

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

**Ardscoil La Salle
Raheny, Dublin 5
Roll number: 60291D**

Date of inspection: 27 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 Ardscoil La Salle. 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, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Ardscoil La Salle is a co-educational post-primary school under the trusteeship of the De la Salle Brothers. Currently, 275 males and 132 females are enrolled. While a programme of religious education is offered to students in all year groups, 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.

Religious Education (RE) is a core subject in junior cycle in this school. On admission to the school, students are placed in class groupings based on their academic abilities. Three bands are formed. In the first band, students are expected to study all their subjects to higher-level for Junior Certificate examinations. The second band comprises students who will take a significant number, though not all subjects, to the higher level. Students taking the ordinary-level courses are placed in the third band. RE is taught to students in their banded class groups. The formation of mixed-ability groupings for RE is recommended. 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 class grouping arrangements 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/).

The allocation of three class periods per week in each of the three years is in keeping with the recommendations of the syllabus. In reviewing the timetable, it is noted that one teacher has

responsibility for three of the four third-year class groups and has no involvement in RE in either second year or first year. Where practicable, continuity of deployment to specific class groups from first year to third year is recommended, as it allows the teacher to build up a good picture of the abilities and support needs of students in the class. It also ensures that the workload associated with preparation for certificate examinations in third year, when students are completing their journal work for example, is shared by the full RE team.

The RE teaching team includes teachers with a specialist qualification in the subject and other teachers who have been assigned to teach the subject from time to time. In assigning non-subject specialists to teach RE the same good practice principles which exist in other subject areas should be applied. Teachers should have expressed an interest in teaching the subject. They should be actively involved in planning for the delivery of the subject and should participate in subject department meetings. Care should be taken to reduce turnover among the teaching team, so that the same teachers are deployed from year to year, providing continuity of experience over several years. In this way, these teachers can consolidate and extend their subject knowledge and experience.

Resource support for the subject in this school is very good. Where possible, teachers of RE are assigned their own classrooms and stimulating and supportive visual displays have been created in some rooms. These illustrate key concepts being learned and celebrate students' own work in the subject. It is suggested that the opportunity to use displays to support learning in RE should be taken in all of the classrooms used. There is very good access to information and communications technology (ICT) including data projectors and a set of laptop computers which can be booked for use in class. The school's ICT room can also be used by RE teachers for whole-class work and it was reported that use is made of this resource when students are researching projects and completing journal work. A prayer/meditation room and a demonstration room are also provided.

School management facilitates the continuing professional development of the full teaching team in the school. Training events provided in recent years have focussed on the development of a tutor system and on positive behaviour.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The RE subject department structure in Ardscoil La Salle is quite loose. Currently, co-ordination is shared by members of the department who meet formally once a year. Discussions at this meeting are minuted and are forwarded to the principal. This is good practice as it provides a level of open communication between the subject department and senior management. The minutes were not available for inspection so it was unclear whether all members of the RE team, including non-subject specialists, attend department meetings. These meetings should be a forum for sharing information and resources. They also have the potential to develop the knowledge of all RE teachers about the purposes, aims and most appropriate pedagogies for the subject. In this way, they can be an important support to non-specialist teachers. It is unlikely that these aims can be achieved through one meeting only. It is recommended that management work with the RE department to consider how best to facilitate more frequent opportunities to meet and develop their practice. The opportunities presented by staff days and non-teaching time could be considered in this regard.

A subject planning folder was presented during this inspection. This indicates that the level of collaborative planning engaged in by the subject department team is poor. Until recently, the

school benefited from the services of a part-time chaplain, funded by the trustees. Examination of school documentation suggests that the management of subject planning has been heavily dependent on the chaplain. The folder included a detailed chaplaincy plan for the school and a short RE plan. Evaluation of the chaplaincy plan does not fall within the remit of this inspection. It is noted, however, that the plan describes the chaplaincy service as a “support to RE” in that it offers a number of experiences to students which can enhance their learning in the subject. Certainly, the liturgies and prayer celebrations which are planned to mark key moments in the school year and the opportunities provided to students to become involved in a number of charitable endeavours provide practical opportunities to promote and develop the affective outcomes of the RE syllabus. This valuable support is acknowledged here.

Use has been made of templates provided by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) to write a very brief subject plan. Whilst some information on the work of the department is provided under standard headings, no information is provided regarding the work done in the classrooms. This is not satisfactory and should be addressed as a priority. The school is hopeful that a new chaplain will be in place for the 2010-2011 academic year. However, subject planning is the responsibility of the full RE teaching team. Whilst those teachers with specialist qualifications in the subject may well take the lead in planning, all members of the RE teaching team should be engaged in discussing what elements of the course are to be covered by each class group in each year. This is particularly important given that class groups may have a different RE teacher in each of the three years. Good planning facilitates a consistent learning experience for students in each year group and provides guidance for classroom work for non-specialist and substitute teachers.

