

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

**Loreto College
Swords, Co. Dublin
Roll number: 60810B**

Date of inspection: 29 January 2010



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION 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 Loreto College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Religious Education (RE) 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 and subject teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Loreto College Swords is a Catholic secondary school with an enrolment of 639 females. 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 RE 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.

In keeping with its mission statement, there is excellent support for RE in the school. RE is a core subject in junior cycle and all students are expected to take it. Mixed-ability class groups are formed for the subject. Three single lesson periods per week are allocated to the subject in each of the three years of junior cycle. This is in keeping with NCCA recommendations and lessons are distributed well across the timetable. Students are encouraged to study the higher-level course and all but a minority of students sit the Junior Certificate examination in RE at this level.

The team of religious education teachers all hold specialist qualifications. School management has facilitated attendance by the teachers at cluster meetings organised by the Religious Education Support Service and a number of relevant whole-school in-service activities have also been facilitated. The general practice in the school of teachers providing feedback on courses attended at staff meetings is very good.

Resources available to teachers and students include two computer rooms which can be booked for whole-class work, particularly to support students' research for journal work. There are

computers in almost all classrooms and in the rooms visited during this evaluation, data projectors were also installed. Other resources include sets of textbooks, DVDs and videos. These have been acquired over the years by the RE department to support planning and delivery of the syllabus. An annual budget is provided to the department for this purpose. The text, video and DVD resources of the RE department are catalogued in the subject department plan. A shared area on the school's intranet further facilitates the sharing of resources among the RE teachers.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The four teachers of RE form a very enthusiastic and highly committed teaching team. Co-ordination of the work of the department forms part of the responsibilities attaching to a post of responsibility for one member of the team. This facilitates very good collaborative work practices, including regular meetings and agreement on the subject plan for each year group. The school provides formal meeting time five times annually and this has been used for forward planning and to review work done. It was reported that meetings most frequently address the management of the wide range of co-curricular activities of the RE department. These activities include a 'Big Sister' mentoring programme which matches sixth-year students with first-year students; a programme of liturgical and para-liturgical events; involvement with a Loreto school in Kenya and a justice and peace group. This provision grows out of, and reflects, the school's mission statement which envisions the school as a Christian community "characterised by care and justice."

A well-developed subject plan was available for inspection. This outlined a linear approach to the delivery of the syllabus which covers all sections. In this way, students have a greater choice of question in the certificate examinations. The programme for RE in junior cycle is appropriately rooted in the NCCA syllabus documents, which are referenced in the department plan. Very good schemes of work have been developed for each year of the programme. These provide information on the learning outcomes to be achieved, teaching and learning methods as well as possible resources to be used. It is suggested that an indication of the timeframe for delivery of particular aspects of the schemes should be included. Planning for assessment should be integrated with the schemes so that assessment is linked with the aims identified in the curriculum plan.

Teachers' individual planning documents interpret the relevant scheme for their class groups. These plans were of excellent quality, demonstrating clear differentiation of department aims to meet the specific needs of each class group. They provided good information about the work done by each group and indicated a high level of planning for appropriate resources to support teaching and learning.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The effectiveness of teachers' individual planning for lessons was evident in the four lessons observed. Each was well-paced and included some opportunities for students to work co-operatively and to learn from each other. Time was used well in every lesson so that the planned activities were completed. Teachers shared the learning intention with students at the outset. This is a most effective way to focus students' attention and can be a very helpful tool by which their

progress can be monitored. In all lessons, students' contributions in class indicated that those who answered had achieved the learning intended.

Clear routines for beginning class, including roll call and revision of work completed in earlier lessons, were noted. In one lesson, this latter activity was supported by excellent whiteboard use. The expected learning outcomes for the lesson were written on the right-hand side of the board and the other side of the board was used to record students' recollection and understanding of relevant key ideas explored in previous lessons. Through judicious questioning, the teacher was able to check comprehension of these ideas and to facilitate whole-class summary of prior learning. The value of the whiteboard as a resource in the RE classroom should be fully exploited in all lessons, particularly to record students' contributions and to reinforce learning.

