Subject Inspection of Physical Education
REPORT

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

Date of inspection: 25 March 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Mhuire agus Íde. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Physical Education 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 lessons 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

All junior cycle classes in Scoil Mhuire agus Íde have a double period of Physical Education per week. While this level of provision is not uncommon in many schools throughout the country, it falls short of the recommendation of the Department of Education and Science Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools (2004-2005) which recommends a minimum of two hours timetabled provision per week for all students. The provision at senior cycle is less satisfactory however. While Transition Year (TY) students have a double period of Physical Education, fifth-year and sixth-year students have two single periods of Physical Education. This provision makes it difficult for students to engage in any meaningful learning in physical education lessons and the difficulties experienced by the school in motivating sixth-year students, in particular, to participate in Physical Education lessons can be seen, in part, as a function of this timetabling arrangement. As time has to be allowed for students to change at the start of each lesson and further time allowed for them to change and possibly shower at the end of the lesson, the time available for actual physical activity can consequently be as little as twenty minutes in a lesson of forty minutes’ duration. This is obviously a less than satisfactory experience for students. The timetabling of sixth-year physical education lessons immediately after morning break does, however, allow students to get changed during break time, should they wish to do so, thus maximising the use of the available time.

The school has adopted a lenient approach to non-participation among sixth-year students by allowing them the option of using the time as a study period for part of the year if they do not want to participate in Physical Education. While this approach could be regarded as pragmatic, and acknowledges the increased maturity of these students by allowing them to make choices relevant to their own education, the provision of a double period of Physical Education could be expected to encourage far more students to participate in physical education lessons. Allied to this, providing opportunities for senior cycle students to have an input into the activities covered and the organisation of the physical education programme is also recommended as a means of further engaging these students and in making sure that the physical education programme continues to meet their needs. Once the school is satisfied that every effort has been made to accommodate senior cycle students in giving them an input into the design of a physical
education programme that meets their needs, clear expectations should be set regarding participation in physical education class. The de facto optional nature of participation in Physical Education for much of sixth year should be removed, and it should be made clear that participation is mandatory for all students, save for exceptional circumstances involving injury or illness. Any subsequent, persistent failure to participate in physical education class should be treated as a disciplinary matter.

It is recommended that the school revisit the timetabling arrangements for Physical Education and works towards the provision of two hours of Physical Education per week for all students as recommended in the Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools, 2004-2005. The provision of this time allocation can be expected to greatly enhance the experience of all students in Physical Education and, as has been observed through the Physical Education School Sport and Club Links Strategy (PESSCL) in the United Kingdom, may also impact positively on other aspects of school life.

Although there are two teachers involved in the delivery of Physical Education in the school, only one of these teachers holds qualifications which are recognised by the Department of Education and Skills for teaching the subject. This is a matter which management should address. There are two main issues with regard to the deployment of a teacher who does not hold physical education teaching qualifications to teach physical education lessons. The first is with regard to the range of activities which this teacher can provide. A lack of expertise in certain areas of the physical education curriculum means that a teacher cannot attempt to teach any topic in which they do not have some experience and background. The consequence of this is that physical education students lack exposure to certain key activities such as gymnastics and field athletics activities for example, and experience a physical education programme in which participation in games typically dominates. This may potentially impact upon the continued involvement of some students in health and fitness activities in later life as their background in Physical Education will be quite narrow.

As the school has a fully qualified physical education teacher on staff, it is considered appropriate that all students are in a position to benefit from the breadth and quality of instruction that such a person can deliver. The school is commended, however, for its willingness to engage the expertise of external coaches and tutors to cover aspects of the curriculum which might otherwise not be covered. This broadens the range of experiences available to students and one such lesson, a dance lesson being taken by an external tutor, was observed as part of the inspection. The second issue with regard to teacher deployment is that there may be a health and safety risk involved in the timetabling of teachers without physical education teaching qualifications to teach timetabled lessons in the subject. While it must be stated that no unsafe practices were observed in any of the lessons inspected, teachers who do not hold physical education teaching qualifications cannot be expected to be as familiar with all health and safety procedures and practices in Physical Education as a qualified physical education professional. The duty of care which the school has to all its students is such that students should always be in the care of a competent professional (Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools 2004-2005, page 5(3) and page 142) and it is therefore recommended that all physical education lessons be taken only by teachers with the appropriate qualifications.

