Subject Inspection of Music
REPORT

John the Baptist Community School
Hospital, County Limerick
Roll number: 91502N

Date of inspection: 12 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 John the Baptist Community School, Hospital. 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 deputy principal and subject teacher. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Music enjoys a high profile in John the Baptist Community School and is available as an optional subject to all students in all years. Students in first year experience subject sampling up to Christmas. At the end of this term students make their choices for the Junior Certificate choosing three subjects from Music, Art, Home Economics, Business Studies, Technical Graphics, Metalwork and Materials Technology (Wood). All students in the optional Transition Year (TY) programme have a double period of Music per week. This is good provision. An open-choice system operates for the Leaving Certificate, where students prioritise their preferred subject options. The uptake of Music throughout the school is good. With the exception of the current fifth-year group which has a good gender balance, and in line with national norms, significantly more girls than boys study the subject. Given the profile of Music in the school, further exploration into ways of encouraging a higher uptake by boys is recommended.

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 the curricular opportunities, an impressive array of extracurricular activities exists in the school. The annual calendar of musical events is packed with activities for every month of the school year with events ranging from charity fundraisers, a talent show for all students, to the annual awards night, TY graduation night and the Leaving Certificate mass. The school has a choir, orchestra and traditional Irish group which come together on a needs basis and perform at the various events that occur throughout the year. The TY students also produce an annual musical with added participation from students in the fifth-year choir and school orchestra. This year’s production of Aladdin had just finished a very successful run at the time of the inspection. This show constitutes one of the highlights of the school’s activities and affords students the
opportunity to become involved in the range of activities associated with these types of productions such as acting, singing, backstage work, art work, set design and so on. The music teacher’s commitment to these events and the school’s support in facilitating such activities is very positive.

John the Baptist Community School has a specialist music room which is a good size and acoustically satisfactory. The room is very well resourced and is a contributory factor to the success of this department. A wide range of instruments including violins, cellos, flutes, clarinets, tin whistles, acoustic, electric and bass guitars, keyboards and a variety of percussion instruments is available for student use, along with a range of information and communication technology (ICT). The music room is equipped with broadband and has a laptop for student use with a range of software installed including Finale Notepad, Audacity and Dance eJay. The room also has a data projector but its present positioning on the teacher’s desk means that the resulting projection is too small. This was seen during a lesson where the impact was minimised due to inadequate visibility. It is hoped that in time the projector will be suspended from the ceiling (where there are existing sockets) to allow the potential of this powerful resource be realised. Timetabled access to the computer room is also facilitated for senior students enabling the elective technology module to be covered for the Leaving Certificate. This is very good practice. A growing collection of audio resources is also available, along with headphones, music stands, and amplifiers. There is a range of musical posters and lots of examples of student work on the walls, all of which also serve to heighten an awareness of Music and the musical activities that go on in the school.

The music teacher is a member of the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) and attendance at its meetings affords the teacher the opportunity 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, the teacher avails of any ongoing training courses which contribute to overall continuing professional development (CPD). This is positive and it is hoped that management will continue to support and facilitate any opportunities for CPD in music education that arise in the future, particularly the courses due to be organised by the Second Level Support Service (www.slss.ie).

**Planning and Preparation**

There is a good level of planning for the development of Music in John the Baptist Community School. A comprehensive subject department plan was presented during the inspection outlining the running of the department, long-term curricular planning, schemes of work, including a very interesting first-year “taster module”, extracurricular planning and assessment procedures. The curriculum plan focuses mainly on content and learning outcomes. It is recommended that future planning includes consideration of specific music teaching methodologies and differentiated learning strategies along with ways of encouraging students to reflect on their learning. The resulting plan would then give a clearer picture of the department, providing more detail on the content to be covered, the timeframes involved, and the corresponding methodologies, assessment modes and learning outcomes to be attained.

It would also be important to ensure that all programmes and schemes of work are working documents that are regularly reviewed according to the student profile and modified to meet any changing needs of the students. This would also help to deal with any unexpected occurrences such as for example the high absenteeism this year in the fifth-year group on Fridays which involves a significant number of students missing their weekly lesson in the computer room.
Alongside the school’s management procedures which tackle situations like this in a disciplinary and pastoral capacity, contingency planning in Music may also be in order to explore ways in which these students can make up for the considerable amount of technology tuition time they have lost in the course of the year. Regular review may also lead to a variety of approach and development every year and would be a useful tool when analysing the strengths and challenges facing the subject within the school. As this is a single-teacher department, it would be important to ensure that these recommendations be prioritised and undertaken within realistic and reasonable timeframes. The resources available on the School Development Planning Initiative website would be useful tools in this regard (www.sdpi.ie).

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In all lessons visited, a very comfortable and warm atmosphere was maintained. There was a good rapport between the students and the teacher in a secure, enthusiastic and work-orientated atmosphere. An excellent level of student engagement was seen in lessons, particularly in one double lesson, with a firm focus on music-making activities. This focus on building the role of Music and giving students the opportunity to take part in and enjoy practical music-making is entirely appropriate. This resulted in attentive, interested, and motivated students who participated very well in the learning process.

