

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of MUSIC
REPORT**

**Coláiste Mhuire,
Ennis, County Clare
Roll number: 61930Q**

Date of inspection: 14 May 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Mhuire, Ennis. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Music 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 the 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

Music enjoys a high profile in Coláiste Mhuire and is available to all students in all years as an optional subject. Students choose their Junior Certificate subjects prior to entry with Music being in an option block with Art, Home Economics, Technology, Technical Graphics and a second modern language. The optional Transition Year (TY) programme includes a music module which the students follow for the entire year, and an open-choice system operates for the Leaving Certificate, where students prioritise their preferred subject options. In addition all first-year and second-year students have one period of choir per week. The number of students opting for Music remains consistently high with a particularly large group in fifth year this year. This is very positive and reflects the value and standing Music has in the school.

Timetabled provision for Music is in line with syllabus guidelines. There is an appropriate class spread of contact time throughout the week along with a sufficient number of double periods to facilitate practical work.

The commitment to extracurricular music activities in Coláiste Mhuire is extensive. Choirs have a long-standing tradition in the school and in addition to the two timetabled choirs mentioned above all students have the opportunity to participate in other choral activities. The school choir is open to students from second year to fifth year. Entry is by audition and the present choir has ninety-four members. This choir which rehearses four times a week including after school on Fridays, has been successful in a number of choral festivals and competitions through the years. Notable examples include the Young Prague Festival 2006 and 2008, and the Cork International Choral Festival. The choir also performs at school masses and concerts and is a significant contributor to raising awareness of the school's activities. In addition all choirs in the school have always entered the annual Choirs, Orchestras and Military Bands (COMB) examinations. Regret was expressed during the inspection at the recent demise of COMB as it was always a very useful means of evaluating progress as well as being an enriching and rewarding experience for the students. The school also has an orchestra which performs at school concerts, prize giving and

community events, and also a traditional Irish group which is particularly active during Seachtain na Gaeilge, Féile na hInse and St. Patrick's day. The school has produced an annual musical for the past twenty-five years. This normally takes place in early December and is produced by non-examination students in senior cycle. The show constitutes one of the highlights of the school's annual events and affords students the opportunity to become involved in the wide range of activities associated with these types of productions such as acting, singing, backstage work, art work, set design and so on. This year it produced *Magic of the Musicals* to huge acclaim and plans are already underway for next year's production of *Anything Goes*. The students' music experiences are also continually enriched by trips to concerts and visits to the school from outside musicians and performers. The music teachers and management are complimented for the considerable investment into these musical experiences for every student in the school. Both the music teachers' commitment to these events and the school's support in facilitating such activities are to be applauded. This consistent participation of the whole-school community is indicative of the standing of and the keen interest in Music in the school and is very positive.

Coláiste Mhuire has a specialist music room which also doubles as a stage and opens out into the main atrium. This room has excellent resources with good quality audio equipment, audio resources, sheet music and texts, piano, a range of instruments, whiteboard, overhead projector (OHP), laptop and data projector and screen. The room has flexible seating which can be rearranged quite quickly and is spacious enough to incorporate a separate performing area when required. Access to the computer room is also available where there is an interactive whiteboard and in which *Sibelius* software is installed on twenty computers. In addition the school has an impressive concert hall the *Danlann*, with tiered seating and a seven foot grand piano. The *Danlann*, which is a wonderful asset for any school, is used for choir classes and all extracurricular music activities. This investment in resource provision is indicative of the wholehearted commitment of all those involved and is deserving of the highest praise. It is recommended that the development of resources be continually monitored in order to optimise the students' music learning experiences.

The commitment to the music teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) is also very good and membership of the Post-Primary Music Teachers' Association (PPMTA) is facilitated by management. The music teachers make every effort to avail of any opportunities that arise which will allow them to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at second level and ideas for CPD are factored into the department's planning documentation. Recent attendance at the current series being organised by the Second Level Support Service (www.slss.ie), soon to be subsumed under the Professional Development Service for Teachers is noted. It is hoped that management will continue to support and facilitate any opportunities for CPD in music education that may arise in the future particularly in the area of information and communication technology (ICT).

