

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of English  
REPORT**

**Newtown School  
Newtown, Waterford  
Roll number: 65010R**

**Date of inspection: 4 March 2010**



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F  
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N  
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

# **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 Newtown School, Waterford. 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 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. At the end of the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. 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**

Newtown School is a co-educational boarding and day school which seeks to deliver to its students a rounded education informed by the values of the Society of Friends (Quakers). The school, which charges fees, is situated in Waterford city and has a local, national and international intake. The present principal took up the position in September 2009. English is a core subject in the four programmes offered by the school: Junior Certificate, a compulsory Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. The subject benefits from the provision of a wide range of linked activities in the school, including both curricular and extracurricular drama, debating and the production of a yearbook.

The timetable makes adequate though not generous provision for English in the junior cycle, with four lessons a week in each year. Lessons are generally well distributed. However, in one instance the four lessons are timetabled over three days only, and this should be avoided in future. Optimal provision for English is a lesson every day, and this is of particular benefit in first year, as it gives ample opportunity to lay a solid foundation in the key skills relevant to Junior Certificate English. The possibility of adding a fifth lesson in first year was discussed with senior management during the evaluation, and should be pursued further. TY has three lessons of core English and good provision of modules in related areas including drama and film studies. English has five lessons over four days on the fifth-year and sixth-year timetable, and is timetabled concurrently in these years. The double lesson provided in fifth year offers greater scope for extended learning activities than the two single lessons on Monday in sixth year, and is to be preferred where a lesson every day is not provided.

There are two or three mixed-ability class groups in each year of the junior cycle, depending on numbers. Most students prepare for and take higher-level English in the Junior Certificate. Those who take English at ordinary level remain in the base class group and receive additional support where necessary from the learning support department as well as their English teacher. Outcomes in the Junior Certificate examinations indicate that the approach taken supports students across the ability range present in the school. Mixed-ability grouping is retained in TY. Students' Junior

Certificate results and their progress in TY are considered in forming English class groups in fifth year. A top and a middle set, both higher-level classes of similar size, and a small ordinary-level class are created. Movement between class groups is managed through consultation among teachers and students, and parents are consulted where a change of level is concerned. While the present systems for class formation and student placement are well thought out, it is prudent to review the rationale and the practice regularly.

Three teachers form the English department in Newtown, and this relatively small number ensures a consolidated delivery of the subject, with two teachers teaching English in each year from first to sixth. Teachers are assigned to classes by agreement with senior management, and seniority has been a consideration in this process. However, the desirability of building capacity by giving teachers an opportunity to extend their repertoire and range of approaches within a wide variety of teaching contexts should also be borne in mind. Therefore, it is advisable that all teachers of English have an opportunity to teach all years and programmes, and both levels in the senior cycle, on a rotational basis where applicable.

Newtown has a fine library, with an adjoining study area. The library contains a collection of rare volumes, and a good range of fiction, biography, books on popular topics, and literary criticism. There are plans to extend the stock in order to encourage all students to read privately for pleasure, including those who are less inclined to read. To this end, it is suggested that books of high interest and low levels of difficulty ('high-low' books) and an eclectic range of non-fiction titles be included, perhaps following a survey of students' interests. The School Library Association ([www.slari.ie](http://www.slari.ie)) and the publications of the Demonstration Library Project ([www.jcsp.ie](http://www.jcsp.ie)) are useful sources of information and ideas. Newspapers are widely available in the school, and circulation spaces have displays of newspapers with current and noteworthy stories, an imaginative use of these areas.

Two teachers in the English department have base classrooms. The class groups taken by the third teacher are small, and they use different rooms over the week. One of these groups has to change classrooms during a double period, and this should be avoided in future. Information and communications technology (ICT) and audiovisual equipment were available to assist teaching and learning in all the classrooms visited. The English classrooms could be further developed as print-rich and visually stimulating learning environments in which, for example, all students would have an opportunity to display their work.

