

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

**Subject Inspection of Music
REPORT**

**Saint Vincent's Secondary School
Seatown, Dundalk, Co. Louth
Roll number: 63900R**

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[Report on the Quality of Learning and Teaching in Music](#)

[Subject Provision and Whole School Support](#)

[Planning and Preparation](#)

[Teaching and Learning](#)

[Assessment and Achievement](#)

[Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations](#)

Report on the Quality of Learning and Teaching in Music

This Subject Inspection report

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Vincent's Secondary School, Dundalk. 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 teacher, examined students' work, and had discussions with the teacher. 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 teacher. The board of management of the school was given the opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

Subject Provision and Whole School Support

The Music department in St Vincent's Secondary school, Dundalk has undergone significant changes during recent years. Substantial development in the profile of Music in the school has been achieved. For example, strong community links have now been firmly established as students are requested to perform in a variety of venues including the local parish church and the Old Folk's Home.

The uptake for Music is healthy and this trend looks set to continue. Music is a compulsory subject for all first year students. All subjects are sampled throughout first year and at the end of the year, students are obliged to select three subjects from a list of five. Two bands are formed for students at junior cycle, one strictly for higher-level students only, the second accommodating both ordinary and higher-level students, thus creating a mixed ability setting. Students in the higher-level band choose Business and Science and one other subject from Home Economics, Art and Music. Students in the mixed band select Business and two further subjects from Home Economics, Art, Music and Science. The allocation to Music in junior cycle is good. Although first-year students only receive one period per week as a direct result of the policy of sampling, this is then increased to four periods per week in second and third year.

Students at senior cycle are well supported in making their subject choices. The Guidance Department coordinates a careers night to present the range of options available for students and the implications of all subject choices. In addition, the school guarantees as much as possible, the availability of the Guidance department to all students and parents as the need arises. The school operates a policy whereby students at senior cycle are presented with an open menu of subject options. The timetable is then created around their selection which ensures that the needs of all students are met. In this context, the school is commended.

Music currently does not play any part in the Transition Year (TY) programme. Understandably, management has sought to increase the uptake from junior cycle upwards and has utilised its personnel to that end. However, management is now committed to ensuring that Music plays a significant role in TY from September 2006 onwards and is strongly encouraged in this regard.

Provision for Music is good. There is one dedicated specialist Music room and a number of small rehearsal rooms which are used for individual instrumental lessons. In addition, there are a number of pianos (including digital), a variety of percussion instruments including Boom Whackers (tuned percussive instruments), orchestral instruments, music stands, various books, CDs, TV and video, and various other resources. Storage facilities are good whereby two large cupboards are available for all materials. Two computers with Sibelius III music software are also available to the Music department. Given the current level of integration of music technology into the teaching and learning of composition, it is recommended that the school, as part of its long-term planning, now devise strategies to ensure the growth and development of music technology in order to facilitate its wider usage among Music students.

Although there is no allocated budget for the Music department, all needs are met subject to requisition. The Music department itself is very pro-active at seeking funds. For example, the department approached a local branch of a large bank and secured €10,000 towards the cost of instruments. The Parents' Council have also generously provided funding and as a result, the department purchased a new piano. Management commendably supports the Music department in that the school provides funding for all travel and subsistence costs for any conferences that staff may wish to attend. These have included those provided by the Post-Primary Music Teachers' Association (PPMTA), music technology training courses, IT courses that focus pupils with special needs, and Teach to the Future (Parts 1 & 2). This level of continuous professional development is excellent practice and the Music department is highly commended in this regard.

The Music department now provides a wide variety of music activities for all students. For example, the school choir consists of over 100 students from all year groups, the orchestra, over 60 students across the full range of instruments, and the traditional Irish group, 15 students. The department produces at least one concert annually and is also heavily involved in the school musical, an event which takes place every three years. All of these music activities are scheduled during lunchtimes and could not occur without the commendable dedication and commitment of the department.

