Subject Inspection of Home Economics
REPORT

St Joseph’s Secondary School
Navan, County Meath
Roll number: 64360Q

Date of inspection: 21 January 2010


REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HOME ECONOMICS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Joseph’s Secondary School, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Home Economics 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 teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal, the deputy principal and the subject department. The board of management 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

St Joseph’s Secondary School is a voluntary Catholic secondary school for girls. Its current enrolment is 526. In addition to the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate programmes, St Joseph’s offers the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), a Transition Year programme (TY) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

All first-year students in the school sample all of the optional subjects for the full year as part of a subject sampling programme. Students choose the optional subjects that they wish to continue studying for the Junior Certificate at the end of first year.

Uptake of Home Economics for the Junior Certificate in St Joseph’s Secondary School has been, and still is, below the national figures. The established practice in the school until recently was that students had to choose either Home Economics or Science as one of their optional subjects for the Junior Certificate. Such an arrangement is unsatisfactory as it restricts access to the subject and can lead to segregation on the basis of ability. It is very positive that this practice has ceased since September 2009. Management reports that all students are now given an open choice and that subject option bands are formed according to demand. The current second-year students were offered Home Economics in a band that also included Science, Music, Business Studies and French. The school reports that uptake of Home Economics declined for this group who represent the first year of operation of this new system. It is recommended that this situation be kept under review to ensure equality of access to the subject for all students. There is also a need to raise the profile of the subject in the school and thus dispel the perception held by some members of the school community that it is most suitable for students of a lesser ability.

Students taking the optional Transition Year programme (TY) are offered Home Economics for the full year. Uptake of Home Economics for the Leaving Certificate is good. While the subject is
mainly offered alongside at least two science subjects, it is good to note that it is available in at least two bands in both fifth year and sixth year.

It is most praiseworthy that students who are not taking Irish for the Leaving Certificate are offered Home Economics as a seventh subject. However, there is an issue with the timetabling of the subject for this group of students, as it is timetabled concurrently with Irish in fifth year and sixth year. As a result no double class period has been allocated on the timetable for these students to complete the required practical coursework in Home Economics. To date the teachers have willingly worked around this arrangement to ensure that students can complete their coursework. However, the absence of a double period is unsatisfactory. It is important to note that the practical coursework undertaken in fifth year and in part of sixth year is an essential and significant assessment component worth twenty per cent of the final mark in the Leaving Certificate examination. The integration of practical coursework with the relevant theoretical knowledge is also a key principle of the Leaving Certificate syllabus. It is strongly recommended that a double class period be provided for all students taking Home Economics for the Leaving Certificate. This is absolutely essential in fifth year and highly desirable in sixth year.

The timetabled allocation for all other home economics classes in both the junior cycle and the senior cycle is satisfactory and almost all lesson periods are well spread throughout the week. Where two double lesson periods are timetabled in junior cycle consideration could be giving to splitting one of the double periods in two singles thus ensuring an extra period of class contact time for students each week.

The home economics facilities comprise two kitchens, both of which are well maintained and well organised. In one of the kitchens, the layout of the units means that worktop space is limited. This was evident in a practical lesson observed during the evaluation where students, of necessity, were working in groups of three. This is not an ideal arrangement in terms of providing students with maximum opportunities to develop proficiency and confidence in food and culinary skills. In some areas of the kitchen, these students were also working in very close proximity to each other, due to the lack of space surrounding the workstations. As part of the school’s long-term planning process and as resources become available, consideration should be given to how the work space in this kitchen could be maximised.

The school did have a textiles room in the past but management reported that this was converted to a general-purpose classroom many years ago. Currently the practical coursework in textiles and in design and craftwork is carried out in the kitchens. This is not ideal from a health and safety perspective. The potential dangers of needles, pins and threads in areas of food preparation, the necessity to lift the sewing machines onto and off the high worktops each time they are used and the actual height of the worktops for such activities all pose risks. As resources become available, school management should consider how this issue could be resolved.

Health and safety rules and procedures have been developed for food studies lessons. It is recommended that the health and safety procedures also be documented for lessons involving practical work in textiles and craftwork.

There is good provision for information and communications technology (ICT) in the home economics classrooms. Demonstration mirrors have also been mounted in the kitchens.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There are two teachers of Home Economics in the school, one of whom is employed in a permanent whole-time capacity. Discussion with the subject department during the evaluation provided evidence of collaboration and a good team spirit. It is a good practice that the role of the co-ordinator is rotated so that responsibility for the development of the subject is shared. Minutes of some recent team meetings indicate the types of organisational activities that form the agenda for these meetings. During the evaluation, one of the teachers was on approved leave.

