

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Religious Education
in the Junior Cycle
REPORT**

**St Paul's Christian Brothers' School
North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7
Roll number: 604300**

Date of inspection: 28 January 2010



REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Paul's Christian Brothers' School (CBS). It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Religious Education (RE) for junior cycle classes 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. 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 Paul's CBS currently has an enrolment of 254 males. Programmes available in the school include the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). The school is included in the School Support Programme of DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), the Department of Education and Skill's action plan for educational inclusion.

This evaluation is concerned only with the preparation of students for Junior Certificate examinations in RE, following study of the religious education syllabus prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). This syllabus for junior cycle was introduced by the NCCA in 2000 and the first Junior Certificate examination in the subject was held in June 2003. The course seeks to promote an understanding and appreciation of why people believe, as well as tolerance and respect for the beliefs and values of all. The course is inclusive of students from all faith backgrounds and from none.

RE is a core subject on the school's curriculum. Class groups are formed in two bands in junior cycle. The larger of these bands comprises two class groups, one of which caters for students who are following the JCSP. All junior-cycle students are timetabled for lessons in the subject for three periods each week. This is in keeping with syllabus recommendations. Lessons are generally distributed well across students' timetables.

The subject enjoys excellent support in the school. A very good range of resources is available to support teaching and learning in RE. This support includes the school library which contains a range of RE-related titles and very good information and communications technology (ICT), both in the classrooms and in the two computer rooms which can be booked by the RE teachers for whole-class work. It was evident that very good use is made of these resources to support students' research for journal work. A variety of textbooks and other resource materials has been acquired by the department over a number of years.

Teachers are generally assigned their own classrooms. Two of these rooms were visited during the evaluation and in both very supportive visual displays have been created. These celebrate students' own project work and posters and illustrate key concepts being learned. All three RE teachers hold specialist qualifications in the subject. Management is supportive of continuing professional development (CPD) and supports teachers' attendance at in-service seminars provided by their professional association, the Religion Teachers Association of Ireland. Teachers are further supported by regular, timetabled, team meetings resulting in a high level of collaborative planning.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Two members of the RE team meet on a weekly basis to plan and co-ordinate their work. The third teacher, who is the learning support co-ordinator in the school, attends less regularly but is consulted on and informed of decisions made at meetings. Minutes are recorded and these indicate that meetings focus on organisational aspects of the RE programme, including planning for and evaluating paraliturgical and other events. The department presented as a cohesive unit, with a shared vision for developing RE in the school. A religious education policy has been developed. This clearly situates the teaching and learning of RE as a key contributor to the achievement of the school's mission "to support teachers, parents and students as they co-operate in the cultivation of an atmosphere of Christian care and concern." The policy identifies a range of co-curricular activities which are available to students. The activities planned are focussed on social justice and include charitable fund-raising, voluntary work and involvement in the Edmund Rice awards.

The professionalism of the RE teachers in the work done to interpret and implement the syllabus is striking, as is their enthusiasm for the subject. Planning documentation of a very high standard was available for inspection. The programme planned reflects the emphases in the school's religious education policy and the requirements of the syllabus. The curricular work planned for students covers the full range of options available in the syllabus. A strength of planning in this school is the flexible approach adopted to the delivery of the syllabus so that students can benefit from the differing enthusiasms of the teaching team. For example, the plan describes both a linear approach to the syllabus, which addresses each topic in sequence, and a spiral approach, which facilitates re-visiting topics through the three years of the course. Clear learning goals which describe the skills, knowledge and attitudes to be acquired by students following study of each section of the course are evidence of the student-centered approach taken by the RE department to curriculum planning. The plan also takes account of the particular needs of students with special educational needs. For example, the textbooks used have been chosen specifically with their needs in mind.

In developing the department plan, it is recommended that detail regarding assessment should be integrated with the plans of work for each year group. This should reflect both the formative and the summative nature of the assessments planned.

Planning for individual lessons observed was very good. All necessary resources had been prepared and the skilful management of lesson pace ensured that in each lesson the intended learning and teaching activities were completed.

In summary, planning for Religious Education is of a very high standard.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was evidence of very good teaching and learning. All four lessons observed were well structured and sequenced, and delivered at a pace that allowed students time to engage with and reflect on the key concepts being explored. As lessons began, teachers established links with previous lessons and topics, thus facilitating continuity of learning. The focus of lessons was clearly outlined as each began and the practice of revisiting key concepts, as seen in these lessons, was particularly good. This ensured that students had mastered the ideas needed to access the new material presented. It was notable that students were fully engaged in the initial discussions about the topics being investigated and that they were comfortable asking for clarification of key terms used so that they were well-prepared to participate in the lesson as it developed.

