An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Regina Mundi College, Douglas Road,
Cork City
Roll number: 62691G

Date of inspection: 19 March 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Regina Mundi 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 two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and examined students’ work. 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 school management. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Regina Mundi College is an all-girls school. Overall, there is very good provision for English lessons on the school timetable. The number of English lessons assigned for classes in second year, third year, Transition Year (TY), fifth year and sixth year is good. Classes in first year are provided with four English lessons per week, which is adequate. While the school is encouraged to explore the possibility of increasing this level of provision to five lessons per week, this suggestion must be made with an acknowledgement of the inevitable constraints which arise in the timetabling process. This recognition is of particular relevance in the case of Regina Mundi College, which provides a full taster programme for first-year students, which is good practice. English teachers are assigned to levels and cycles on a rotational basis. This good practice ensures that a wide skills base is maintained in the English department.

Classes in junior cycle are of mixed ability. Choices of level for the Junior Certificate examinations are not made until late in third year. This is appropriate. Students are encouraged to take the higher-level course wherever possible and students consult with their teachers regarding their choice of levels. Assessment tests are administered to first-year students in the December prior to entry in order to identify students who may be in need of additional support. In addition, the school liaises with students’ primary school teachers, examines students’ psychological assessments and the learning-support teacher meets with students’ parents. This is appropriate. Students are assigned to levels in senior cycle on the basis of their performance in examinations, teachers’ advice and the preferences of students and their parents.

There is a school library and a postholder has been appointed to act as librarian. The library is open for lending once a week and incorporates a data projector and screen, a wide selection of books and an array of media posters. English teachers take their junior cycle class groups to the library once a fortnight for reading activities. Students donate books and both the school and the parents’ council have provided support for the development of the library. World Book Day is also acknowledged and used to promote reading for pleasure among the student body. It is suggested that the English department could usefully investigate the mounting of a
*Wordmillionaire* or *Reading Challenge* initiative as a means of promoting reading among first-year students, alongside the worthwhile work which is already being undertaken in this area. It is very positive to note that the learning-support department already utilises *Readalong* books as part of its practice. A useful resource for these and other ideas regarding the development of library services is an evaluation report on the Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project. This report can be found on the website [www.jespliteracy.ie](http://www.jespliteracy.ie). It is suggested that, in order to consolidate and further develop good practice in encouraging reading among the student body, the English department should create a reading policy as an element in the subject plan.

English teachers have access to audio-visual equipment in a number of locations around the school building. In addition, there is a trolley system in operation to facilitate the movement of audio-visual equipment to particular rooms, where necessary. All of this is worthwhile, given the importance of film and audio-visual resources in both junior cycle and senior cycle English. The school is encouraged to continue the expansion of its audio-visual facilities, within the inevitable constraints of available resources.

There is a computer room and a number of rooms have a broadband internet connection. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance the learning experience of students was observed on a number of occasions during the evaluation. English teachers are encouraged to grasp opportunities to develop their practice in the use of ICT. One area which may be worth exploring is the use of webquests to support students’ genre writing and project work. School management is open to providing further access to ICT for English teachers, within the inevitable and necessary constraints of available resources.

There is an induction process for new teachers and student teachers participating in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). The deputy principal provides mentoring and there are also informal meetings with new teachers and student teachers. In addition, a handbook is being developed as a further element in the induction process. In English, the subject co-ordinator also meets with new teachers. This is positive. It is suggested that the English department should formalise its approach to subject induction and this process should be set out clearly in the subject plan. This should be viewed as a means of maintaining and further developing the very good practice already present in the department. Familiarisation of new teachers with the subject plan should form a key element in the subject-induction process.

The school is supportive of English teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD) and pays for teachers’ membership of their subject association. Teachers have availed of CPD opportunities. The English department maintains links with the relevant subject association. It is suggested that, where teachers attend in-service education sessions, relevant material should be added to the subject folder. In addition, where teachers have attended CPD sessions, information should be returned to the rest of the subject department and discussed as an important element in subject-department meetings.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A subject co-ordinator has been appointed. This is positive. While the contribution of the co-ordinator is acknowledged and the system is working well, the English department should now move towards adopting a rotational system with regard to the appointment of a subject co-ordinator. This approach will serve to widen the leadership skills base in the English department, providing all members of the department with experience of the co-ordinator’s role. The role of
the subject co-ordinator should be delineated in the subject plan. There is one formal subject departmental meeting per year, along with good informal interaction and collaboration within the department. Opportunities to expand the number of formal meetings each year should be examined, although this suggestion is made with an acknowledgement of the possible limitations of available resources in this area. Minutes of formal meetings are recorded and stored in the subject plan. The recent focus of formal meetings has been on the selection of texts, film options for TY, the first-year English programme and the assigning of students to different class groups.

