An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Home Economics
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire agus Íde
Newcastle West, County Limerick
Roll number: 64170L

Date of inspection: 24 March 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 Scoil Mhuire agus Íde, Newcastle West. 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 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 planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT – MAIN POINTS

There is a good level of provision and support for Home Economics in Scoil Mhuire agus Íde, and the subject has a high profile in the school.

With the exception of Transition Year (TY), where all students study Home Economics, the subject is offered as an optional subject on the school’s curriculum. In junior cycle, overall uptake levels in the subject are very healthy, although the uptake level amongst the current second-year group is noticeably lower. This trend is also apparent in the numbers of students studying Home Economics in previous years, for example the class of 2009. Overall uptake of the subject amongst boys is also, relatively speaking, strong, and therefore a good gender balance in uptake is obvious. Comparatively speaking, general uptake levels in senior cycle are not as consistently high as those witnessed in junior cycle. It is suggested that this is worth some further exploration by management and the members of the home economics department, in order to identify the reasons for the significant decline in the numbers studying the subject to Leaving Certificate level. This will also present an opportunity to discuss strategies that might be implemented to redress the identified trend. Higher-level aspirations are fostered in students by the members of the home economics department who also demonstrate an awareness of the need to continue to promote uptake of Home Economics in the school.

A system of open subject choice in senior cycle facilitates an equality of access to all subjects in the school. If and when demand dictates, Home Economics is offered in both senior cycle subject bands. Both of these findings are very positive. In junior cycle, incoming first-year students are required to choose three optional subjects from a list of four, refining that choice at the end of first year to two of their original three choices. As the current system is having a periodic impact on overall uptake levels in Home Economics, management and staff are encouraged to explore how this identified impact might be offset for future years.

Overall, there is good timetabled provision for the subject. That said, the possibility of providing one double period and two single periods in first year, as opposed to the current provision of one
double and one single period, could be explored by management. Deployment is very satisfactory with two, qualified professionals teaching the subject. In addition, deployment is also fair and equitable, with a rota operating in relation to the teaching of different year groups. Teachers avail of any relevant continuing professional development (CPD) activities on offer, and are supported by management in engaging in such opportunities. Management provides an opportunity on an annual basis for subject departments to submit and discuss subject-specific timetable requirements, which senior management endeavours to accommodate. Timetabling practices also seek to ensure that class sizes are conducive to the safe and effective delivery of the more practical elements of each syllabus.

The subject is very well resourced, including provision and access to information communication technologies (ICT). It is very positive that provision has also been made in the food studies room for reverse-cycle fans, a demonstration mirror and a microphone. Specialist rooms are well equipped and maintained and effective systems exist for the replacement and updating of equipment. A set of safety guidelines has been devised for each room. It was clear that due care and attention is given to the active management of health and safety during class. Of particular credit is the appropriately termed ‘Responsible Care Contract’ which parents and students are requested to read, date and sign. A very comprehensive personal accident form is also in use. Management and the members of the subject department are advised to develop a subject-specific health and safety statement which would identify the specific hazards in each room, as well as the level of risk attached to each hazard and the control measures that need to be implemented or followed in order to reduce the likelihood of a hazard occurring. This, in turn, should inform a review of classroom rules.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The home economics department has adopted a team approach to subject department planning. This approach is proving very successful, as it is supported by a very strong collegiality and a very obvious spirit of co-operation. As a result, much work has been undertaken and the department’s planning work is an area where the collective experience of the department really comes to the fore. Teachers’ professionalism is reflected in their planning, both in terms of subject department planning and in planning for individual lessons. The department’s approach to planning was also found to be very proactive. A SCOT analysis, identifying the subject’s strengths, challenges, opportunities for development and any possible threats has, for example, been completed. Furthermore, much effort has been expended on seeking to address one of the emerging challenges. This relates to uptake in the subject, which has been discussed in the previous section.

Clear structures have been put in place to support teachers in planning tasks. This includes: provision by management of time for formal department meetings; the willingness of the teachers to meet informally, often on a daily basis, and an approach to timetabling which facilitates this practice; as well as the maintenance of comprehensive minutes for all meetings.

