

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

**Saint Ciarán's Community School
Kells, County Meath
Roll number: 91456J**

Date of inspection: 23 April 2010



**AN ROINN DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Ciarán's Community School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Religious Education for junior cycle classes only 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 Ciarán's Community School was established in 1988 following the amalgamation of the Christian Brothers Secondary School and Kells Vocational School. It is a co-educational school offering the Junior Certificate, established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Currently, the majority of students are male with females making up just over ten percent of the student body. Religious Education is a core subject on the school's curriculum and all students take this subject. This evaluation is concerned only with the preparation of students for Junior Certificate examinations in the subject, following study of the religious education syllabus prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The course is inclusive of students from all faith backgrounds and from none.

Mixed-ability class groups are formed for Religious Education (RE) in first year. From the beginning of second year, a small support class group is formed, comprising students who need additional support. Following examinations in their core subjects which take place at the end of first year, all students are placed in class groups determined by their ability in those subjects. RE is taught to students in their streamed class groups. Notwithstanding the careful monitoring of student placement which was reported during this evaluation, the formation of mixed-ability groupings for RE in second year and third year is suggested. One of the key aims of this syllabus is to promote understanding, tolerance and respect for all. Class groupings which reflect the full ability spectrum, as well as diversity of religious background, where relevant, support the achievement of this aim. Consideration should also be given to relevant research findings regarding the impact of ability grouping on students' experience of school, for example, the longitudinal study commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Commentaries on this work were published in May 2006 and September 2007 (www.ncca/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Research_on

_students'_experiences/). Three class periods per week in each of the three years are allocated to the subject on the timetable. This is very good provision. Lessons are well distributed across the timetable.

Support for the subject in the school is excellent. Three teachers comprise the core subject teaching team. Their work is supported from time to time by the deployment of additional teachers to the subject. It was noted that care is taken to ensure that all the teachers who deliver the course have a specialist qualification in the subject. Teachers are generally assigned their own classrooms and they have made very good use of this resource to create a supportive and visually stimulating learning environment. The colourful displays created in the classrooms include students' project work, teacher-generated learning resources and commercially produced posters.

The school operates a book rental system which provides students with their core RE text for each year of junior cycle. Audio/visual resources and information and communications technology (ICT) facilities are available to the RE teachers on a booking system. Additional resources can also be acquired, where school funds allow, on request to management.

A school oratory provides a place of quiet where para-liturgies and experiential learning activities can be facilitated. The school benefits from the support of a full-time chaplain, who also teaches RE. Throughout the school year, liturgies and prayer celebrations mark key moments and students are encouraged to become involved in a number of activities, most notably a Zambia Immersion Programme. This has been designed in the school to give teachers, parents and students an understanding of development issues in Ireland and Africa. Together with a range of other support activities, this project provides practical opportunities to promote and develop the affective outcomes of the religious education syllabus.

Very good support is provided to teachers to attend continuing professional development (CPD) training. The RE teachers have attended cluster meetings organised by the Religious Education Support Service in the past and are members of the Religion Teachers Association of Ireland, their professional network.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject department planning is very well established in this school. Responsibility for the co-ordination of the work of the department is rotated annually between the three members of the core RE team and the chaplain. This is a very good way to ensure that different interests and perspectives are brought to the co-ordination of the subject. Management currently supports subject planning and development through the allocation of time for department meetings on at least a termly basis. Department meetings are scheduled to coincide with staff meetings and development days. Senior management indicated that the RE team meet formally at least six times and frequently have informal meetings during the school year. The high level of collaboration between teachers of RE which this suggests was evident in the quality of the planning documentation presented for inspection.

All formal meetings are minuted and it is very good practice that copies of the minutes are provided to members of the department and to the principal. Records of the meetings held in the current year demonstrated that there is a strong focus on teaching and learning during department discussions. As a result, agreement on the timing of delivery of aspects of the course is reached

and the excellent practice of monitoring and reviewing planned lessons is well established in the department.

A meeting to discuss subject department planning was scheduled but was not attended by the subject co-ordinator. However, a subject planning folder was presented. This was organised in five sections and it provided details of everything related to the organisation, planning, teaching and assessment of the subject in the school. The attention paid at the planning stage to the needs of students with special educational needs is a notable strength of the work done. It is a good example of how the RE department's aim to create "a nurturing environment which is inclusive and student-centred" is implemented.

The curriculum plans for each year of the junior-cycle programme in RE describe the content to be covered by teachers and students. The organising principle determining the order in which work would be done appeared to be the chronology of the textbook used. In order to enhance the very good approach to planning noted in St Ciarán's, it is recommended that the lists of topics should be developed further. They should identify a list of the learning outcomes that students should achieve from their study of each aspect of their courses in each year. An indicative list for each section of the syllabus is provided in syllabus documentation. Care should also be taken to ensure that the syllabus aims and students' needs are considered when determining the order in which topics are explored. This more student-focussed approach is better practice and is entirely in keeping with the aims of the RE department in this school.

Planning for resources to support teaching and learning is a key element of subject planning for RE in the school. The RE teachers have also built up a 'library' of textbooks, videos, reference books and other resource materials which have been acquired by the department over a number of years. These have been catalogued in the department folder and are stored in two of the RE classrooms.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A very high quality of teaching and learning in RE was evident in this school. At the outset of the lessons observed teachers outlined the topics to be explored and used revision of work done previously to help students to situate the new material. Very good questioning at this time checked their readiness to develop the topics further. In two of the lessons, a clear statement of the learning intention was made. This is an excellent way to focus students' attention and it is suggested that it should be adopted in all RE lessons.