The subject plan includes the results of a reflective exercise on the strengths and areas for development in Home Economics in the school. Combined with the enthusiasm that is evident in the home economics department, this is a very good foundation for moving forward. The subject department should now prioritise one or two areas for development within a given timeframe. In doing so consideration could be given to focusing on particular aspects of teaching and learning, perhaps using some of the suggestions from this report. The Inspectorate publication *Looking at Home Economics* could also be used as a tool to aid this self-evaluation process.

The programmes of work which the teachers have developed as part of subject planning are well advanced. These written documents have recently been reviewed and are described by the subject department as a work in progress. The content to be covered in junior cycle and senior cycle lessons is expressed in terms of learning objectives which detail what students should know and be able to do in relation to each area. This very good approach ensures that the students are the focus of the planning process. The programmes also provide an outline of the methodologies and resources that might be used to help students attain the planned learning objectives. Homework activities and links to relevant syllabus areas are also included. It is good practice that the introduction and implementation of the design brief process is integrated in the planning.

In order to enhance the very good work that has already been done, consideration should be given to reviewing the sequence in which some of the content is presented in the programmes of work for junior cycle and for senior cycle. As an example, in senior cycle consideration should be given to focusing on the relevant food commodities immediately after the study of each of the nutrients, rather than completing all of the nutrients consecutively.

Currently the planning of the practical coursework in design and craftwork and in food and culinary skills for third-year students means that each of these areas is delivered as a block. In the first term of the current academic year, the double lesson each week was devoted to coursework in design and craftwork. It is planned that the double lesson each week in term two will be devoted to the practical work in food and culinary skills. The subject department explained that the rationale for this is that it is easier for students to complete the design and craftwork in a block. However, this arrangement also means that the current Junior Certificate examination students have not had a practical lesson in food and culinary skills since the end of their second year. Given the mark weightings in the Junior Certificate examination for each of these areas, (15% for design and craftwork and 35% at higher level or 45% at ordinary level for the practical examination in food and culinary skills), it is recommended that the current practices be reviewed.

Good progress has been made in planning for Home Economics in TY. The programme for 2009-2010 includes four modules that represent different areas of Home Economics. An interesting approach has been taken to the delivery of the programme. Good opportunities have also been included to maximise student involvement in the activities.
Attention is given to the planning of some co-curricular and extracurricular activities that are linked to particular areas of Home Economics. There is also a proactive approach to the development of resources to support the teaching and learning of the subject.

The short-term planning for all of the lessons observed was very good. The planning included the preparation of a range of resources, many of which have been skilfully prepared using ICT.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The atmosphere in the lessons observed was positive, encouraging and very conducive to learning. There was very good rapport between students and their teacher, and a high level of mutual respect and co-operation. The warm and professional manner in which the teacher interacted with the students was most impressive. As a result classroom management was very good.

At the outset students were provided with an overview of the lessons. In a theory lesson, key headings had been written on the board in advance. The teacher referred to each heading as the lesson progressed and again at the end to summarise what had been covered. In order to develop these very good practices and make them more valuable for students, consideration should be given to identifying learning outcomes for each lesson. The learning outcomes could guide students in their learning and encourage them to become involved in checking on their progress at each stage of the lesson.

The quality of teaching observed was very good. Instruction was clear, the content was presented with enthusiasm and good attention was given to the correct use of subject-specific terminology. Resources and examples were used to help students understand difficult concepts. In a lesson on the circulatory system a very creative and visually stimulating PowerPoint presentation was used to help students understand the structure of the heart and blood vessels, and the blood flow through the heart. Students took notes from the presentation. Towards the end of the lesson each student participated in a simple but very effective exercise on taking the pulse. Apart from the latter exercise, it was difficult to assess the quality of learning in the lesson. Consideration should be given to balancing teacher input with a greater level of student engagement. As an example, rather than the teacher describing and explaining the differences between the structure of veins, arteries and capillaries while the students remain passive, students could engage in this task either individually or in pairs and perhaps using a worksheet. This would provide students with opportunities to think and analyse information. It is also recommended that understanding and learning should be checked before moving on to each new section of a lesson. The use of learning outcomes, as suggested in the previous paragraph, would facilitate this process.

Good practices were observed in the operation of practical lessons. The students were well trained in the routines and in the health and safety procedures for practical work. There was a very good focus on the development of key skills. Teaching involved a combination of demonstration to the whole class at key stages and to small groups as required. Overall, the students demonstrated a good range of practical skills despite the fact that some of them had only recently begun studying Home Economics. There was a sense of enjoyment and pride amongst the students as they worked. It was unfortunate that students had to work in groups of three due to the limitations on space.

During the evaluation a variety of students’ project work in the area of design and craftwork was observed. The projects presented indicate that some students have attained a good level of
competence and skill in the crafts chosen. Creativity and originality are fostered. There is scope for development in relation to some of the coursework and the accompanying design folders. In finalising the coursework and folders for the Junior Certificate, it would be useful if students were made aware of the marking criteria for these components of the examination. The Junior Certificate Examination Home Economics Guidelines and the chief examiner’s report for the Junior Certificate should prove useful sources of information in this regard. Both of these are available from the State Examinations Commission website (www.examinations.ie). The documents will also provide very useful information for the students for the food and culinary skills practical examination.