Students can also avail of instrumental lessons which are facilitated by the school on a rotational basis, or in the case of examination students, at lunch-times. Such careful planning ensures that students do not miss valuable teaching time in their subjects and the Music department and the school is commended in this regard - it is also acknowledged that these lessons could not occur without the support of all staff. These lessons are provided by ten external tutors and such provision adds to the variety of musical activities in the school. Other activities include trips to the National Concert Hall (NCH) and participation in a national composition competition which is coordinated by the National Chamber Choir and in which students won first place in 2005. Students are also provided with the opportunity to work with professional musicians who are brought in to workshop with interested students. Once again, the breadth of musical activities ensures that all tastes are catered for through the generosity of the Music department.

Planning and Preparation

School Development Planning is ongoing in St Vincent's Secondary School with some policies already in place. The Music teacher voluntarily acts as coordinator. Formal planning times are set aside for all subject departments. At present, the Music teacher meets with senior management informally to relay plans for forthcoming events. Such meetings are held subject to the availability of senior management and to date, have not been documented. It is recommended that formal planning times now be used to create opportunities for structured meetings between management and the Music department in order to facilitate long-term planning of all music activities. A record of such discussions should be kept to track decisions taken and to guide future planning.

Planning documents were provided on the day of the inspection which outlined a broad range of content and included long-term schemes, aims and objectives. It is commendable that such planning has begun in the Music department. This good work could now be enhanced by expanding the current planning documentation to include precise medium-term targets for completion of specified topics. Good planning is also evident in the level of extra-curricular activities on

offer to the students. Such a wide variety could not occur so successfully without an appropriate level of advance planning and the department is commended in this regard. Planning for all lessons observed was good. Objectives in most lessons observed were clearly stated and showed the value of sharing learning outcomes with students, thus allowing them to gain a sense of the direction in which the lesson was heading and an inner sense of achievement when objectives had been attained.

Good advance preparation was equally apparent by the manner in which all resources, worksheets and hand-outs were ready for use during lessons. Records of attendance, homework assignments and assessments were evident on the day of the inspection.

Teaching and Learning

Three classes were visited during the course of the visit: two groups at junior cycle and one at senior cycle. In addition, at the request of the department, an orchestra rehearsal was also visited informally. In all lessons, a very good rapport existed between teacher and students. Discipline was very well maintained. An atmosphere of mutual respect existed. Students were constantly affirmed for good work and when necessary, criticism was handled sensitively. There was a strong atmosphere of learning in all lessons visited. Students were kept very engaged with the content by the variety of teaching methodologies deployed.

The classroom atmosphere was richly enhanced by the vast provision of professionally produced printwork materials and with work produced by the students themselves. Such display emphasised the fact that visually stimulating material provides a useful source of learning for students (especially when the students themselves have produced it) and is an additional strategy for reinforcing learning. For example, Italian musical terms were reinforced using pictures to illustrate their meaning. Other theoretical concepts were reproduced by the students in similar fashion. This style of collaborative work among students complemented teacher-led learning and allowed students to develop the necessary skills for self-directed learning. The Music department is commended in this regard.

All lessons observed had a very clear structure, were logically sequenced and delivered at a pace appropriate to the students. Particularly good practice was observed when the content of the lesson was varied, as was evident during a session at junior cycle which contained listening assignments, composing assignments and performing activities. Such an array of content ensured that students were stimulated and their interest never waned.

A variety of teaching methodologies also ensured that students were engaged with the content. For example, in a lesson at senior cycle, the key task was to compose an answering four bar phrase to a melody. In this case, the melody was taken from one of their prescribed works. Excellent links were made with previously acquired knowledge and the composition task that would be assigned, serving to reinforce their knowledge in a different way. All technical concepts including the techniques of modulation were then re-enforced through questioning, where all responses were documented on the board. Once prepared, students were put to task and worked in pairs at various locations throughout the room. Students' practical skills were maximised as each pair checked their melodies on their own instrument such as violin or piano. In addition, music technology was also incorporated into the lesson as two students were assigned to a computer to check their melody. As a result, composition was a vibrant and musically stimulating activity, which is good practice.

