

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of English  
REPORT**

**Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada  
Árainn Mhór, County Donegal  
Roll number: 71244F**

**Date of inspection: 05 May 2010**



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT  
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION  
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

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

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada. 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 of the school was given an 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**

Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada is a co-educational post-primary school with a current enrolment of 33 males and 21 females. Programmes on offer include the Junior Certificate, a compulsory Transition Year (TY), and the established Leaving Certificate. In 2009-2010, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) was introduced for some students in the first-year group.

The small student population influences class organisation, with one class group being formed in each year. The first-year group includes a small number of students who are following the JCSP. All class groups formed are of mixed-ability, with the opportunity to take examinations at higher-level and ordinary-level offered in each. The skills of the teachers of English in managing this challenge must be acknowledged, particularly in the Leaving Certificate classes.

There is very good support for the subject in the school. Timetabled provision for English is good on all programmes. The teachers in the English department are appropriately deployed and they also teach other subjects to their class groups. As a consequence, they know their students well. Teachers are generally assigned to their own base classrooms. This resource is well-used by the teachers of English who have created a very supportive and stimulating visual environment which supports learning.

A very good range of resources is available to support teaching and learning in English. These include audio-visual resources and information and communications technology (ICT). It was reported that specialised software is available to support teachers working with students who have learning support needs. All of the teachers have been provided with a laptop computer and data projectors are fitted in most class rooms. The school's computer suite can also be booked for whole-class work. The school is part of a pilot scheme which will provide wireless high speed internet access. During this evaluation, very good use was made of the ICT facilities both to prepare teaching materials and to deliver lessons. A very good library space has been created in

the original school building. While it is small, and so cannot facilitate a full class group, it held a good selection of books. It was noted that the quality of the book stock available to students has recently been enhanced by participation in the JCSP. First-year students have participated in a paired reading programme and in the 'Word Millionaire' initiative. The teachers' efforts to promote reading are commended. It is suggested that the English department include the promotion of personal reading into its schemes of work for junior-cycle students in particular.

Management in Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada encourages and facilitates continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers. In addition to whole-school in-service on special education needs and on co-operative learning, members of the English department have attended modular courses relevant to English provided by the Second Level Support Service.

The students in Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada benefit from a very good programme of extracurricular activities designed to support their learning in English. Through workshops and engagement with the Writers-in Residence scheme, they gain insight into the process of creative writing, for example. Trips to the theatre to see professional productions of plays, both for pleasure and to support the study of particular drama texts are organised. The English teachers' commitment to providing these opportunities and the school's support in facilitating them are commended.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject department planning is very well established in this school. While no time is currently provided to the department for the purpose, the four teachers meet regularly throughout the year. Meetings are formal and minutes of discussions held are recorded. These indicated ongoing planning for teaching and learning which is action-oriented. The department has identified a number of areas for development and has initiated strategies to address them. These include a vocabulary-building emphasis in the plan for one year and the promotion of reading in another. The very professional, reflective, approach to the planning process which this indicates is a positive feature of the work of this department.

A subject department plan has been drawn up and it was available for inspection. The plan sets out aims and objectives and gives details of course content and materials for each year group. Notable features of this document included a very good section on methodologies for skills development across the four domains of language learning. Agreed approaches to teaching a range of genre, for example, drama, poetry and fiction were also outlined. This is very good work and the following recommendations are proposed to develop the department's practice.

Currently, the department's junior-cycle curriculum plan indicates that fiction writing, poetry and drama are studied at fixed times during the three years of the course. This means that in second year, for example, the focus is on drama and a range of reading and writing activities, but the plan does not require the study of a novel during this year. In reviewing the plan, care should be taken to ensure that students study all genres in each year of the junior cycle. Flexibility regarding text choice was also noted in the planning documentation. This allows teachers to design a programme of study in line with the interests and abilities of their students. It is suggested that a wider range of titles should be included in the lists from which teachers choose.

Students with special educational needs (SEN) are given learning support on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. Good liaison between the learning support department and the English

department is facilitated by the fact that two of the teachers of English are on the team timetabled to provide this support.

Individual teachers' plans for teaching were included in the subject department plan. These took the form of schemes of work which described the work proposed for the year with each class group. There is a strong focus on content in these schemes. It is suggested that a shift of emphasis in the schemes towards the learning that students are expected to achieve during each year would more accurately reflect the student-focussed ethos held by the department. The department's own plan for TY can provide a model for this. For example, students in TY are provided with a list of learning statements for each module of their course and they are encouraged to monitor their own progress using the statements. Similarly, a clear description of the expected learning outcomes in English is provided by the JCSP statements for students on that programme in first year. Currently, the small size of the school means that all students in the class group are benefiting from the use of JCSP learning statements. It is recommended that a similar approach is taken to curriculum planning for the other year groups. Support in framing appropriate learning outcomes may be found in the draft rebalanced Junior Certificate English syllabus, available on the website of National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), and in section four of the Leaving Certificate English syllabus.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In all three classes visited, lessons were well structured and purposeful and there was evidence of good short-term planning. It was evident that teachers and students know each other well in this school and that teachers use that knowledge to prepare lessons which engage students across the ability spectrum. Lessons opened with activities designed to check and to reinforce what students already knew about the topics being explored. In one class, for example, concepts such as theme, tone and simile were revisited before the teacher introduced an unseen poem. In another lesson, again on poetry, new vocabulary was written on the whiteboard and explored before students met it in the text. Both approaches are good practice and they were helpful in the two mixed-ability class settings. It is suggested that providing students with a clear 'map' of how lessons will unfold would be a good support, particularly where the group includes students on both the ordinary-level and higher-level courses.