A suitable variety of methodologies was employed by teachers to facilitate active student engagement with the lesson material. These included: whole-class, text-based work; questioning; directed viewing of a DVD and cloze work. In all lessons, students were appropriately challenged to apply their learning in a practical context. In a lesson on changing religious practice in Ireland, very good use was made of DVD recordings to contrast First Holy Communion in the first half of the last century with more recent practice. This exemplar and the mode in which it was presented captured the interest of the students and elicited a lively, strongly-focussed, whole-class discussion of the changes noted. Students quickly referenced their own experiences and used these to support their understanding of changes in practice.

In another lesson, students worked independently of the teacher. As the lesson began, the teacher checked that all students were clear about the work they were expected to complete during the lesson period. Students worked in pairs at their computer terminals to continue their research for their journal work. Each student had chosen a title from the prescribed list so that their own interests were reflected in the variety of titles being explored. The teacher supported their work by providing a small library of reference texts and by circulating to offer help and advice. Some students consulted the reference material from time to time as the lesson progressed and others were clearly satisfied that they had accessed sufficient information for their needs on the internet. In conversation with the inspector, students demonstrated a good deal of knowledge about their chosen topics. In a minority of instances, there was evidence of unreflective cutting and pasting of information garnered from internet sources. This should always be challenged. In this class, the requirement by the teacher that all students make a presentation on their topic to their classmates may do much to ensure that this is addressed.

Teachers used the students' experiences well and few opportunities were missed to relate the work directly to their lives. Students' personal opinions were actively sought and were listened to respectfully. Throughout, teachers modelled good interpersonal skills and, through a combination of good humour and gentle repetition of commands, clear expectations of student behaviour were communicated. This worked to ensure a pleasant and productive learning atmosphere in all lessons observed. Classroom management in all lessons was excellent and all learning activities were managed skilfully.

Students are making good progress through their course. In classroom discussion, it was evident that they can recognise religious art, symbols and words and talk about them. They are confident in their use of subject-specific vocabulary to express their ideas and opinions, in keeping with their abilities in the subject. Generally, students' copies and notebooks are well maintained and organised, indicating the high expectations of standards set by the teachers. The quality of

students' work in the copies which were reviewed reflected a range of ability in the subject. All students tackled short-answer questions confidently and demonstrated good knowledge of the key concepts explored in the syllabus. Less-able students, however, are less secure when writing more extended answers. In some instances, the standards achieved were limited by a student's literacy difficulties. In contrast, a significant minority of students were comfortable applying and evaluating what they have learnt about religion. It is recommended that the range of written assignments set should be expanded to facilitate practise of these learning skills. Questions should invite students to reflect on what they are learning in religious education classes and to connect it with their own experiences in more extended pieces of writing.

ASSESSMENT

In the lessons observed, teachers assessed students' understanding by the use of questioning and in some cases by the completion of worksheets. In keeping with the school's homework policy, homework is regularly set by the teachers of RE. The range of exercises set reflects the emphasis on knowledge and understanding in the Junior Certificate syllabus at ordinary level. In some cases, an emphasis on reinforcing learning, as opposed to developing understanding, was evident in the homework tasks set. In order to promote and support participation in the higher-level examinations in the subject, it is suggested that homework assignments should provide students with more practice in addressing picture questions and essay type questions.

Homework exercises are generally corrected promptly and, in the majority of cases, the marking of written work combined encouragement with guidance. It was noted that the majority of students complete all homework tasks assigned and their work ethic is acknowledged here. The religious education teachers record students' achievements in good detail, including information on completion of homework and the results of class tests.

Students' progress is measured regularly. In-class tests are administered on completion of a unit of study and formal examinations are set for first-year and second-year students at Christmas and the end of the summer term. Third-year students sit Christmas tests and 'mock' examinations early in the second term. In addition to parent-teacher meetings which are held annually, parents are kept informed of students' progress through reports which issue twice during the year for all students in junior cycle.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The subject enjoys excellent support in the school. It is well-resourced and teachers facilitated a broad range of co-curricular activities focussed on social justice.
- Planning for Religious Education is of a very high standard.
- The lessons observed were very well planned and executed. A range of strategies to stimulate students' interest and participation in class is used.
- In the lessons observed, teachers used the students' experiences well and few opportunities were missed to relate the work directly to their lives.

- The range of homework exercises set reflects the emphasis on knowledge and understanding in the Junior Certificate syllabus at ordinary level.

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

- In order to promote and support participation in the higher-level examinations in the subject, the range of written assignments set should be expanded as appropriate to facilitate more reflective responses from students.

A 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.