There was a strong reliance on whole-class work with the teacher taking the lead in framing class discussion. This worked well in the lessons observed particularly where students were engaged through reading aloud or were given time to work independently on a reflective exercise. In one lesson, students were particularly active participants. Working in pairs to match place names in the Holy Land with specified biblical references and to record these on a map, students appeared to enjoy the task and they were successful. In another lesson, students were expertly guided through a discussion of images of God, prompted by consideration of a familiar painting. The teacher acted as recorder, plotting the various images on a mind map on the whiteboard. This led to a short time for personal reflection. Students were asked to compare their current preferred image with one they had each recorded as an image a number of weeks earlier. Good planning of classroom activities for each lesson in this section of the course ensured that this powerful exercise was successful in helping students recognise and acknowledge how their own images of God had developed through this section of the course. Both these examples demonstrate the value of teaching methods which facilitate active student involvement in the lesson. It is recommended that the RE team should address ways in which to achieve this more often.

Students' learning during lessons was monitored and developed by questioning. Very good use of familiar examples and an encouraging approach facilitated the sharing by students of their own experiences and opinions, wherever appropriate. In the written work reviewed, all students demonstrated good familiarity with the topics studied. It was good to note that the exercises set encourage students to write lengthy paragraphs in which they are required to go beyond demonstration of knowledge to discuss topics more fully. In a few cases, it was evident that students do not read the questions fully. For example, when asked to "name and describe", these students did not address the second part of the question. It is suggested that sharing the assessment criteria with students in advance of them tackling the work may be helpful in addressing this.

Overall, the work done by students was purposeful and focussed and it was clear that the writing tasks set were appropriately challenging. Students were making good progress through their courses and any variations in achievement reflected their differing abilities in the subject. Work on the journal component of the certificate examinations begins in the third term in second year, when students choose the title for exploration. A first draft of the journal is completed in the first term in third year, allowing students ample time to address any issues which are identified at that stage. The religious education teachers have communicated expectations about how work should be presented and the majority of notebooks were well organised, with work very neatly presented.

ASSESSMENT

Teachers use a range of strategies to assess students' understanding in class. These include oral questions, completion of work sheets and observation. End-of-topic tests are held in class to reinforce learning. It was noted in some teachers' planning documentation that the outcomes of these tests and other assessment strategies have influenced teaching, such that concepts and topics have been re-visited. This is excellent practice.

The school's homework policy has been further developed by the RE department to reflect its subject-specific aims. Work is regularly set and is marked promptly. In the copies which were reviewed, feedback to students on their work was particularly good. Students' efforts are very positively affirmed and clear guidance for improvement is given. An examination of the work done in these copies indicated good evidence of progression in the quality of the work completed by students.

Summative assessment tests are held at Christmas and summer for first-year and second-year students. Third-year students have examinations at Christmas and "mock" examinations in the spring term. Where appropriate, common papers are set for summative tests in each of the three years. This good practice means that teachers are well placed to advise students regarding the level at which they should sit certificate examinations in RE. Teachers maintain very good records of students' progress. In the best example, students' individual strengths and difficulties in the subject were noted and their progress in addressing these was tracked.

Parents are kept informed of their daughter's progress through reports which issue following summative assessments and annual parent-teacher meetings. It is noted that students, to date, have been very successful in their Junior Certificate examinations.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is excellent support for Religious Education (RE) in the school.
- Participation in the Junior Certificate examination in RE at higher level is very high and, to date, students have been very successful in their examinations.
- A very good subject plan has been developed by the enthusiastic and highly committed RE team. Teachers' individual planning documents were of excellent quality.
- Teaching and learning activities engaged students' interest and were appropriately challenging.
- Students were making good progress through their courses. Their progress is regularly assessed and reported on to parents.

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

- Planning for assessment should be integrated with the schemes so that assessment is linked with the aims identified in the curriculum plan.

- The RE team should address ways in which to achieve active student involvement more often in lessons.

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