Subject Inspection of Home Economics
REPORT

Coláiste Íosagáin,
Portarlington, Co Laois.
Roll number: 68680R

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REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HOME ECONOMICS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Íosagáin, 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 senior management team. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Home Economics is a well-established optional subject in Coláiste Íosagáin. The subject-specific notice boards adjacent to the home economics rooms promote the subject’s profile within the school community. Student uptake of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Home Economics is currently very good. Evidence would suggest that the subject is traditionally chosen mainly by girls. As a result, student uptake can be largely dependent on the proportion of girls in each year group. It is recommended therefore that the home economics team explores strategies to promote Home Economics as an optional subject with appeal for all students, in order to improve gender balance and maintain uptake. It was noted in school documentation that Leaving Certificate Home Economics may only be available to students who have studied the subject to Junior Certificate level. This practice should be reviewed as part of the strategies devised.

The school timetable facilitates very good access to Home Economics. In junior cycle and senior cycle the subject is available on two option lines. This arrangement provides flexibility in subject choice. School management is very conscious of the need to assist first-year students in making informed subject choices. Various mechanisms to support this very good practice have been tried over the years and this is to be commended. In the current year, first-year students had one block of four periods of each optional subject during the first week of term. While it is laudable to support informed decision-making among students, the benefits of this practice in supporting subject choices should be kept under review. Consideration could be given to providing a short taster programme that would allow students greater access to each optional subject before decisions are made. If a taster programme was introduced, in order to optimise students’ learning, the home economics department would need to devise a plan for the duration of the taster programme that complements the normal first year programme of work.

It is commendable that students who opt for the Transition Year programme (TY) study Home Economics. This can inform subject choice for the Leaving Certificate. Senior cycle students, and their parents, are supported in relation to subject choice as part of the school’s guidance programme. It is laudable that the option bands in fifth year are generated from students’ preferences and that every effort is made to accommodate students in their subject selection.
Home Economics benefits from a good level of provision and whole-school support. The amount of time allocated to each year group is in line with syllabus requirements. The arrangement of this time into single and double lessons is a particularly good means of facilitating effective continuity in teaching and learning. However, the manner in which the lessons are spread across the week merits attention. In the case of one class it was noted that two lessons, one double and one single lesson, are timetabled on the same day of the week. The remaining lesson is scheduled the following day. This arrangement is unsatisfactory as the lessons are tightly concentrated over two days, resulting in a gap of almost one week between lessons. Students who may be absent on a day when a number of home economics lessons are scheduled are particularly affected. In the context of future timetabling such practices should be avoided.

The current deployment of teachers to Home Economics merits review. The home economics team comprises two specialist teachers. The loss of a third home economics teacher, who had been employed as part of a job-sharing arrangement, presented difficulties for management in terms of flexibility in the deployment of specialist hours this year. As a result Hotel, Catering and Tourism (HCT) could not be offered as part of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. This is regrettable, given the fact that HCT had been a vibrant component of the programme. Furthermore, the number of class periods allocated to Home Economics in TY was reduced to one double lesson per week. The contextual factors relating to staffing are recognised but a review of each subject specialist’s timetable indicates that there may be some scope to refine the deployment of specialist hours as well as to realign the balance of subjects taught. Therefore it is recommended that management maximise the deployment of available specialist hours. In this context, the feasibility of re-introducing HCT as an elective or vocational specialism could be explored as a means of retaining the breadth and balance of the LCA programme.

Very good specialist facilities are available for Home Economics. Both kitchens are well resourced and organised. Senior management is very supportive of requests made for additional equipment. A textiles room is also available but it is mainly used as a classroom for other subject areas. At the time of the evaluation it was reported that practical textiles lessons take place in the kitchens. As neither kitchen is designed as a dual-purpose room, in the interests of health and safety it is recommended that this practice ceases. All practical textiles lessons should take place in the textiles room. There is also scope to explore the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to support the teaching and learning in Home Economics. Therefore, it is recommended that the home economics team develops a strategic plan that demonstrates concrete strategies for utilising and embedding ICT in the teaching and learning in Home Economics. This plan would be useful in establishing resource needs that can be met over time, as resources permit.

