

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta  
Department of Education and Science**

**Subject Inspection of Music  
REPORT**

**Castleknock College  
Castleknock, Dublin 15  
Roll number: 60100Q**

**Date of inspection: 30 September 2009**

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**REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC**

**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Castleknock 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 two days 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, deputy principal and subject teachers. 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**

Castleknock College currently caters for 559 male students. Music has a very high profile in the school and as a subject it is available to students in all year groups. The study of Music is optional in the junior cycle and for the Leaving Certificate. Transition Year (TY) is a mandatory programme in senior cycle for all students and Music is compulsory within this. Music in TY is delivered in two modular courses, each of eight weeks' duration. In all programmes, timetabling arrangements for Music are in line with the recommendations of the syllabuses. There are a sufficient number of double periods for each class group to facilitate practical work.

In junior cycle, students choose their optional subjects for study from bands set by school management; the design of these bands means that, in practice, students can choose any combination of subjects they wish. An open-choice system is used by students when selecting optional subjects for the Leaving Certificate. All of these arrangements are appropriate. The uptake of Music by students is very impressive.

Budgetary arrangements in the school are supportive of the subject. Currently, there is no pre-determined budget in place for Music. Instead, direct requests are made to school management when resources are needed. This system is reported to work well but planning is in place to introduce fixed budgets for all subject departments including Music. Music is very well resourced in this school. Music facilities include two large and spacious classrooms, one smaller room and five practice rooms for instrumental activities. Four computers are also available and *Sibelius III*, a music software package, has been installed. Music technology is available as a choice to students as part of the practical component of certificate examinations in this school.

Good efforts have been made at creating a learning environment in the music rooms that is vibrant, attractive and stimulating for students. Some subject-related posters, both professionally printed and handcrafted, are on display. Very good storage facilities ensure that materials and equipment can be housed safely.

The music department is staffed by three specialist music teachers. This department has had some changes in staffing personnel in the current academic year arising from the temporary absence of one teacher. During the evaluation, it was apparent that members of the music department are collaborating closely together. It is good to note that where individuals have particular music strengths there is an overt willingness to share expertise. This teamwork is commended.

The school is very supportive of continuing professional development. Some teachers are members of the Post-Primary Music Teachers' Association (PPMTA). Attendance at PPMTA conferences offers opportunities for teachers to engage in constructive dialogue with fellow professionals, to remain abreast of all information pertaining to music education at second level and to keep up to date with ongoing curricular innovation. Membership is strongly encouraged.

In addition to the curricular aspects of the subject and preparation for certificate examinations, a wide variety of additional music activities is available for the students. These include participation in all liturgical ceremonies, a school choir consisting of staff and senior students which is formed on a needs basis, the bi-annual school musical, instrumental lessons and a school band. The music department is also committed to the formation of a senior choir. The commitment of the music department in facilitating all of these activities is commended.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school provides formal opportunities for subject departments to meet four times each year. Records of all such meetings have been kept by the music department. The school has developed a *Subject Improvement Plan* template. This encourages all subject departments to identify at least one area for development and to outline a strategic action plan to achieve the desired objective. This initiative is commended. It is good to note that the music teachers have made effective use of this template.

There is a good level of planning and co-ordination of Music within the school. In addition to the high level of advance planning to ensure the smooth operation of the many musical activities that take place, there is good planning for the timetabled lessons in Music. The programme of Music for TY is well planned, creative and provides a wide breadth of music experiences to students.

Subject planning documentation was presented during the evaluation. This documentation outlined the organisation of the department and programmes of work scheduling the topics to be covered. Overall, these were relevant to the syllabuses and to the requirements of the examinations. However, an examination of copies and manuscripts in some instances in junior cycle indicated that additional topics are being tackled which are more appropriate in senior cycle. It is strongly recommended that particular attention is paid, in the initial stages of planning, to ensuring that each programme of work to be delivered is suitable to the age and ability of the students concerned.

Meticulous attention has been paid to the development of a common weekly scheme of work for all year groups. These schemes were developed for the full year. This attention to such a high level of advance planning is impressive but it is very ambitious. It would be more practical for each teacher to develop short-term schemes which include planned learning outcomes, along with a consideration of learning strategies, of active methodologies and appropriate assessment procedures. This is recommended. Reference could be made to the inspectorate report, *Looking at Music*, for further advice. This is available at [www.education.gov.ie](http://www.education.gov.ie).

In the fifth-year plan, there is little evidence to suggest that the three disciplines of Music—listening, composing and performing—are being delivered in an integrated and systematic manner each month. In addition, there was no planning for the inclusion of unprescribed listening activities in other schemes of work. It is important that there is not a ‘block approach’ to music planning and that students do encounter the three disciplines in their fullness on an ongoing and integrated basis. This is recommended.

