

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Music  
REPORT**

**Scoil Mhuire Convent of Mercy  
Buncrana, County Donegal  
Roll number: 62770C**

**Date of inspection: 12 November 2010**



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF  
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION  
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

**REPORT**  
**ON**  
**THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Mhuire, Buncrana. 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, 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 and subject teachers. 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**

Scoil Mhuire is a co-educational school catering for 550 students. Music is available as an optional subject for both the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate examinations. Music is also taught as a compulsory component in the Transition Year (TY) programme where it is delivered in modular format.

Overall, the uptake of Music is good. However, there is no music class in sixth year due to insufficient demand at the time when these students were selecting their optional subjects. The school reported that subject options available then did not afford students a sufficient level of flexibility and it is now confident that this has since been addressed. This evaluation found that the systems in place to facilitate students' selection of optional subjects for study in both the junior cycle and senior cycle offer a high level of choice to students. In addition, very good support systems are in place to provide relevant subject information to in-coming first-year students and students in the first year of the Leaving Certificate programme and to their parents.

The music department is staffed by two fully qualified, specialist teachers. Music is well supported by senior management. Timetable provision for Music is in line with the guidelines from the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). It is noted that an additional period has been provided to first-year students in each of their optional subjects. There is an appropriate spread of contact time throughout the week with a sufficient number of double periods to accommodate practical work.

In addition to the curricular opportunities, a wide array of extracurricular musical activities is available for students in this school. Music activities on offer include participation in the school choir, liturgical ceremonies, participation in Seachtain na Gaeilge and the bi-annual musical production. In 2010, students also participated in a school talent show. Guitar and piano lessons are also available to students after school and it is good to note the support of other members of staff for these activities. The high level of commitment of the music teachers to these events in

conjunction with the very good level of support which is provided by senior management to facilitate these activities is commended.

Budgetary arrangements in the school are supportive of the subject and resources for Music are very good. The addition of percussion instruments will enhance this provision. A very large and spacious classroom which is fully equipped is available to the music department. The music teachers can also access the information and communication technology (ICT) facilities in the school where music software has been installed on eight computers. The music teachers have spent considerable time and effort ensuring that the music room is very vibrant and attractive for students. Many illustrations of various musical concepts both professionally printed and hand-crafted are on display in the room and this is good.

Management is very supportive of teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). The music teachers have attended annual conferences hosted by the Post-Primary Music Teachers' Association (PPMTA). This affords the teachers opportunities to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at second-level and to keep up-to-date with ongoing curricular innovation. At the time of the evaluation, the music teachers were scheduled to attend in-service provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). The level of interest demonstrated by the music department in continuing professional development is noteworthy.

#### **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Management systems in the school facilitate collaborative planning and formal time is allocated to all subject departments, including Music, to meet three times per year. Records have been kept by the music teachers of all formal meetings.

The quality of department planning and co-ordination of Music is good in this school. The music department is co-ordinated by one teacher in a voluntary capacity. This role has been clearly defined. In addition to the necessary planning to ensure the smooth operation of the musical activities that take place, there is good planning for the timetabled lessons in Music. Planning documentation that was made available by the music department contains much information about the many organisational practices that are in place for Music in the school.

Programmes of work have been developed for each year group. These generally included a broad list of topics to be covered. Commendably, the first-year plan includes detailed information about each topic, a broad estimated timeframe for the completion of topics and some reference to how the three components of Music—listening, composing and performing—are being synthesised into lessons. These are good practices and should be adopted for all programme planning. The TY music programme is broad and is designed to provide students with experience of a wide breadth of musical styles.

In order to progress the good work completed to date, there is a need for the music department to develop the plans for each year group further. These year plans should reflect all of the teaching and learning practices that are ongoing in the department so that they can direct teaching into the future. On that basis, the following recommendations are being made. Content should, where appropriate, be linked to the intended learning outcomes, methodologies and modes of assessment that will be used to determine the extent of the learning. The *sound before symbol* approach should be a core feature of all planning. All strategies which are currently in use in lessons to facilitate student participation should be documented in the plan. As a start, the manner in which

topics are currently being delivered should be tracked. This information would make a significant contribution to the further development of individual year plans.

