An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Music
REPORT

Bailieborough Community School
Bailieborough, County Cavan
Roll number: 91351S

Date of inspection: 16 March 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Bailieborough Community School. 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Bailieborough Community School caters for 268 male and 264 female students. Music is available as an optional subject for both the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate examinations in this school. The systems in place for selection of optional subjects for study are satisfactory. A short subject sampling programme is provided to students entering first year so that they can experience all the optional subjects available in junior cycle in the school. They then make their selections for study for the Junior Certificate from set bands so that, in effect, they choose from a restricted range of subjects. While this system does limit students’ choices and the extent to which their individual needs and preferences can be met, the opportunity to sample optional subjects is very good. It is suggested that the limitations on choice be considered as an issue when this arrangement is next reviewed.

The system in place for choosing optional subjects in senior cycle offers a high level of choice and flexibility to students. Students entering fifth year select their preferences from a full menu of subjects prior to the commencement of the September term. In order to support students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate, an information evening is held for parents of third-year students. This is complemented by the provision of a pack which includes information regarding the music curriculum.

The music department makes every effort to accommodate students in senior cycle who have not studied this subject before. While it is not a pre-requisite for students to have studied Music in the junior cycle, beginning the study of the subject at this point usually poses particular challenges. It is recommended that management and the music department ensure that appropriate information about the challenges involved prior to making this choice is provided to senior-cycle students who have not taken Music in the junior cycle and with their parents. This information should outline the requirements of the syllabuses and emphasise the particular level of commitment required of students who pick up the subject in the senior cycle and who aim to achieve success in the certificate examinations.
The music department is staffed by one, fully qualified, specialist music teacher. Music is very well profiled in the school and is well supported by in-school management. A healthy number of students opt for Music throughout the school. However, a particularly low proportion of males study this subject despite the very good gender balance in the student population overall in the school. This is regrettable. It is recommended that the school should explore the reasons for this with a view to increasing the number of boys choosing Music. This is recommended.

Timetable provision for Music is in line with guidelines from the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the allocation of one extra period of Music per week for the Leaving Certificate class group is acknowledged here as good additional support. There is an appropriate spread of contact time throughout the week with a sufficient number of double periods timetabled to accommodate practical work.

In addition to the curricular opportunities, a wide variety of extracurricular musical activities is available for students. These include participation in all liturgical ceremonies, musical productions, the in-school talent competition School Stars, choir and provision of music for the annual ‘Seachtain na Gaeilge’. In addition, students have performed in choral competitions, and at the National Concert Hall (NCH) and the Helix. The school also makes its facilities available at weekends to the Bailieborough School of Music where any student from the area can access instrumental lessons. Through all of the activities on offer in the school, all students have access to some form of practical music-making activities which is very good. The music teacher’s commitment to these events and the school’s support in facilitating such activities are commended.

Budgetary arrangements in the school are supportive of the subject. Resources for Music are good. All music lessons are held in a classroom which is appropriately equipped with a sound system and a laptop computer on which music software has been installed. Music technology is available to students as an option for the practical component of the Leaving Certificate examination. This provision could be enhanced by exploring the range of resources in relation to music technology that is available on the internet. Installing these resources on computers in the school’s computer room would allow music technology to be delivered to a larger number of students. This is recommended.

There is an array of musical posters, both professionally printed and hand-crafted, on the music classroom walls. Students could also contribute materials through engagement in projects or other creative work. This strategy would foster their ability to work independently from the teacher and, for this purpose particularly, should be borne in mind.

Bailieborough Community School is very supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD). Attendance at the annual conference hosted by the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) is facilitated by management. This affords the teacher opportunities to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at second level and to keep up-to-date with ongoing curricular innovation. In addition, the music teacher has attended many other courses hosted by the north-eastern branch of the PPMTA. All this should pay dividends not just to the professional development of the teacher but also to the development of the department. This high level of interest in CPD by the teacher is commended.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Formal planning time is allocated to all subject departments in this school three times per year. The music teacher uses these planning times to meet with the principal and with the co-ordinator from the special educational needs (SEN) department. This form of collaboration is very good and helpful. Records of all such meetings have been kept by the music department.

The quality of planning and co-ordination of Music is very good within the school. In addition to the high level of advance planning needed to ensure the smooth operation of the many musical activities that take place, there is very good planning for the timetabled lessons in Music. The extent and quality of planning and preparation for all lessons was found to be very good. Much time has been devoted by the teacher to the creation of handouts and resources. Those which were presented at the time of the evaluation were tailored specifically for the students’ needs, were developmental in design and seamlessly integrated at the appropriate stages in lessons. In all lessons observed, there was a very good balance between teacher input and participative strategies for students.

