Subject Inspection of Home Economics
REPORT

Breifne College
Cavan, Co. Cavan
Roll number: 70380I

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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 Breifne College, Cavan. 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 examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the acting principal. 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

Home Economics enjoys a good profile in Breifne College. The subject is an integral component in all of the curricular programmes on offer in the school and is promoted through a range of co-curricular and cross-curricular projects. This is good practice.

The home economics team comprises two subject specialists both of whom display a very high level of commitment and enthusiasm for the continued development of the subject within the school. A very good level of on-going engagement with continuing professional development (CPD) is evident. One teacher recently joined the team. It is noteworthy that a high level of support is being provided by the established teacher and that both members of the team are attending a mentoring programme currently being provided by a third-level institution.

The arrangements for student access to Junior Certificate Home Economics merit review. First-year students are offered Home Economics on a pre-set option band against Metalwork. The fact that the subject is available on more than one option band provides good flexibility. However, uptake of Home Economics among the male student cohort is low. The current arrangement of option bands may be encouraging a stereotypical uptake of the subject along gender lines. It is recommended that school management and staff review current practice. A preferable arrangement of where option bands are informed by an initial survey of students’ preferences, as is the case in senior cycle should be considered. While it is acknowledged that the open night for first-year students supports informed decision making, consideration could be given to providing a short sampling programme for part of first year. This would allow students greater access to each optional subject before decisions are made.

Home Economics is an integral component of the Transition Year (TY) and the Leaving Certificate programmes in the school. The home economics department also makes a contribution to the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme through the provision of one of the vocational specialisms; Childcare and Community Care. Student participation rates suggest that
uptake of Leaving Certificate Home Economics is dependent on the proportion of females in each year group. In order to strengthen uptake it is recommended that the home economics team explores strategies that would make the subject a realistic option for all students in the school.

The timetabling of Home Economics is mostly in line with syllabus recommendations. The arrangement of class periods into double and single lessons facilitates good continuity in teaching and learning in almost all instances. First-year students only have the equivalent of three class periods per week arranged as one double and one single lesson. Best practice is where students are allocated the equivalent of four class periods per week in each year of the junior-cycle programme. It is recommended that this shortfall be addressed in the context of future timetabling.

Two specialist rooms comprising one kitchen and one textiles room are available for Home Economics. In-school management is supportive of requests made by the team for additional equipment. A range of dedicated information and communications technology (ICT) is also available to support lessons. The school supplies the students with all of the necessary ingredients for practical lessons in food studies. This practice is a worthwhile means of supporting the inclusion of all students in lessons. It was noted during the evaluation that the kitchen is used for lessons in other subjects. This arrangement presents challenges for the home economics teachers in terms of room maintenance and using the room to prepare lessons during their non-class time. While recognising the contextual factors that exist in the school it is recommended that this practice is minimised.

Some very good health and safety practices are evident. The health and safety rules for Home Economics have been translated to support newcomer students. Reporting and recording procedures are in place in the event of an accident. Safety notices are displayed in each specialist room. To enhance existing practice, some additional safety notices should be clearly displayed at each workstation in the textiles room where sewing machines and irons are used.

A hazard analysis and risk assessment of each specialist room recently took place. This project was led by a whole-school health and safety sub-committee. Some very good follow-up actions took place to address issues that were highlighted in the risk assessment of the kitchen. However, despite recent changes made, the kitchen remains in significant need of a complete refurbishment to provide high-quality modern specialist facilities. It is recommended that school management in association with Co. Cavan Vocational Education Committee (VEC) investigate the feasibility of re-fitting the room with modern built-in units. This should be pursued as a matter of priority in the interests of health and safety in the facilitation of practical lessons in the area of food studies.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject planning is well established in Breifne College and is facilitated by senior management through the provision of planning time three times per year. At VEC level a worthwhile initiative to enhance collaborative planning is underway. It is intended to set-up an electronic forum on the VEC intranet to allow the home economics departments from each school within the scheme to share resources and ideas. This could be an interesting means of sharing expertise and effective practice in the teaching and learning of Home Economics.

A subject co-ordinator is in place for Home Economics. This is good practice. Traditionally the position was not rotated among team members and the duties appear not to have been agreed at
whole-school level. A new co-ordinator was appointed this year in a voluntary capacity. In order to build capacity, it is recommended that this position rotates periodically among the home economics team and that the duties be agreed at senior management level.

A very good level of collegiality and collaborative practice underpins the work of the home economics team. In addition to the formal planning time provided by senior management the home economics teachers meet each week at a time that they are both not teaching classes. Records of meetings indicate that very good levels of collaboration exist in relation to organisational and pedagogical issues in Home Economics. This is very good practice.

ICT is being used effectively to support programme planning. Very good efforts are being made to catalogue and update the wide range of additional resources available. The creation of a shared electronic resource folder to store worksheets, PowerPoint presentations and relevant web links is illustrative of particularly good practice.