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A very good level of planning for the development of Music exists in Coláiste Mhuire, Ennis. A comprehensive curriculum policy was presented which included programmes of work for all groups. These were relevant to the different syllabuses and the requirements of the examinations, and took into account the level and the ability of the students in question. A range of teaching methodologies was outlined which included references to Assessment for Learning (AfL) and a wide range of strategies to help students with special educational needs and students with English as an additional language such as modification of course materials and differentiated teaching. There was evidence of long-term curriculum planning for the integration of the three areas of

performing, composing and listening, particularly at junior cycle, and clear procedures for record keeping and reporting were outlined in the planning documentation. The planning for first-year students was particularly comprehensive and included long term, medium and detailed schemes ranging from time allocation to materials and equipment used, teaching methods, assessment modes and learning outcomes. This is excellent practice. There was also a range of cross-curricular planning with the Irish and religion departments, and choir plans were also included in the documentation.

In order to enhance the effective planning that has already been undertaken, it is recommended, that this plan be a flexible working document open to review so that the contents remain relevant and purposeful. It may also be worthwhile to consider some new choral evaluation procedures to fill the void left by the cancellation of COMB.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all lessons observed, a secure, enthusiastic and work-orientated atmosphere prevailed. High expectations of attainment and behaviour were set. A warm friendly rapport was evident between the students and the teachers at all times. The music teachers added to this positive learning environment through effective organisation and management of learning activities. Students responded well and participated with enthusiasm wherever challenging opportunities were presented. Teachers valued students' contributions to class discussions and used praise effectively to acknowledge their efforts.

A range of appropriate music methodological practice was observed in all classes visited, whether the lesson focused on listening activities, introducing new material or performing. Materials were well prepared and the teaching was supportive to all students. Good teaching was characterised by engaging and motivating the wide range of abilities of the students through well-structured and varied activities. Good learning was seen through listening and analysis, skill development, progressive refinement in all activities and a thorough consolidation and reinforcement of previously learnt material.

The teaching observed employed many strategies to engage the students and include them in all aspects of the learning process. A collaborative learning environment allowing constructive and productive peer-to-peer interaction and purposeful group work was observed in some lessons, where the teachers guided students through various stages and facilitated a stimulating and challenging music-learning environment. Aspects of AfL were used to support learning wherever possible, such as sharing clear learning outcomes with the students at the outset of a lesson and using the traffic light system to ascertain the students' learning. Multiple entry points of understanding specifically visual, aural and experiential were skilfully used by the teachers and exemplified by consistent cross-referencing with examples familiar to the students such as mobile phone ring tones, recognisable film scores and songs.

Strategies linking aspects of the curriculum were utilised to very good effect often through appropriate practical elements. Consistent cross-referencing with other parameters of music was evident and contributed to a thorough integration of the three curricular areas of performing, composing and listening. This was exemplified in a first- year lesson with students completing a listening exercise on texture, discussing effective compositional techniques used, experimenting with a variety of rhythm patterns on different instruments and finally consolidating all the material through group performances of *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* employing a range of textures. Through these types of activities, students are exposed to a wide variety of musical thinking

which is very good practice and does much to ensure a broad musical development rather than a narrow focus on examination material. It also extends the range of musical experience of the students and is highly effective in developing critical listening skills.

All lessons observed had an aural focus and included performing opportunities, which is optimal practice. The music teachers' subject knowledge and skills impact well on students' musical thinking, attitudes and skills, and when performing or listening activities were utilised, a wide range of interesting musical extracts was introduced. This repertoire ranged from the music of composers such as Haydn, Beethoven, Liszt and Rachmaninov to the music of more modern composers such as Danny Elfman, Karl Jenkins, Stephen Sondheim, Wendy Carlos and Vincent Lo. Students listened to these extracts, provided appropriate and interesting responses, and through effective questioning techniques, discussions and consolidation of the material, were introduced to new music that they may not otherwise come across in their regular listening activities. Lessons with performing elements included relevant rote learning and good rehearsal techniques, where awkward passages were isolated and worked on. Suitable warm-up exercises had tongues tripping over such twisters as *many mumbling mice making music in the moonlight* in a variety of keys, and appropriate exercises to improve breathing, diction and intonation were observed. Students also sang a variety of pieces such as *Vois Sur Ton Chemin*, *Mr Mistoffelees*, *Wimmoweh*, *Saltwater* and *What A Wonderful World*. In addition students were encouraged to perform in a solo capacity which further contributes to their development as confident, competent players. Effective use was made of the classroom space and, notably, correct posture was insisted upon regardless of levels. Students were very familiar with these procedures. Junior students used music stands positioned in front of their desks when in the classroom, while in the *Danlann* students sat or stood appropriately as required by the activity taking place. Supportive and assured accompaniments by the teachers also enhanced the quality of these performances.