The subject plan should provide clear details of the organisational and curricular aspects of RE in the school. Schemes of work should document the programme to be taught in each year of junior cycle, indicating the learning outcomes for each section of the course. An indicative list for each section of the syllabus is provided in syllabus documentation. Information on teaching and learning methods as well as possible resources, homework tasks and a description of the assessment modes to be used to measure achievement of planned outcomes should also be included.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The very good planning and preparation engaged in by individual teachers for the lessons observed is a good foundation for the work recommended above. The resources used were well chosen to support student learning and in one lesson it was clear that the teacher had considered and implemented procedures to help students to file and store lesson notes and handouts. As a result of this planning, the lessons observed had a distinct focus and were well paced, taking account of the relative abilities of students. For example, work done previously was revisited to check students’ readiness to develop the topic further. New material was then contextualised in what students already knew, so that they were confident and relaxed during the lessons. It is suggested that teachers should share the learning intention with students at the outset. This is an excellent way to focus students’ attention and can be a very helpful tool by which their progress can be monitored.

The predominant teaching strategy observed was whole-class work, well-supported by a variety of appropriate resources. In a lesson on the miracles of Jesus, for example, a video clip was very well used to engage students’ attention. A worksheet was then used to reinforce their learning. In

another lesson, past certificate examination papers were used, together with a handout, to facilitate revision work. The effort and commitment of RE teachers in preparing handouts and information sheets is recognised here. Nevertheless, care should be taken to ensure that students are given ample opportunity to think through issues and topics for themselves in order that the aims of the RE syllabus are achieved. Examples of good practice in this regard were evident in two of the lessons observed. In the first, on the Decalogue, students were asked to consider the potential difficulties their school community could experience if stranded in a desert for a period of time. Following a short period during which students worked quietly to gather their ideas, the lively plenary discussion pushed students to think through their ideas critically. The teacher introduced a handout on the Ten Commandments only after the class had already generated a number of ideas independently. In closing the lesson, students were asked to think through the reasons for each Commandment and to consider their relevance in 2010. In another lesson, students considered the 'Damascus moments' they had experienced in their lives. In whole-class discussion, references were made by students to an earlier lesson when they had negotiated their classroom blindfolded in order to appreciate the experience of Saul. Both these lessons provided students with opportunities to acquire knowledge and understanding, balanced with time to explore, reflect on and discuss ideas. There is scope for further development of experiential learning methodologies in RE. Subject department planning meetings can provide a forum for disseminating the very good practices described above throughout the department.

Teachers used questions frequently throughout the lessons observed both to engage students and to check their understanding of the topics being discussed. In some lessons, students were provided with opportunities to both demonstrate their knowledge and to give their personal views, supported by reasons and examples. In others, however, insufficient 'wait time' was provided and the teacher provided the necessary development of students' answers and students were quite passive. It may have been that some students were reluctant to respond to questions and to express opinions in the presence of an inspector. Nevertheless, care should be taken to ensure that opportunities to express, clarify and extend their knowledge and understanding of lesson topics orally are provided to students. Where this is not done, students can become overly reliant on the teacher and, in this way, avoid working to their potential in the subject.

The quality of students' responses to questions asked indicated a good knowledge of the relevant topics generally. Students clearly could recall and comprehend the information learned in class. Work in the students' copies which were reviewed was good and reflected the range of ability in the subject. It was noted that short-answer, lower-order questions, often taken directly from a textbook or handout dominated in the majority of cases. In one instance, exercises which move beyond checking students' knowledge or recall of information and which allow them to reflect on their own religious experience or the experiences of others, had been set. Students handled these questions well. Records of class tests were not presented during the evaluation. However, it was clear from student copies that the work done by them is generally of a good standard.

ASSESSMENT

A review of students' copies indicated that homework is set regularly. As noted above, transcription and short answer questions feature most frequently. Generally, work was well-organised and the standard of presentation was good. Homework is acknowledged, in the majority of copies examined, by 'tick' marking and from time to time, brief encouraging comments. There is scope to provide more detailed, developmental, feedback which both identifies areas for development and affirms the work done.

It is recommended that the RE department review its assessment practices, including homework and in-class assessments which may be set on completion of a unit of work. Assessment tasks should be differentiated for higher and ordinary level courses and should be linked directly to specific learning outcomes for each section of the course. As appropriate, tasks should provide students with opportunities to go beyond demonstrating knowledge and understanding to express opinions, supported by, for example, references to specific religious texts or teachings. Consideration should also be given to the setting of common examination papers for classes within a year group.

Summative assessment tests in RE are held at Christmas for each year in junior cycle. Formal tests are also held for first-year and second-year students at the end of the summer term. 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:

- Religious Education (RE) is a core subject in junior cycle.
- The allocation of three classes per week in each of the three years is in keeping with the recommendations of the syllabus.
- Resource support for the subject in this school is very good.
- Use has been made of templates provided by the SDPI to begin the development of a subject department plan.
- Examples of good teaching and learning practices were evident in the lessons observed. The resources used were well chosen to support student learning and in some instances opportunities to acquire knowledge and understanding were balanced with time to explore, reflect on and discuss ideas.
- Students are making good progress through the course and the quality of their learning was good.

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

- All members of the RE teaching team should be engaged in developing the subject department plan. This plan should document the programme to be taught in each year of junior cycle, indicating the learning outcomes for each section of the course, the teaching and learning methods and the assessment modes to be used.
- The RE department should review its assessment practices, including homework and in-class assessments which may be set on completion of a unit of work.

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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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of Ardscoil La Salle welcomes this report. It is generally positive, and recommendations made will be implemented.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection