An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Music
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School, Thurles, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65460C

Date of inspection: 6 May 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Presentation Secondary School, Thurles. 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 two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, and examined students’ work. 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 deputy principal. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Music enjoys a high profile in Presentation Secondary School, Thurles, and is available to all students in all years. All first-year students study Music for one period a week and at the end of the year choose three from a list of six subjects and study these for the Junior Certificate examination. The uptake at junior cycle is healthy, with two groups formed in each year. All students in Transition Year (TY) study Music, and at senior cycle students choose four subjects out of fourteen, one of which must be a language. The number of students opting for Music remains consistently high, especially at junior cycle. Choirs have a long-standing tradition in the school and in addition to the curricular aspects of the subject, all students continue to have the opportunity to participate in choral activities. All year groups have one choir lesson per week with the result that the school has six timetabled choirs in the school. This is very good provision. Unfortunately the recent demise of the Choir, Orchestra and Military Band (COMB) examinations means that this year the choirs had no end-of-year evaluation. Such is the commitment of the teachers to providing high standard aspirations and motivating factors for their students that next year they intend providing an external examiner to fill the gap left by this regrettable cut in music education.

Provision for Music on the timetable is in line with syllabus guidelines. There is an appropriate spread of class-contact time throughout the week along with a sufficient number of double periods in all year groups to facilitate practical work.

The commitment to extracurricular music activities in Presentation Secondary School is extensive and impressive. The school has a traditional Irish group, a guitar group and an orchestra, the Pres Players, who perform at the numerous events that take place throughout the year. There are rehearsals after school almost every day of the week for these ensembles and groups. The annual calendar of music events is packed with activities for every month of the school year. Some examples of this wide range include the school Mass, a musical evening in collaboration with
Comhantas Ceoltóirí Éireann, a range of concerts including one for patients in a local hospital, and involvement in TippFM’s ‘Search for a Star’ and TV3’s Glee competition. The school also produces an annual school musical with participation from students in second year, TY and fifth year. This year saw a very successful run of Godspell and plans are already underway for next year’s production of Beauty and the Beast. In addition to the choirs mentioned above, this year also saw the formation of a voluntary school choir, the Presentation Singers. Admission is by audition and like the other ensembles it rehearses after school. At the time of the inspection the choir had just made its inaugural appearance at the Cork International Choral Festival where it performed to great acclaim. A system of individual instrumental tuition in piano, voice, violin, flute, saxophone, clarinet and guitar also operates in the school. This system enables students to attend instrumental tuition throughout the school day and complements the curricular activity provided by the school. 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.

The school recently completed a major building project which included the addition of six classrooms, one of which is a new music room. This room has been specifically situated near the main entrance as it was felt that the constant sound of music emanating from this area would create a fitting atmosphere in keeping with the profile Music has in the school. Having nearly completed the first year in this room at the time of the evaluation, management, staff and students reported their satisfaction with this decision. The music room is appropriately equipped and resourced, and includes a piano, keyboards, classroom instruments, sound system, TV and DVD player, a computer and a data projector. In addition, there is a stock of audio resources and sheet music, and the walls are decorated with a variety of posters, pictures of instruments and student projects. One small shortcoming pertains to the sound system. This system is mounted on the wall in the far left hand corner of the room with the speakers positioned on either side. The positioning of these speakers militates against good quality aural development as all audio sources come from the left of the room from the students’ point of view. Furthermore the maximum volume capable on this system is insufficient to fill the room. It is recommended that for the moment the speakers be positioned on the wall on both sides of the whiteboards, as this would improve the situation considerably and allow for appropriate aural stimulation for all students. When practicable, replacement of the sound system is suggested.

All choir lessons take place in the hall which has good acoustics and a sufficient number of choir steps to accommodate choirs with over 120 members. The facilities on site also cater for the programme of instrumental tuition outlined above. This is very good resource provision.

The music teachers have availed of some opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD) and membership of the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) is facilitated by management. The teachers are encouraged to avail of any opportunities which will allow them to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at post-primary level, to keep up to date with ongoing curricular innovation and to network with other music teachers. In addition, it is hoped that management will continue to support and facilitate any opportunities for CPD in music education that arise in the future such as, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and for example 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.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A very good blend of experience and expertise exists between the team of music teachers in the school and the role of subject co-ordination is currently undertaken by the senior music teacher. The five music teachers work effectively as a team, planning programmes of work for the school year and organising activities for the many musical events that take place. Formal planning meetings occur at least twice a term and the good work done at these meetings is supported by frequent informal meetings. Records of subject department meetings are maintained and it is good to note that each term’s work is evaluated and reviewed.

