An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of MUSIC
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Mitchelstown, County Cork
Roll number: 62421A

Date of inspection: 7 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. 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 teacher. 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. 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

A key aspect of the school philosophy in Presentation Secondary School, Mitchelstown is to provide a holistic education. In keeping with this philosophy and in order to promote aesthetic appreciation Music is a core subject at junior cycle. This is excellent provision and is a fitting testament to the value Music has in the school. All students in Transition Year (TY) have one period of Music per week and 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. In addition collaborative arrangements are in place with the local boys' school to allow students there to study Music for the Junior and Leaving Certificate. This is very positive and currently there are boys in the second-year, third-year and sixth-year class groups.

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 in senior cycle to facilitate practical work.

In addition to curricular aspects, other musical activities contribute to the profile of Music in the school. The school has a long choral tradition and its choir, which has been successful in a number of choral festivals through the years, is a significant contributor to raising awareness of the school’s musical activities. The school also has an Irish traditional ensemble and both these groups rehearse during lunchtime and perform for the many events which take place during the school year, for example the open night, liturgies, award ceremonies, Presentation Day Celebration and Christmas festivities. In addition, the choir participates in many competitions including Feis Maitiú and the Cork Choral Festival, and has 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.
Presentation Secondary School has a specialist music room which is suitably equipped with a piano, a sound system, classroom instruments, audio resources, sheet music and choir steps. In addition the walls are adorned with a range of student project work and posters. Plans are underway for broadband installation in the music room and the upgrade of software to Sibelius 6, as well as the acquisition of an interactive whiteboard. The department also has access to one of the school’s computer rooms where Sibelius is installed on fifteen computers for use by senior students. This is good provision and the music teachers are encouraged to monitor the ongoing development of resources. In the event of a timetable clash, lessons are held for junior classes in the group’s base room and the teacher has access to a portable CD player and an electronic keyboard. Every effort is made to minimise these clashes so at present these portable resources are adequate. The music room has desks which are laid out in traditional style but can be easily rearranged to cope with any changing music-teaching setting, as evidenced during the inspection when the desks were efficiently pushed back to allow group performing to take place. However the size of the room is inadequate for larger groups, as also experienced during the evaluation where twenty-eight students were packed into the room considerably restricting teacher mobility. This is further compounded by a low ceiling which creates an oppressive atmosphere when the room is full to capacity. The school has recently completed a building project which has resulted in the addition of a multi-purpose building with more space for musical activities. It is envisaged that this building will be used for choral activities, production of school musicals, school liturgical events, traditional music recitals and any other musical activities which would reflect the level of musical development and education in the school. This is a very welcome development and perhaps the difficulties with the size of the existing music room could be surmounted through strategic use of this new space which is also suitably equipped for classroom use.

The music teachers avail of opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD) when they can and membership of the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) is facilitated by management. The teachers are encouraged to engage with any opportunities which will allow them to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at second 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 of CPD 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 good level of planning for the development of Music exists in Presentation Secondary School, Mitchelstown. 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. There was evidence of long-term curriculum planning for the three areas of performing, composing and listening and clear procedures for record keeping and reporting were outlined in the planning documentation.

In order to enhance the effective planning that has already been undertaken, it is recommended that individual planning be expanded to include schemes reflecting a purposeful sequencing of material with suggested learning outcomes and appropriate specific music teaching
methodologies. Given the newly-completed building project, it would be timely if a five-year development plan for the music department was instigated at this stage. This could include planning for resources with a particular emphasis on technology, curricular plans to include the role of ICT in teaching and learning, new choral evaluation procedures to fill the void left by the cancellation of COMB, and ways in which the new performing space could be most effectively utilised. Furthermore it is important that this plan be a flexible working document open to review so that the contents remain relevant and purposeful.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

All lessons observed were presented in a coherent, warm manner with high expectations of attainment and behaviour. There was a good rapport between the students and the teacher in a secure, work-orientated and respectful atmosphere. The music teachers created a positive learning environment through effective organisation and management of learning activities. Students responded very well to this positive climate for learning and participated with enthusiasm wherever challenging opportunities were presented. Learning outcomes for the lessons were clear and in some instances shared with students at the outset, with the learning intention written up on the whiteboard at the beginning of the lesson. It is recommended that this approach be expanded and utilised in every lesson in order to optimise students’ motivation and learning.