Outline programmes of work have been prepared for each year group. These demonstrate a number of positive, as well as interesting features. Junior cycle programmes of work, for example, are time-based, detailing the work to be covered on a month-by-month basis, while senior cycle programmes detail the work to be covered on a week-by-week basis. This is applauded. A very interesting approach, and one which was obvious in the first- and second-year programmes of work, is the development of a graphic organiser which represents and summarises
the monthly programmes of work. The inclusion of a theme approach to curriculum delivery, and one which seeks to include topics from each of the five areas of the Junior Certificate syllabus was also apparent in these documents. This approach, which supports an integrated, best-practice approach to topic delivery, is very positive. The organisation of this information in such a user-friendly way also supports department’s practice whereby programmes of work are issued to students. This latter practice is also highly praised, as it has a role in motivating students and in fostering their interest and enthusiasm for the subject and the topics planned for exploration. Teachers are advised to seek to ensure that at all times programmes of work are based on the syllabus rather than the text book is use.

Some progress has been achieved in relation to the development of more detailed programmes of work, in that some attention has been given to the identification of each of the following: learning outcomes; suitable homework; and assessment modes. It was also reported that teacher journals possess much information relating to these three areas as well as in relation to resources and methodologies, and provide in essence, a record of work covered. This practice is very highly praised. It is suggested therefore that this valuable information be combined with the existing outline programmes of work with a view to the development of a document that would reflect how Home Economics is taught and assessed in Scoil Mhuire agus Íde. This should be completed on a phased basis. To begin, for example, one junior cycle and one senior cycle outline programme of work could be further developed.

The subject plan includes a section relating to providing for students with additional educational needs, including students with special educational needs, students for whom English is a second language and exceptionally able students. This level of planning is highly praised.

Planning for the provision of co-curricular, cross-curricular and extracurricular activities designed to enhance students learning in Home Economics is another planning activity of the subject department that is prioritised.

There was evidence of very thorough planning for the lessons that were observed as part of the subject inspection. This included the preparation and presentation of detailed lesson plans. The inclusion in such plans of the intended learning outcomes is particularly credited. Lessons demonstrated an appropriate and very clear consistency with the agreed, outline programmes of work.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning in Home Economics in Scoil Mhuire agus Íde is very good.

Lessons were purposeful, with the lesson intention being shared with students at the outset. This included the identification of the lesson’s intended learning outcomes, an approach which is particularly praised. Teachers sought to demonstrate continuity with prior lessons through, for example, the examination or review of previously explored, relevant topics. This is good practice. A wide range of resources was prepared and collected for use in lesson delivery, for example, handouts, worksheets, quiz sheets, product samples, and video. In addition to the provision that was made for students who are good auditory learners, excellent provision was made for both visual learners and the students who learn more effectively by doing. PowerPoint presentations were a feature of all lessons. The very obvious use of ICT by the home economics teachers in
Scoil Mhuire agus Íde, and their recognition of its value as an aid to teaching and learning in the subject, is a very positive finding.

Lessons were well structured, with smooth transitions from one activity to the next. Several strategies were employed in the teaching of topics, the majority of which sought the active participation of students and included strategies which promoted collaborative learning, such as think, pair, share. In addition, student activity was very well organised and managed. Each of these qualities is highly praised. The students’ tendency, in particular in senior cycle, to engage in very natural note-taking, as well as, and as observed in one TY lesson, the issuing of handouts designed to promote students’ independent reading and learning, serve as fine examples of the department’s emphasis on promoting student autonomy relative to their learning. This outlook, and the associated provision, is highly commended.

In one lesson, very clever use was made of the school context for the teaching of the design brief process. In this instance, a request from the principal, that students would consider designing a school scarf, helped to increase the relevance of the process and its associated learning. This demonstrates a clear willingness on the part of the subject department to seek out and avail of opportunities that would help to ensure learning is made as meaningful as possible for students. This approach was clear in all other lessons too by including reference to, for example, television programmes, calendar events and certificate examination requirements, as part of lesson content. In another lesson, there was a clear link being established between in-class learning and a co-curricular activity planned to support students’ learning. This degree and type of planning is very valuable and is, therefore, highly commended. In this instance students were introduced to the theory relating to HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point), essentially preparing the students for a visit to a local bakery which operates such a system, thereby increasing the value of the planned visit.