Good progress has been made in the development of the music department plan. The current plan contains a mission statement for the department and aims and objectives for music education in the school. It also includes organisational details, planning for students with additional educational needs and for students with English as an additional language, resource lists and some differentiated teaching methodologies as well as details of homework, assessment and reporting procedures. A range of collaborative planning is evident in the variety of extracurricular and cross-curricular activities which occur throughout the school year. From examination of the documentation it was found that considerable thought has been given to the accurate and effective delivery of all music courses in the school. There is regular contact and co-operation among the music teachers in the sharing of collective facilities and resources and in the day-to-day implementation of the syllabuses with their classes. To develop the plan further, it would also be useful to document planned learning outcomes and consider cataloguing suitable music-teaching methodologies.

Individual subject planning outlined the broad plan for each class group, included references to the various syllabuses and a stock of support material suitable for all levels. In all lessons observed, clear objectives were evident, there was continuity from previous lessons and appropriate resources and stimuli were utilised. In general, planning for performing was evident in the prior preparation of relevant materials such as sheet music, accompaniments, worksheets, and audio resources. This indicates that short-term planning is at a satisfactory level. It is recommended that future planning include consideration of student learning strategies and of ways of encouraging students to reflect on their learning.

Whilst acknowledging the good planning that has already been achieved by this department, it is recommended that all activities for the timetabled choirs be documented. At present this planning is done informally and while this has run relatively smoothly in the past, due to the experience of the teachers involved, a more structured approach would be in order at this stage. A collaborative approach and a sharing of responsibility would ensure a broad agreement by all members of the department and minimise what might seem to be an onerous task at the outset. Suggested areas include cataloguing suitable repertoire and reasons for choosing same, the sequencing of material, documenting proposed team-teaching methodologies and outlining performing opportunities and events for all the choirs. An effective choir plan could also help deal with any contingencies, such as the cancellation of COMB as outlined above, without compromising the high standards of choral activity in the school.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The atmosphere in all lessons seen in Presentation Secondary School was characterised by warmth and mutual respect. There was a good rapport between the students and the teachers in a secure, enthusiastic and work-orientated atmosphere with good use of humour. The music
teachers created a positive learning environment through effective organisation and management of learning activities. Students responded well to this positive climate for learning and participated with enthusiasm wherever challenging opportunities were presented. Materials were well prepared and the teaching was supportive to all students, ensuring that all classes were pitched at their level and the pace of learning commensurate with their ability. The repertoire chosen both for performance and listening was attractive and accessible for the age levels concerned, and the resources chosen contributed to the quality of learning.

The teaching observed employed many strategies to engage the students and include them in all aspects of the learning process. A good range of teaching strategies to promote the students' own self-learning skills was also seen. A collaborative learning environment allowing constructive and productive peer interaction and purposeful group work was observed, where the teachers guided students through various stages and facilitated a stimulating and challenging music-learning environment. The students were very familiar with these procedures and, when any of these activities was taking place, moved appropriately to their assigned groups in an orderly fashion and returned to their desks later in the same way.

All lessons observed had some elements of vocal performing. This was at a suitable standard for the levels visited and all classes seen were on target with the syllabus requirements. The students perform regularly both in public and for competitions, and this contributes to their development as confident, competent singers. Total student participation in all these activities enhanced the quality of these performances. Whole-class performances of the music provided convincing evidence that most students are capable of maintaining their own part in group music making. Students also readily sang on their own as seen in a first-year class where competent solo performances of *Mollie Malone* and *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* were enthusiastically received. This focus on building the role of Music as a living subject and giving students the opportunity to take part in and enjoy practical music making is entirely appropriate.

Team teaching is used for all choir lessons with two or three teachers involved depending on the size of the group. Good teacher demonstration, accompaniment, relevant rote learning and good rehearsal technique, where awkward passages were isolated and worked on, were some of the activities seen. It was good to note that students work from sheet music at all times, and when correcting errors or shortcomings in the performance, the teachers interspersed their explanations with appropriate technical terms, thus contributing to a further consolidation of the more theoretical aspects of Music. This was further borne out in a junior cycle music class where students were able to answer questions on aspects of a prescribed song by referring to knowledge and technical terms which the students themselves acknowledged had been covered during choir lessons. At times the activity was open-ended enough to allow students’ opinions to impact on the musical interpretation of these performances which is very good practice. This was exemplified during the TY choir lesson for example where the students were encouraged to arrange a hymn *Listen, Let Your Heart Keep Seeking* in preparation for their end-of-year Mass.

Lessons which had a distinct aural focus often included subtle musical links which is good practice. These included vocal warm-ups exclusively in minor keys when about to develop suitable skills to compose melodies in a minor key, or similarly when about to learn a new song in a minor key. At other times however, there was a tendency to indulge in too much talk about the theoretical aspects of music before introducing the sounds themselves. It is important that the ‘sound before symbol’ approach be consistently utilised to allow students experience a more meaningful exploration of the parameters of music. This would ensure that opportunities to reinforce musical concepts and to encourage students to think musically are never wasted.
The extensive resources available in the music room are used to very good effect. Appropriate use of the whiteboard, musical extracts, piano and bongos was seen which contributed to the effective learning environment observed. Good use of the computer and data projector was observed where a YouTube™ clip of Louis Armstrong performing *Oh When The Saints Go Marching In* was utilised to stimulate an interesting discussion on jazz by students exploring this genre for the general studies module in the Junior Certificate. Enhanced use of these technological resources is worth considering, beginning with the sharing of expertise within the department and with staff members less experienced in the use of ICT starting with small projects. Not only could these resources be used to build up a stock of more student-friendly resources and handouts but would also allow for a more efficient use of teacher time in the long term. Strategic use of the data projector could also minimise the inordinate amount of photocopying necessary at present as a significant amount of material could be displayed appropriately rather than distributed to each individual student. This could enhance student engagement and also allow for more appropriate student posture when singing or performing on instruments for example, as the required visual stimuli could be displayed in a more effective way.

**ASSESSMENT**

In all lessons observed, students were generally confident and capable, and performed to a good standard. Students’ folders, copybooks and manuscripts showed evidence of good organisation, were generally neat in appearance and contained coursework, words of songs, sheet music and worksheets.

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. Good quality homework practices include written, aural and practical work, which is given on a regular basis. Other examples include questioning in class, completion of worksheets, games, quizzes, presentations and project work. In some instances students frequently receive comments and words of encouragement on their assessments. It is recommended that this practice be expanded as students inevitably place more value on this kind of feedback rather than a tick or a grade. Practical elements are continually assessed and 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 sound 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. In keeping with this commitment, it would be timely to establish a system whereby students could build up profiles of their own musical competencies and take ownership of their own learning. This would help them to monitor their own improvement and achievements and contribute to their development as independent learners.

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 enjoys a high profile in Presentation Secondary School, Thurles and is available to all students in all years.
• Choirs have a long-standing tradition in the school and in addition to the curricular aspects of the subject all students continue to have the opportunity to participate in choral activities.
• Good standards of teaching and learning, a positive attitude towards Music and a warm classroom atmosphere were significant aspects of the lessons seen during the visit.
• Well-resourced music-teaching areas exist in the school, which are used appropriately and effectively in an integrated way to support the teaching and learning of Music.
• The commitment to extracurricular music activities in the school is extensive and impressive.

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

• Appropriate positioning of the speakers for the sound system is recommended in the short term and, when practicable, replacement of the sound system is suggested.
• Future planning should include consideration of student learning strategies and of ways of encouraging students to reflect on their learning. It would also be useful to document planned learning outcomes and consider cataloguing suitable music-teaching methodologies.
• It is recommended that all activities for the timetabled choirs be documented.
• It is important that the ‘sound before symbol’ approach be consistently utilised to allow students experience a more meaningful exploration of the parameters of Music.
• The enhanced use of ICT resources is recommended.
• It is timely to establish a system whereby students could build up profiles of their own musical competencies and take ownership of their own learning.

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

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Appendix

School Response to the Report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

B.O.M are very pleased with report. They appreciated the suggestions and ideas for improvement and further development. The school is happy that a full and thorough inspection was carried out, proving that music has a high profile in our school.

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

- Surround sound system in place.
- Documenting choral activities at present.
- More emphasis being placed on “sound before symbol” approach.
- New Interactive Whiteboard in Music Room, and in-service being arranged for use.
- Ongoing sharing of methodologies.