

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

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AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

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

THIS SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Stratford College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in English 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 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

The provision of four English class periods a week at junior cycle is satisfactory. In addition, first and second-year students have timetabled speech and drama lessons which are a good link with English. Transition Year students have four English lessons each week which is good provision. They also have a module of speech and drama for half the year and a module on film technology. There is good subject provision for fifth and sixth-year students who receive five class periods of English each week. Generally there is just one core group in each year. However, the resource allocation has allowed management to set up a small ordinary-level class group in each of second and third years. English classes are concurrently timetabled from second year which facilitates movement of students. Overall there is good whole-school provision and support for English in the college.

The Transition Year (TY) class is mixed ability as is the fifth-year class group. However, the sixth-year group is divided into one higher-level class, which contains the majority of students, and one small ordinary-level class group. Students are placed in higher-level classes on the basis of their academic record and their preferences.

Five teachers currently teach English in the college. Three have English up to degree level. English teachers generally retain the same classes from first to third year and from fifth to sixth year. The principal allocates English teachers to class groups and levels. It is suggested that all teachers with English up to degree level be given the opportunity to teach English to its highest level.

English teachers are encouraged to join their subject association and to attend any relevant inservice or professional development courses. Inservice is also organised for teachers in-house.

There is a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) policy in the school which is good practice.

Students are offered a range of co-curricular activities pertaining to English in the college. These include involvement in literary competitions, in-class and inter-school debating and public speaking, theatre and film visits and visits by writers and drama groups to the school. The work of English teachers in facilitating this range of activities is commended.

Currently there are no designated teacher-based classrooms in the college but staff have made the decision to introduce this on a trial basis next year which is to be encouraged especially as English teachers have developed a wide range of resources which, at present, they have nowhere to store. Each classroom is well equipped with television, video, DVD player, CD player, overhead projector and whiteboard.

There is a library in the college which is run by a librarian and it was reported that this library serves as a central storage area for common resources. The library stocks a good range of books, audio resources, and DVDs and videos. There is no designated English budget but money is allocated on a request basis. The library is mainly used for the supervision of students who have study periods. It is to be regretted that the library is not more easily accessible for use by all subject teachers during school time. English teachers access the library by arrangement with the librarian and it is available to students at lunchtime each day.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities are available in the college. There is a computer laboratory and computers are available in the library. Some students use ICT for typing up work. Plans are underway to provide classroom based data projectors and laptops on a phased basis next year. It is suggested that English classes then use ICT on a more frequent basis, by being asked to make PowerPoint presentations for example.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The college is well advanced in terms of school development planning. All policies and relevant information about the school are displayed on the college website. Subject planning has been introduced this year and the college is following the school development planning initiative guidelines. Four planning meetings were scheduled this year with three already held. Plans are underway to introduce a common plan for English. Although five teachers currently teach English in the college most of English teaching is delivered by one member of the department who is the *de facto* head of English.

There was evidence that English teachers collaborated well, for instance, in the sharing of ideas and resources. Teachers presented as being highly organised and individual planning was of a very high standard. Many of these individual plans outlined course objectives, learning outcomes, links between texts and assessment methods. It is recommended that these individual plans be incorporated into a long-term common plan for the subject, which includes learning outcomes for each year group to achieve and a list of suggested texts for each year group. The Transition Year plan is commended for providing a link between junior and senior cycle, for teaching the skills of critical analysis, for providing a balanced and broad curriculum and for being well laid out in terms of objectives, methods, content and resources.

English teachers are highly commended for the range of texts they teach from first to sixth year. First-year students study one or two novels each year and a range of short stories. Second-year

students study a novel. Third-year students study another novel and a Shakespearean play. It is recommended that second-year students be introduced to Shakespeare so that they cover the novel and Shakespearean play at this stage. Transition Year students also study a range of appropriate texts including film texts. Texts are also well chosen and suitably challenging for fifth and sixth-year students.

Good practice was observed in first-year students being provided with a reading class once a week. A book forum is also held annually for these students who, in groups, discuss books they have read and the features of good writing. They also write a short story in groups based on some of these features. All year-groups have a core textbook. Good practice was seen in that there is no over reliance on these textbooks in class. Students are also expected to have a dictionary from first year.

The school has a well-documented special needs policy which identifies among other things the way students with special educational or learning-support needs are identified and supported in the college. The support for students with literacy or special educational needs is commended. Short-term targeted help is given to students in each year who may need literacy support. This is good practice. Commendable education plans are available for these students. One of the English teachers is also the resource teacher in the college which has facilitated good dialogue about learning support needs. In addition, teachers in the college have received inservice on special educational needs. There is an inventory of hardware and software for learning support. Students also receive language support as required.

English teachers have built up a range of useful resources, some accessed from websites and some created by the teachers themselves. DVDs are used to consolidate written texts as appropriate, overhead transparencies are prepared for students and the whiteboard was well used in classrooms.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

All teachers were well prepared for their lessons. There was evidence of good teaching in all classes observed. Instructions and explanations were always clear and lessons were well structured. Good links were created between texts and subjects. For example a link was created between English and Classical Studies when introducing the concept of tragedy. Good practice was observed when one poem with a particular rhythm was used as the basis of informing students about how rhyme is often used by poets to influence meaning. Mind mapping was an example of an effective strategy used to record key points on the board which students in turn recorded.