In keeping with good practice, school management provide the music department with an analysis of certificate examination results and a comparison of school achievements to national norms. This information is very valuable and should be used to inform teaching and learning further.

Individual preparation for the lessons observed was very good. All resources used, including audio and ICT, were well chosen and appealed to the students. In many instances, written materials provided to students were designed by the teacher and tailored to meet their needs.

### **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, a mutually respectful atmosphere was created. Students' responses were warmly welcomed. Where there was a need for constructive criticism by the teacher, this was sensitively handled. Good routines were established in all lessons from the outset.

All lessons were very well structured and suitably paced. The material chosen was very suitable to all students. In senior cycle, students were constantly challenged to develop their music vocabulary and use appropriate music language. Younger students who were less knowledgeable in this regard were encouraged to develop these skills at an appropriate pace.

The range of methodologies used was varied and included a quiz, questioning students, students working independently on written assignments, discussions, pair work, performing on the recorder and rhythmic performances. Good efforts were made to integrate listening, composing and performing into lessons. Lessons were very successful when the *sound before symbol* approach was adopted and when students themselves were provided with opportunities to perform their compositions.

In a junior-cycle lesson observed, students were required to work in pairs to compose a rhythmic composition. Upon completion, students called out their answers to the teacher using the correct technical name for each note value. Providing opportunities to students to work together is good. However, very little time was allocated to students to perform these patterns. This was unfortunate as the full learning potential of this activity was not fully realised.

In general, the balance between teacher and student input was appropriate. However, on occasion, this was not the case. For instance, in one lesson, the teacher did not afford the students any time to identify the features of a piece of music. Instead, this information was provided to them. In another lesson, the teacher talked while students were trying to listen to a carefully chosen piece of Music. It is recommended that attention be given to ensuring that there is an appropriate balance between teacher and student input in all lessons.

The standard of teaching in all of the classes visited was very good. From the outset, the teachers established high expectations of the students who in turn rose very competently to these challenges. Students were monitored for all activities and where necessary, individual help and support was provided to students.

The quality of learning displayed by students was equally very good. This was evidenced by the standard of analytical information provided by students after listening to Music, the standard

achieved by students in written activities, the ability to recall extensive quantities of information from previous lessons and to apply musical technical language in listening exercises. Practical activities were incorporated into all lessons observed and generally took the form of clapping exercises, recorder performances or class-based performances on their chosen instruments.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Music students in this school are assessed regularly through formal house examinations, “mock” certificate examinations for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students and class assessments. Parents are made aware of students’ progress through the annual parent-teacher meeting and the student journal. Reports are sent home at regular intervals.

The music department has developed an assessment policy which describes a variety of assessment practices currently in use. Students’ homework and class work is monitored and assessed very frequently and this is good. Music students are assessed through the completion of worksheets, homework assignments and questioning in lessons. Students’ copies and manuscripts are thoroughly corrected and it is good to note that feedback contained lots of helpful comments and words of encouragement for the students. 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.

There is an expectation that students will store all materials and resources provided by the teacher in folders. This practice was not seen to be implemented consistently across all class groups. This should be addressed as these materials will function as useful sources for revision. These folders should also be monitored regularly. Records of students’ progress in assessments are kept by the teachers and this is very good practice. However, the marks assigned to students for homework are not recorded. The music department should also keep records of a selection of homework assignments from time to time.

Patterns of attainment in certificate examinations indicate that students are achieving well. However, there is scope to further explore these trends to ensure that all students are reaching their full potential.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The systems in place to facilitate students’ selection of optional subjects for study in both the junior cycle and senior cycle offer a high level of choice and flexibility to students.
- A wide array of extracurricular musical activities is available for students.
- Budgetary arrangements in the school are supportive of the subject and resources for Music are very good.
- The music department have engaged in a high level of continuing professional development.
- The quality of department planning and co-ordination of Music is good in this school.
- Individual preparation for the lessons observed was of a very good quality.

- In all lessons, a mutually respectful atmosphere was created and all lessons were very well structured and suitably paced.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good.

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

- The music department should develop the plans for each year group further and the *sound before symbol* strategy should be at the core of all music lessons.
- In all lessons, students should be provided with sufficient time to develop their own critical responses before the teacher provides supplementary information.

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