An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Rockford Manor Secondary School
Blackrock, Co. Dublin
Roll number: 60081P

Date of inspection: 28 April 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Rockford Manor Secondary School. 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 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

Rockford Manor Secondary School is a well-established school for girls situated in a south Dublin suburb. The school is a Presentation Order foundation, now in the trusteeship of CEIST (Catholic Education An Irish Schools Trust). Its students are drawn from a wide and socially varied catchment area, and the school offers a range of programmes to meet their needs. English is a core subject in the junior cycle, the optional Transition Year (TY) programme and the Leaving Certificate programme. English and Communication is a core component of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, which the school currently offers every second year.

The timetable makes very good provision for English in all years and programmes with the exception of first year. There is particularly good provision in the TY and LCA programmes. All years from second to sixth have five lessons per week, with either a lesson every day or five lessons over four days. However, there are just four English lessons per week in first year, with no English on Monday. While the time allocated to English over the three years of junior cycle is satisfactory, it is recommended that provision of a lesson per day in first year be prioritised. It is the foundation year of a three-year programme and a lesson per day would give students a solid grounding in the key skills relevant to Junior Certificate English. Where this cannot be provided, English should be timetabled on Monday and Friday to minimise the gap between lessons.

On entry, first-year students are generally placed in mixed-ability base classes and remain in these groups for English. At the beginning of second year, students are set for English, taking into account Christmas and summer test results, teacher recommendations and the views of the guidance and support departments. This is clearly a careful process, and the English teaching team generally feels that setting from the beginning of second year is in the best interests of students across the full spectrum of ability. However, classroom observation during the inspection suggested that some very able students might be misplaced when setting occurs this early in the junior cycle. It is therefore recommended that consideration be given to deferring setting for English until the end of second year. The earlier recommendation on the provision of five lessons in first year is of relevance in this regard, as the aim would be to ensure that all students have a
well-reinforced set of skills by the time they enter second year. In making the above recommendations, this report also commends the English department policy of encouraging students to take English at the highest appropriate level irrespective of class placement, and the generally good uptake of higher-level English in the Junior Certificate.

At the beginning of fifth year, students are placed in higher-level or ordinary-level class groups for English on the basis of Junior Certificate results and progress in TY, where applicable. Instances of students who took ordinary-level English in the Junior Certificate but performed very well during TY and proceeded to a higher-level set in fifth year indicate a flexible and supportive approach. English is timetabled concurrently in all year groups from second year onwards, accommodating student movement between levels as well as collaboration in the delivery of the subject. The uptake of Leaving Certificate higher-level English is very satisfactory.

Five teachers form the English teaching team in the school and they demonstrate a high level of commitment to the subject and their students. All teach English to at least two class groups and almost all teach both junior and senior cycle. One of the team is also the school’s learning support teacher. A sixth teacher delivers literacy support to students with identified needs, and there was evidence of good communication between literacy support and resource teachers and the English teaching team. Teachers are assigned to classes with a view to providing continuity of delivery as well as opportunities for teachers to take a range of years, levels and programmes. These are sound criteria. Where possible, however, continuity of teaching from first year to second year should be maintained, so as to underpin the three-year timeframe of the Junior Certificate programme and the cumulative and sequential acquisition of knowledge and skills that it entails.

School management is supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD). Members of the English teaching team have played prominent roles in the subject association and in the delivery of courses within the teachers’ professional network. Student teachers are offered teaching hours in English and usually take some junior cycle and TY lessons that remain formally assigned to their mentor teacher. However, in the current year a student teacher is the only teacher timetabled for some English lessons. This situation should be avoided if possible. Student teachers also have the opportunity to observe lessons and this support is commended.

The school library is also the music room and is accessed for reading periods and research. In addition, teachers of English bring book boxes to classrooms to encourage private reading for pleasure. English department books and resources are held in accessible storage areas, and an electronic folder of English resources is available on the school network. Class groups are based in their own rooms, some of which have been developed as print-rich and stimulating learning environments, a practice worth extending. Among other English-related activities, a very fine mural inspired by the poetry of Adrienne Rich was created in a most imaginative cross-curricular project.

