

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science**

**Subject Inspection of Art
REPORT**

**Abbey Vocational School
Donegal Town
Co. Donegal
Roll number: 71180F**

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ART

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Abbey Vocational School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Art 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 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

The art department at Abbey Vocational School is operated by two members of staff. A high level of collaboration takes place in the department which is evident in the planning for and delivery of the subject. A subject department structure has been established and the post of art department co-ordinator is shared. Both formal and informal meetings are held and minutes of these meetings are recorded. Teachers are members of the Art Teachers' Association of Ireland and have attended courses in their personal time to enhance the delivery of Art in the school. There is a positive awareness on a whole-school level of the value of Art and its ability to enhance the educational experiences of all of the students in the school.

Two dedicated art rooms are provided for the delivery of the subject and both rooms are maintained and organised with a very high level of care and planning. Neither of the rooms has an abundance of

natural light. The darker of the rooms is also small with a layout which is not ideal for the delivery of Art. It is recommended that consideration be given to the provision of alternative accommodation for Art as soon as an opportunity presents.

Both rooms are used to display students' work, relevant images and informational posters. It was noted in the planning documentation that the department has a policy on presenting work and encourages students to complete their work to a high level of finish. Commendably, this approach to the finish and presentation of work is visible in both the displayed presentations and also in students' folders.

A designated ceramic room is also provided with kilns which are out of use. Since there is expertise in this discipline on the staff, it is recommended that consideration be given to investigating how this resource can be reinstated. Ceramics as an area of study has the potential to enthuse and motivate students of all abilities and access to a working kiln would be of great benefit to the department and to the students who study Art.

On the day of the visit, it was observed that there was an appropriate level of consumable materials available to students. Storage and maintenance of these resources was excellent. It was reported that school management is very supportive in this regard.

A taster programme is in operation for all first year students within which short modules of Art are offered. It was noted that the other practical subjects on offer in the school for first years are timetabled for regular class contact time and are not involved in this modular taster system. Separating Art from the other subjects in this way sends a particular message regarding the subject which might not be appropriate.

As well as regular art class provision in second and third year, Art is also provided as a modular subject to all junior cycle students whether preparing for Junior Certificate examinations in Art, Craft and Design or not. This means that there is a cohort of students studying Art who will not sit the Junior Certificate examinations in the subject. The fact that students who would rather not study Art are obliged to attend lessons may have certain negative effects. Whilst the provision of Art to students is commended, the fact that the subject is timetabled differently during first, second and third year sets it apart from the other subjects and may disadvantage Art in terms of perception, access and value. It is recommended that the provision for the subject in this regard be reviewed in consultation with all the relevant parties.

To date, students embarking on the Junior Certificate programme and those starting the Leaving Certificate programme have been asked to choose their subjects from pre-arranged bands. It was voiced by senior management during the evaluation that there will be a review of the procedures for student subject choice in the next academic year and that allowing students an open choice subject menu will be considered. This is to be welcomed as it would mean that students at both junior and senior cycle would have a better chance of studying their choice of subjects as opposed to subjects that are available to them.

Currently, there is some scope for increasing the numbers of students taking the subject at both junior and senior cycle. In addition to the access issues presented above, it is recommended that the art department should devise some strategies to promote the subject at both levels. An example of this might be to specifically tailor subject matter to students in the modular programmes in first year and to show junior cycle students the work of senior students at appropriate times during the year.

The holistic approach by the department to the delivery of Art can be seen in the provision of sound learning experiences which are totally in the spirit of the syllabuses and not restricted by examination procedures. This approach favours learning about the professional artist in the community and opportunities for working in the field. Students are brought out to various galleries and museums to enhance their experience of the subject. Work experience has been organised for current students in local craft centres and past students of the school who have pursued artistic careers are asked to give talks on their experiences. Students are encouraged to create sets and props for school productions and the department has a policy of encouraging students to enter both national and local competitions.

The dedication of the members of staff in the art department is evident in the encouragement and support of students who wish to study art at third level. This support and instruction is given informally in teachers' own time. Such support has resulted in a number of students being accepted into art-related

courses each year. The work at this level is inspiring to younger students and indicates the quality of product that can be achieved.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Evidence gathered on the day of the evaluation showed that ambitions and aspirations for Art in the school are high. This was particularly evident in the work conducted by students in senior cycle.

Teachers are commended for their efforts in collecting books, audio visual equipment and other supports for the delivery of the subject. It was reported that the books used in the art department were purchased by the staff from their own funds and that these books are made available for general use by the students. Such generosity is commended, however it is suggested that funding from the art department's budget be used to build up a stock of appropriate school-owned books over time.

