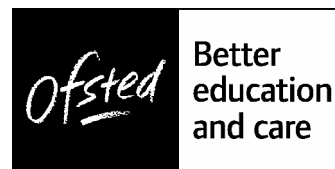


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26 March 2007

Mr M Chapman
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Chapman

Ofsted subject inspection programme – Music and English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and pupils, during my visit on 13 and 14 of March 2007 to look at work in Music and English.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the extent to which every pupil was benefiting from your music provision. In particular, it sought to explore the links you may have developed with other schools and agencies, such as the local Music Service or other professional musicians, in order to improve continuity and increase opportunity for all your pupils.

The visit provided valuable information, which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions, but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text unless to highlight exceptional practice. In such circumstances the school would be contacted prior to publication to agree the exact wording. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of lessons, ensembles and instrumental tuition.

The overall effectiveness of music was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- Standards in Years 7 to 9 are above average and have been consistently so for several years. Pupils enter school with musical skills that are broadly average.

Through a well matched curriculum and secure teaching they quickly make progress so that by the end of Year 9 their standards have improved to above average, which constitutes good achievement. However, teacher assessment of standards at the end of Year 9 is over generous, placing the standards in the highest percentile for the country. Pupils in Key Stage 3 enjoy music lessons because they get lots of opportunities to create music and use glockenspiels and keyboards. They can perform accurately from simple notation but do not use musical terminology particularly well. The quality of singing in lessons is poor but is very good in the school choir.

- The pupils that choose to study GCSE music enjoy lessons and are confident performers. They have a wide range of musical ability when they enter the course because some of the more accomplished musicians do not choose to study music in Years 10 and 11 but are content to continue with their instrumental lessons. They make good progress so that by the time they take their examination their standards are well above average and they achieve well. All are good independent learners and are also able to work very well in pairs or small groups. Composing work is of a high standard with pupils producing a variety of well-structured and often complex pieces. Their performance skills are strong and are enhanced by the performance opportunities offered to them outside lessons. Pupils are well prepared for examination success and build effectively on their previous achievements.
- Sixth form students achieve well when compared to their standards on entry to the course because teaching is very secure and focuses well on examination preparation. There is a wide range of musical ability because there is no requirement for students to have studied music at GCSE to be accepted on the courses. Nevertheless, standards are generally above average with a high proportion of very competent performers on voice and a variety of instruments.
- Standards of the extracurricular musical groups are also above average. Pupils make good progress in these groups and achieve well. The standard of the school choir is particularly high. The large numbers of instrumentalists contribute well to the good range of musical ensembles.

Quality of teaching and learning of music

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Pupils learn well because all lessons are underpinned by excellent relationships and high expectations. This results in a relaxed atmosphere that is conducive to learning; 'You feel trusted by the teachers' said one pupil. Pupils work hard in response to the good quality teaching they receive and because they enjoy the highly practical focus of lessons. They are particularly strong independent learners and relish opportunities to think for themselves in an environment where 'you can't really go wrong'. Teachers work very hard, often giving freely of their time to ensure the pupils have many opportunities to perform throughout the locality. Lessons are well planned and teachers use their expert musical skills really well when demonstrating musical points to help pupils quickly grasp ideas. However, learning objectives are not always measurable or shared and the progress made in a lesson is not always

evaluated. Occasionally too much time is devoted to one task and the pace of learning drops as a result. Work set is usually well matched to the needs of pupils but on occasions the more musically talented are not sufficiently challenged in lessons because they are given work that is too easy for them.

- Assessment procedures have recently been reviewed and teachers now have a better understanding of how well pupils are doing. However, not all pupils know their target grades or exactly what level they are working at.
- The quality of the instrumental tuition is good and contributes effectively to the success pupils have in examinations and in local music festivals.

Quality of the music curriculum and extra-curricular provision

The overall quality of the curriculum and the extra-curricular provision is good.

- The curriculum is regularly revised to ensure that it meets the needs of the pupils. It covers the statutory requirements but is currently lacking in content relating to the music of other cultures particularly those found within a modern multicultural Britain. Schemes of work have been revised and the introduction of the 'Musical Futures' project has significantly enhanced the curriculum. Lessons are suitably focused on creating music and all have a strong emphasis on practical music making.
- Music has a satisfactory impact on those pupils that do not learn an instrument or choose to study music at GCSE level or beyond. This is achieved through regular musical events such as the recent production of Bugsy Malone and other performances and concerts. Pupils appreciate the good quality musical performances and speak highly of them even if they are not directly involved.
- A significant strength of the curriculum is the excellent range of out of school opportunities for pupils to make music together. There are several musical ensembles including three choirs, brass groups, wind bands and orchestras. These activities are highly valued by pupils because they enjoy the social dimension in addition to the gains they make in their musical knowledge.

Leadership and management of music

The leadership and management of music are good.