**Planning and Preparation**

Good subject planning structures and processes are in place in the school’s English department. One teacher co-ordinates the subject on a voluntary basis, and the role is described in the subject plan. In addition to responsibility for circulating subject-related information, chairing meetings and communicating with school management, the role also includes overseeing the student-placement process and ensuring that the subject plan is reviewed and updated annually. This work is carried out in a committed and enthusiastic manner. In the interests of extending professional experience and sharing the responsibilities involved, the rotation of the role among all members
of the teaching team on an agreed basis could be discussed. Formal meetings take place each term, and the minutes indicate reflective practice as well as attention to organisational matters. An English planning folder and other relevant documents were presented during the evaluation. Syllabuses, Department circulars, guidelines and materials from CPD events are stored centrally and are available for reference. Some of the terms used in the plan require updating.

An integrated plan for the teaching and learning of language and literature has been adopted for the Junior Certificate programme. It makes explicit links between the genres studied and the reading and writing skills to be developed. This provides a very sound framework for the delivery of a skills-focused programme. To further support this approach, the English teaching team should consider the range of learning outcomes in the plan and identify specific teaching methods and activities that are most appropriate to them. Areas that are known to present particular difficulties to students should be the focus of this collaborative work, with a view to sharing and extending effective classroom practice.

A common anthology-style textbook is chosen in first year and retained. At least two novels and a Shakespearean play are studied over the three junior cycle years. However, the plans seen did not contain an agreed list of poems. It is suggested that key poems taken from the anthology and other sources be agreed as part of the common programme for each year. The inclusion of a dictionary and thesaurus on the booklist is commended.

Planning the delivery of the Leaving Certificate programme is largely done on an individual basis. A Shakespearean play is the agreed single text, and teachers choose other texts and materials on the basis of preference and suitability. It is recommended that the teaching team consider how best to achieve a balance between making individual text choices for each class and the desirability of ensuring a level of commonality, so that, where appropriate, students can move between class groups, and teachers can work towards similar learning targets.

The planned TY programme is stimulating and challenging. Its content supports the learning objectives of TY and is designed to match the interests of the students and to extend their horizons. The inclusion of areas such as Middle English and the genre of fairy tale is imaginative, and the plan is well structured. No plan for LCA was included in the planning documents seen, although it was evident that an appropriate and enjoyable programme is being delivered to LCA students. One teacher generally takes the LCA classes. However, the programme itself should be seen as an integral part of the school’s English curriculum and, to foster a consistent approach to skills development, all members of the teaching team should be aware of its objectives.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Ten lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all years, levels and programmes and involving all members of the English teaching team. A high standard of teaching was evident in the lessons observed, and many instances of very effective and facilitative practice were noted. In general, an appropriate balance between teacher and student talk was maintained, and senior cycle students in particular showed confidence and independence in class discussion. In a few cases, students were less inclined to engage in whole-class discussion, and the teacher voice tended to dominate. It is suggested that the teaching team collectively explore strategies that allow students to engage and respond on a basis other than whole-class discussion.

Course areas covered in lessons included the novel, poetry, drama, film, and the comparative study. In all cases, these were approached in a manner consistent with the aims of the syllabus.
An appropriate emphasis was placed on the development of higher-order skills, including inferential reading and critical evaluation. Lessons were generally well planned, with a view to covering a substantial amount of material and allowing sufficient time for learning activities. These involved a focus on personal response, textual analysis and examination techniques, among others. Lesson pace varied considerably but was generally well matched to the group and the learning objective. However, care should be taken to ensure that a purposeful pace is set for all groups across the spectrum of ability, although the supportive intention of a slower pace with certain groups was clear.

