An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of MUSIC
REPORT

Our Lady’s Secondary School
Templemore, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65440T

Date of inspection: 17 November 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Our Lady’s Secondary School, Templemore. 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 principal and subject teacher. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Music has a good profile in Our Lady’s Secondary School and is available to all students in all years. Students choose their Junior Certificate subjects by prioritising three subjects from Art, Home Economics, Technical Graphics, Metalwork, Materials Technology (Wood) and Music. This choice is made prior to entry and the school generates blocks to facilitate students’ preferences. The optional Transition Year (TY) programme includes a music module which the students follow for the entire year, and an open-choice system operates for the Leaving Certificate optional subjects. Music has been available as a Leaving Certificate subject for over five years now and the numbers continue to grow. Both management and the music teacher are complimented for the ongoing efforts to ensure its viability as a subject in senior cycle. Twice as many girls as boys opt for Music despite the gender balance in the student cohort being the reverse. This is regrettable and thus further exploration into ways of encouraging a higher uptake of Music by boys is recommended.

Timetabled provision for Music is in line with syllabus guidelines. There is an appropriate class spread of contact time throughout the week along with a sufficient number of double periods to facilitate practical work.

There is an extensive range of extracurricular activities for Music which includes choir, instrumental groups and traditional Irish groups. The students’ music experiences are also continually enriched by trips to concerts, participation in workshops and visits to the school from outside musicians and performers. Students regularly perform at charity and fundraising events and participate in competitions and talent shows such as Search for a Superstar and Comórtas do Ghrúpaí Traidisúinta. The tradition of staging a musical was revived a few years ago with such productions as Little Shop of Horrors, Grease and The Wiz. At the time of the inspection the school had just completed a successful run of the musical All Shook Up. These productions involve students from first year to fifth year and are now an established highlight in the school’s
annual calendar of events. This consistent participation of the whole-school community is indicative of the standing of and the keen interest in Music in the school and is very positive.

Our Lady’s Secondary School has a spacious music room which is very well resourced with good quality audio equipment, piano, classroom instruments and sheet music. Information and communication technology (ICT) is also prominent and in addition to student computers, the music room has a data projector and teacher computer. Access to two fully equipped computer rooms is also facilitated when required. In addition, the walls are adorned with posters and charts about Music, students’ projects and notices relating to different aspects of the music courses.

One small shortcoming pertains to the speakers for the sound system, which are positioned incorrectly. The positioning of these speakers militates against quality aural development as all audio sources come from the left of the room from the students’ point of view. It is recommended that the speakers be positioned on the wall, on both sides of the whiteboard, as this would improve the situation considerably and allow for appropriate aural stimulation for all students.

The commitment to the music teacher’s continuing professional development (CPD) is good and membership of the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) is up-to-date. It would be worthwhile to explore the association’s internet discussion forum (www.ppmta.ie). This forum could assist the teacher in networking with other music teachers, thus minimising professional isolation. The music teacher makes every effort to avail of any opportunities that arise which will allow her to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at post-primary level and ideas for CPD are factored into the department’s planning documentation.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Good progress has been made in developing Music in Our Lady’s Secondary School and much work has gone into the creation of a comprehensive subject department folder. This folder contains organisational details, planning for students with additional educational needs, extracurricular and co-curricular activities as well as details of homework, assessment and reporting procedures. It also includes detailed monthly schemes for each class group which are regularly evaluated. This is very positive.

To develop the plan further, it would be useful to draft schemes reflecting a purposeful sequencing of material with suggested learning outcomes and appropriate specific music-teaching methodologies. Planning could also be developed to facilitate more integration of the core activities of performing, composing and listening within the classroom context. Planning for the ongoing development of resources and how they would be utilised in the classroom setting as effective teaching tools is also recommended.

In general, a good level of planning for individual lessons was evident in the prior preparation of relevant materials such as audio extracts, worksheets and ICT resources. This indicates that short-term planning is at a satisfactory level.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all lessons visited, a comfortable and warm atmosphere was maintained. High expectations of attainment and behaviour were set. There was a good rapport between the students and the teacher in a secure, enthusiastic and work-orientated atmosphere. The music teacher created a
positive learning environment through effective organisation and management of learning activities. Students responded very well to this positive climate for learning and participated with enthusiasm wherever challenging opportunities were presented.