In the main, examples of sound music methodological practice were observed when the more theoretical aspects of the syllabus were addressed. In a lesson focusing on modulation however, although most students were able to identify aurally the key changes due to the range of examples and demonstration used, when it came to outlining the required steps to modulate on paper the explanations lacked clarity leaving the less-able students confused. In this light it is recommended that differentiated teaching strategies be included coupled with clear explanatory stages. This is particularly important when the more technical aspects of Music are being presented.

The resources available in the music room are used to very good effect and contribute to a successful learning environment. Skilful use of the laptop and data projector was seen in one lesson. In some instances however, it would have been preferable if written musical examples had been prepared in advance on an overhead transparency and used in conjunction with an OHP rather than written up on the whiteboard by the teacher. This would also allow for more interactive engagement by the students. It is recommended that ways in which an OHP could be used effectively in a music-teaching setting be explored as it would greatly enhance learning, and when appropriate, more advanced use of ICT should be considered. The effective use of these resources would greatly enhance students' learning and would allow for a more efficient use of teacher time in the long term.

ASSESSMENT

The music teachers' music knowledge, skills and experience ensure high expectations and a challenging learning environment for the students with subsequent high standards of performance. In most lessons observed, students were generally confident and capable, and

performed to these high standards. Some student folders and manuscripts showed evidence of good organisation and were generally neat in appearance, while others were haphazard and contained loose sheets and handouts. Careful monitoring of student materials is recommended as valuable supplementary information and work will invariably go astray if not documented properly.

In addition to regular assessments at Christmas and summer, and the mock examinations for Junior and Leaving Certificate students in the spring, formative assessment takes place in a variety of ways. Homework, which includes written, aural and practical work, is assigned on a regular basis and is regularly monitored. Other examples include questioning in class, completion of worksheets and projects, quizzes, practical assessments and end-of-topic tests and portfolio assessment for TY. Useful teacher comments in copybooks and manuscripts provide valuable feedback to students on their progress and words of encouragement affirm work well done. This good practice is encouraged further as regular constructive feedback enhances learning by informing students about their own individual progress. In all lessons informal assessment of students is achieved through oral questioning, observation of students' engagement and monitoring students' progress during practical activities. Students also experience practical assessments similar to those encountered in the certificate examinations. These methods allow for careful monitoring of a student's progress, provide appropriate guidelines for performance in the certificate examinations, and are indicative of the commitment of the teachers to helping all students achieve their potential in Music.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music has a very high profile in the school, is available to all students on an optional basis with a very good uptake, and is supported by in-school management.
- The music teachers are highly committed to the development of the subject in the school.
- Students benefit hugely from this commitment both holistically and musically. They enjoy the subject and are very motivated.
- Very good standards of teaching and learning and a positive classroom atmosphere were significant aspects of the lessons seen during the visit.
- Students' involvement in extracurricular musical activities impacts greatly on their musical development. The variety of activities available to the students is very good. The teachers' commitment to all these activities and the school's support in facilitating these experiences is an important strength.
- An extremely well-resourced music-teaching area exists in the school, and is used appropriately and effectively in an integrated way to support the teaching and learning of Music.
- Comprehensive planning documentation was available during the evaluation.

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

- It is recommended that the development of resources be continually monitored in order to optimise the students' music learning experiences.
- The department plan should be a flexible working document open to review so that the contents remain relevant and purposeful.
- More differentiated teaching strategies should be included particularly when the more technical aspects of Music are being presented.

- Careful monitoring of student materials is recommended as valuable supplementary information and work will invariably go astray if not documented properly.

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