

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of English  
REPORT**

**Pobalscoil Iosolde  
Palmerstown, Dublin 20  
Roll number: 91302F**

**Date of inspection: 17 November 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 Pobalscoil Iosolde, Palmerstown. 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. 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 evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Pobalscoil Iosolde is a co-educational community school with 245 male and 203 female students, which is an improving gender balance. The school offers the widest possible range of programmes: the Junior Certificate and the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP); an optional Transition Year (TY); the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. English is a core subject in all programmes offered. The school participates in the Department's DEIS initiative (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), thereby providing a range of supports to students, including a literacy programme, now in its third year.

English is well provided for in the senior cycle, with four single lessons in TY, a lesson per day in fifth and sixth year, and four lessons per week in each year of the LCA. Provision in the junior cycle is adequate though not generous, as it is a lesson short of the optimal provision of a lesson per day in each year. The possibility of offering a fifth lesson in first year particularly should be considered, as it would assist students to set down a firm foundation in the skills and knowledge required for the post-primary English curriculum. Where four lessons only are provided, it would be helpful to timetable English on Mondays and Fridays, to minimise the gap between lessons, especially in the case of class groups following the JCSP.

Students are placed in base class groups on entry to first year, and these provide a mixed-ability setting for English, which continues into second year. In third year, classes are rearranged into higher and ordinary level. School management and the English department are reviewing this system, and it is planned that mixed-ability classes will continue into third year in the future. The worthy aim is to create higher expectations among students and encourage more students to consider taking English at higher level in the Junior Certificate. This is part of a praiseworthy whole-school focus on raising student attainment, other elements of which include communications with parents to explain the implications of choosing higher or ordinary level in Junior and Leaving Certificate, and sound advice to parents and students on good study habits.

In the junior cycle, a discrete class group that follows the JCSP programme is formed. Commendably, English is concurrently timetabled where necessary to ensure that high-performing JCSP students are able to take the subject at higher level. In senior cycle, students taking LCA generally do not take TY; for students intending to take the Leaving Certificate, TY is compulsory. Higher and ordinary level English class groups are formed in fifth year, on the basis of examination results, performance in TY and students' preference, and concurrent timetabling allows students to move class where appropriate. These are good arrangements.

Seven teachers form the English department. An eighth teacher, who is a member of the learning-support department, team-teaches in a number of lessons to provide in-class support to JCSP students. Five teachers of English take at least three class groups for the subject. However, only three teach both junior and senior cycle English, and an increase in this number would benefit the delivery of the subject as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first to sixth year. Teachers generally rotate the teaching of higher and ordinary level, thus supporting the development of a wide range of teaching and learning approaches. Only one teacher teaches JCSP English and only one takes LCA English and Communication. While this provides continuity, the subject department as a whole should contribute to the development of these programmes as an integral part of the school's English curriculum.

Five of the seven teachers of English have their own classrooms and these have been well developed as resources for teaching and learning English. In addition to posters, word charts and other illustrative material, students' work was also displayed, and was referred to in some lessons. Audiovisual equipment is available and the school is expanding its information and communication technology (ICT) provision, having received the ICT grant. Subject department planning could usefully have a focus on the best use of the expected ICT resources. Students can access the school library on two lunchtimes a week, and a number of book boxes are available for class groups to promote private reading for pleasure. A language support room is available to support the teaching and learning of English as an additional language (EAL).

Teachers have attended in-service courses relating to the JCSP and LCA programmes. The school's continuing professional development (CPD) programme has included in-service days on areas such as inclusion, differentiation and classroom management. A teacher in the school with experience of teaching EAL has contributed to staff in-service sessions. Some teachers have attended CPD through the subject association in the past. Renewing this connection through INOTE (The Irish National Organisation of Teachers of English) would allow teachers to share good practice and engage with their professional peers and is recommended.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A subject co-ordinator for English is in place. The role has recently been handed on from one of the long-serving members of the English teaching team. An agreed rota, possibly with a two-year term, would ensure that all teachers of English have an opportunity to experience and develop the role. The English department meets four times per year and minutes are kept. The co-ordinator's role involves chairing meetings, keeping records of decisions made, communicating with school management and organising resources. A discussion of the developmental aspect of the role, as well as its organisational functions, would be useful, so that an agreed description can be placed in the subject plan.