Facilities in the school are very good and include an indoor sports hall, outdoor basketball courts, and a full-sized grass pitch. The school also has access to two local G.A.A. pitches and two local rugby pitches as required. The physical education hall is well stocked with a good range of equipment to facilitate the delivery of a full curriculum in Physical Education and includes a data projector and video and a whiteboard in the balcony area which is used for delivering talks to
small groups. The physical education office, adjacent to the hall, is well stocked with a wide
range of reference and resource materials for use in the planning and delivery of the subject. The
plentiful array of charts, notices and photographs displayed on the walls of the physical education
hall and at the entrance to the hall also contributed to a positive atmosphere towards the subject.
School management is commended for its efforts in making sure that the physical education
department is well resourced.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The quality of planning and preparation physical education observed in the school was good and
individual lessons were well planned. Detailed schemes of work for each year group have been
compiled and the physical education department works through five blocks of activity per year
with each year group. It is noted, and commended, that a detailed outline of topics to be covered
in each lesson has been documented and that this contains a clear focus on student learning
outcomes. Such a focus is essential in evaluating the success of the school’s physical education
programme. The department subject plan also contains information concerning the participation
of students with special educational needs in Physical Education and it is noted that school
management makes a list of all students who have special educational needs available to the
physical education department. This enables the department to plan appropriately for these
students. Their needs are considered in line with the subject plan with a view to modifying games,
groups, skills and practices, as required.

Most of the main syllabus areas are covered in the school’s physical education curriculum and the
range of activities planned for each year is broad and balanced. Aquatics is the only core activity
area that the school currently does not provide although it is noted that plans are in place,
following negotiations with a local leisure centre, to provide some aquatics from the start of the
2010 school year. This is to be welcomed, and the school is commended for its efforts in
organising this.

Very good planning for the use of information and communication technology (ICT) was
observed in one lesson where students had the opportunity to watch video footage of their
performances in gymnastics. Cross-curricular planning opportunities have been documented
involving collaborations between the physical education department and the art, geography,
science, Irish and biology departments. Management supports professional development through
allowing the school’s qualified physical education teacher to access continuing professional
development (CPD) provided by the Department of Education and Skills and other organisations
such as the Physical Education Association of Ireland (PEAI), of which the teacher is a member.

The school provides a very good range of co-curricular and extracurricular physical activities
with hurling, football, rugby, camogie, ladies football, basketball, golf and soccer the main areas
of involvement. Recent successes have included the under 18½ football team reaching the finals
of Corn an Rúin (Munster Senior Football) and the county final, and the senior rugby team
reaching the final of the Mungrer Cup. The school also won an all-Ireland equestrian team event.
Second-year students begin each year with a residential trip to an outdoor education centre as part
of their adventure activities programme. TY students also visit an outdoor education centre in
November as part of their physical education programme and climb Croagh Patrick at the end of
the school year. All involved in promoting the involvement of students in these activities are
commended for their efforts as such involvement can be very rewarding and can form the basis
for lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity for many students.
It is recommended that the school plan to facilitate greater student autonomy in the learning process in Physical Education. In this regard, the greater use of the “rich task” approach to the teaching of the subject is recommended. It may also prove beneficial, and is strongly recommended as a means of furthering the engagement of senior-cycle students in the learning process, to provide students with opportunities to have some input into the design and delivery of their physical education programme. The excellent practice noted of providing TY students with opportunities to plan, organise and run some coaching sessions for first-year students during lunch break is regarded as an excellent entry point towards this process. The current practice of block timetabling fifth-year boys and girls separately for physical education lessons can also be expected to facilitate students’ participation in activities in which they are interested.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning observed was satisfactory in all lessons and was good in some lessons. In lessons where teaching and learning was good, there was a clear structure to the lessons and a clear focus on lesson aims and objectives. The quality of technical information provided in these lessons was good and teacher instructions and explanations were clear. The teacher was also attentive to students who were experiencing difficulties in performing set tasks and was quick to provide individual attention and encouragement when required. In lessons where the quality of teaching had some scope for improvement, there was an absence of a clear focus on the learning objectives and a subsequent lack of clear purpose to some of the drills and practices in which students participated.