The school has an excellent range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities that extend students' experience of English and promote their creative engagement with it.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

One member of the English department acts on a voluntary basis as co-ordinator, dealing with correspondence to the school relating to English, and liaising with school management with regard to teaching and learning materials and resources. The role also involves co-ordinating the formation of class groups in fifth and sixth year. Very regular meetings of the teachers of English were reported but no records of these were available.

A considerable depth of experience and expertise exists within the school's English department. Future subject planning should aim to share and consolidate the very good teaching and learning practices observed, and to develop structures and processes that will strengthen collaboration and reflective practice. In this context, it is suggested that the English department consider the

rotation of the role of co-ordinator, an agreed description of the role, and a system for recording the discussions and decisions at subject department meetings.

The planning documents made available during the inspection gave an outline of course plans from first to fifth year. These set out objectives, identified a range of skills and indicated some of the material to be covered. The plans seen were in keeping with the aims of the English syllabuses. However, it is suggested that a planning framework be adopted that would link each learning outcome to the methods and materials best suited to achieving it, and the form of assessment most appropriate to it. Such a plan should always be viewed as a work in progress, to be amended where necessary.

The planning documents indicated a limited level of collaborative planning, for example in devising a common programme for the first half-term in fifth year until final decisions on student placement are made. However, the general planning practice to date has been that teachers devise and follow their own programmes of work for each year within the agreed framework of objectives. A greater degree of collaboration within the teaching team with regard to programmes of work is recommended, to facilitate the sharing of ideas and, where appropriate, the choosing of common texts for study. The school operates a textbook-lending scheme, and the cost of books is included in school fees. There was evidence that a good mix of accessible and challenging material had been selected in each year. Furthermore, students are exposed to a commendably wide experience of reading in fiction, drama, poetry, film and journalism.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Seven lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all programmes, years and levels, and involving all members of the English department. A very high standard of teaching was noted in almost all of the lessons observed. These were characterised by authoritative and lively presentation of the material, very good management of learning activities, and a willingness to show and to elicit a love of English. The level of student engagement was generally high, with many taking part confidently in class discussion. A spirit of co-operation prevailed, marked in particular by the extent to which students listened to each other. Teachers and students placed a noteworthy emphasis on learning through inquiry, in classroom interactions and activities. Topics covered in the lessons observed included the composition of short stories, the novel, poetry, social networking sites, the comparative study, and drama.

Teachers' good preparatory work for lessons was evident in the material selected and the planned learning activities. This work was supported in most instances by effective lesson structure and sequencing that linked prior learning and new topics. Lessons began with a brief recall session in some cases, or a statement of the lesson topic with a helpful emphasis on what students would be doing and what the outcome should be. One senior cycle lesson on the comparative study began with questions to help students recall the opening sequence of the chosen film, but they would have benefited from viewing the sequence again to reinforce it rather than trying to recall it orally. Lesson pacing was generally very good, meaning that substantial ground was covered while sufficient time was given to students to engage fruitfully in learning activities.

Among the resources used in the junior cycle lessons observed were a collection of objects to stimulate ideas for short story writing; attractive response journals with a set of prompt questions to guide students in writing their entries; and a sheet with three poems by the same poet to help students identify the poet's characteristic style and concerns. In preparing and using these resources, teachers demonstrated a commendable focus on the development of students' creative

and critical responses, and their active engagement with text and task. In the senior cycle lessons observed, work was text-focused with a strong emphasis on building students' critical reading and developing their capacity to make an informed personal response. All texts used were appropriately challenging. In some lessons, the board was used effectively by both teachers and students, for example to chart the structure of the short story. Its effectiveness in providing additional visual reinforcement of key points is worth bearing in mind, and greater use of ICT could also be considered in this regard.

