An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Civic, Social and Political Education
REPORT

Saint Mary's High School, Midleton
County Cork

Date of inspection: 19 November 2009

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 St Mary's High School, Midleton. 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 days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students' work, and had informal 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

CSPE is appropriately timetabled for one period per week in each junior class at St Mary's. These periods are fairly spread across the days of the week and between morning and afternoon timeslots. It is commendable that the teachers assigned by management to the delivery of CSPE in general are people who have expressed an interest in doing so. The school has a good compliment of eight teachers in all, plus an additional two student teachers, involved in CSPE. A matter which does need to be addressed, however, is the fact that only four of the fifteen CSPE classes have their teacher for another subject as well. Department of Education and Science circulars M12/01 and M13/05 stress the value of assigning CSPE to teachers who have the class for another subject, as it can facilitate project work and assists teachers in getting to know their students in a way that having a class once a week can make more challenging.

Some very good whole-school supports for CSPE were noted. The subject teachers are allocated annual meeting time and student teachers who work in CSPE at the school are assigned a staff mentor, which is commended. It was evident during the inspection that a number of citizenship activities permeate school life on a regular basis. There are notice boards highlighting the activities of the students' council, the work of a school Human Rights Group and supporting the Fair Trade initiative. Elsewhere, there are prominent displays on the challenges faced by developing countries, the importance of recycling and even a guide to the main features of CSPE itself. Significant levels of social and community concern were also evidenced by advertisements for fundraising activities for local or national causes.

A particularly exciting new development at whole-school level is the well-advanced plan to designate a new classroom in the school extension as a CSPE facility. Storage facilities have been provided for CSPE materials, heretofore in a staffroom press and within Room 15, which is satisfactory, but the new facility offers great opportunities. In the assumption that the new CSPE room will be used for a maximum of fifteen lessons per week, roughly one third of the time available, it may be that the room will be shared with other subjects. The incorporation into the new facility of seating arrangement that could be adjusted for group activities should be

considered. Matters such as display space, resource storage and perhaps the installation of information and communication technology can be discussed at a future planning stage.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Although it was not possible to meet formally with the subject department in the course of the inspection, a very detailed subject folder for CSPE was made available to the inspector. This folder contained a comprehensive list of contents, a list of subject teachers, policies relevant to CSPE and outline schemes of work for each year group. An interesting and relevant feature of the subject plan is an outline of the thirty-one different nationalities among the school's student population. The documented yearly schemes suggest that four of the seven course concepts are covered in first year, with the remaining three in second year and then a review of all, including the completion of a major action project, in third year. In practice, however, observation of lessons shows that there is a more staged approach to course coverage, a better spread of topics over the three years and the opportunity for a trial action project to be carried out before third year as well as during it. The three-year approach to covering the seven concepts, and the doing of at least two action projects, are in keeping with the Department's guidelines and the syllabus for CSPE. The current written schemes should be revised to reflect the good practice, which is happening on the ground anyway.. The current written aims and objectives for CSPE in the department plan are identical in all three years. It is suggested that these be reconsidered with a view to identifying a more developmental approach to achieving these intentions across the three-year cycle.

The CSPE department has a designated subject co-ordinator who takes responsibility for the development of the subject plan and also for organising and minuting subject-planning meetings. The co-ordinator and teaching team are highly commended for their commitment to planning meetings. Records show that a total of nine such meetings were held during the last academic year and a significant number have also been held this year. Among the wide range of practical and developmental issues being discussed by the school's CSPE teachers are assessment matters, in-service attendance and feedback, planning for visiting speakers and action projects and, since May 2009, seeking a designated CSPE room as outlined above.

Individual levels of planning and preparation by teachers for every lesson were very good. Significant amounts of handout materials were generated in advance of lessons for use with students. These ranged from information leaflets and quiz sheets to templates for letter writing and brainstorming activities. Pre-planning also saw careful organisation of room signage for group activities, and included the organisation of *rapporteurs*, seating arrangements and other issues. Flashcards for use on the classroom whiteboard, human rights booklets, demonstration materials on disability, and practical items like glue, scissors and paper were all immediately to hand when required by teachers. In individual lessons, a laptop computer and an overhead projector were prepared in advance, while the general level of wall décor relating to CSPE in a number of classes also added a significant citizenship atmosphere to the classrooms.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A very good teaching and learning environment was evident in all classes observed. Some classrooms were not ideal for CSPE delivery, being essentially practical or demonstration rooms, but teachers were creative in dealing with any such restrictions. Students were ready for work

within seconds of arrival at the classrooms and teachers gave very clear directions to them regarding the purpose of lessons or any particular activities planned. Where group work was required, teachers' instructions were very clear and students followed such instructions very well. It was good to note the degree to which some teachers commended students for their willingness to share resources and co-operate on tasks, reinforcing the aim of using CSPE to teach values as well as knowledge. On occasions, given the mixed-ability nature of classes, the core lesson aim and related course concept might have been placed on the classroom boards and left there for the lesson duration for reference and reinforcement, but the general parameters within which CSPE was taught were otherwise excellent.

Teacher-student interaction featured positively in all lessons. Some lessons were substantially built around group work, with teachers taking more of a facilitatory role, which is commended. At other times, lessons were largely teacher-driven and, although opportunities for a little more variation ought to have been sought via student activities, these were also very successful in engaging students' interest. Questioning featured prominently in all lessons and was sufficiently varied and targeted at a wide range of students in all classes.