Teacher instruction was clear and accurate, with thorough explanations being provided in all lessons. An appropriate emphasis was placed in lessons on key words and concepts, as well as on the examination of students’ understanding and knowledge of same. To this end, very good use was made of the whiteboard. Opportunities to review, revise and examine other relevant student learning were also well utilised during lessons. In examination classes, there was a good emphasis on examination papers and the desirable approaches to answering the different types of questions. Timing, technique and marking schemes were also discussed and emphasised. As appropriate, students’ textbooks were used to support teaching and learning in the topics being explored. Questioning was effectively utilised to involve students in lesson content and to examine student learning, both past and current.

Good classroom management strategies at lesson outset supported the creation of an atmosphere that was supportive of both teaching and learning. Classroom atmosphere is very positive, supported in the main by a very good teacher-student rapport. Print-rich environments have been created with rich displays of, for example, posters, photographs and examples of students’ work in each room. Provision for other school-specific, room resources was also very obvious. This included magazine racks, housing reading material and student activities, a vegetable patch preparation area, and a year-planner notice-board. Much of this suggests a commitment to teaching and learning on the part of teachers that goes beyond the demands of the syllabus, and which seeks to develop in students a passion for subject matter relevant to and related to the overall aims and objectives of both syllabuses. This is deserving of much praise.
ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment modes is utilised in determining students’ progress and attainment in Home Economics. The test papers reviewed as part of the subject inspection, demonstrated a consistency with the design and layout of past certificate examination papers. This is praised. It is very positive that students’ attainment in all examinable components of the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate syllabuses is assessed, and that a mark, grade or comment relative to each area is provided in relation to this work. This is consistent with syllabus recommendations. In addition, students are issued with aggregate marks at key times during the school year, an approach which acknowledges a range of skills and aptitudes and, thereby, provides a more accurate indicator of students’ actual achievement in Home Economics. This approach informs the expectations of teachers, parents and students, relative to the certificate examinations and, as a result, is particularly commended.

Homework was assigned in each lesson, and students’ copybooks and workbooks indicated that homework is assigned on a regular basis. Overall, a range of approaches was seen to be employed in relation to correcting students’ completion of homework assignments. It was very positive to note that a percentage of students’ copybooks bore evidence of the annotation of students’ work. In these instances, teacher comments affirmed students’ efforts, and provided encouragement and direction for future exercises. This approach is encouraged for wider use. The use of self-assessment and peer assessment was also obvious, facilitated in the main through the in-class correction of students’ work, which is facilitating some informal teacher monitoring of students’ ability to complete assigned exercises. However, where this was observed, it appeared to be the main approach being utilised. As a result, it is strongly suggested that this approach requires supplementation with, for example, the periodic collection and formal monitoring of students’ homework.

Reporting on students’ progress and achievement in Home Economics is supported by a good approach to record-keeping, with teachers’ journals being used to support the practice. A significant amount of information is recorded in journals including, as detailed by the teachers, attendance, behaviour, participation levels, homework, test results, practical assessment grades and the outcomes of in-house and pre-examinations. Good reporting structures have been put in place by management, which were found to support the work of the department in the area of assessment.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a good level of provision and support for Home Economics, as evidenced by management’s approach to the areas of timetabling, deployment and resourcing.
- A system of open subject choice in senior cycle facilitates an equality of access to all subjects in the school, including Home Economics.
- Due care and attention is given to the active management of health and safety.
- A very strong collegiality and a very obvious spirit of co-operation support the planning work of the department, which is well advanced.
- Clear structures have been put in place by management to support teachers in planning tasks.
• Outline programmes of work have been prepared for each year group, and these demonstrate a number of positive, as well as interesting features. Progress has also been achieved in relation to the development of more detailed programmes of work.
• There was evidence of very thorough planning for the lessons that were observed as part of the subject inspection.
• The quality of teaching and learning in Home Economics in Scoil Mhuire agus Íde is very good.
• Approaches to the formal assessment of students’ progress and attainment in Home Economics were found to be wholly consistent with syllabus recommendations.
• Reporting on students’ progress and achievement in Home Economics is supported by a good approach to record-keeping and good, whole-school reporting structures.

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

• It is recommended that trends in uptake levels in Home Economics, particularly at senior cycle, be monitored and strategies to promote uptake be explored.
• As the current subject choice system operating in junior cycle is having a periodic impact on overall uptake levels in Home Economics, school management and staff are encouraged to explore how this identified impact might be offset for future years.
• School management and the members of the subject department are advised to develop a subject-specific health and safety statement.
• Teachers, if not already doing so, are encouraged to provide for the formal, monitoring and correction of students’ homework.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Home Economics at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

Published June 2011