Subject Inspection of Music
REPORT

Saint Joseph’s Secondary School,
Abbeyfeale, County Limerick
Roll number: 63990V

Date of inspection: 16 March 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Joseph’s Secondary School. 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 the teacher, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teacher. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and the teacher’s written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teacher. 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 is available as an optional subject to all students in all years in St Joseph’s Secondary School. Students experience all optional subjects in first year and at the end of the year choose three subjects from Music, Home Economics, Business, Art, Science and German. All students in the optional Transition Year (TY) programme have two single periods of Music per week. This is good provision. The option blocks for the Leaving Certificate vary to accommodate students’ preferences, with Music placed in the block that facilitates the majority of those students wishing to take the subject. The uptake of Music throughout the school is good with particularly large numbers in the third-year group.

Timetabled provision for Music is in line with syllabus guidelines and there is an appropriate spread of contact time for individual class groups throughout the week. It is good that there is a sufficient number of double periods in all year groups to facilitate practical work.

In addition to curricular aspects, other activities contribute to raising the profile of Music in St Joseph’s Secondary School. The school has a traditional Irish band which rehearses at lunchtime and participates in a wide range of Irish traditional music activities in the local area. In keeping with the school’s ethos other groups come together on a needs basis to perform for the many liturgical events which present themselves in the course of the school year. The students’ music experiences are also continually enriched by trips to concerts and events outside school especially fleána cheoil, and visits and workshops within school. Cross-curricular links are maintained through a variety of events that take place often in conjunction with Civic, Social and Political Education action projects. This year’s more interesting events include X Factor type talent shows and a jumble sale incorporating karaoke.
St Joseph’s Secondary School is one of the three schools in the town due to be amalgamated to form the new Abbeyfeale Community College, a public-private partnership. Planning is at an advanced stage and it was announced last October that building work is expected to begin in the spring with the hope that the school will be ready for September 2011. While the existing school has a specialist music room, it is barely adequate where resource provision is concerned. There has been some recent investment in, for example a new digital piano, but everything else has been curtailed because of the new building. Whilst acknowledging that the most cost-effective strategy is necessary, consideration should be given to the acquisition of certain resources which would benefit students before the move and which could be easily transported when the new school is ready, thus minimising the cost but maximising the learning outcomes, especially if there are any delays. One example would be the acquisition of a proper sound system with correctly positioned speakers as the present portable CD player is less than satisfactory. It would be also worthwhile examining the design of the new music room before the build to ensure the most effective specialist area has been considered. Consultation with other schools that have been in similar situations may be helpful in this regard.

The teacher has availed of any in-service courses in the past but allowed membership of the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) to lapse while on a career break. Renewed contact with the PPMTA is recommended. Even if attending meetings is problematic, the internet discussion forum ([www.ppmta.ie](http://www.ppmta.ie)) is very useful. This forum would assist the teacher in networking with other music teachers, prevent professional isolation and could also help with the plans for the new school as outlined above. Membership of the association also helps teachers to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at post-primary level and provides information about any opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD) in music education such as, for example the current music CPD being organised by the Second Level Support Service ([www.slss.ie](http://www.slss.ie)).

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A subject department plan was presented during the inspection. This document outlined the running of the department and included long-term curriculum planning and schemes of work outlining the broad plan for each class group which included references to the various syllabuses, appropriate methodologies and a stock of support material and resources suitable for all levels. It is recommended that future planning includes consideration of specific music-teaching methodologies, differentiated learning strategies and ways of encouraging students to reflect on their learning. Planning to include some broader aspects of musical development is also recommended, with a focus on precise medium-term and short-term targets and the inclusion of additional active learning methodologies. Planning could also be developed to facilitate more integration of the core activities of performing, composing and listening within the classroom context, along with a variety of suitable assessment procedures. In addition, it is important that the music department plan be a flexible working document open to review so that the contents remain relevant and purposeful.

In the context of the new school, strategic planning is required in a number of areas. Any feelings of apprehension could be allayed through key planning and training. This may help to smooth the transition and support the handling of any significant challenges not only in the context of resources and facilities as outlined above, but also in terms of the different forms of teaching and learning which may be necessary in the new environment. The new school will be over twice the size of the current one and will be co-educational. Currently Music is not available in the other
two schools and the music teacher has only experienced teaching in a single-sex setting. Planning for training in these areas, along with strategies to increase the uptake should there be a poor gender balance in the new school may be in order. Should the opening of the new school be delayed, the aforementioned networking suggestions could be helpful here also.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all lessons visited, a comfortable and warm atmosphere was maintained with a good rapport between the students and the teacher. There was a good level of student engagement and students’ contributions to class discussions were valued, with praise used effectively to acknowledge their efforts.