- The head of department has a very clear and accurate view of the strengths of the subject and the areas in need of development. She is very hard working and committed to improving the department. GCSE music results have been consistently above average. Assessment procedures, a weakness at the last inspection, have improved. Teaching is effectively monitored. Pupils enjoy using the resources but feel that the accommodation is very tight. Music contributes well to the emotional and personal development of pupils through the wide range of opportunities to perform in groups. Teachers work well as a team; they willingly give their own time to ensure pupils can take part in a vast array of performances throughout the community.
- Documentation is of a good standard and used well within the department. The subject leader has a very good awareness of the latest national initiatives

for music and has ensured that the department is fully up-to-date with developments. This has resulted in revised schemes of work and a curriculum that better matches the needs of pupils.

Subject issues

Partnerships

- The department has established very good links with partner primary schools. Staff work regularly in one of the schools and this is helping to improve the quality of music teaching, which in turn, is leading to higher standards. There is an annual music day in the summer term when pupils from the partner schools take part in musical activities at Keswick School. The head of music has taken part in a song-writing project with one of the schools. Links with the county music service are effective. They are mainly through the visiting instrumental teachers many of whom also work in the partner schools. Several pupils regularly perform in county groups such as the Youth Orchestra and Training Orchestra.
- The department also benefits from excellent links with 'The Sage', Gateshead, where an ex pupil is the head of schools programme. Pupils have been involved in several projects and performances including a workshop on Bhangra Drumming and the 'Big Sing'. In addition, the department has been actively involved with the 'Musical Futures Project' and pupils from Keswick enjoy a range of involvement in many local musical events and organisations.

Inclusion

- The wide range of high quality extra-curricular activities provides excellent opportunities for all pupils to extend their musical experiences. Examination courses are open to all pupils and school ensembles are non-audition. Consequently, this lack of elitism in musical activities means that the department is highly inclusive. The many musical events engage pupils well and effectively extends their musical and social experiences.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring all pupils, particularly the more musically talented, are fully challenged by the work in lessons so that they achieve as well as they are able
- ensuring pupils know exactly what they are to learn in lessons and are given the opportunity to evaluate their progress during and at the end of the lesson
- improving the curriculum so that it contains sufficient emphasis on music from other cultures particularly those of Asian origin.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop music in the school.

English

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of eleven lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement & standards

Achievement and standards in English are outstanding.

- Exam results prior to 2006 were very high at both key stages.
- In 2006 there was a decline, but results were still well above average in both key stages. Fewer pupils gained Level 7 at the end of Year 9, but the proportion reaching Level 5 rose. At GCSE, boys' results continued to fall, but overall results were well above national average in both language and literature.
- Evidence shows that pupils achieve exceptionally well.
- Lesson observation and work scrutiny show that the majority of pupils are progressing very well and are currently reaching high standards.
- On all three A-level courses above average results reflect good student achievement.

Quality of teaching and learning in English

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding.

- Lessons are well planned and imaginative. Teachers are enthusiastic experts who make very good use of resources, including interactive whiteboards and PowerPoint, to guide learning and explain or exemplify ideas.
- Pupils learn exceptionally well because success criteria are made very clear to them. These are used as guidelines to focus learning rather than just goals to work towards. This means that individuality is not stifled.
- Marking is regular and very helpful, and pupils appreciate and respond to it well.
- Teaching is notable for its consistent quality. There are no major weaknesses but some aspects of class discussion generally, and management of some Key Stage 3 classes, need refining.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- A tighter scheme of work and the use of common assessments for Key Stage 3 classes each term have improved continuity and progression.
- Opportunities for studying media, drama and library/research skills are well planned.

- Pupils in lower ability Year 10 and 11 sets are not able to take English literature to GCSE level.
- The range of Sixth form courses in English is good and appropriate.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- Teachers are very clear about, and highly committed to, the department's high expectations and aspirations.
- The head of department is an excellent model of quality teaching, and of how to combine a high degree of organisation with an openness to fresh ideas.
- Regular and searching questioning and analysis of the department's performance and direction gives a strong steer to development planning.
- Relationships in classrooms are excellent because the outstanding team spirit and common philosophy within the department is transmitted to pupils.

Provision for poetry

Provision for poetry is outstanding.

- Poetry has status with pupils because they are taught to respond to and appreciate it, as well as to analyse it. Most relish working on the GCSE anthology.
- Teachers love poetry and this enthusiasm is infectious. Poetry Days and competitions give it a high profile, and are popular.
- Even in the lower years and sets, pupils have a good understanding of how poets create effects and how they might use such techniques in their work.
- From Year 9 upwards, pupils would benefit from more opportunities to write their own poetry in school.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is good.

- Vulnerable pupils are well supported by smaller classes and setting.
- Clear strategies are in place to tackle the relatively lower achievement of some boys, and the need to enable more pupils to gain Level 7 by the end of Year 9.
- Lower ability Key Stage 4 pupils are not able to take the GCSE literature examination.
- English motivates pupils and provides them with the study and expression skills which enable them to do well in other subjects, and in school life.
- Some pupils, especially younger boys, tend to rely on teachers for ideas and direction.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- stimulating livelier class discussion and independence of thought by pacier and more demanding questioning during class discussion
- expecting more attention and effort in class from a minority of younger boys.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Anthony Briggs
Additional Inspector