A set of subject department plans was submitted as part of the evaluation. Generally these plans were well thought out and covered a range of pertinent topics. The good planning evident in the practical operations of the department are by and large reflected in this document and it gives the reader a good understanding of how the department is organised.

The curricular planning section of the plan outlines a number of topics and disciplines to be addressed by each group. Whilst these general aims are appropriate there is scope for the development of skills and outcomes for each year group and programme. There is also scope for differentiation of topics for students at both ends of the ability spectrum. Some of the written plans do not reflect the level of preparation and planning necessary for the production of the high quality of student work that is expected in the department. Transition year (TY) is optional in the school and Art is compulsory within this programme. A short written programme was observed as part of the evaluation, in addition to some examples of students' work. Whilst the students' work was of a good standard, the written documentation did not make clear the nature of the course of study. Neither did it outline in any detail the expected outcomes or criteria for assessment. It is recommended that the plan for each programme, including TY, should have clear objectives, outcomes and criteria for assessment.

Preparation for lessons was good with visual aids, materials and resources organised before class groups came into the room. Particular students were employed in helping others to get what was needed and no time was wasted.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three class groups were visited as part of the evaluation; one senior and two junior cycle groups. In all lessons structure was good and all activities purposeful. The pace of lessons was generally appropriate to the individual abilities of the students. Instruction was given in a clear and pleasant manner and attention was drawn to appropriate exemplars as necessary. In particular the teachers' emphasis on the 'aesthetic' and intelligent use of materials is commended.

Students were found to be generally well behaved and interested in their work. The atmosphere of lessons was lively and interactions between all of the parties involved were courteous and friendly. Discipline was addressed where necessary by drawing students' attention back to the task in hand.

It was noted in lessons where junior students are studying Art but will not be candidates for the certificate examinations that they were less engaged in their work and were easily distracted. While this extra provision for Art remains, it is recommended that particular attention be paid to planning lessons which offer a high degree of flexibility with regard to differentiation, as the groups cover a wide ability range. It is also recommended that lessons be planned to offer students a good chance of success and that students are assessed regularly so that they understand the relationship between effort and outcome. This latter approach would help students to develop a sense of mastery over topics addressed.

The senior cycle students observed were engaged in observational drawing. Students employed a variety of approaches to the topic and commendably were encouraged to develop their own approach to the stimulus using a range of techniques. The work was of a high standard and showed that students

are reaching their potential. On questioning, students displayed a confident and thorough general understanding of the topic.

During the evaluation it was noted that there were relatively few examples of unfinished work in evidence, showing that the emphasis on completing projects and schemes of work is successful. In addition, the examples of finished work observed showed a very good level of attention to detail by students and in particular high levels of skill in the manipulation of the various media used. The efforts of teachers in encouraging and achieving, these high levels of skill are commended.

ASSESSMENT

The assessment of students' work in the art department is largely formative and informal. It is based on assessing work in progress with a view towards improving the quality of the work of the individual. Students are challenged to critically evaluate their own and peers' work using the appropriate terminology. This fosters a sense of critical awareness and is good practice. Summative assessment generally occurs at the end of term and is based on the term's work, homework and drawing examinations. These records of summative assessments are held by the department. It is recommended that the system of assessment be reviewed to include regular recorded assessment and to vary the assessment methods used so that comprehensive profiles of student effort and achievement can be created.

Mock examinations are held for examination classes and parents are kept informed of students' progress using the school journal, parent/teacher meeting and twice yearly reports.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- An art department structure has been established and a high level of collaboration has created an ambitious approach to the delivery of Art.
- Whole school support for the subject is good and there is a positive awareness of the value of Art on a whole school level.
- The emphasis placed on finish and presentation of work has resulted in high levels of performance and very good displays of students' work.
- A range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is provided for students to support teaching and learning of Art.
- A high level of support is offered to students especially those wishing to create portfolios of work for entry to third level colleges.
- An art department plan has been initiated and covers a number of pertinent topics.
- Students following syllabuses at junior and senior cycle were proceeding effectively and reaching their potential.

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

- It is recommended that alternative class-room accommodation be provided for the delivery of Art as soon as an opportunity presents.
- It is recommended that kiln facilities be reinstated.
- The timetabling provision for Art to junior cycle should be reviewed in consultation with all the relevant parties.
- The art department should devise strategies to promote the subject at both junior and senior cycles.
- The existing department plan should be expanded to include written objectives, outcomes and criteria for assessment.
- Particular attention should be given to planning for differentiation and assessment in lessons for groups studying Art but not preparing for certificate examinations.

- The system of assessment should be reviewed to enable comprehensive profiles of student effort and achievement to be created.

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