The pacing of lessons was very good in two of the classrooms visited and less satisfactory in a third. In this lesson an overly lengthy preamble, though it related the content of the lesson to the students' own lives, lessened the sense of purposeful work. It is important that time is managed carefully during the opening phase of lessons, particularly when references are made to students' own interests and experiences as a 'way-in' to lesson content. The enthusiasm of the students when chatting about their interests needs to be swiftly channelled towards the topic to be addressed in a lesson so that the time available is efficiently used.

The quality of teaching observed was good and the strategies employed facilitated sufficient differentiation to meet the needs of students across the ability spectrum. In one lesson, for example, students worked in small groups to complete a handout. In the plenary session which followed, students listened to each other's point of view and discussed the text. Very good practice in teaching poetry was noted in another lesson, where a 'think-pair-share' approach was used to encourage close and careful reading of the text. Following independent reflection on a new poetry text, students were asked to share their first impressions of the poem with one other student before whole-class discussion took place. The provision of a short list of prompts, for

example, story and feelings, gave direction to those students who needed support whilst allowing all students the freedom to respond to the poem in their own way. This led to a very rich exploration of how the poem achieved its effect.

The teaching and learning activities observed included both traditional direct instruction and more active, participatory approaches. These latter allowed students to engage with lesson content more closely and were particularly appropriate in these mixed-ability settings. It is recommended that the English teachers should collaborate to formally share these strategies so that all students benefit from their use. More frequent use of co-operative learning strategies, such as pair-work and group work, should be explored. If used well, these strategies both facilitate differentiation of the learning task to cater for all abilities, and develop a range of interpersonal skills.

It was clear that teachers spend a lot of time planning and preparing for their classes, evidenced by the notes and model answers which they have made available to senior-cycle students. Their commitment to accessing and providing a wide range of support materials for their students is commended. Material is drawn from a number of sources to supplement work done in class and students are encouraged to keep this information in folders. In some cases, students' homework assignments, once corrected, were also included in the folders. This practice should be extended so that there is a good balance between notes and students' own work retained in the folders. It is recommended that students are taught strategies which support them in identifying and engaging with the ideas and opinions presented in these notes. In this way, they will learn how to extract the most relevant ideas and re-present them with their own critical commentary. This guards against uncritical use of notes and models and supports students' direct engagement with literary texts, so that they form their own responses rather than simply developing a familiarity with someone else's interpretation of the texts.

Observation of class discussions and students' written work indicated that they are making very good progress through their courses. Students demonstrated a good knowledge of their texts and an ability to quote accurately and to infer meaning. At the higher end of the ability range, students demonstrated mastery of the appropriate formal elements for structuring language. They establish and maintain momentum in their personal writing and show a good appreciation of audience, purpose and content when writing. Less able students presented under-developed arguments and, in their writing, they make phrasal errors and tend to summarise rather than analyse plot and character. However, the teachers demonstrated a very good knowledge of students' individual strengths in the subject and they are well placed to address these difficulties in class. The quality of the assessment data which they have compiled for each student will assist them in supporting students appropriately.

In all classes, teachers gave varied and appropriate encouragement to students. It was clear that students readily engaged in class activities and were purposeful in their work. Students seemed stimulated by the teaching and learning activities and this interest and attention was maintained throughout the classes. Teachers affirmed students' work in class and managed their classes firmly and fairly. In classes which included students with special needs, teachers managed to ensure that each student was working at his/her own pace.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The teachers of English employ a range of assessment strategies, including in-class questioning and written tasks; end-of-topic tests, longer assignments and homework. They maintain very good records of students' progress. Homework tasks were closely related to lesson activity, so that they reinforced and extended learning. Very good practice was evident in the feedback provided to students. A sample of students' copies was examined and these indicated that copies are regularly monitored and students' work is appropriately corrected. In the majority of cases, very thorough feedback is provided to students, both identifying the strengths of their work and providing constructive comments on areas where students should improve. It was noted that copybooks were well organised and presented in most cases, indicating that high standards are expected.

In some cases, teachers use assessment criteria to good effect to help students understand what is required, for example, the marking scheme used in the Leaving Certificate examinations. However, this approach is underdeveloped across the department. It is recommended that opportunities for students to identify relevant criteria for evaluating their own work should be developed. The benefits of this approach include greater awareness, prior to the writing phase, of what constitutes a good piece of work. This can help students to shape their work, practise targeted skills and monitor their own progress. It may also be a useful support to students working in the senior-cycle classes, where both the higher-level and ordinary-level courses are taught simultaneously.

Formal assessments are scheduled twice each year for students in first year, second year and fifth year. Students in certificate examination classes sit formal tests in October and "mock" examinations in the spring term. Reports on students' progress are issued to parents following each formal assessment.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good support for the subject in the school. It is well-resourced, including ICT facilities and a very good library space.
- The English teaching team have adopted a very professional, reflective, approach to the subject planning process.
- The teachers demonstrated a very good knowledge of their students' individual strengths and they prepared lessons which engaged students across the ability spectrum.
- Students are making very good progress through their courses and they demonstrated knowledge and understanding of the texts being studied.

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

- The student-focussed approach taken to curriculum planning for TY and JCSP class groups should be used when planning for the other year groups.
- Students should be taught strategies for critical engagement with notes and model answers.
- Opportunities for students to identify relevant criteria for evaluating their own work should be developed.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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