Subject Inspection of MUSIC
REPORT

Roscrea Community College
County Tipperary
Roll number: 76069P

Date of inspection: 16 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 Roscrea Community College. 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 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. 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 enjoys a high profile in Roscrea Community College and is available to all students in all years. All students study Music for the entire year in first year after which students make their choices for Junior Certificate employing an open-choice system in which students prioritise their preferred subject options. 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 selection of the optional subjects for Leaving Certificate. The number of students opting for Music is good in both junior and senior cycles, but despite a balanced gender breakdown in the school, almost twice as many girls as boys study Music. Given the profile of Music in the school, further exploration into ways of encouraging a higher uptake 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.

Roscrea Community College has a wide range of extracurricular music activities. The school choir, which is open to all students, rehearses during lunchtime and after school and sings at the many events that occur throughout the school year. The school is in the process of developing a range of instruments which the students may rent for use during the scheme of instrumental tuition going on in the school. So far tuition is available after school in guitar, keyboard, flute, violin and drums. This scheme provides individual and group tuition in a variety of instruments. Plans are underway to avail of funding from the Music Capital Scheme, an Arts Council initiative, which is very positive. The school is in its second year of producing a TY musical having previously presented musical variety shows. At the time of the inspection preparations were already well underway for its forthcoming production of Grease. Other concerts are held throughout the year, including a January musical evening in which Junior Certificate students gain experience for their practical examinations through performing the pieces they will present.
for their examination. Traditional Irish music is also very strong in the school, and the local Comhaltas group have been winners in Fleadh Ceoil na Mumhan a number of times. The music teachers and management are complimented for the considerable investment of time and resources into these musical experiences for every student in the school.

The college uses two rooms for music lessons, one of which is considered to be the main music room. This room is suitably resourced and includes good quality audio equipment, audio resources, data projector, piano, a range of instruments and information and communication technology (ICT). The room has flexible seating which can be re-arranged quite quickly and is spacious enough to incorporate a separate performing area if required. The second room is equipped with similar resources including an interactive whiteboard. The walls in both rooms are adorned with posters, charts and students’ projects, all of which heighten an awareness of the subject. The main shortcoming concerns the second room which is a tiered demonstration room, formerly used for science lessons. This type of design with fixed seating limits the type of interaction available to the students and teachers, and diminishes the available space. It is recommended that when practicable either the feasibility of changing the room layout or moving to a room whose design is more conducive to the teaching and learning of Music be explored. Any further design to either room should take cognisance of the types of learning situations particular to Music and aim to provide as flexible a setting as is possible.

The commitment to the music teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD) is good and membership of the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) is facilitated by the school. As attending branch meetings can be problematic, the internet discussion forum (www.ppmta.ie) should be explored as it serves as a very useful networking tool. The teachers are encouraged to avail of any opportunities which will allow them to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at post-primary level, to keep up to date with ongoing curricular innovation and to network with other music teachers. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (formerly the Second Level Support Service), is also a useful source of information for CPD especially at present as a series of in-service programmes for Music is currently being organised in various education centres around the country. Details of all these programmes are available on its website (www.pdst.ie).

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

There is a good level of planning for Music in Roscrea Community College. The current plan contains a mission statement for the department and aims and objectives for music education in the school. It also includes organisational details, planning for students with additional educational needs, and general long-term and medium-term plans for all year groups. Collaborative planning is evident in the variety of extracurricular and cross-curricular activities which occur throughout the school year. There are common programmes for the five first-year groups but assessment procedures vary. It is suggested that a move towards common tests for those classes be instigated in order to get a clearer picture of the students’ progress before moving onto second year.

In order to enhance the effective planning that has already been undertaken, it is recommended that individual planning be expanded to include schemes reflecting a purposeful sequencing of material with suggested learning outcomes and appropriate specific music teaching methodologies. Planning for the development of ICT resources and how they would be utilised in the classroom setting is also recommended. Future planning should include consideration of student learning strategies and of ways of encouraging students to reflect on their learning. It
would also be important to ensure that the music department plan would be a flexible working document with a built-in formal review process to ensure that the contents remain relevant.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In all lessons visited, a comfortable and warm atmosphere was maintained. A clear and fair code of behaviour was very much in evidence. There was a good rapport between the students and the teachers in an enthusiastic, work-orientated environment. Student engagement was good and the students were secure in asking questions during the course of the lessons.