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. Strategies linking aspects of the curriculum were utilised to very good effect with the areas of performing, composing and listening integrated in a musically-focused way. In a lesson focusing on rhythm patterns for example, students clapped their own two-bar patterns devised according to the spelling of their names. These had been notated by the students on clear visually attractive sheets and placed in a prominent position on the notice board, visible to all. The students were then given a task in pairs to devise a suitable two-bar pattern for the words “Music Class”. The resulting patterns were refined and manipulated in such a way that not only was the concept of rhythm consolidated but other parameters of musical performance such as dynamics, textures and tempi were also introduced. This in turn led to a specific focus on dynamic terms as students adapted the volume of their clapping according to the teacher’s directions, were introduced to the technical terms through skilful questioning and demonstration, and viewed a YouTube™ clip of *O Fortuna* from *Carmina Burana*. This encapsulated all the dynamics introduced, linked all the group patterns together and used a range of dynamics to perform the class composition and finally consolidated this learning through a well-designed worksheet that the entire group was capable of answering. The integrated learning and teaching of performing, composing and listening, and the manner in which it was demonstrated that these skills complement each other and support the development of each area, is excellent practice. This contributes greatly to students’ overall musical development.

Incidences of very successful lessons involving purposeful peer-peer interaction and a high degree of collaborative learning were also witnessed. They contributed to the high-functioning learning environment evident in the classroom and ensured that students achieved successful outcomes. Methods that made use of the students’ expertise and particular talents and embedded these in the learning process, allowing the teacher to be more of a facilitator and enabler, were notably successful as in the example where having played Irish traditional dance types on the tin whistle, and asking the students to identify same, the teacher then asked students to play examples on their own instruments, in this case the fiddle and accordion. The skill with which these
students presented their examples and the ensuing attention from the rest of the class group enhanced the quality of the learning and is very good practice. Having covered jigs, reels and hornpipes, a new dance, the polka, was introduced. Before the dance was ever learnt, the material was introduced aurally, manipulated by the students, reinforced through performing and subsequently consolidated through a composing activity where students had to compose an answering bar, linking with the melody-writing section of the Junior Certificate. This was carried out through detailed questioning, explanation, clarification and encouragement. Purposeful and meaningful engagement in music-making activities ensured a high level of experiential learning so that by the time the students came to learn the specific tune by rote they did so with ease and provided an acceptable performance of a Kerry polka on flute, tin whistles, glockenspiels, fiddle and accordion. These activities which extend the range of musical experience of the students are also highly effective in developing critical listening skills and are very good practice.

The performing, listening and composing elements of the syllabus are well addressed and are linked and integrated in a balanced way. The resources available in the music room and the computer room are used to good effect and the use of teacher-generated handouts and worksheets and differentiated material adds to the quality of learning. A positive learning environment was evident in all classes observed, and it contributed to an enjoyment of Music for the students. This challenging learning environment, the use of varied learning methods and strategies which were used to increase and develop their aural awareness, understanding and appreciation of music are examples of best practice and are significant contributory factors to the high profile Music has in the school.

**ASSESSMENT**

In all lessons observed, students were generally confident and capable, and performed to a good standard. Students’ folders and copybooks were very well organised and generally neat in appearance. These contained a range of materials and coursework, and the good organisational habits which are established in the junior cycle are a significant means of support for all students. Students’ work is checked regularly by the teacher, both to monitor standards of work completed and to ensure that all relevant work is filed and stored appropriately. This is very good practice as is the fact that constructive comments were provided to enable better learning and improvement.

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 used to reinforce and review knowledge and skills introduced during lessons, includes listening, performance practice, composition, written assignments, research and technology projects. This is given on a regular basis and is usually corrected in the next lesson. Other examples include questioning in class, completion of worksheets and projects, regular aural assessments and continuous and end-of-topic assessments. Practical elements are continually assessed and students undertaking the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations experience regular assessments similar to those encountered in these examinations during the year. The teacher maintains a profile of each student’s practical competency over a number of months prior to their practical examination. These methods allow for careful monitoring of a student’s progress, provide appropriate guidelines for performance in the certificate examinations and are indicative of the commitment of the teacher to helping all students achieve their potential in Music. It would be worthwhile if efforts were made to build up a profile of a student’s overall musical competencies allowing input from the student. This process would in turn assist students to reflect on their own learning and progress in Music.
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 children’s progress.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music has a very high profile in the school, is available to all students on an optional basis with a healthy uptake and is supported by in-school management.
- Very high standards of teaching and learning, a positive classroom atmosphere and good standards of school-based music making were significant aspects of the lessons seen during the visit.
- A well-resourced music teaching area exists in the school and is used appropriately and effectively in an integrated way to support the teaching and learning of Music.
- Students’ involvement in extracurricular musical activities impacts greatly on their musical development. The variety of activities available to the students is very good along with the teacher’s commitment to all these activities and the school’s support in facilitating these experiences.

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

- Given the profile of Music in the school, further exploration into ways of encouraging a higher uptake by boys is recommended.
- It is recommended that future planning includes consideration of specific music teaching methodologies and differentiated learning strategies along with strategies for encouraging students to reflect on their learning.
- It would also be important to ensure that all programmes and schemes of work are working documents that are regularly reviewed according to the student profile and modified to meet any changing needs of the students.
- It would be worthwhile if efforts were made to build up a profile of a student’s overall musical competencies allowing input from the student which would in turn assist students to reflect on their own learning and progress in Music.

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

*Published, December 2010*