Good health and safety routines are apparent for Home Economics. A hazard analysis and risk assessment has been devised for each specialist room. This is very good practice. As the textiles room is a specialist room, management, in consultation with the home economics team, should establish health and safety procedures that will be followed by other classes using the room. These routines should be clearly displayed and be communicated to everyone using the room.
Planning and Preparation

Subject department planning is well established and a collaborative approach underpins the planning practices evident. The teachers are very committed to the continued development of the subject. The subject co-ordinator is selected on the basis of seniority. As this is a voluntary position, it is recommended that the post rotates among the home economics team to share the workload, allow each teacher assume a leadership role in the development of Home Economics and build capacity within the team.

A professional and systematic approach to subject department planning is evident. Records are kept of all planning meetings to facilitate continuity and record progress and good work is apparent in the development of a subject plan. It is highly praiseworthy that a culture of reflection and self-evaluation is evident in this work. For instance, a very detailed and informed analysis of student outcomes in the state examinations is submitted by the home economics team to the board of management on an annual basis. It is evident from planning documentation that the outcomes of this analysis has informed on-going subject planning in areas such as homework practices, the sequencing of content in the programme plans and the further integration of the design brief process to support delivery of the practical coursework components of the home economics syllabuses. This is excellent practice.

Common programmes of work have been devised and are implemented. The current programmes outline a basic schedule for the delivery of topics. A separate schedule for some of the practical work, together with lists of generic resources and assessment procedures, are also included. The full range of practical coursework completed should be documented. This can ensure that a balanced and incremental approach is evident in the development of students’ procedural and manipulative skills. The listed coursework should also be integrated into the sequence of lessons to maximise the integration of theory and practice. To build on the good work already evident, it is recommended that the next stage of programme planning focus on the development of differentiated learning outcomes for each topic or thematic unit of work. In sequencing lesson content and devising learning outcomes, further attention should be given to integrating topics from within and across core areas of each syllabus. This would support the integrated approach recommended in home economics syllabuses. Teaching strategies and resources that proved particularly effective should be discussed regularly at planning meetings and be incorporated into each programme plan.

In keeping with good practice, the design brief process is an integral component of the junior cycle programme. A tiered approach to the development of students’ evaluative skills is proactively supported through the use of a number of well-designed evaluation templates that are introduced on a phased basis from first year through to third year. This is highly commendable practice.

The TY Home Economics, which is based on a food and nutrition module, would benefit from further development. To optimise the learning potential of this module, it is recommended that the TY plan be reviewed. The plan should be underpinned by a set of learning outcomes that identify key knowledge and skills that students will develop. The learning outcomes should be appropriately differentiated to support the learning needs of students who may not have studied Home Economics for their Junior Certificate while at the same time challenging those who have previous experience of the subject. The potential of cross-curricular links through the development of thematic units of work should be investigated. Assessment criteria and
performance indicators should then be devised for each assessment component. These criteria should be shared with students and form the basis of feedback given on completed work.

To promote a student-centred and integrated approach to the Leaving Certificate food studies practical coursework, it is recommended that the assignments be spread more evenly throughout the programme plan. Lessons to explain the routines for compiling the coursework journals should also be documented, particularly as progress is made from one area of practice to another.

A very good range of resources have been developed to support the teaching and learning of Home Economics. These resources are systematically filed and are easily accessible to each member of the team.

All home economics classes are mixed ability. To support planning for differentiation, it is laudable that the learning-support department provides a range of information regarding the needs of individual students. Teaching methods that support differentiation and inclusion should be discussed further at team meetings.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of advance planning and preparation for the lessons observed was good. All lessons were in keeping with the agreed programmes of work. Some very good use of additional resource material such as worksheets, newspapers and magazines was also noted. This very good practice supported students’ learning by linking the lesson content to the everyday experiences of the students or reinforcing key points of information.

