

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

**Margaret Aylward Community College
Whitehall, Dublin 9
Roll number: 70321P**

Date of inspection: 11 October 2010



REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Margaret Aylward Community College. 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 and the subject teacher. 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

Margaret Aylward Community College is a small community college for girls under the management of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC). The school offers the Junior Certificate (JC) and the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) in junior cycle. The established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme are available in senior cycle, along with an optional Transition Year (TY) programme. The majority of students take up this option and two class groups were formed in the current year. The school is included in the School Support Programme of DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), the Department's action plan for educational inclusion.

The school's mission statement indicates that the religious and moral development of students forms an important part of school policy. Religious Education (RE) is a core subject on the school's curriculum and all students take this subject. However, only one class group in junior cycle are studying the RE syllabus prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). This course leads to Junior Certificate examinations in the subject. While acknowledging the school's reasons for this arrangement, it is suggested that consideration should be given to extending the option of taking RE in the Junior Certificate examination to all junior-cycle students. The course is differentiated to allow students study the subject at either ordinary level or higher level and it is inclusive of students from all faith backgrounds and from none.

The school introduced the NCCA course in 2009-2010 and one mixed-ability class group was formed. These students are currently in second year and it is the progress made by this group which is the focus of this inspection. Three class periods per week are allocated to the subject on the timetable. Lessons are well distributed across the timetable. This is very good provision.

There is good support for the subject in the school. The RE department comprises two teachers with specialist qualifications in the subject. One of these teachers is responsible for preparing students for certificate examinations in RE. The RE class group are timetabled for all lessons in this subject in the same classroom. It is suggested that better use could be made of this resource to create a supportive visual environment to reinforce teaching and learning in the subject. Displays could illustrate key concepts being learned and celebrate students' own project work and posters. Audio/visual resources and access to the school's information and communications technology (ICT) rooms are available to this RE teacher by arrangement with the school's ICT co-ordinator. Additional resources can also be acquired, where school funds allow, on request to management.

School management facilitates the continuing professional development (CPD) of the full teaching team in the school. Training events provided in recent years have focussed on multiculturalism and on learning styles.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The school allocates time each term to subject departments for planning. The two RE teachers meet and have collaborated to ensure that the variety of RE activities provided in the school are appropriately managed. It was reported by the RE teacher that these meetings are a helpful forum for sharing information and resources. Subject planning documentation for the NCCA RE syllabus was presented. Good work has been done to identify a general scheme of work which takes a sequential approach to the delivery of the subject. Thus, the sections of the course are taught in the order in which they are presented in the syllabus documentation. Given that the school perceives this course as a particularly challenging one for its students, consideration of the merits of a spiral, developmental, approach to syllabus delivery is recommended. This would facilitate re-visiting topics in each year of the course, thus reinforcing and deepening students' understanding of the key concepts explored.

The general scheme of work outlined in the subject plan is very textbook-driven. This is then interpreted on a lesson-by-lesson basis, such that the content to be covered and the homework assignments set are identified. This work indicates a strong commitment from the RE teacher to ensuring that the course is covered and students are well-prepared for certificate examinations. The following recommendations are made to support and develop the current planning practices. The scheme of work should be developed to identify learning goals for each section of the course. An indicative list for each section of the syllabus is provided in syllabus documentation and the JCSP religious education learning statements may also be a helpful resource in this work. 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. Care should be taken to ensure that the syllabus and the needs of the students, rather than the textbooks used in class, should be the deciding factor in determining the scheme. Advice on subject planning is provided in the *Religious Education Guidelines For Teachers* publication, available on the Religious Education Support Service website, www.ress.ie. Finally, the skills required to complete journal work should be taught from first year and the curriculum plan for RE should reflect this.

Planning and preparation for the lesson observed was of a very good standard. Good, relevant, resources had been prepared and clear links with the subject plan were evident.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning in the lesson observed was good. Following roll call, the learning target for the lesson was clearly identified. In this way, students' attention was focussed from the outset and they understood the purpose of classroom activities. This is very good practice, and it is suggested that re-visiting the target at the conclusion of lessons is a positive way to mark students' progress. Throughout this lesson, students readily engaged in class activities and were purposeful in their work.

The topic being explored was Islam and the teacher had prepared a handout which invited students to rehearse the previous RE lesson by matching words relating to Islam and their definitions. It was evident that this activity had been planned to reinforce prior learning and to provide a link with new material in this lesson. This is a very supportive approach and it worked well to identify where students had difficulties. However, quite a significant amount of lesson time was devoted to supporting students' recognition of the key words and the opportunity which this exercise provided to revise the meaning and importance of the concepts was not used well. It is important that lessons move students beyond simple recall and comprehension of terms towards activities which encourage them to reflect on what they are learning, linking it with their own religious experience or the experiences of others, a key aim of the junior-cycle syllabus.

In the second, shorter, phase of the lesson, students read from the textbook. The language of the textbook presented some minor challenges to students, which were sensitively managed by the teacher. It is suggested that the potential for ICT to enhance the teaching and learning of RE should be explored by the RE department. It can provide access to a wide range of sources of information on syllabus topics, some of which may be more accessible to students than the textbook. It can also facilitate meaningful encounters between the class group and aspects of a variety of faith communities in a way that traditional teaching materials cannot provide.

There are clear expectations set in this school regarding the maintenance of notebooks and copies. All students had a keywords notebook, in keeping with the literacy support policy in the school. These were very well organised. Homework copies were well-presented, with examples of a range of tasks evident. Graphic representations of the pillars of Islam, timelines and other student illustrations have been completed, so that the varying learning styles of students have been accommodated. It was noted that short-answer, lower-order questions, often taken directly from the textbook, tend to dominate as homework assignments. Whilst such questions are very helpful in measuring knowledge, they do not provide sufficient opportunities for students to reflect on what they are learning in religious education classes and to connect it with their own experiences. It is recommended that the variety of written assignments set is reviewed in order to ensure that it supports the achievement of the full range of learning outcomes outlined in the syllabus.

Students' work in these copies which were reviewed was good and reflected the range of ability in the subject. They are making good progress through their course.

ASSESSMENT

The teacher used questions frequently throughout the lesson observed both to engage students and to check their understanding. Students were encouraged to record new vocabulary in their notebooks and sufficient time was allocated to ensuring that these words were understood by all.

An examination of students' copies and notebooks indicated that homework is set regularly and corrected promptly. This good practice is commended.

The first cohort of students taking the certificate examinations in RE in this school will do so in 2012. Formal tests in RE are set for students at the end of the first term and again at the end of the summer term. These provide a good opportunity for the department to assess the level at which students should continue their studies in the subject. Careful monitoring of students' achievements is ongoing in the school. This is very positive. 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:

- There is good support for the subject in the school. Timetable provision is very good, teachers with specialist qualifications in the subject are appropriately deployed and there is good access to audio-visual and ICT resources to support teaching and learning.
- Good planning for RE was evident. A clear scheme of work has been developed and lesson preparation was of a very high standard.
- Students readily engaged in class activities and were purposeful in their work.
- The quality of teaching and learning in the lesson observed was good.
- Lesson activities are planned to reinforce prior learning and to provide a link with new material.
- Students are making good progress in the subject, relative to their abilities.

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

- Consideration should be given to extending the option to study RE for certificate examinations to all junior-cycle students.
- The scheme of work for RE should be revised to include identified learning goals, planned teaching and learning strategies and a description of the assessment modes to be used to measure achievement.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and the teacher at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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