Subject planning documentation was presented during the evaluation. This documentation outlined the organisation of the music department and included programmes of work scheduling the topics to be covered for all classes. These plans were relevant to the syllabuses and to the requirements of the examinations. A culture of self-review and continuous improvement has been established in the department. For example, this year the music teacher has identified four developmental goals for her department and has developed a strategic plan of action to achieve these objectives. This initiative is highly commended.

Meticulous attention has been paid to the development of short-term schemes of work for all year groups. These schemes have been developed for the full academic year and provide a broad indication of the intended learning objectives. Some appropriate teaching and learning methodologies are also identified. This attention to such a high level of advance planning is very good. Consideration should be given to the inclusion of pair work and group work activities when planning lessons. It is good that the instrumental skills of music students are being used and integrated into lessons.

There is a need for the music department to adopt differing approaches to short-term and longer-term planning during the planning process. It is fully appropriate that short-term planning should be detailed and thorough. However, longer-term planning should be flexible enough to accommodate the progress made in the implementation of the plan and consequently it should be less detailed and broader in nature. Short-term schemes should reflect all of the very good work that is happening in lessons and should be revisited during the course of the year. References should also be made to the manner in which the Sound before Symbol approach is being adopted in Music.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three music lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation, one in junior cycle and two in senior cycle. In all lessons, the teacher created a very positive learning environment and there was a very good rapport between the students and the teacher. Students’ contributions to class discussions were valued and praise was used effectively to acknowledge their efforts. Good routines were established in all lessons from the outset.
All lessons observed were well structured and suitably paced. The material chosen was pitched at the level of the students who were constantly and appropriately challenged to develop their music vocabulary and to use the relevant music language. The learning intention was clearly stated in each lesson. This is good as it provides a focus and a structure for the lesson and encourages students to assume responsibility for what they should understand and be able to do at the end of the lesson.

Very good quality teaching and learning was observed during the course of the evaluation. All lessons were well structured, logical and sequential. High expectations were set. Teaching and learning strategies were facilitative and invited students to actively participate in the lesson. However, there is scope to include strategies such as pair work and group work into lessons to allow increased opportunities for students to work independently from the teacher. Questioning strategies that were used by the teacher were very good and the responses that were given by the students were of a high standard. Good cross-curricular links were made between Music and Irish as part of the preparations for the annual ‘Seachtain na Gaeilge’.

In the majority of lessons observed, links were constantly being made between the activity of the lesson and the certificate examinations as the principle reason for engaging with the activity. This is unnecessary in the context of the lessons observed because it underestimated the interest students had in the subject. It is very important that students are afforded the opportunity to develop their knowledge, skills and enjoyment of Music without frequent references to the certificate examinations and this should be borne in mind.

The ‘Sound before Symbol’ approach was used in all lessons observed. For instance, in a senior-cycle lesson, students performed melodies prior to tackling the composing activity. During a listening activity which was centred on their prescribed work, students identified technical features aurally. In all lessons observed, the quality of learning was very high. An element of practical performing was incorporated into the lessons visited. It is very apparent that the time that is allocated by the teacher to practical activities is paying dividends in music. Students in the lessons observed were very competent performers. In particular, singing was very tuneful.

**ASSESSMENT**

Formal house examinations are held for first-year, second-year and fifth-year students at Christmas and before the summer holidays. “Mock” certificate examinations are held for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students in the spring. Parents are made aware of students’ progress through the annual parent-teacher meeting and the student journal. Reports are sent home following formal examinations.

Students’ work is monitored and assessed very frequently in this school and this is good. Music students are assessed through the completion of worksheets, homework assignments and questioning in lessons. Practical elements are continually assessed in the classroom. This process includes assessment under examination conditions at appropriate stages throughout the year. These methods allow for careful monitoring of students’ progress and provide a solid basis to inform preparation for the certificate examinations. Peer assessment strategies are used on occasion as an alternative method for assessing progress in practical activities. This is very good and should now be used for other components such as listening and composing.
There is an expectation that students will store all materials and resources provided by the teacher in folders. In all cases, this practice is consistent across all class groups. This is very good as these materials will function as useful sources for revision.

Students’ copies and manuscripts are thoroughly corrected and constructive comments indicating strategies for improvement are provided. Student profiles are maintained by the teacher and these consist of a record of results from assessments. It would be useful to keep records of a selection of homework assignments in order to build on these profiles.

Patterns of achievement in certificate examinations are very good.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music has a high profile in this school and the uptake for the subject is very healthy.
- A wide variety of musical activities is available to students.
- The music teacher has attended many courses hosted by the PPMTA.
- The quality of planning and co-ordination of Music is very good.
- Very good teaching and learning was observed and the ‘Sound before Symbol’ approach was adopted in all lessons observed.
- Students’ work is monitored and assessed very frequently.

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

- Students should be afforded the opportunity to develop their knowledge, skills and enjoyment of Music without unnecessary references to the certificate examinations.

A post-evaluation meeting was 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.

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