The extent to which the role of interested learner was effectively modelled by teachers was a considerable strength of the teaching and learning processes observed during the evaluation. While teachers introduced and presented material authoritatively, they were also confident in allowing students to take the lead role in explaining and information giving. This approach ensured that class discussion generally had a very good balance between teacher and student talk, and that teachers were also seen as learners. For example, a class reading an article on social networking sites was able to explain the features and typical clientele of different sites in response to questions from the teacher that were genuinely looking for information, rather than testing recall. Students in another class group were encouraged to describe their own experience of life in small-town Ireland as a way of showing them how much they already understood of the social setting of a novel they were reading. While this approach empowers students, it also requires them to share responsibility for their own learning.

Students were alerted to the different purposes of questions, from straightforward questions demanding factual answers to higher-order questions looking for thoughtful individual responses. Commendably, this approach was applied to written assignments, so that students were made aware of the questions that required longer thinking time and a substantial response. In further developing this good practice, especially in the mixed-ability classroom, teachers should ensure that sufficient time is given in class to allow students to formulate oral responses of the required depth, to help them produce more extended written work. Effective use of follow-on questions and prompt questions to elicit more detailed responses from students was noted. Good pre-reading strategies were used to focus students' attention and prepare them to read alertly.

While students were affirmed for their efforts, an expectation that they would apply themselves and think critically was clearly communicated. For example, in a junior cycle lesson on poetry, students were reminded that it was insufficient to say that a poem expressed strong emotion; it was necessary to attempt to say what the emotion was and how the poem conveyed it. This rigorous approach led to some very good observations in the course of a comparative analysis of Wendy Cope's poetry. A senior cycle group looking at a poem by Hopkins was encouraged to respond and give honest first impressions but also to pay close attention to the poem's words and patterns. In sum, the learning environment in the lessons observed was supportive but also challenging and stimulating.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Teachers showed a good knowledge of their students and of the range of abilities and characteristics of each class group. They monitored students' levels of participation through close observation of the class group, and focused questioning of individual students was used to check understanding or recall. A number of lessons began with an oral review of homework, with the repetition of key points where necessary before moving on to new material. While students' written work varied in line with the range of ability in the school, it provided clear evidence of

learning and progress, and students' input into lessons showed that they were building effectively on prior learning.

Students' copybooks and folders were inspected during the evaluation. They were generally well organised, with good practice noted in the dating and heading of assignments. There was no evidence of homework being dependent on textbook assignments, repetitive summary or lower-order questions. The emphasis was on the production of substantial critical and creative assignments that were meaningful in the context of syllabus aims and that supported the development of writing skills. Helpful written feedback is given to students, affirming their work and making constructive suggestions for improvement. This is augmented in class where appropriate, through the identification of common errors or areas of difficulty. Aspects of assessment for learning were evident in the developmental approach taken to students' assignments, and this approach could be further extended.

In-house examinations are held at Christmas and summer, and the practice is to have common papers where appropriate. Teachers keep careful records of students' progress, including the results of in-house assessments and of 'mock' examinations, which are marked by the teachers. It was reported that these are likely to be set also by teachers in the future. It would be useful, as part of the reflective practice discussed in the planning section above, for the English department to analyse the outcomes of the certificate examinations as part of a yearly review of its work.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school has an excellent range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities that extend students' experience of English and promote their creative engagement with it.
- A very high standard of teaching was noted in almost all of the lessons observed. These were characterised by authoritative and lively presentation of the material, very good management of learning activities, and a willingness to show and to elicit a love of English.
- Teachers introduced and presented material authoritatively, yet were also confident in allowing students to take the lead role in explaining and information giving.
- While students were affirmed for their efforts, an expectation that they would apply themselves and think critically was clearly communicated.
- The emphasis was on the production of substantial critical and creative assignments that were meaningful in the context of syllabus aims and supported the development of writing skills.

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

- The timetable makes adequate though not generous provision for English in the junior cycle. The possibility of adding a fifth lesson in first year should be pursued further.
- It is advisable that all teachers of English have an opportunity to teach all years, programmes, and senior cycle levels, on a rotational basis where applicable.
- With regard to planning the English programme, it is recommended that a planning framework be adopted that would link each learning outcome to the methods and materials best suited to achieving it, and the form of assessment most appropriate to it.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with 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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