A further example where a variety of methodologies were incorporated into the lesson was evident at junior cycle. Students' knowledge regarding composing strategies was developed in a variety of ways. The importance of rhythm was demonstrated in a practical way as students listened to sentences been spoken using the same rhythm throughout. This, while amusing, highlighted the significance of rhythm. Long and short notes were described using links to everyday occurrences. These concepts were further developed by the provision of a worksheet which the students tackled in pairs. This led to lively discussions within the lesson where students were very obviously stimulated by the opportunity to discuss the task.

In all lessons, pacing was very good. All activities were very suitable to the age and abilities of all students. The learning activities were well selected and the timing was appropriate. For example, towards the end of a lesson at junior cycle, students were encouraged to perform a piece, already heard on recorder, on tuned percussion instruments. This activity is, by its nature, lively and boisterous but was very well managed and rounded off the lesson very appropriately.

Lessons incorporated the synthesis of the different disciplines in music. For example, in a lesson at junior cycle which was based on a listening exercise, performing was incorporated into the lesson through active student participation as students engaged with the content through clapping and singing. This synthesis was equally evident when students were directed to perform their own compositions. This approach is very good practice and is commended.

In all lessons observed, good questioning strategies were employed which were either directed to specific students or were let out to the entire class. This encouraged students to form personal opinions about the topic at hand while enabling the development of their critical thinking skills. For example, at junior cycle, students' opinions were sought on film music, which was played as part of a listening assignment. Skilful management of this activity encouraged students to engage with the music beyond the requirements of the assignment and as a result students were very forthcoming with their opinions. Allowing students the opportunity to engage with music in this way is good practice. The board was used effectively in all lessons to highlight key concepts, explain musical features or to record the students' melodic compositions.

Assessment and Achievement

Formal assessments are held for second- and fifth-year groups at October, Christmas Easter and summer. First-year students are assessed in November, Easter and summer. Third- and sixth-year students sit exams in October, Christmas and formal "mock" certificate examinations in February. Practical work forms a percentage of these assessments. Written reports are issued to parents of all year groups following assessments and third- and sixth-year students receive final progress reports in May prior to their State examinations. Parents also have the opportunity to meet with teachers at parent-teacher meetings and are kept informed of students' progress through the school journal (primarily in junior cycle). The Music department also sets end-of-topic tests as an additional mode of assessment. Continuous assessment and monitoring occurs during practical and written activities in lessons.

Homework was set in all lessons observed. Questioning and examination of students' work indicated that students were at the appropriate level and well equipped to respond. Practical activities further indicated the good work that is being done by the department and all performances were very appropriate to the age group. The standard of all practical work was very good and the Music department is commended in this regard. Monitoring of students' written work occurs very frequently and as a result, presentation standards were very good while clearly illustrating students' personal development within their own capabilities. All written assignments that were monitored were accompanied by useful and encouraging comments. A review of certification data indicates that students are generally encouraged to participate at the highest level of which they are capable. Participation at higher level is very good. The Music department is commended in this regard and is encouraged to maintain such successful trends.

Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations

The following are the main strengths and areas for development identified in the evaluation:

- The Music department, in addition to its core subject work, provides opportunities to students across the school to engage in a wide variety of music activities.
- A good level of whole school support is shown for music as evidenced by the resources, the provision of the dedicated Music rooms and the number of rehearsal rooms. The use of music technology is an area to be exploited further.
- Subject planning is progressing well, both for syllabus requirements and for wider extra-curricular purposes. The inclusion of precise medium-term topic-related targets would enhance this planning.
- Individual lessons were well planned, with a clear structure, delivered at an appropriate pace to the students and in all cases integrated the three components of listening, performing and composing.
- A very good teacher-pupil rapport existed in all lessons observed and contributed to very good learning environment. Discipline was well maintained.
- Participation rates at higher level in State examinations are very good and regular assessment of students' work occurs in lessons and beyond.

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

- Subject department planning times could now be used as an opportunity to hold structured meetings between senior management and the music department, with the outcomes of such meetings to be recorded.
- Plans could now be put in place to increase the provision of music technology, already a key component of the teaching and learning of music.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and with the teacher of music at the conclusion of the evaluation

at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.