The most overriding aspect of all lessons seen was the focus on music and sound. Whether preparing for the summer practical examinations, or working on a backing chords exercise or even organising an end-of-year talent show, everything began with the music. This is very good practice. Appropriate methods were used and the ‘sound before symbol’ approach was consistently utilised. The pace of lessons was good and there was a variety of approaches when reinforcing concepts. The resources and activities chosen were suitable for the age levels concerned, consolidated past work and contributed to the quality of revision going on at this time of the year. Well-designed, clear worksheets, skilful use of the whiteboard and good questioning, which ascertained the level of student retention in terms of the more cognitive areas of musical understanding, was observed. Appropriate links were made with the musical features that the students outlined when answering these questions. Student contributions were welcomed and affirmed and praise and encouragement were given where warranted.

The repertoire chosen for performance was suitable for the age levels and the resources chosen contributed to the quality of learning which is very positive. Recorder playing and singing were at a suitable standard for the levels visited and all classes visited were on target with the syllabus requirements. Students are exposed to a wide variety of musical genres through performing, composing and listening. This range of varied repertoire is used in many ways to expand and extend the range of musical experience of the students. Thus such pieces as Au Clair de la Lune; All Through the Night; Frère Jacques and Lord of the Dance were used not just for ensemble performance but also as suitable examples for composing and listening activities. Students are also allowed to choose their own repertoire with the proviso that it be musically and educationally suitable. For their end-of-year concert this year, the TY group has chosen songs from areas of their own experience such as Tonight from West Side Story, having recently attended a production of the show in Cork, and Journey’s Don’t Stop Believin’ currently enjoying a revival through its use in the TV musical comedy Glee. These types of approach are highly effective in developing critical listening and appreciation skills, impact well on students’ musical thinking and attitudes and are examples of very good practice.
The performing, listening and composing elements of the syllabus are very well addressed and linked and integrated in a balanced way. The varied activities and methods used to reinforce learning as well as the structured approach to the more examination-orientated aspects of the syllabus, which allowed for suitably challenging situations and yet were accessible to all students, are examples of best practice. It was good to note also a consolidation of all information at the end of the lessons, especially those dealing with the more theoretical aspects of music. It is recommended that the teachers now explore the different ways in which ICT could be successfully integrated into lessons with the caveat that this be used to enhance rather than substitute for the high-quality methods currently being used in the classroom.

ASSESSMENT

The teachers’ music knowledge, skills and experience ensure high expectations and a challenging learning environment for the students with subsequent high standards of performance. In all classes observed, students were generally confident and capable, and performed to these high standards. Students’ folders, workbooks and manuscripts showed evidence of good organisation, and were generally well organised and neat in appearance. The school is committed to the principles that underpin Assessment for Learning (AfL) and the music department is no exception with some very good practice evident in the monitoring of student work employing the ‘three-strand feedback’ technique. Useful teacher comments in copybooks and on completed worksheets provided valuable feedback to students on their progress and affirmed work well done. This good practice is encouraged further as regular constructive feedback enhances learning by informing students about their own individual progress.

Formal assessment takes places at Christmas for all class groups and at the end of the year for non-examination classes. Mock examinations are held for certificate examination classes in the spring. Parents are informed of their daughter’s progress through school reports issued after all formal assessments and through an annual parent-teacher meeting held for each year group.

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 this light it is suggested that teachers could encourage students to establish and maintain their own progress reports and build up profiles of their own musical competencies. This could contribute to the students’ ownership of their own learning and help cultivate an environment of independent learners.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music enjoys a high profile in the school and is a core subject in junior cycle.
- Collaborative planning and preparation, very good standards of teaching and learning, and a positive classroom atmosphere were significant aspects seen during the visit.
- Students were motivated and actively engaged with all aspects of Music. Observation of students’ work, both practical and written, 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:

- It is recommended that individual planning be expanded to include schemes reflecting a purposeful sequencing of material with suggested learning outcomes and appropriate specific music-teaching methodologies.
- The music teachers should now explore the different ways in which ICT could be successfully integrated into lessons.
- It would be worthwhile if teachers encouraged students to establish and maintain their own progress reports and build up profiles of their own musical competencies.
- Given the newly-completed building project, it would be timely if a five-year development plan for the music department was instigated at this stage. Suggested areas for inclusion in this plan are outlined in the body of the report.

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

Published, December 2010
Appendix

School Response to the Report

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

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

Since the Inspection, the school has designated a new, stand-alone, double sized classroom as the new Music Room. This has been equipped with new resources including 4 new computers, an interactive white board and contains both a seated and performance area.