A subject plan has been developed. The subject folder includes documents relevant to the teaching and learning of English such as the Junior Certificate syllabus and teacher guidelines. It is suggested that a number of other documents could be added to the subject folder as a support to English teachers. These include current circulars from the Department of Education and Skills relevant to senior cycle English, the Leaving Certificate English syllabus and teacher guidelines and the primary curriculum and teacher guidelines for English. These latter documents can be accessed at www.curriculumonline.ie. A very useful document dealing with subject planning and a range of other ideas relevant to teaching and learning in English is the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate publication Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools (2006). This may be located in the Inspectorate publications section of the Department’s web site at www.education.ie and could also usefully be included in the subject folder.

There is good communication within the department regarding material taught. In addition, there is a document in the subject plan which sets out learning goals to be achieved in each year group of junior cycle. This is positive. However, common, time-linked plans for each year group have not been developed. It is recommended that the subject department should now begin to develop common, time-linked, skills-based plans with clear learning goals. These learning goals should be extracted from the syllabuses. The development of common plans should be undertaken on an incremental basis and should be engaged with by all members of the English department. The plan should also highlight the importance of the adoption of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in each year. There are a number of reasons why a common subject plan of the nature outlined should be developed. It will allow teachers the facility to choose the texts which are best suited to their class groups’ particular interests and experiences. It will inform substitute teachers and teachers new to the department regarding the topics their class groups have already studied and of the high expectations maintained by the English department in Regina Mundi College. In the context of an expanding student and staff population, common plans will facilitate communication within the department. They will also limit the need for the unnecessary duplication of work as teachers will be clear regarding goals to be achieved and the timeframe for their achievement. A common plan will also serve the creation of common examinations across year cohorts, a practice which should be implemented. A model for such a plan can be found on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie, which includes the Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus for junior cycle. Some further development of this will, however, be necessary in the context of Regina Mundi College.

Alongside the development of common plans, or, potentially, concurrent with their development, it is recommended that the English department should adopt a teaching-and-learning focus to be advanced and incorporated into teachers’ practice over the medium term. In the context of some of the very good practice observed during the evaluation, assessment for learning would appear to be a suitable area for exploration. External support in the area of assessment for learning could be accessed through the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). The development of assessment for learning in the English department should not, however, rely primarily on
external experts. It should rely on the considerable expertise already present in the department. Following an initial external in-service education session, teachers should experiment with a variety of assessment-for-learning strategies and use part of subject department meetings as a vehicle for the discussion of their experiences and the exchange of new ideas. Over time, new methodologies should become a part of the practice of the department and, ultimately, should be consolidated through the creation of an assessment-for-learning policy in the subject plan. Elements of assessment for learning which may be of interest include peer-assessment and self-assessment, comment-based marking, the outlining of learning goals and the traffic-light system, although this list is far from exhaustive.

English teachers are involved in organising a wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. These include drama, film, library visits, theatre visits, debating and public speaking, World Book Day and collaboration with the art and music departments. Teachers’ involvement in these activities is to be praised.

Teachers vary texts in senior cycle, within syllabus guidelines. This is good practice. There is less variation in junior cycle. Given the high expectations which are evident in the college, it is recommended that the English department should seek to expand the range of genres explored in all year groups, reflecting this in the texts noted in the subject plan. In particular, the subject plan should highlight the study of a novel in first year as part of the department’s policy and practice and the range of novels studied in junior cycle should be expanded so that students encounter a new novel in each year of their junior cycle. The wide range of very good young adult fiction, which is currently available, should support the English department in achieving these ends. The implementation of this recommendation should be very feasible, given the dedication and enthusiasm for the subject which is displayed in the English department.

There is a subject-specific TY programme for English. Earlier recommendations regarding the development of time-linked, learning goals-based common plans are of relevance with regard to the TY programme as well. A useful resource for the further development of the TY programme can be found in the Transition Units on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment at www.ncca.ie. A further item which may be worthy of consideration is the inclusion of an English portfolio as part of students’ work during TY. Such a portfolio would contain a set number of major genre works which would count towards students’ overall mark at the end of TY. It would serve as a ‘centre of excellence’ for students’ work, thus highlighting the importance of the drafting and redrafting process, as well as the need to remain aware of the anticipated audience when creating new texts. Some representation of oral exercises could also be included in the portfolio. An interesting and worthwhile event in this regard is the Poetry Aloud competition organised by Poetry Ireland each year.