English department meetings largely concern organisational and resource issues. However, the team has also engaged in action planning in response to an earlier subject inspection and an internal whole-school review of student attainment, and this bodes well for future development

planning in the subject. Measures in the action plans include co-curricular and cross-curricular initiatives, class formation and placement designed to raise attainment, and curriculum planning to develop higher-order skills. These commendable steps should be carefully monitored so that they can be modified or extended as required. Specific planning to ensure that team-teaching is as productive as possible would be a further worthwhile initiative.

The English planning folder contains a commendable policy on supporting EAL students; a literacy policy with a range of useful strategies; details of models of team-teaching used in the subject; a library policy; and a list of co-curricular activities. Outline schemes of work for each year are included. A brief subject plan for the current year has been drawn up, the largest section of which gives details of textbooks and course materials. It refers directly to the syllabus documents with regard to aims and objectives, and also outlines some measures relating to differentiation and assessment.

While many elements of good planning are in place, there is some scope for development. The English department is encouraged to review its planning practices and consider collectively how the syllabus aims and objectives can be stated in terms that are specific and relevant to the school. The most practical way to proceed is to agree on the learning outcomes that are appropriate to each year and to describe them as far as possible in terms of what students must, should, and could know and be able to do. This approach would support the good work already done in the area of differentiated teaching and learning methods, and would strengthen collaborative planning. Plans that are centred on learning outcomes are likely to have a direct relation to classroom practices, since they require teachers to consider the materials and methods that will best achieve the desired outcomes. They also bring the area of assessment into practical focus, as teachers work together to devise modes of assessment that ascertain how well students have succeeded in their learning.

Appropriate choices of novels, poetry and plays have been made for the junior cycle programmes. Teachers have sought to balance accessibility and a level of challenge when selecting texts, but should maintain as much variety as possible, especially in the selection of novels. A story-telling component has been introduced to the first-year programme as part of the school's literacy policy in action, and students are enjoying and benefiting from it. Its capacity to develop students' oral production is especially valuable, and it should become an integral part of the planned programme for first year. A stimulating English programme has been put in place for TY students, and includes various forms of assessment. The Leaving Certificate programme has been planned with a view to encouraging able students to follow the higher level course, while facilitating a change of level if thought advisable.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Ten lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all years, levels and programmes offered in the school, and involving all members of the English department. The quality of teaching in the lessons observed ranged from very good to fair, while classroom management was consistently good. Very good practice was noted where productive learning tasks had been prepared, critical thinking was encouraged, and less able students were affirmed and supported in their work. However, also noted were instances of an inappropriately early focus on examination technique, and some classroom practice that limited students' opportunities to respond. All teachers were receptive to the feedback given and showed commendable concern for their students' progress. The English department has the capacity and willingness to address areas for development.

Most of the lessons observed were well planned and had clear objectives, so that substantial ground was covered. Very good links were made with prior learning, while a sense of forward movement was maintained. In many instances, teachers began by positioning the lesson topic in the continuum of students' learning, for example as part of the storytelling project in first year or the comparative study in fifth and sixth year. This approach placed a helpful focus on the skills to be acquired, such as the ability to infer meaning and to recognise significant details in a text, and led students to active engagement in their own learning. In lessons where the acquisition of skills was not sufficiently emphasised, students tended to be more passive and less able to apply prior learning to new material.

Teachers' preparation was evident in the well-chosen material for many lessons. In a senior cycle lesson, students were provided with copies of reviews of a play they had attended and could draw on their experience to distinguish between good and bad review writing. The exemplars provided material for critical analysis and served as models for students' own reviews, thus underpinning an integrated approach to skills development in reading and writing. The board was used very effectively in a number of lessons to visually reinforce new vocabulary, and to record the structure and sequence of points relevant to the lesson topic, thus providing a framework for the students' own writing. However, a relatively narrow range of resources was observed in use. Greater access to ICT in the classroom should significantly extend this range and facilitate the use of audio as well as visual resources.

A range of teaching and learning methods was observed. Whole-class instruction and teacher-led class discussion were the most prevalent practices. Whole-class instruction was effective where teachers communicated key concepts with clarity and authority and where rapport was good, and this was the case in most instances. In a few instances, students were passive recipients rather than active listeners, and more student-centred approaches should be chosen to meet their needs. Teacher-led discussion was generally well managed, with teachers ensuring good levels of participation through targeted questions. Some instances of highly effective preliminary questioning were noted, where teachers asked straightforward questions that affirmed students' knowledge of the topic and thus encouraged them to take part in the more open discussion and opinion sharing that followed.