The strong focus on critical reflection observed in each of the classes visited is noted as a very positive feature of teaching and learning in this school. For example, students were encouraged to think through their ideas very carefully in a lesson on tolerance. Here, students were invited to suggest ways communities might combat sectarianism. Once these had been written up on the whiteboard, the teacher challenged students to consider which were most likely to be successful and why. The resulting class discussion was a very useful exercise in critical evaluation. It was made all the more effective by the teacher's encouragement of students to comment on and develop each other's ideas. As the lesson progressed, it was clear that this excellent groundwork made reading about the topic in their textbooks much easier for students. In another lesson, grounding the discussion of morality in students' own experiences achieved the same effect. As students proposed possible influences on moral thinking, the teacher gently prompted them to express an opinion about the relative impact of each. This group of ordinary-level students rose to

the challenge, providing good justification of their opinions. Again, the handout summarising the topic was introduced only when students had fully rehearsed in their discussion the quite complex ideas involved. These examples illustrate the commitment noted in each of the lessons observed to develop in students the skills needed to engage in meaningful dialogue about RE.

The use of teaching strategies which actively engaged students in learning was also noted during the evaluation. In one class, this took the form of an experience of worship in the school's prayer room. During the initial phase of the lesson, the teacher situated the experience in the context of the journal work titles which students had chosen. Acknowledging the diversity of faith backgrounds which might be represented in the class group, the teacher invited students to approach the experience either as participants or as observers. The closing segment of the lesson allowed students to comment on the symbols and gestures used and to critically explore their contribution to the experience. Students were also very active in a lesson which focussed on the symbolism in baptism in the Catholic tradition. Their contributions to class discussion were affirmed and they were encouraged to 'translate' formal definitions of some of the concepts which were considered into their own words.

The quality of students' responses to questions asked and their contributions in class reflected the range of ability in the subject. Students demonstrated a good knowledge of the key concepts underpinning the RE courses at both higher and ordinary levels. Generally, students were confident contributors to class discussions and were comfortable answering questions. The encouraging manner of all of the teachers drew out even those students who were quite reticent initially and there was very good student engagement in class discussions. Work in the students' copies which were reviewed was good. Homework is well planned to complement the work carried out in lessons and the standard of answering was good, reflecting the full range of abilities in the school. Work set was based both on the textbook, which provided short-answer questions designed to check students' recall of what was learned in class, and exercises which required students to give their personal views, supported by reasons and examples and to compare or to make a connection between ideas. Progression in the level of challenge posed by exercises, and in the students' abilities to achieve them, was noted. Student achievement in the Junior Certificate examination in RE is good.

It is a good practice that management analyses the results achieved by students in the certificate examinations. It is recommended that the outcomes of this analysis should be used to inform the planning process and that an improvement in take-up of the higher-level course in RE might be adopted as a goal by the RE department.

ASSESSMENT

Students' progress through class work is monitored through the use of oral questioning and a variety of worksheets. These were used to check students' knowledge and understanding as well as providing them with opportunities to reflect on the content of the lessons. In accordance with the school's homework policy, homework is regularly set in RE classes.

Students were encouraged to make notes in all lessons. A review of students' copies indicated their attention has been drawn to the importance of organising their copies by, for example, dating and titling their work and to using a pen rather than a pencil to complete homework. As a result, their notes and homework copies were well-organised and they constitute a valuable revision aid.

In general, feedback to students on their written work took the form of useful teacher comments which provided valuable feedback to students on their progress, affirmed work well done and indicated areas for development. This good practice is commended. The awarding of marks or grades was not seen in the sample of copies examined. It is recommended that this practice should be re-considered for students in third-year class groups. The good practice of assigning questions from past examination papers for these students is noted and encouraged. This helps students interpret questions and become familiar with the answering of various styles of examination questions. The awarding of a grade, in addition to the detailed, developmental, feedback which is already provided, would give students a very clear picture of their performance in the subject.

Students in junior cycle are assessed on a continuous basis during the first term of each year. The form this takes is at the discretion of the teacher and may include end-of-topic tests, for example. Students' behaviour in class and their application to study is considered. Summative assessment tests in RE are held at the end of the summer term for first-years and second-years. In drawing up these tests, consideration should be given to the setting of common examination papers for classes within a year group. This provides very clear information on how each year group is progressing through the course and is a solid basis on which to make recommendations about the level at which a student should take certificate examinations in Religious Education. Third-year students sit a 'mock' examination during the spring term. Parents are kept informed of students' progress through reports which issue twice during the year. Parent-teacher meetings are held annually for each year group.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Support for the subject in the school is excellent. Audio/visual resources and ICT facilities are available to the RE teachers, as is a school oratory. The school also benefits from the support of a full-time chaplain.
- A high level of collaboration between teachers of RE was evident in the quality of the planning documentation presented for inspection.
- The strong focus on critical reflection and the use of teaching strategies which actively engaged students in learning were noted as particular strengths of teaching and learning in RE.
- Students' progress in RE is monitored appropriately and their achievement in the Junior Certificate examination in RE is good.

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

- In developing the subject plan, the lists of topics for study each year should be developed to identify a list of the learning outcomes to be achieved by students.
- Analysis of students' performance in the Junior Certificate RE examination should inform the planning process. An improvement in take-up of the higher-level course in RE might be adopted as a goal by the RE department.
- In addition to the detailed, developmental, feedback which is already provided, grades or marks should be recorded on the work of third-year students of RE.

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.

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