A variety of methodologies was seen with some examples of active music-making. In the main, lessons were well structured and paced accordingly, although at times a more appropriate ordering of activities, with some aspects being kept until the end of the lesson when concentration levels tend to be a little lower, would do much to optimise the learning outcomes. This is especially true when it concerns the pacing of double periods for junior cycle students, for example. The performing elements seen focussed on playing the recorder and singing. These were at a suitable standard for the levels visited. Observation of students’ practical work showed that whilst many were challenged, few students were unable to cope with the demands of the music.

Some strategies linking aspects of the curriculum were utilised to good effect as for example the senior lesson focussing on backing chords. Students in this lesson also worked collaboratively and effective musical learning was seen through meaningful engagement with musical activities. When dealing with the dictation aspects and the more technical areas of the course, care should be taken to ensure an even balance between passive and theoretical teaching, and performing and experiential learning in all lessons. The quality of teaching is less effective where teachers give too much information in lessons. Students become particularly passive and the pace of their learning is reduced. Students need to be encouraged to involve themselves as active learners, especially when dealing with the more analytical aspects of music. It is recommended that where this situation arises, students 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, akin to what was observed in the lesson mentioned above, which would allow for more peer-peer interaction and fewer teacher-led activities, is recommended.

The effective use of ICT as a teaching tool was seen in one lesson but at other times opportunities where it could have been used to enhance the learning situation were missed. This inadvertently reinforced bad practice as observed in one lesson where the teacher drew rough staves on the whiteboard rather than projecting up a blank music manuscript page and writing on that. As every student was notating the music in their copybooks by drawing rough staves themselves, it was evident that this was seen as the norm. In order to reinforce the importance of accuracy, neatness and legibility, students should either acquire manuscripts for the purpose of notating music or utilise blank staves in their workbooks or examination papers.

Although the coursework is well addressed, it is recommended that more integration of the three elements of the syllabus would be developed to ensure a better balance between performing, listening and composing. 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. Whilst acknowledging that some examples of the ‘sound before symbol’ approach were seen during the evaluation, it is recommended that this approach be consistently utilised to allow students experience a more meaningful exploration of the parameters of music. This would ensure
that opportunities to reinforce musical concepts and encouraging students to think musically are never wasted. It could also help to energise what traditionally are looked upon as ‘skill and drill’ activities such as the dictation question in the Junior Certificate.

**ASSESSMENT**

In all lessons observed, students were generally confident and capable, and performed to a good standard. Students’ folders, copybooks and the music manuscripts used by senior cycle students showed evidence of good organisation, most were generally neat in appearance, and many 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. Sometimes students receive comments and words of encouragement on their assessments but this is quite sporadic. It is recommended that this practice be expanded 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 and gain experience from the aforementioned musical evenings held in the school. 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 teachers to helping all students achieve their potential in Music. At this stage it would be in order 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.

Teachers keep records of student assessments in their individual record books and test results are recorded in the comments section of the students’ journals. School policy promotes open communication with parents and, in addition to reports issued after formal examinations at Christmas, spring and summer, regular parent-teacher meetings take place for all class groups. These meetings also provide a forum for parents to discuss any concerns or difficulties students may be having. There is also a willingness on the part of staff to meet parents at any stage if they have concerns about their son’s or daughter’s progress.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music has a high profile in the school, is available to all students on an optional basis and is well-supported by in-school management.
- 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 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:

- Given the profile of Music in the school, further exploration into ways of encouraging a higher uptake by boys is recommended.
- When practicable, either the feasibility of changing the room layout in the second music room, or moving to a room whose design is more conducive to the teaching and learning of Music should be explored.
- Individual planning should be expanded to include schemes reflecting a purposeful sequencing of material with suggested learning outcomes and appropriate specific music teaching methodologies.
- All programmes and schemes of work should be working documents that are regularly reviewed.
- More integration of the core activities of performing, composing and listening within the classroom context ought to be facilitated.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers 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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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

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

The report is a fair and accurate account of Music provision in the school. It should be noted however that our most experienced Music teacher was on leave (Maternity) and was replaced with a very junior teacher at time of inspection.

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

Individual planning will be expanded and use will be made of 33hrs as per Croke Park agreement for better planning.
Changing the room layout will be priority in school infrastructure works going forward. Every effort will be made to encourage a higher uptake by boys.