The subject department plan is well advanced and includes aspects of on-going self-evaluation. Priorities that have been agreed for this year include planning for resources and reviewing the teaching programme for junior-cycle textiles.

Programmes of work have been evolving and developing over many years. Good progress is evident in the development of programme plans to support the implementation of the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate syllabuses. Each plan provides details of the theoretical knowledge to be covered in terms of intended learning outcomes, suitable methodologies and resources to be used. A separate list of practical work is also included. As a next step in the development of these plans it is recommended that each plan is presented as a sequence of lessons that demonstrates an incremental and integrated approach to the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills. In sequencing lessons there is a need to integrate topics and consequently learning outcomes from within and across core areas of each syllabus. Home Economics is an applied subject. Therefore the range of practical coursework completed from first year through to third year as well as the sequence of completion of the Leaving Certificate food studies assignments should be carefully monitored so as to ensure that opportunities to integrate relevant theoretical knowledge are optimised.

The home economics team has identified the need to revise planning for junior-cycle core textiles. In this review it is recommended that the range of skills that students acquire through making the items be revised to meet fully the requirements of the Junior Certificate syllabus. In this context the requirements for students to complete separate samples of stitches should also be reviewed. To optimise learning, consideration should be given to the completion of all of the stages of the design brief process in tandem with the items made. This revised approach would enable students to develop essential knowledge and skills over time, in the areas of task investigation, problem solving, planning and evaluation. This would be a very good foundation for students who progress to the design and craft work option as part of their Junior Certificate examination. The sequence of lessons for the revised module should be carefully planned to support a logical and developmental approach to the acquisition of students’ skills.

TY was introduced into the school two years ago. To optimise the learning potential of this recently-introduced programme the Home Economics plan should be further developed. The plan should be underpinned by a set of overarching aims for TY Home Economics. Expected knowledge and understanding should be outlined as intended learning outcomes that identify key theoretical information as well as the procedural and manipulative 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. Assessment criteria and performance indicators should then be devised. These criteria should be shared with students and form the basis of the marks awarded and feedback provided.

The home economics team is very conscious of planning for the needs of students who have additional educational needs. The home economics team works in collaboration with the learning-support team and is aware of the needs of students who have individual education plans. A range of strategies is also in place to support the literacy needs of students whose first language is not English. These are very good practices.

In junior-cycle home economics classes some students are taking the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). At the time of the evaluation Home Economics was not routinely included as a subject for student-profiling purposes. This practice should be reviewed. The learning statements for Home Economics can assist in breaking down the Junior Certificate Home Economics syllabus into manageable components. This allows JCSP students to experience a sense of self-achievement on an ongoing basis. Cross-curricular statements can also help to reinforce students’ learning across a number of related subject areas as they prepare for their Junior Certificate examination. It is recommended therefore that the home economics team explores the potential of using the specific learning statements for Home Economics or contribute to the completion of some of the cross-curricular statements.

Good short-term planning was evident for all of the lessons observed. This included the preparation of a range of additional resources which were used to support effective student learning. Best practice in lesson planning was in instances where the planned content was based on students’ immediate previous learning experiences and where the lesson supported a logical progression in the completion of the planned unit of work.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Good quality teaching and learning was evident during the evaluation. All lessons had a clear focus. At the start of a number of lessons the practice of sharing the learning intentions with students was noted. This strategy proved effective in setting the scene for the lesson and in ensuring that students understood the relevance of the content being studied. To enhance students’ learning it is recommended that time is taken towards the end of each lesson to revisit the planned learning intentions. This will provide an opportunity to assess students’ learning from the lesson, affirm effort and offer further clarifications where needed.

Teachers displayed very good levels of subject expertise which resulted in appropriate attention to detail in the clear explanations given during each lesson. Questioning strategies were used to good effect to assess students’ previous knowledge of the topics under discussion. Deliberate efforts were made to enhance students’ understanding. Teachers adopted a very visual approach to the teaching of Home Economics. Colourful posters, diagrams, overhead transparencies and ICT presentations were used effectively to clarify points of information and to reinforce learning. These strategies were very well received by the students as they supported the active engagement of students in the learning process. This is very good practice. To support learning when using ICT presentations students should be given a copy of the presentation to allow them to make additional notes arising from the class discussion.
The home economics team makes a conscious effort to implement strategies to support literacy development. There was a good emphasis placed on ensuring that students understood key terminology. Sequential points of information were reinforced though the use of graphic organisers and revision sheets. These are very good practices. On occasion however there was scope to improve the effectiveness of the use of the textbook in lessons. It is recommended that the home economics team gives some consideration to strategies that promote the effective use of text books in lessons.

In the practical textile lesson observed there was a very good balance between whole-class and individual teaching. Spot demonstrations were well used to model best practice in the range of manipulative skills being developed. Students displayed good standards of manipulative textile skills, given their level of experience and expertise. Sound safety and hygiene routines were evident.

The atmosphere in all of the lessons observed was conducive to learning. The environment of each specialist room is enhanced by displays of students’ project work while thematic notice boards displayed a range of appropriate educational posters. A stock of reference books is also available to supports students’ independent learning. This is good practice.