Planning and preparation for most lessons was found to be predominantly good. Lessons included the integration of resources, handouts and musical excerpts, all of which were very appropriate to the students. In most cases there was a good balance between teacher input and participative strategies for the students. This is very good practice and should be borne in mind when planning all music lessons.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Four classes were visited during the course of the evaluation, two in junior cycle and two in senior cycle. In all lessons observed the music teachers created a positive learning environment through effective organisation and a good use of humour. There was a very good rapport between the students and the teachers. Students’ contributions to class discussions were valued and praise was used effectively to acknowledge their efforts. Throughout, a comfortable and warm atmosphere was maintained.

Overall, lessons were well structured and suitably paced. The material chosen in most classes was pitched at the level of the students who were constantly and adequately challenged to develop their music vocabulary and use appropriate music language.

Some high quality teaching and learning was observed during the course of the evaluation. The *Sound before Symbol* approach was adopted in some of the lessons observed. For instance, in a junior-cycle lesson observed, students sang various scales using the *tonic solfa* approach. This was followed by a sight reading exercise where various notes were written on a chart and which the students accurately performed. Students were subsequently requested to link the *tonic solfa* to the correct named note. Students then sang in unison and subsequently in two parts. These activities were followed by recorder playing which served to further reinforce the theoretical concepts of the lesson. These strategies ensured that the students were continuously active and engaged with the content throughout the lesson.

Listening activities were most successful when students were given opportunities to analyse the music independently from the teacher. For instance, this strategy was evident in a lesson

observed which allowed students to form their own impressions of the music and think critically without any intervention from the teacher. This is good practice. A second lesson in junior cycle, where the topic-at-hand was their prescribed work, was less successful. These students were provided with too much information before they had an opportunity to listen to the music. They were then provided with an inappropriate level of analytical detail for the remainder of the activity. At this level, detailed analysis of the music should be undertaken in small steps to allow students the opportunity to build their knowledge and skills gradually. This is recommended.

In a composing lesson observed, further opportunities were provided to students to think analytically. These students listened to melodies written by their peers and identified positive features and areas for development in each melody. The lesson was conducted very sensitively and the anonymity of the students was preserved. Students remained very engaged throughout the lesson and the learning was very apparent.

In one lesson, students who were proficient on their practical instruments were encouraged to perform a part of the music. Optimising the skills of students in this way is good practice. However, these students were sent to a different room in order to practise the assigned task. Although the students concerned behaved responsibly on the day of the evaluation, this arrangement must stop immediately because of the inherent risk to health and safety arising from the lack of supervision.

Questioning strategies observed throughout the evaluation were varied and in general there was a good balance between those requiring a specific answer and those which encouraged students to think analytically at a higher cognitive level. Practical activities were incorporated into some lessons and the standard, particularly of all choral activities, was impressive.

## **ASSESSMENT**

In addition to regular house examinations at Christmas and summer and the “mock” certificate examinations for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students in the spring, formative assessment takes place in a variety of ways. Assessment strategies include questioning in class, completion of worksheets and practical assessments. 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.

Some students store materials which have been provided by the teacher in folders. These materials generally take the form of listening and composing assignments. However, during the evaluation this was not found to be consistent practice among all students. It is essential that students be given clear direction regarding the appropriate storage of materials and that this is checked regularly. This is recommended.

Monitoring of students’ work does not occur regularly in all classes. An examination of students’ copies and materials showed that many exercises had not been marked. It is essential that students’ work is monitored regularly and that a comment indicating strategies for improvement be provided where appropriate. This is recommended.

Reports issue after each set of formal examinations and annual parent-teacher meetings take place for all class groups. Patterns of achievement in certificate examinations are good but there is scope to explore this further to ensure that all students are reaching their full potential. This is recommended.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The uptake of Music is very impressive.
- Resources and facilities for Music are very good.
- A wide variety of additional music activities is available for the students.
- There is a good level of planning activity and co-ordination of Music in the school.
- In all lessons observed, the music teachers created a positive learning environment.
- Some high quality teaching and learning was observed during the course of the evaluation.
- Practical elements are continually assessed and students experience practical assessments similar to those encountered in the certificate examinations.

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

- Particular attention should be paid, in the initial stages of planning, to ensuring that each programme of work is suitable to the age and ability of the students concerned.
- It is important that there is not a 'block approach' to the teaching of aspects of the music syllabus and that students encounter the three disciplines of listening, composing and performing in their fullness on an ongoing and integrated basis.
- Students should not be assigned to tasks unsupervised during scheduled class time.
- It is essential that students' work is monitored regularly.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Music and 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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