The topics covered in the course of the evaluation included Irish traditional dances, Choice Songs and Works for the Junior Certificate and Instruments of the Orchestra. Lessons observed were very well planned as was evident in the advance preparation of supplementary resource materials, PowerPoint slides, musical extracts and worksheets. The many resources available in the Music room were used to good effect and contributed to an effective learning environment. It is recommended however that ways in which ICT resources could be used even more effectively as teaching tools be explored. This is particularly true of strategies and use which would allow for more interactive engagement by the students.

In the lesson where student performances and demonstrations of Irish traditional dance tunes were observed, a collaborative learning environment was evident which ensured that students achieved successful outcomes. This is good practice. Facilitating student contributions in this manner should be extended as it allows them to take responsibility for their own learning and increases understanding. Focussing on building the role of Music and giving students the opportunity to take part in and enjoy practical music making should be one of the primary aims of every lesson.

Students were provided with guidelines and encouragement from the teacher when the focus was on worksheets with examination-type questions. Similarly, when new material was being introduced, the teacher mostly relied on clear explanations and description. These activities were almost exclusively teacher-led with few opportunities being provided where students were responsible for generating active participation. It is recommended that these strategies be expanded in order to minimise teacher-led activities and to encourage students towards more self-directed and autonomous learning. These could include activities such as note making as opposed to note taking and incorporating more higher-order questioning. Students need to be exposed to a wider range of teaching strategies to promote their own self-learning skills rather than relying on teacher instruction. A more collaborative learning environment, which would allow for more peer-peer interaction, and lessons with fewer teacher-led activities is thus recommended.

The listening element of the syllabus is very well addressed but it is recommended that more integration of the three elements would be developed to ensure a better balance between performing, listening and composing. While performing elements were appropriately linked on occasion, opportunities to include the integration of composing were often overlooked. It is recommended that greater consideration be given to the manner in which the three areas of performing, composing and listening could be integrated in musically-focussed ways in all lessons. In this way more opportunities for creative expression and experimentation from the students would evolve and there should follow a more favourable balance between students’ musical development and their preparation for the examinations.

ASSESSMENT

In all lessons observed, students were generally confident and capable, and performed to a good standard. Students’ folders, copybooks and manuscripts showed evidence of good organisation, were generally neat in appearance, and contained detailed information sheets, coursework, and worksheets.
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 includes written, aural and practical work, is given on a regular basis and complements and consolidates the activities undertaken during lessons. Other examples of formative assessment include questioning in class, completion of worksheets and projects, and practical assessments. It is good to note that students frequently receive comments and words of encouragement on their assessments. This good practice is encouraged further as regular constructive feedback enhances learning by informing students about their own individual progress. 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 teacher to helping all students achieve their potential in Music. In this light, and in keeping with the recommendations in planning and preparation above, it would be timely to organise assessment strategies which would help develop students as independent learners. This could help build up an awareness of individual students’ musical competencies balanced in terms of examination requirements and overall musical development.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music has a good profile in the school with a well-organised department that has been developed over the last five years.
- Good standards of teaching and learning, a positive attitude towards Music and a warm classroom atmosphere were significant aspects of the lessons seen during the visit.
- A well-resourced music teaching area exists in the school, and is used appropriately to support the teaching and learning of Music.
- Student involvement in extracurricular musical activities also impacts greatly on their musical development. The wide-ranging activities available to the students enrich and complement the curricular Music in the school.

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

- Planning should include consideration of student learning strategies and the inclusion of more active learning methodologies, and it could be developed further by documenting planned learning outcomes.
- A collaborative learning environment which would allow for more peer-peer interaction and lessons with fewer teacher-led activities is recommended for all class groups.
- More integration of the core activities of performing, composing and listening within the classroom context ought to be facilitated.
- The monitoring of student musical competencies ought to be formalised with a view to establishing developmental profiles.
Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teacher 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.

Published June 2011
Appendix

School Response to the Report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management wishes to acknowledge the professional and courteous manner in which this subject inspection was conducted. The Board recognises the positive report given to the teacher and compliments her on her commitment to teaching and learning in the area of Music.

Area 2 Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The Board takes cognisance of the recommendations for future development of the subject and commits to addressing the issues highlighted in the report. In response to the inspection:

- The speakers for the sound system have been properly positioned.
- The music teacher continues to engage with the PPMTA online discussion forum.
- The monitoring of student musical competencies has been formalised.
- The Music Department is cognisant of the recommendations regarding active learning methodologies/collaborative learning and will continue to develop these through the subject planning process which is well established in the school.
- The Music Department will explore further possibilities with regard to enhancing the integration of the core activities of performing, composing and listening within the classroom context.