Materials for lessons were well chosen. Poems selected for study in a junior cycle lesson and an LCA lesson were engaging and challenging, and elicited good levels of response from students. Helpful templates relating to the comparative study had been prepared for students to complete. A class group revising *Romeo and Juliet* worked through a substantial commentary on the play, and demonstrated a good grasp of plot and character. An audio recording of the play to highlight key moments and to remind students of the importance of performance and interpretation would be useful both in the initial reading and as a revision aid. Another junior cycle group had read a novel over the Easter holidays. The teacher had gathered first impressions in a previous lesson, typed them up and circulated them. The sheet was then used to trigger and focus further commentary, to reflect on the power of fiction, and to reinforce aspects of grammar and punctuation. Putting resources to multiple uses in this way is highly effective practice.

In most of the lessons observed, teachers ensured that students took an active role in their own learning. Pair and group work was well managed, and students were clearly accustomed to it and worked co-operatively and productively. In one instance however, greater clarity as to the intended outcome of the task was required. Teachers should ensure that all necessary instructions and information have been communicated in advance. Teachers monitored the work carefully and prompted students where necessary. Students listened to feedback from each group attentively and good practice was followed where they were asked to note down points made by other groups. The teaching team may wish to investigate co-operative learning strategies further, as they led to productive interactions in the instances observed.

Questioning strategies were effective in eliciting responses from named students, whether to test recall or understanding or to invite an opinion. Teachers also used global questions judiciously as a means of directing whole-class discussion and encouraging the class to consider a range of interpretations. Where questions required a deeper level of thought or engagement, students were generally given sufficient time to formulate responses. For such questions, it would be useful to signal clearly that a swift response is not expected by adopting a hands-down policy. To a noteworthy extent, teachers sought and affirmed a wide range of response and encouraged students to form and express their own opinions. In some instances, students’ responses were valid and interesting but unexpected, and teachers should strive to remain open to all justifiable interpretations and reactions.

In all the lessons observed, including those few where students tended to be rather silent, there was evidence of enjoyment, understanding and progress. Some very good interactions were noted where students responded confidently to the teacher’s enthusiasm and to the challenges presented to them. Many students demonstrated considerable levels of perception in their responses, and the recall of prior learning was generally impressive. Students maintained a good focus on the tasks in hand and were, for the most part, well organised. It is suggested that, especially with senior cycle classes, teachers encourage students to make their own notes of class discussion and teacher input to further their active listening skills.
Classroom management was uniformly good and students were learning in a supportive, stimulating and enjoyable setting.

**ASSESSMENT**

Students’ engagement and understanding were effectively monitored in the lessons observed, and teachers generally circulated to oversee students’ work. In a number of lessons which were building on prior learning, an initial question-and-answer session ascertained the level of recall and, where indicated, previously-studied material was briefly reviewed.

The English plan contained a copy of the school homework policy which has a good focus on the responsibility of students for their own work. A good cross-section of students’ folders and copybooks was reviewed during the evaluation. It was evident from these that substantial assignments are set on a regular basis, and that students have good opportunities to practise extended writing. Imaginative and quite challenging assignments were noted, and there was no evidence of textbook-dependent work or of an over-reliance on lower-order comprehension exercises. Very good practice in giving helpful developmental feedback to students was evident in written comments on students’ work and in oral feedback in lessons.

Teachers keep very good records of students’ progress and attainment. Commendably, the principal and the teaching team analyse student outcomes in the certificate examinations as a means of informing teaching and learning practices.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The timetable makes very good provision for English in senior cycle programmes.
- The English teaching team demonstrates a high level of commitment to the subject and the students.
- Good subject planning structures and processes are in place in the English department.
- A high standard of teaching was evident in the lessons observed, and many instances of very effective and facilitative practice were noted.
- In all the lessons observed, there was evidence of enjoyment, understanding and progress.
- Substantial assignments are set on a regular basis, and students have good opportunities to practise extended writing.

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

- The provision of a lesson per day in first year should be prioritised.
- Consideration should be given to deferring setting for English until the end of second year.
- The teaching team should consider how best to achieve a balance between making individual text choices for each class and the desirability of ensuring a level of commonality.

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.
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