A striking feature of all lessons seen was the consistent aural focus. Any new concepts introduced were approached through the medium of sound and consolidated through modelling, demonstration and links with previously heard material and well-known musical examples. Topical extracts were used for listening worksheets to engage the students and focus their attention. Songs from the television musical comedy *Glee* were skilfully used to reinforce concepts introduced to junior students. The ease with which these students used technical language and musical terminology to describe what they had heard demonstrates that significant learning is taking place. Students also sang through themes from prescribed material with specially written lyrics incorporating various features and aspects of the work in question, for example the *Farandole* theme from *Bizet’s L’Arlésienne Suite No.2*. Not only did this approach reinforce the melodic elements of the pieces but also helped to consolidate the relevant theoretical aspects of the music in a meaningful way, the effectiveness of which was borne out by the teacher’s comment “and that’s why we sing our theory” after the students had successfully recalled all the pertinent features of the set work.

Opportunities to cross-reference and link aspects of the curriculum were taken in all lessons as appropriate. Thus in a senior lesson when working on an extract from *Mozart’s Mass in C minor*, students were reminded of the relevant choral features in the cantata *Jesu, der du meine Seele* by *Bach*, a prescribed work for the Leaving Certificate. Similarly, having revised rhythm patterns associated with Irish traditional dances in a junior lesson, attention was drawn to the resemblance a subsequent tune used for dictation purposes had to a reel. This is good practice as it allows students to enrich their learning in a musically-focused way.

The teaching observed employed many strategies to engage the students and include them in all aspects of the learning process. It is recommended that these strategies be expanded in order to minimise teacher-led activities and to encourage students towards more self-directed and autonomous learning. Students need to be exposed to these types of teaching strategies to promote their own self-learning skills rather than relying too much on teacher instruction. When working on dictation for example, despite the aural focus as discussed above, the emphasis was very much on ‘skill and drill’ to the exclusion of all other forms of learning. Inclusion of other strategies such as purposeful peer-peer interaction, group work and a co-operative learning environment with fewer traditional didactic methods is recommended particularly when tackling the dictation question for the certificate examinations. A learning environment which includes the teacher as a facilitator and enabler is very effective in developing an atmosphere of autonomous learning and contributes to students taking responsibility for their own learning.
The resources available in the music room, along with materials prepared by the teacher in advance, were used to good effect. Suitable worksheets and handouts were used to supplement textbooks and other materials and appropriate use of the whiteboard and musical extracts were seen. Whilst acknowledging that this will not happen in the immediate future due to the new school, it is recommended however, that when practicable, ways in which technological resources could be used effectively in a music-teaching setting be explored. This would greatly enhance the learning situation. Not only would it minimise the writing up of complicated questions on the board, but it could also be used to produce more student-friendly resources and handouts. Moreover, when considering information and communication technology, some consideration should be given to looking at ways in which suitable software could be utilised within the classroom setting. 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**

In all lessons observed, students were generally confident and capable, and performed to a good standard. Whilst some student folders and manuscripts showed evidence of good organisation and were generally neat in appearance, others were haphazard and contained loose sheets and handouts. Careful monitoring of student materials is recommended, especially with junior classes, 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 is given on a weekly basis includes written, aural and practical work and is corrected appropriately. It is good to note that students also undergo practical assessments similar to those encountered in the certificate examinations. In all lessons observed, informal assessment of students was achieved through questioning, correction of homework and the provision of class exercises and worksheets based on the lesson content. In these lessons a global questioning strategy dominated which resulted in undue levels of chorus answering. It is recommended that greater use of directed questioning is made so that individual students are challenged, the entire group is required to remain alert throughout the lesson and the teacher can more effectively ascertain the level of learning and understanding by individual students.

The school has an open communication policy for parents and in addition to reports issued after formal examinations at Christmas, spring and summer, regular parent-teacher meetings take place for all class groups. These meetings also provide a forum for parents to discuss any concerns or difficulties students may be having. There is also a willingness on the part of staff to meet parents at any stage if they have concerns about their daughter’s progress.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music has a good 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.
• Good standards of teaching and learning and a warm classroom atmosphere were significant aspects of the lessons seen during the visit.
• Students were motivated and had a positive attitude towards Music. Observation of students’ work indicates that the skills developed are appropriate and are of a good standard.

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

• In the context of the new school, strategic planning is required in a number of areas such as resources and facilities, and new and different forms of teaching and learning.
• The music department plan should be a flexible working document open to review so that the contents remain relevant and purposeful and should include consideration of specific music teaching methodologies, differentiated learning strategies and ways of encouraging students to reflect on their learning.
• It is recommended that teaching strategies be expanded in order to minimise teacher-led activities and to encourage students towards more self-directed and autonomous learning.
• Consideration should be given to the acquisition of certain resources which could be easily transported when the new school is ready.
• It is recommended that, when practicable, ways in which technological resources could be used effectively in a music-teaching setting be explored.
• Renewed contact with the PPMTA is recommended.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teacher 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.