All of the lessons had a clear focus and were, in most instances, pitched and paced at a level that suited the range of student abilities and learning styles typical of mixed-ability settings. It was noted positively that learning outcomes were shared with students at the start of each lesson. This proved effective in setting the scene and engaging students with lesson content. However, to maximise the learning potential of this strategy, it is recommended that the planned outcomes are re-visited towards the end of each lesson to assess students’ learning, affirm effort and clarify points of information.

In some of the lessons observed there was evidence of very good continuity with previously taught material. This very good practice supports students’ learning. In some instances specific areas of the course that related to the subject being taught were effectively integrated into lesson content. For instance, in one lesson where students were preparing for an upcoming practical, opportunities were created to apply theoretical knowledge to practical skills. This very good practice is in keeping with the integrated approach underpinning Home Economics. In some of the other lessons observed there was scope to optimise this approach. Therefore, when planning learning outcomes for lessons, teachers should be mindful of the need to link relevant topics within and between core areas of each syllabus.

Teachers displayed a high level of subject expertise in all of the lessons observed and some very good strategies to enhance student learning were noted. Some worksheets were particularly well designed to support the development of students’ literacy skills. In one lesson students were asked to complete a wordsearch which effectively reinforced key terminology on household technology. In another lesson the use of small illustrations on a worksheet acted as very good prompts for students as they compiled the rules for making pastry. Some good use of questioning was observed in lessons. Best practice was evident in instances where there was a good balance of
directed and open style questioning to assess individual levels of student learning. Some good use was made also of the board to support learning and reinforce key terminology. While some pair-work was observed, there was a tendency to be over-reliant on teacher-led activities in the theoretical lessons observed. In accordance with the home economics team’s stated aim of supporting mixed-ability teaching, it is recommended, in lessons where there may be a tendency for students to be passive, that a greater range of teaching methodologies be used to accommodate the various learner styles and provide additional opportunities for teachers to assess student learning. In this context, consideration should be given to strategies that would explore the effective use of textbooks and other text-rich resources in lessons.

Very good student routines were evident for food studies practicals. In the lesson observed there was a very good balance of teacher-led and student-led activity. Spot demonstrations were well used to refine students’ manipulative skills and integrate relevant food preparation theory. However, chances to integrate nutritional information into practical lessons should also be considered and optimised. During the lesson students demonstrated a commendable ability to work on their own and in pairs. They displayed a very good level of practical and procedural skills, given their level of experience. It is laudable that very good attention was paid to the integration of stages of the design brief process. To enhance practice, it is recommended that the evaluation sheets are given to students at an earlier stage in the lesson so that they can fill out the relevant sections when time allows. Students should also be encouraged to complete the evaluation based on a critical appraisal of their own dish rather than the ideal product.

Classroom management was very good in all of the lessons observed. Teachers affirmed student efforts. Students also displayed a sense of security in seeking additional clarification if needed. The learning environment, both inside and adjoining the specialist rooms visited, was greatly enhanced by the organisation of themed notice boards containing a range of newspaper articles and leaflets, displays of students’ textile coursework and photographs of student achievements. Such practices are highly praiseworthy as they help to stimulate and engage student interest. Displays of student work also promote a sense of student ownership and responsibility for the creation of a stimulating learning environment.

Very good progress was evident in the students’ copybooks examined during the evaluation. It was noted that students are required to compile summary notes from textbooks to assist learning. To support students in this established practice, it is recommended that consideration be given to the use of graphic organisers such as mind maps as a revision tool to support learning. Observation of students’ practical coursework indicated very good levels of creativity in the interpretation of the design brief. A very good standard of appropriate craft and textile skills was also evident.

**ASSESSMENT**

Students of Home Economics are challenged and encouraged to aim for high academic standards and, where possible, to take Home Economics at the highest possible level in the certificate examinations. Student attainment levels are generally very good. However, participation rates at higher level in Junior Certificate Home Economics should continue to be carefully monitored by the home economics team.

