooperation in planning action projects and sharing resources evident. It is important that a more formal structure be put on a number of aspects of subject planning, however. The cataloguing of the team's impressive bank of resources is a task which can certainly be shared by subject teachers but needs overall coordination as well, especially as some of these resources may in the future be stored electronically for use via ICT. Whether or not any of the subject teachers decide to take on coordination duties, it is important that at least one annual meeting of CSPE teachers be held. There has been no formal meeting of the CSPE teaching team in some considerable time and this needs to change, ideally beginning at the staff planning day anticipated in January and at a different time from the other subject meetings which could involve the CSPE teachers.

The teaching team has drafted an outline plan for the delivery of CSPE annually but this plan should be followed more closely, as none of the lessons observed dealt with the concept identified for the time of year in any of the relevant yearly plans. Such an outline plan, if followed reasonably closely, can be a particularly important support to substitute or new teachers when the need arises, and can facilitate the use of common assessment instruments in Christmas and summer examinations. The general planning and preparation which has gone into CSPE action projects has been good, with a number of interesting topics being chosen in recent years, including getting some local TDs to visit the school, a Fair Trade awareness initiative and fundraising for the local PAWS animal shelter. Good levels of individual preparedness for lessons were also evident among the teaching team, with props, handouts and books all ready for use as needed, and good provision made for student activity in most lessons too.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In the lessons observed, a uniformly good standard of teaching was evident, which significantly impacted on students' learning opportunities. The relationship between teachers and students was very positive in all lessons, and students interacted with each other in an equally positive manner when opportunities presented themselves. Seating arrangements were normally in traditional format but there was sufficient space and the potential for student movement to allow for pair or group activity in most lessons and this was supportively monitored by teachers when it occurred. Lesson aims were clearly identified by teachers at the outset of all lessons and it is simply recommended that an additional reference to the key concept of the syllabus being dealt with be included at this stage too, ideally on the board for further visual reinforcement.

Teaching methods varied in the different classes observed. Good levels of teacher-led questioning were observed in all lessons, with an appropriate mix of lower and higher order questions and good gender balancing in the way questioning was spread among the student cohort present.

Sometimes, a focus on pair work and group discussion was evident while in other classes a more structured approach using questioning and written stimuli was deployed. All of these worked well in their different contexts. When focused on fair-trade issues, the pair task needed to be a little more challenging or more structured but it did encourage debate and opinion-forming which developed into good learning opportunities for all students to engage with. Other lessons, also dealing with development and the developing world used variations of didactic and student-centred approaches. The pace of the lesson where a more didactic approach was used was slightly faster than the other, although more opportunities for reflection and analysis presented themselves where small-group tasks were given, so that good learning opportunities were provided in all instances through varied means. Where pair or group tasks are given, slightly more direction may be needed overall, such as the assignment of specific tasks like note-taking or reporting to identified students at the outset, in order to bring a clearer focus to the task in hand.

A good range of resources was employed in lesson delivery. Textbooks were consulted for support only when needed, and teacher-generated handouts and a class set of books were the main written resources employed as stimulus materials in lessons. It is recommended that wherever possible some additional emphasis be given to analysing and interpreting the visuals contained in such material. This is worthwhile as a support to mixed-ability teaching but also because the CSPE certificate examination itself contains a variety of such materials. A coffee jar was very productively used in one lesson as a practical stimulus to discussion on fair trade. In all lessons, teachers made use of the board to generate written and diagrammatic summaries of key points discussed or students' ideas coming from the stimulus material. This is good practice. The imminent arrival of ICT equipment in each classroom will afford a number of different possibilities, both for presenting stimulus materials and possibly video items, and also for the electronic collation of students' ideas and their storage for future use. This reinforces the value of restoring a formal departmental meeting where a graduated approach to the integration of ICT into aspects of classroom practice, including the use of visuals, can be developed.

Good learning opportunities were given to students in all lessons observed. It was notable that in all lessons the board summaries which were developed came from student responses to questioning in the main. These summaries were best utilised as supports to learning where students were encouraged to make notes of the key issues as they emerged, as happened in the majority of lessons. Some very good cross-curricular references were also made in different contexts, especially where students were reminded of their learning in geography lessons. Similarly, students were asked to employ simple mathematical tasks to develop an understanding of how challenging it can be to make a living as a farmer who supplies products to multi-national companies in the developing world. In all lessons observed, students were given ample time to ask questions, and were assisted in summarising key learning points towards the end of lessons. When questioned by the inspector, students showed a good level of engagement and understanding of the material they had covered in all lessons.

ASSESSMENT

In-class questioning was generally of a good standard, with students asked a variety of oral questions, both factual and analytical, as well as ones seeking to promote discussion and opinion-giving. Some in-class questioning also centred on seeking responses to stimulus material, and this is worthy of further development in pair or group tasks as it can help train students for the sort of questions common in certificate examination papers. Homework copybooks examined showed a good variety of tasks being assigned, some of which had visual elements such as drawing tasks, poster design or graph making. The use of such visual tasks is appropriate, for reasons previously referred to. In year groups involving two different CSPE groups, a more uniform approach to

topic coverage would support the possibility of using common assessment instruments in CSPE at Christmas and summer examinations and therefore is worthy of consideration.

Whole-school policy in relation to CSPE assessment is satisfactory, with the subject included in the reporting templates at mid-term and end-of-term examinations, and CSPE teachers attend parent-teacher meetings as in all other subjects. The stated procedures for the completion of action project reports, and their retention in the school until the written component of the examination is complete, are also satisfactory.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Appropriate timetable provision, a defined teaching team and base rooms are very good supports to the delivery of CSPE at the school.
- Individual teacher preparation for the lessons observed was very good.
- A uniformly good standard of teaching was observed, providing good learning opportunities to students in all lessons.
- Good use of discussion and interaction, in-class stimulus materials and cross-curricular references characterised the teaching observed.
- Good informal and formal assessment techniques are employed in CSPE.

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

- A more formal approach to subject planning is needed, to include designated coordination roles if possible and departmental meetings on an annual basis at least.
- Subject planning should also focus on the specific concepts to be covered in each year, accessing CPD if possible and cataloguing resources for mutual benefit.
- The promotion of CSPE activities through the student council, general notice boards and the school magazine deserve consideration.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

Published June 2011