Classroom management was satisfactory in most lessons and was very good in some lessons. Lessons in which classroom management was very good were characterised by student activities that maintained high levels of student interest in the topic at hand and ensured that students remained on-task and focused throughout the lesson. In these lessons, those students who could not fully participate in activities due to injury were purposefully involved in keeping score, coaching and in providing feedback to their peers. During part of a gymnastics lesson observed during the evaluation, the use of digital video was a clear help to students’ understanding of their achievement of the lesson objectives. In this lesson, and in another basketball lesson, excellent opportunities were provided by the teacher for students to comment on their own and each others’ performances. This was expertly handled by the teacher in a relaxed and comfortable manner that encouraged students to volunteer their views in a non-threatening, non-judgemental environment which they clearly enjoyed.

Where classroom management was less effective, students became easily distracted and their activity levels dropped. In order to maintain high levels of student engagement, clear targets for success should be set when students are performing tasks. These targets can be set by the teacher or, in keeping with the principles of assessment for learning (AFL), students can be allowed set their own targets for success. Other opportunities which should be used to incorporate aspects of AFL in the teaching and learning processes include the sharing of learning goals with students. Although the sharing of lesson content in advance of lessons took place with regard to some lessons, the sharing of lesson goals is preferable as this can assist students in evaluating their own performances and in becoming more reflective learners in the long-term. In some games lessons, very good use was made of conditioned and modified games as a means of reinforcing learning. This good practice should be used in all games lessons.

Students’ answers to questions displayed a good level of understanding in most lessons and the quality of the questions posed by students in some lessons exhibited a very good insight into key
concepts. In these lessons, students also demonstrated an ability to apply learning from previous lessons. The use of probing questioning by the teacher in such lessons encouraged students to reflect on their performance and was a considerable help to learning. This strategy is recommended for more widespread use in all lessons.

**ASSESSMENT**

The range of assessment modes in place in Physical Education is very good, with the provision of opportunities for practical assessment of performances particularly commendable. Opportunities for self-assessment have also been documented in the subject plan and were used to good effect in some of the lessons observed.

Records maintained by teachers include details of attendance and participation by each student in every lesson and this information feeds into the formal reporting process in the subject. Physical Education is included on school reports that are sent to parents at Christmas and summer where an overall effort comment as well as a general remark from the teacher is included in most reports. This is considered good practice and is appropriate to the subject. To further develop the reporting process in Physical Education in the school, it is recommended that the range of computerised comments that are available be extended to include additional comments appropriate to Physical Education. Alternatively, physical education teachers should avail of the capacity of the reporting software to include a customised, individually written comment for each student. Providing such personalised commentary to each student can be a significant aid to formative assessment in the subject.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The facilities available for the teaching of Physical Education are good and management is commended for making sure that the physical education department is well resourced.
- The quality of planning and preparation observed in the school is good and individual lessons are well planned.
- The school provides a balanced physical education programme and is commended for its efforts to provide aquatics to students from the start of the next school year.
- The school provides a very good range of co-curricular and extracurricular physical activities which complement learning in timetabled physical education lessons.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed was satisfactory in all lessons and was good in some lessons.
- The range of assessment modes and reporting strategies in place in Physical Education is very good.

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

- School management should revisit the timetabling arrangements for Physical Education and work towards the provision of two hours of Physical Education per week for all students as recommended in the *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools, 2004-*
2005. The timetabling of single periods of Physical Education in senior cycle in particular should be discontinued.

- School management should ensure that timetabled lessons in Physical Education should be taken only by teachers who hold appropriate qualifications in the subject as recognised by the Department of Education and Skills.
- As a means of increasing the engagement of senior-cycle students in Physical Education, the physical education department should plan for greater input from these students into the content of the physical education programme.
- Opportunities for greater use of aspects of AfL should be exploited in all lessons.
- It is recommended that the range of computerised reporting comments available be extended to include additional comments appropriate to reporting in Physical Education so as to further extend the formative nature of reporting in the subject.

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