In all of the lessons observed a very good rapport was evident between students and their teacher. Student contributions to all lessons was encouraged and affirmed. High expectations are set for students by their home economics teachers and students respond accordingly. Very good systems are in place for the maintenance and organisation of student notebooks and good progress is evident.

The teaching and learning processes underpinning the completion of the Junior Certificate design and craftwork option are in need of review. It is evident from the coursework reviewed that all students make a very similar product. This limits opportunities for students to illustrate their creativity and originality in making the item. The accompanying design brief folders, as a consequence, are also quite similar in nature. It is recommended that this practice be reviewed. The item produced should enable students to use their creativity and make use of the craft skills that best suits their interests and abilities.

Some good progress is evident in the Leaving Certificate coursework journals. In planning for the Leaving Certificate programme it is important to be mindful of the need to include strategies to support students in the completion of this work. It is worth noting that the chief examiner reports and associated marking schemes are useful resources in informing strategies to support the teaching and learning of all of the practical coursework components. These documents are available at www.examination.ie

**ASSESSMENT**

A range of assessment strategies is used to monitor students’ progress. Questioning was well used in all lessons to check students’ understanding. On occasion the use of probing higher-order questioning proved effective in challenging students to analyse and apply the information from the lesson and to make relevant links with previous learning. This is particularly good practice. Class tests are used as a regular assessment strategy. It was noted that students are required to complete test corrections on receipt of the marked script. This very good practice supports learning. In drafting in-house examinations teachers should be mindful of the format and pitch of
each paper. The regular inclusion of questions that assess students’ higher-order abilities to analyse, apply, synthesise and evaluate information is recommended. Furthermore in instances where students are still aiming for the higher-level in the certificate examination, it is very important that the format of the in-house examinations is in keeping with the relevant examination paper.

Homework is regularly assigned to all class groups to support learning and to inform lesson planning. For instance the content of one lesson observed was adjusted to provide additional clarifications on information that students found difficult in a previously assigned homework activity. This is very good practice. Some good practice in assigning a range of homework activities was evident. There were some noteworthy examples of high-quality monitoring of work. In some cases teachers provided written feedback to students, in line with the principles of Assessment for Learning (AfL). In the case of some class groups however there is a need to review the range of homework assigned or the practices used to monitor assigned work. To standardise practice it is recommended that a homework policy be devised for Home Economics. In drafting the policy it is recommended that the range of activities assigned should be reviewed to ensure that students in all class groups complete a range of long-answer and short-answer style questions, as well as research-style activities. As part of this process consideration also needs to be given as to how best to balance the amount of homework assigned with the provision of constructive feedback to students.

Some good summative assessment practice is evident. Students preparing for the certificate examinations are well supported through the provision of a structured revision programme. In the case of other students assessment modes include an examination of all of the relevant practical coursework components of the syllabus. This is good practice as the aggregate mark thus provided on the students’ report is a more accurate indicator of students’ progress than solely basing the grade on a written paper only. The marking schemes issued by the State Examinations Commission should be used to inform planning for the assessment of students’ practical food and culinary skills in first and second year (www.examinations.ie).

Students are challenged to reach their full potential in Home Economics with some very good overall levels of student attainment in the certificate examinations evident. It was noted that the subject team do not analyse students’ outcomes in the certificate examination. It is recommended that an in-depth analysis of student outcomes in the certificate examinations be routinely carried out by the home economics team. It would prove useful to analyse student outcomes against national norms while at the same time bearing in mind school-context factors. This exercise would provide opportunities to recognise positive trends and identify where issues arise. The trends emerging should inform ongoing planning for the teaching and learning of Home Economics.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The profile of Home Economics is promoted within the school and the wider community through a range of co-curricular and cross-curricular projects.
- The home economics team displays a very high level of commitment and enthusiasm for the continued development of the subject within the school.
In-school management is supportive of requests made by the team for additional equipment.

Subject planning is well established and very good collaborative practice is evident. ICT is being used effectively to support the process.

Good practice is evident in planning for the needs of students who have additional educational needs.

Teachers displayed very good levels of subject expertise which resulted in appropriate attention to detail in the clear explanations given during each lesson.

Deliberate efforts were made to enhance students’ understanding by adopting a very visual approach to the teaching of concepts.

The atmosphere in all of the lessons observed was conducive to learning with a very good rapport evident between students and their teacher.

High expectations are set for students by their home economics teachers and students respond accordingly.

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

- The arrangements for student access to Junior Certificate Home Economics should be reviewed.
- The position of subject co-ordinator should be rotated periodically among the home economics team and the duties for the position agreed in collaboration with in-school senior management.
- The teaching and learning processes around the design and craftwork option should be modified to ensure that students demonstrate more creativity and originality.
- The potential of the learning statements for Home Economics as a means of supporting learning among JCSP students should be considered.
- An agreed homework policy should be devised for Home Economics.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the acting principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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