ASSESSMENT

The assessment policy for Home Economics in the school outlines clearly how students’ progress and competence in the subject is assessed in the formal in-house examinations. It is good to note that the assessment modes used include the assessment of practical and project work and thus reflect the assessment objectives of the syllabuses.

Oral questioning was used to check students’ understanding during the lessons observed. There is scope to increase the number of higher-order questions used and to spread the questions amongst all class members. The use of higher-order questions provides opportunities for differentiation in mixed-ability settings. This style of questioning when accompanied by ‘wait-time’ to allow students to formulate their answers can also help all students develop the skills of analysis, application of knowledge and evaluation of information.

It is very evident from the large number of students’ copybooks reviewed during the evaluation that homework is assigned regularly. This includes lots of written work. It is good to note that effective use is made of questions from past papers in the certificate examinations, in both junior cycle and senior cycle. There were some examples of careful monitoring and marking of students’ written work, using similar marking criteria to those used in the certificate examinations; this was sometimes accompanied by helpful teacher comments. Given that all classes are mixed ability, it is to be expected that there would be variety in the standard of students’ work in their copybooks.

There is scope to review the policy and practice in relation to homework in Home Economics. Consideration should be given to the amount and type of homework assigned to the different year groups. The purpose of the homework in terms of how and what it will help students to learn should also be considered. This should then be balanced with the capacity to provide constructive feedback to students in terms of how well they have achieved and by identifying areas for improvement where necessary. The practice of assigning the homework at the beginning of some lessons, rather than at the end, and linking it to the learning outcomes of the lesson could also be considered.

To date the percentage of students from the school taking higher level in Home Economics in the certificate examinations is low compared to the national figures. Given the recent changes in the school regarding how Home Economics is offered to students as an option, especially in the junior cycle, it is now timely to develop strategies that would increase participation rates at higher level in both the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate examinations. Such strategies might pay dividends in raising student expectations and achievement.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- It is very positive that the practice whereby students had to choose either Home Economics or Science for the Junior Certificate has ceased.
- Students who are not taking Irish for the Leaving Certificate are offered Home Economics as a seventh subject.
- There is good provision for ICT in the home economics classrooms. ICT has also been skilfully used in the preparation of a range of resources to support teaching and learning.
- Subject planning is well advanced. The programmes of work illustrate many good practices including the identification of learning objectives thus ensuring that the students are the focus of the planning process.
- The atmosphere in the lessons observed was positive, encouraging and very conducive to learning. The warm and professional manner in which the teacher interacted with the students was most impressive.
- The quality of teaching was very good. Instruction was clear, the content was presented with enthusiasm and good attention was given to the correct use of subject-specific terminology.
- Good practices were observed in the operation of practical lessons. There was a sense of enjoyment and pride amongst the students as they worked.
- The assessment modes used include the assessment of practical and project work and thus reflect the assessment objectives of the syllabuses.
- Effective use is made of questions from past papers in the certificate examinations, in both junior cycle and senior cycle. There were some examples of careful monitoring and marking of students’ written work using similar marking criteria to that used in the certificate examinations.

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

- It is timely to develop strategies that would increase participation rates in Home Economics at higher level and thus, raise student expectations and achievement.
- Management should ensure that a double class period is provided for all students taking Home Economics for the Leaving Certificate.
- As part of the school’s long-term planning process and as resources become available, consideration should be given to how the necessary improvements can be made to the home economics facilities.
- The subject department should now prioritise one or two areas for the development of Home Economics in the school.
- In the planning of lessons consideration should be given to balancing teacher input with a greater level of student engagement.
- The use of learning outcomes in lessons, an increase in the number of higher-order questions and a review of policy and practice in relation to homework are recommended.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the home economics department and 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

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

- Junior Certificate timetabling of Home Economics altered to give one double and three single classes per week
- The provision of Home Economics as an additional subject for some Senior students has been discontinued
- An additional kitchen unit and external emergency exit has been provided thus easing congestion and enhancing safety
- Health and Safety procedures in practical work in textiles and craftwork are currently under review and a policy reflecting same is under active consideration.
- Following review, scheduling of practical work at both Junior and Senior Cycle has been implemented
- Recommendations in the Chief Examiner’s report have been used to give more focus to practical work
- To gain further expertise in practical work it is planned to release a teacher to take part in the examining of the Practical Junior Cert Home Economics

Short Term Goals for Home Economics

- Homework to be geared towards enhanced student learning
- Enhanced use of Assessment for Learning

Longer Term Goals for Home Economics

- Health and Safety issues associated with practicals in textiles and craftwork to be updated and kept under review
- Raising profile of Home Economics in the School