

28 June 2007

Mrs Helen Hyde
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Dear Mrs Hyde

Ofsted Subjects & Survey Inspection Programme – art, craft and design

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and pupils, during my visit on 12 and 13 June 2007 to look at work in art, craft and design.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject the visit had a particular focus on the impact of assessment on pupils' progress and creativity.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interview with the subject leader, discussions with groups of pupils in all key stages, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work in all years and observation of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the subject was judged to be good with some outstanding features.

Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and pupil achievement is good with some outstanding examination work.

- The girls start in Year 7 with average skills, knowledge and understanding in the subject, make good progress and most have achieved some work of above average standards by the end of Year 9. Their progress is underpinned by good drawing skills, thorough research and skilful control of different media. Where mixed-media is used or the work of different artists juxtaposed, ideas and outcomes are often lively, showing confident use of different visual elements.

- An above average proportion of girls choose one of the GCSE courses in Fine Art, Photography, or Graphics and numbers are increasing. The three-dimensional course is less popular. Overall, the girls make good progress and achieve standards above those achieved nationally but many attain higher grades in their other subjects. Nevertheless, across the different courses, sketchbooks contain a consistently high standard of exploration with media, development of ideas and investigation into different artists' work. Their outcomes are well crafted and effective through mature handling of visual composition. However, the impact of final pieces, particularly in fine art, sometimes lacks the vitality or depth of their preliminary work. This is particularly evident where the subject matter contains insufficient opportunity for personal expression or individual interpretation of different artists. Some outstanding work in photography and graphics use these features well.
- In the sixth form, opportunities to use textiles and fine art, work on a large scale and respond to more conceptual themes result in adventurous experimentation with media, analytical use of other artists and striking outcomes. The girls use gallery visits effectively to inform their work; closer connections between their own thinking and that of contemporary artists is evident but more use could be made of digital media as a contemporary art form. However, achievement is good overall in the sixth form.
- The vast majority of girls enjoy the subject; this is evident in their enthusiastic contribution to discussion in lessons, through the good take-up at GCSE and AS level, and their commitment to preparing and following up lessons often alongside wide ranging demands from other subjects. Groups are large and some of the spaces small; this makes considerable demands on the girls' ability to work co-operatively and methodically which most do well.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning in the subject are good overall.

- All teachers make objectives clear to pupils and take good account of varying creative ability within each group. The balance of opportunities for pupils to show independence with teacher led activities is most effective in the examination groups where a tutorial style predominates. In Years 7 to 9 there are occasionally missed opportunities for the girls to apply their initiative or ability to collaborate. In most lessons teachers use demonstrations effectively to make visible some possible solutions to the problems set. However, the use of computers as a tool for teaching is at an early stage of development. Displays are used well to make explicit different levels of work and give value to creative diversity. Several public areas of the school including the school grounds are used to reinforce the schools' ethos as a visual arts college where different talents are celebrated equally.

- The best lessons fully embrace the schools' attention to developing and applying a range of thinking skills. Lessons contain some outstanding features when the teachers' high level of subject knowledge promotes challenging questioning, bringing out the best in the girls' ability to hypothesise. The girls are also fully involved in the assessment of their own work and that of other pupils. This is most effective where teachers have prepared prompts on the whiteboard or handouts that are informative and presented to the high standards. Feedback by teachers is consistently good. In one lesson observed the teacher made a critical but helpful comment when handing back every piece of work; the achievements of individuals were used effectively to move on the whole group. It was a particularly effective strategy because the teacher's engaging manner and informed introduction to the lesson won the confidence of the girls; they clearly respected the views that followed.

Quality of curriculum

The art, craft and design curriculum is good with outstanding features.

- The breadth of opportunities available to the girls is a strength of provision and promotes their understanding of art, craft and design from the start. However, not all media is a focus or option in each key stage limiting the overall coherence of curriculum provision. Nevertheless, some features of provision such as gallery visits and work with contemporary artists are outstanding because they are unusually an entitlement for all pupils in each key stage. In many projects these first hand experiences accelerate the girls' progress and deepen their own work. For example, the work of Kathy Foster and Imogen Welch exhibited in the school gallery to the theme 'The Ordinary Made Extra-Ordinary' had shifted predictable still life coursework in a more exciting and challenging direction. First hand experience of the artists' work had boosted the girls' confidence to express their own creativity. This link is less evident in three dimensional studies where the impact of some ambitious workshops with artists and stimulating exhibitions in the gallery has not yet led to lasting impact on this aspect of the curriculum. Overall, curriculum provision is enhanced by regular opportunities to extend contact with the subject outside lessons which many of the girls use effectively to refine their work.
- The most effective features of the curriculum promote progression by introducing the girls to unfamiliar skills, knowledge and understanding but ensure that opportunities to revisit and apply prior learning are well structured. This is evident within the schemes of work produced by individual teachers but is less evident across Key Stage 3 when pupils experience different teachers as part of their course. At the start of Year 7 there is also little knowledge of, or building on, the previous two key stages of the National Curriculum. However, the well established creativity test developed by the department provides a useful indicator worthy of earlier and later use.

Leadership and management of art, craft and design

Leadership and management are good.

- The subject leader, recently established in the role, has a clear vision for the subject informed by her own good practice and accurate evaluation of existing strengths and weaknesses. Monitoring of teaching is regular, clearly focused on individual development and professionally conducted. However, it is insufficiently linked to departmental priorities, including making the best practice more consistent. This is not helped by subject policy statements that no longer match practice or capture the current direction of the department. The subject leader has started to address this and is beginning to distinguish her new role as a complement to others supporting the schools' visual arts status. A visit to another visual arts college has been used well to inform the shaping of subject strategy, and more are planned. The process of achieving the Arts Council's 'Artsmark' gold award has also been used effectively to inform self-evaluation. The specialism is regularly and widely discussed as an important dimension of the whole school.
- The department uses data systematically to track progress once pupils have started at the school. There is good understanding across the department about how and why the same girl might achieve differently in various aspects of the subject and this is used well to support and direct individual pupils. Where weaknesses are consistent these are addressed with a concerted approach. For example, evident weaknesses in pupils' drawing skills have been addressed across the department. This also provides an opportunity to evaluate different teachers' success in responding to a common aim. The Graduate Teacher Programme is integral to the department's continuous development as a group of reflective practitioners. When teachers make their skills and interests as artists explicit the impact on learning is very positive. This is a distinctive if inconsistent feature of the ethos of the department.

Inclusion

Inclusion in the subject is good; pupils with differing experiences and skills make broadly even progress once they have started at the school.

Subject issue: The impact of assessment on pupils' progress and creativity

Teachers provide a good level of feedback to pupils about how to improve their work in lessons and through marking. Pupil self-assessment is particularly well structured in Key Stage 3 to promote analysis rather than description through the 'Plus, Minus and Interesting' prompts. Peer assessment between pupils is very well managed through structured use of research, outcomes and assessment criteria.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- increasing opportunities for pupils to express their feelings, emotions and insights through open-ended topics and connections with other artists
- tracking evidence of pupils' creative development across schools and within the school in order to build on the quality and range of standards already achieved
- developing a more coherent experience between teachers and key stages while continuing to promote the distinctive qualities of different teachers.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop art, craft and design at the school.

Feedback letters are published on the Ofsted website every half-term. A copy of this letter will also be sent to your local authority and the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector