Subject Inspection of Music
REPORT

Saint Joseph of Cluny
Killiney, County Dublin
Roll number: 60260P

Date of inspection: 4 February 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 of Cluny, Killiney. 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 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 acting 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

St Joseph of Cluny currently caters for 453 female students. Music has a very high profile in this school. The study of Music is optional for the junior cycle and for the Leaving Certificate. Transition year (TY) is a mandatory programme in senior cycle and Music is compulsory within this. In all programmes, timetabling arrangements for Music are in line with the recommendations of the syllabuses. There are a sufficient number of double periods to facilitate practical work. First-year and second-year students are provided with a class period for choir in addition to the scheduled music lessons. This provision is good.

In junior cycle and senior cycle, students choose their optional subjects from a menu of subject choices. These arrangements are appropriate. The uptake of Music by students in all year groups is very good.

Music in TY is delivered as a modular course for one term. Four periods are allocated each week to Music. The TY music programme is very good and provides opportunities to students to encounter an appropriate range of music experiences. For instance, as part of the programme, TY students attend choir for two periods each week and are provided with a general introduction to music technology. These are good experiences for students and ensure that music education is rooted in practical music-making activities.

Music is well resourced in this school and budgetary arrangements are supportive of the subject. The acquisition of a set of percussion instruments would be a valuable addition to the resources already in place. Facilities for Music are satisfactory. Music lessons are delivered in a room which is narrow and which does not allow students much space to move for practical activities. However, the music teacher generally has access to the concert hall for all such activities when
required. The school plans to provide additional facilities for Music as part of its ongoing building project.

Very good efforts have been made to create a learning environment in the music room that is vibrant, attractive and stimulating for students. Subject-related posters, both professionally printed and handcrafted, are on display. Very good storage facilities ensure that materials and equipment and materials can be housed safely.

The music department is staffed by one fully qualified specialist music teacher who has been teaching in this school since 2008. This teacher is a member of the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA). Attendance at PPMTA conferences is facilitated by the school. These conferences offers opportunities for teachers to engage in constructive dialogue with fellow professionals, to remain abreast of all information pertaining to music education at second level and to keep up to date with ongoing curricular innovation.

In addition to the curricular aspects of the subject and preparation for certificate examinations, a wide variety of additional practical music-making activities is available for the students. These include the annual fifth-year musical production, the annual TY talent show and a Midsummer’s Evening Concert, which is hosted every May by the school’s parents’ association. Individual vocal and instrumental tuition is available after school. There is also a school orchestra and school choir, both of which rehearse each week. The music teacher is helped by one other member of staff for these two activities. The commitment of the music department in facilitating all of this provision is commended.

**Planning and Preparation**

The school provides formal opportunities for subject departments to meet three times each year. The deputy principal is also a qualified music teacher and meets with the music teacher on all such planning occasions. This arrangement is noteworthy as it provides valuable support to the music teacher. Records of all such meetings have been kept by the music department.

There is a very good level of planning and co-ordination of Music within the school. In addition to the high level of advance planning to ensure the smooth operation of the many musical activities that take place, there is very good planning for the timetabled lessons in Music. The extent and quality of planning and preparation for all lessons was found to be very good. Much time has been devoted by the teacher to the creation of handouts and resources. Those which were presented at the time of the evaluation were tailored specifically for the students’ needs, were developmental in design and seamlessly integrated at the appropriate stages in lessons. In all lessons observed, there was a very good balance between teacher input and participative strategies for students.

Subject planning documentation was presented during the evaluation. This documentation outlined the organisation of the music department and included programmes of work scheduling the topics to be covered for all classes. These plans were relevant to the syllabuses and to the requirements of the examinations. Meticulous attention has been paid to the development of a weekly scheme of work for all year groups. It is fully appropriate that short-term planning should be this detailed and thorough. However, these schemes have been developed for the full year. While they provide a broad indication of the intended learning objectives and reflect
commendable attention to the need for advance planning, care should be taken to distinguish between the requirements of short-term and longer-term planning.

Longer-term planning should set out how the programme aims and objectives will be accomplished over the year while short-term planning should be flexible enough to accommodate the progress made in the implementation of the plan. Consequently, longer-term planning should be less detailed and broader in nature. Short-term schemes should include methodologies and topics linked to learning outcomes and indicate how the three components—listening, composing and performing—are being synthesised into music lessons. References should also be made to the manner in which the *Sound before Symbol* approach is being adopted in Music.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Three lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation, two in junior cycle and one in senior cycle. In all lessons, the teacher created a very positive learning environment and there was a very good rapport between the students and the teacher. Students’ contributions to class discussions were valued and praise was used effectively to acknowledge their efforts.

All lessons observed were well structured and suitably paced. The material chosen was pitched at the level of the students who were constantly and adequately challenged to develop their music vocabulary and use appropriate music language. The learning intention was clearly stated in each lesson. This is good as it provides a focus and a structure for the lesson and encourages students to assume responsibility for what they should know and be able to do at the end of the lesson.

High quality teaching and learning were observed during the course of the evaluation. All lessons were well structured, logical and sequential. High expectations were set. Teaching and learning strategies were facilitative and invited student participation at a high level. For instance, in one senior-cycle lesson observed, the topic-at-hand was one of their prescribed works, Romeo and Juliet, *Fantasy Overture* by Tchaikovsky. Good questioning strategies were used by the teacher and the responses that were given by the students were of a high standard. Good cross-curricular links were made at this point as students were shown an extract from the film to help them to draw thematic comparisons between the play and the music. Further opportunities were provided to students to determine the technical features of the music through questioning and reflection and this led to a lively class discussion. To reinforce their learning, students were provided with a worksheet as part of a listening exercise and worked in pairs to complete this task.

Information and communication technology (ICT) was used very effectively in the lessons observed. For instance, in a junior-cycle lesson, ICT was used to illustrate a performance on the uileann pipes. This introduced the main topic of the lesson, the prescribed work *Ripples in the Rockpools*. Students engaged with this music through questions, singing and listening activities, all of which led to a dynamic lesson where the learning was very apparent. In the second half of this lesson, there was very good integration of the three disciplines, listening, composing and performing. This is sound methodological practice.

In TY, students are required to complete a project based on material covered in lessons. This is good as it fosters in students the ability to engage in discovery learning and to assume more responsibility for their own work. In planning to extend the range of approaches used, it is important to recognise the high levels of ability within the student body and to encourage an even greater degree of autonomy and self direction in their learning. This is recommended.
An examination of students’ manuscripts and folders indicated that undue emphasis is being placed on teaching composing strictly to the requirements of certificate examinations. For instance, at the start of the year, fifth-year students were provided with a list of rules to allow them to tackle an examination question. One of the core aims of the Leaving Certificate Music Syllabus is ‘to encourage the development of musical creativity, sensitivity and potential through active involvement in composing’. It is important that students are given the essential techniques for engaging with composing and this is appropriate. However, it would enhance their appreciation and understanding of this discipline if they were given opportunities to engage with composing creatively in addition to meeting the requirements of examination questions.

An element of practical performing was incorporated into all lessons and this consisted of mainly choral activities. It is very apparent that the time that is allocated by the school to choir classes is paying dividends for the students studying Music. Students in the music lessons observed were very competent performers. Singing was very tuneful and, when required, students sang very proficiently in harmony.

ASSESSMENT

Formal house examinations are held for first-year, second-year and fifth-year students at Christmas and before the summer holidays. “Mock” certificate examinations are held for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students in the spring. Parents are made aware of students’ progress through the annual parent-teacher meeting and the student journal. Reports are sent home following formal examinations and in addition, a progress report is sent home during the course of the year.

Students’ work is monitored and assessed very frequently in this school and this is good. TY students maintain a portfolio of work. This contains samples of work in all subjects, including Music. The portfolio is assessed at the end of the academic year. In all programmes, music students are assessed through the completion of worksheets, homework assignments and questioning in lessons. Practical elements are continually assessed in the classroom. This process includes assessment under examination conditions at appropriate stages throughout the year. These methods allow for careful monitoring of students’ progress and provide a solid basis to inform preparation for the certificate examinations.

There is an expectation that students will store all materials and resources provided by the teacher in folders. In the majority of cases, this practice is consistent across all class groups. This is good as these materials will function as useful sources for revision.

Students’ copies and manuscripts are thoroughly corrected and constructive comments indicating strategies for improvement are provided. Student profiles are maintained by the teacher and these consist of a record of results from assessments. It would be useful to keep records of a selection of homework assignments in order to build on these profiles.

Patterns of achievement in certificate examinations are very good.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music has a very high profile in this school and there is a very good uptake for this subject.
- A wide variety of additional music activities is available for the students.
- There is a very good level of planning and co-ordination of Music in the school.
- High quality teaching and learning was observed in all lessons.
- Choral activities are integrated into lessons frequently and the standard of singing is very good.

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

- Students should be given opportunities to engage with composition beyond the requirements of the certificate examination.
- Students should be given an even greater degree of autonomy and self direction in their learning in recognition of the high levels of ability within the student body.

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

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