A significant and important emphasis on the use of visual and other supports was observed in all lessons to varying degrees. Handouts featured in all lessons but always with a view to directing student learning. Structured handouts to guide letter-writing on children's issues, the development of ideas on an environment day and ones shaped into a form of democracy table-quiz were particularly valuable. On occasions, handouts or question sheets were entirely text-based and it is recommended that some visual-stimulus material be included wherever possible in any items used. This supports mixed-ability teaching and is consistent with multiple-intelligence learning theories. It is also in keeping with much of the assessment strategies employed in the terminal certificate examination. The inclusion of a poster-creation task in an action project, and provision of a laptop computer for students working on another element of the project were good supports to visual learning. In one lesson, the employment of flashcards and a very simple and effective use of an overhead projector added a visual emphasis to learning about a guide dogs project, while the use of a wall chart and computer-generated text and images to complement students' guide books on a relatively challenging human rights 'mind mosaic' were other examples of good visual reinforcement.

Very important use was made of student activity in all lessons observed. The focus on learning by doing is a central tenet of CSPE generally and this was emphasised to a high degree. A blind mask and white cane were given to a student, who was then questioned by classmates on her feelings and fears. In another lesson, a student was encouraged to give an impromptu presentation to classmates on a project about Calcutta, and the use of a video to record portions of the lesson was a very interesting element of interactive learning. Where group work was used, it was organised with designated tasks, aims and time targets in most lessons. Group work used to investigate a possible school Environment Day and to progress an action project on children's rights was particularly effective. Where short reading tasks were required elsewhere, these were assigned to different students and were sparingly used. Students were used to mark and monitor an in-class quiz, while in another lesson they were asked to make decisions and then walk to a wall area to place their 'votes' on an appropriate line.

The general level of learning in evidence in lessons was very good. Greater structuring of some lessons to consolidate learning is recommended, like the giving of the written correct answers to a quiz before a lesson ends, or ensuring that students get an opportunity to make notes of any core points identified through group work and brainstorming. Review questioning towards the end of lessons by teachers, and occasionally by the inspector showed a very impressive level of

engagement and understanding among students. There was evidence of very satisfactory learning, for which teachers and students are highly commended.

ASSESSMENT

Informal assessment through homework is good in CSPE. A generic homework policy has been adapted for CSPE by the subject department. Although still denoted as a 'draft' policy, this is very good, and states that it takes cognisance of the multiple intelligences of students. Moving this draft policy to a more solid footing of formal adoption is desirable when time allows. Evidence of homework examined shows a wide range of assessment methods being used by teachers, drawn from students' workbooks, certificate examination papers and teachers' own good ideas. Stimulus-driven homework, drawing tasks, multiple choice and matching exercises have all been productively used as homework with different groups. Homework is monitored through in-class review questioning or sometimes through teacher commentary on drawing or longer written work, which is appropriate. Where teachers are in a position to outline the learning intentions at the beginning of a lesson, it is suggested that advising students at that initial stage of the anticipated homework task can be a productive additional support to learning and is worthy of consideration.

The school is commended for its inclusion of CSPE in all Christmas and summer examinations, report templates and in all planning for parent-teacher meetings. A departmental decision to accommodate multiple intelligences in assessment was minuted in March 2009, so the broadening of assessment methods has been proactively engaged with in recent months. This focus has been supported by a staff training day and certainly the department is encouraged to explore to the fullest the ways in which different learning styles can best be facilitated in teaching, learning and the assessment of learning. It is commendable that the department has adopted a common assessment policy with first-year and second-year classes and the aim to promote social and moral development is stressed in the planning materials for first-year assessment, which is also applauded. With a view to furthering the engagement with multiple-intelligences assessment, it is recommended, on the basis of past assessment instruments seen, that the inclusion of questions on visual and text-based stimuli, poster creation, slogan writing and other creative tasks be considered to a greater degree for future in-house assessment.

While there has been a significant emphasis on completing a core action project in third year, it is good to note that action projects have been engaged with in second year and current departmental discussion has focused on the incorporation of a short project in first year too. It is a stated aim of the syllabus that action project work should be linked to the concept being covered at any one time, not completed well afterwards, so the idea of including action project work in both first-year and second-year assessment is commended. The CSPE department is praised for its consideration, at present, of including marks for action-project work in first-year and second-year termly assessments. The completion of two or more action projects is good training for students and is supported by the syllabus and Department guidelines. Very thorough procedures are in place for the completion, by all third-year students, of the report on an action project (RAP), worth 60% of the marks in the Junior Certificate, which is done under controlled conditions prior to the deadline set by the State Examinations Commission

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good whole-school support for CSPE and for citizenship activities generally at St. Mary's.
- The proposal for a designated room for the teaching of the subject is commended.
- A committed teaching cohort is responsible for the delivery of CSPE across the school's junior cycle.
- Departmental and individual teacher commitment to planning and preparation in CSPE is excellent.
- The department is particularly commended for its reflective commitment to engage with multiple-intelligence strategies and pro-activity on the development of a CSPE room at the school.
- A very good standard of teaching and learning has been observed in CSPE classes, with very good support for visual learning and student activity in particular.
- Thorough procedures in informal and formal assessment in CSPE are commended.

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

- Where possible, CSPE classes should be assigned to teachers who have the class group for another subject as well.
- Written yearly plans ought to reflect the three-year approach to course coverage which is happening in reality and which is recommended in the syllabus and Department guidelines.
- Departmental consideration of issues like seating, display areas and the potential for ICT development within the new CSPE room is recommended.
- The inclusion of varied assessment instruments in formal examinations, and the on-going integration of action projects, simultaneously within the concepts being covered, are recommended.

An informal 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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