In keeping with good practice, a range of assessment modes is used to monitor student achievement in Home Economics and to provide feedback on a regular basis. These include oral questioning, class tests and the on-going monitoring of project and practical work. Homework is
regularly assigned to students in accordance with the procedures outlined in the whole-school homework policy. A commendable level of consultation with all partners within the school community informed the development of the homework policy. However, it was noted that it is school policy that formal homework, as described in the whole-school homework policy, is not applicable to LCA students. Home tasks or homework activities are very beneficial in reinforcing and supporting class-based learning and in promoting learner autonomy. Therefore, it is recommended that the whole-school homework and assessment policy be amended to include students participating in the LCA programme. This would promote consistent assessment practices across all subject areas.

Observation of student copybooks and folders indicated that a good range of homework activities is assigned to students on most curriculum programmes. Some very good practice was evident where useful teacher comments provided valuable feedback on students’ written work. This good practice enhances learning by informing students about their own individual progress, highlights areas for improvement and assists students to reach their full potential. At the next review stage of the homework policy for Home Economics, consideration could be given to documenting students’ subsequent responsibilities on receipt of this marked work. To build on the very good practices already evident, it is recommended that the home economics team reviews the range of homework assigned to LCA students in order to enhance current practice and provide additional formative assessment opportunities. The range of activities assigned should complement all assessment objectives of the programme. Non-traditional types of homework, such as research, recording observations, analysing television programmes and gathering samples of everyday materials for use as learning supports in lessons could be explored.

In-house examinations are held at Christmas and summer. Some very good summative assessment practice is evident in the organisation of these exams. Common examinations are set where appropriate and feasible. This is very good practice. Where appropriate the mark allocated to each section of the question is clearly outlined to students. This laudable practice trains students in the development of examination techniques such as the timing and depth of treatment in answering questions. In some instances students are awarded an aggregated mark for a written examination and an assessment of the relevant coursework components. As these procedures assess all components of the syllabuses and support the relevant assessment objectives, they are a good indicator of students’ performance in the subject. It is recommended that this good practice be extended where relevant. To enhance practice, it is recommended that the home economics team reviews the format of written papers drafted for in-house examinations. The revised format should be in keeping with each relevant certificate examination. For instance, all papers should include long-answer questions typical of the styles included in the certificate examinations. It is important to be mindful that some of the questions posed should be designed to assess higher-order thinking skills such as the analysis, synthesis and evaluation of information.

Records of student attendance and assessment outcomes are stored systematically in the teachers’ diaries. This good practice helps to build a profile of students’ progress and achievement in the subject over time and is a useful evidence base when providing advice on examination levels to students and parents. Results are communicated regularly to parents by means of reports and at the parent-teacher meetings.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation

- Home Economics is a well-established optional subject in Coláiste Íosagáin.
- The school timetable facilitates very good access to Home Economics.
- Very good specialist facilities are available for Home Economics.
- A professional and systematic approach to subject department planning is evident. A culture of reflection and self-evaluation informs this planning process.
- The design brief process is planned as an integral component of the junior cycle programme.
- A very good range of resources has been developed and is centrally stored to support the teaching and learning of Home Economics.
- The quality of advance planning and preparation for the lessons observed was good.
- Teachers displayed a high level of subject expertise and some very good strategies to enhance student learning were noted during the evaluation.
- Very good routines were evident in the practical food studies lesson observed.
- Students displayed a very good level of practical and procedural skills.
- Students are challenged to aim for high academic standards.
- Observation of student copybooks and folders indicated that a good range of homework activities is assigned to students on most curriculum programmes.
- Some very good summative assessment practice is evident.

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

- Management should maximise the deployment of available specialist hours to facilitate optimal continuity in teaching and learning and to support a broad LCA programme design.
- All practical textiles lessons should take place in the specialist textiles room.
- The TY plan should be reviewed and further developed to optimise its learning potential.
- In lessons where there may be a tendency for students to be passive, a greater range of teaching methodologies should be used to accommodate the various learner styles.
- The home economics team should review the range of homework assigned to LCA students in order to enhance current practice and provide additional formative assessment opportunities.

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

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