There was evidence that students have regular practice in the different modes of writing. In addition, students had good knowledge of the concepts and techniques of language necessary to discuss their course. There was a good emphasis on personal response to literature in all lessons and teachers equipped students with the skills necessary to make an informed personal response.

There was clear evidence of learning in all lessons. Students knew their course well and showed insight and reflection in many of the points they made. Students were actively involved in their learning for example through discussion, by being set tasks such as looking for evidence in their texts and by being encouraged to read independently as appropriate. There was evidence that students had participated in good debate about the content and themes of their texts.

Questioning was effective in all lessons. Teachers asked clear and directed questions and were skilful in encouraging students to think more deeply about their text or topic. For example through good questioning students were led to see the effect of colour on advertisements. Students were also expected to back up their answers as appropriate. There was an appropriate range of closed and more open-ended questions asked in all lessons, the latter leading to the development of higher-order thinking skills. Questioning was inclusive of all. Teachers asked global questions and questions of individual students which ensured that all students were on task. Good questioning led to very good discussion and students were, on the whole, good at expressing opinions and participating.

The learning-support room was a good example of a stimulating learning environment. It is recommended that students be surrounded by a print-rich environment in all their classrooms. For instance, samples of students' work and key words and quotations could be displayed.

Teachers are commended for using a thematic approach to the teaching and learning of English in junior cycle. In this way all aspects of the course were integrated and learning was enjoyable for all students. Teachers agreed a number of themes, for example nature, fashion and racism and taught a range of texts based on these themes. In addition, the teaching of language and literature was integrated so that students completed various writing tasks based on these themes. For example students had to write a propaganda pamphlet from the point of view of a character they had studied in their novel. This is a practice that should be used by all teachers.

Classes are generally mixed ability and it was reported that sometimes it is difficult to cater for all levels in such class groups, especially at senior cycle. It is recommended that management access inservice on mixed-ability teaching, perhaps from the Second Level Support Service, for all teachers in the college. In addition, senior-cycle teachers stated that they engaged in team teaching. By this they meant that sometimes one teacher taught the class group a particular aspect of the course. It is suggested that other models of team teaching be used. For example, students of lower ability could be withdrawn for extra support at this time by the other teacher or else the two teachers could work together in the classroom with one teacher focusing on students of lower ability. In addition, pair and group work are strategies that could be used to facilitate self-directed learning at times.

There was a very good relationship between students and teachers in all lessons. Overall, teachers presented as being reflective practitioners and being committed to their teaching. Teachers ensured that English was promoted as an enjoyable subject and that students were well prepared for examinations. Students clearly felt comfortable enough to participate in their learning.

ASSESSMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT

Expectations are consistently high in the college and the majority of students do higher-level English in their state examinations. The college has a well-defined Homework and Assessment policy and students are well profiled. Students are set regular assignments and tests and teachers keep good records of students' progress. Three reports are issued to parents annually. Parents of examination students receive two reports on students' progress which inform them of, among other things, students' behaviour, attitude and participation. In addition, they receive one report on the results of their school-based examination. Parents of non-examination students receive two reports based on formal in-house examinations held in January and May and also receive one progress report annually. Parent-teacher meetings are held annually for each year group in the school. State examination students sit 'mock' examinations which are externally corrected. The

school offers after-school supervised study. The marking schemes of in-house written examinations reflect the state examination marking schemes which is good practice. Students are made aware of the discrete criteria of the Leaving Certificate marking scheme which is appropriate. Regular class-based assessment takes place and there was evidence that a range of interesting and appropriate assessment methods takes place including oral presentations and essays.

Students generally had manuscript copies for their English work often having different copies for different aspects of their course. This is good practice and these copies revealed that a range of interesting and enjoyable work has been covered and that this work was very well corrected with constructive feedback given to students on areas where they needed to improve. Some teachers encourage students to use folders for storage of notes which is good practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- There is good whole-school provision and support for English in the college.
- The work of English teachers in facilitating the co-curricular activities pertaining to English is commended.
- English teachers are highly commended for the range of texts they teach from first to sixth year and for promoting the reading habit. The library is well-stocked but it is regrettable that it is not more easily accessible for use by all subject teachers during school time.
- Subject planning has been introduced this year in the college.
- Teachers presented as being highly organised. Individual planning was of a very high standard.
- The support for students with literacy or special educational needs is commended.
- There was evidence of good teaching in all classes observed. Lessons were enjoyable and students were well-equipped with the skills necessary to discuss their course and make informed responses to questions.
- Students were actively involved in their learning.
- Teachers are reflective practitioners and are committed to their teaching and to their students.
- Appropriate and regular assessment takes place in the college for all students.
- Students' work is very well corrected and copies demonstrate that a range of appropriate work has been covered.

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

- All teachers with English up to degree level should be given the opportunity to teach English to its highest level.
- When available, English classes should use ICT on a more frequent basis.
- Teachers' individual plans should be incorporated into a long-term common plan for the subject.
- Students should be surrounded by a print-rich environment in all their classrooms.
- Management should access inservice on mixed-ability teaching for all teachers.
- English teachers should practise different models of team-teaching in order to help cater for students of lower ability.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and with the teachers of English at the conclusion of the evaluation at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.