In addition to these approaches, effective individual, pair and group work was observed in both junior and senior cycle lessons. A JCSP class group was given the opportunity to practise skills of skimming and scanning, and the team-teaching model was used well in this context to offer students individual assistance where necessary. Students working in twos and threes benefited most when the task to be done was clearly set out in advance, and the groups knew what they were expected to produce within a stated time. While students are becoming accustomed to group work, it may be prudent to limit the variety of tasks in the interests of clarity. More co-operative learning methods can then be introduced, involving groups working on different tasks, and then pooling their findings.

Students seemed to find the texts and material they were studying reasonably accessible and interesting, and were able to respond when asked why they preferred one novel to another. To support the worthy aim of encouraging students to read voluntarily, teachers should guard against over-analysis of novels during the initial reading, emphasising instead the forward momentum of the plot and inviting students to consider what might happen next. The practice of working on examination-type questions before the novel or play has been completed should be discontinued, and assignments should focus on each student's developing response to plot, character and theme. Greater exposure to a range of poetry read for enjoyment and focusing on personal response

would be appropriate to the aims of the junior cycle syllabus, and would be best served by a discovery-learning approach to develop students' understanding of what makes a good poem.

In some lessons observed, students were quiet and inclined to be unresponsive. Nervousness was clearly a factor, as it was noticeable that students became more engaged and willing to volunteer responses as the lesson progressed. Significantly, students were often more vocal and engaged when it came to task-based work in groups, rather than whole-class discussion. However, in a number of lessons, students showed a good ability to state and explain their views and, especially in the senior cycle lessons observed, students participated very well in whole-class discussion, offering perceptive comment and analysis. As students' written work will benefit if they have had an opportunity to give well-developed spoken responses in class, teachers should seek to use the methods most likely to encourage students to articulate their views. In this regard, teachers' very good use of follow-on questions in some lessons to elicit better-developed responses from students is commended.

### **ASSESSMENT**

Students' participation in class and their understanding of the lesson topic were monitored satisfactorily through teacher observation and targeted questioning. Some differentiation in questioning was noted, and this served to provide a good level of challenge, for example in the case of very able senior cycle students. In general, all valid responses by students were affirmed, although teachers should be vigilant with regard to the unexpected but legitimate response that may be offered.

A review of students' copybooks and folders indicated a wide range of ability and attainment. However, many instances of very substantial work were noted, and many students present their work and maintain their folders to a high standard. In general, homework in English is regularly set and monitored. Good practice was noted where students received helpful written feedback, indicating where they had made progress and identifying specific areas for further work. The school has a homework policy, which is a point of reference for the English department in setting and marking homework. It would be useful to include in this policy a statement on the students' role in ensuring that they have carefully re-read and corrected all work before it is submitted.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school makes good provision for English in its range of programmes and in the time allocation to English in the senior cycle.
- The English department has engaged in action planning.
- Classroom management in the lessons observed was consistently good.
- Effective teaching and learning practices were observed in many lessons.
- Many students present their work and maintain their folders to a high standard.

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

- The English department should engage in a greater level of collaborative planning, with a focus on appropriately differentiated learning outcomes.

- The English department should investigate approaches such as co-operative and discovery learning that encourage more active student participation.
- Expansion of the ICT facilities should be used to introduce more audio and visual resources to the English classroom.

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

*Published June 2011*

# **Appendix**

## **School response to the report**

### **Submitted by the Board of Management**

#### **Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report**

- The Department were pleased to note that the quest to promote higher attainment at examination level was recognised.
- Classroom management as a whole was acknowledged as being consistently good. The Department feels the adoption of a New Code of Discipline in line with the NEWB has contributed to this.
- The innovative approach to Transition Year was recognised. The Department believes this further enhances the creative ethos of Transition Year.

#### **Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection**

- The adoption of the learning outcomes must, should, could have been worked into school documentation. Schemes of work now promote this approach as a tool to focus as well as allow for differentiation.
- The school has reviewed team teaching in each department and endeavours to promote methodologies which allow for utilisation of this resource in the most beneficial way.
- Cognisant of our status as a DEIS school, the Department believes literacy is of paramount importance and has reviewed the subject plan and aims to reflect this.