There are good informal links between the English department and the special educational needs department. This is facilitated by a crossover of personnel between the two departments. Along with assessment tests, which are conducted prior to students’ entry to the school, the special educational needs department also retests students for progress and shares information with other members of staff and at whole-staff meetings. It is suggested that, along with current modes of support, the school should investigate the adoption of team-teaching (co-operative teaching) to support students with special educational needs, where practicable and appropriate. Details of this approach can be found in the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate publication Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines (2007) which is available in the Inspectorate publications section of the Department’s website at www.education.ie.
The school has a small number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). EAL students are interviewed upon entry to ascertain their level of English language competence. English language support is provided and three teachers with Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) qualifications are involved in this area. The school has supported these teachers in accessing in-service education in the area of EAL. Senior management is commended for seeking to develop and sustain capacity in this area. As a means of further adding to the school’s capacity to support EAL students, it is suggested that one or more members of the EAL team should be sent to the CPD sessions offered by the PDST. Details of these sessions can be found at www.pdst.ie. In addition, the *English as an Additional Language Post-Primary Assessment Kit* should be adopted as a means of measuring and recording students’ progress in EAL. The inclusion area of the NCCA website also contains valuable material to support EAL students.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed during the evaluation. Lessons began, variously, with the taking of the roll, the collection of homework and the recapitulation of work previously covered. This latter practice was worthwhile, serving to link the new material to be encountered in the lesson with students’ previous knowledge and experiences, thus forming a useful scaffold for new learning. Planning was evident in all lessons. Particularly good practice was observed where the learning intention of lessons was clearly outlined for students at the outset. This strategy conforms to the principles of assessment for learning and is good practice. All members of the English department are encouraged to incorporate this in their approach to lessons.

A wide range of resources was used by English teachers to support students’ learning during the course of the evaluation. These included ICT, visual resources, photocopied handouts and the blackboard. This is positive and English teachers are encouraged to continue to expand the range of resources utilised as an aid in engaging the interest of all students in the classroom.

A clear and consistent emphasis on the discussion and analysis of writers’ use of language was a very positive element in the English department’s practice. In one instance, a teacher adopted a very strong, integrated approach to the development of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. This involved the teacher providing a model for students to examine and discuss, with a particular emphasis on the language techniques being utilised. A reading of the piece through a compact disk recording further added to students’ experiences and there was a commendable emphasis throughout on students enunciating their own personal responses to the text. Ultimately, it was planned that students’ own work would also be recorded and listened to. All of this was very good practice. In another lesson, students were directed towards the sensual language used in a piece of writing. The text chosen was very appropriate in the context of this exercise and led to their undertaking a written exercise in which they were to utilise the same type of language. It is suggested that visual support could have added somewhat to this latter exercise, but this suggestion is made in the context of what was already a very good lesson.

Pair work, group work and other active methodologies were used frequently in English lessons. Particularly good practice was observed where teachers assigned different roles to each member of a group, thus focusing the work and ensuring that the maximum benefit could be derived from the exercise in question. For example, in one lesson students were tasked with composing letters. One student was to act as a scribe, one was to focus on the text and one was to comment on the drafting process. This worked very well and teachers are encouraged to define students’ roles
when assigning pair and group work. Beyond this, English teachers should view such methodologies as an opportunity for developing students’ skills in the key areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Strategies such as placemat, envoy and jigsaw are all useful in this regard. However, these suggestions are made with an acknowledgement of the very good use of pair work and group work which was observed during the evaluation.

Reading and writing activities featured regularly in lessons. The use of ICT to aid students in the creation of a travel brochure was one example of this. The approach adopted served not only to advance students’ technological literacy, but also enhanced their critical literacy and their awareness of the drafting and redrafting process. A consistent emphasis on the importance of audience in the writing of text was another worthwhile element in this lesson. In another lesson, the development of students’ visual literacy was the focus, with ICT again being used effectively. Here a variety of images were viewed and analysed in turn. The possibility of moving students towards independent work at an earlier point might have aided the pacing of a part of the lesson, but overall, the approach worked well. In another senior cycle lesson, a teacher reading of a piece was followed by questions being put to students where the importance of their own personal response to the writing was clearly highlighted. This was good practice.

A very positive relationship between teachers and students was evident during the evaluation. Seating was organised effectively, and adjusted in one lesson to better suit the tasks being undertaken. In one instance the maintenance of a clear ‘line of sight’ between the teacher and EAL students in the class could usefully inform the class seating arrangement in the future. On a number of occasions, teachers used humour as an effective management tool. Student learning was evident in all lessons observed. Students worked diligently and displayed a good knowledge of texts studied. High expectations of students were also evident.

In some cases a print-rich environment had begun to be developed. Here, student projects were displayed, as well as students’ genre exercises and a number of graphic organisers and posters. The English department is strongly encouraged to adopt the development of a print-rich environment as policy and practice in the teaching and learning of English. Such an environment can serve to strengthen students’ literacy through an increased awareness of the place of audience and of the importance of the drafting and redrafting process where their work is potentially going to be ‘published’ in the classroom space. Additional useful ideas in this area include the display of keywords, writing frames, character diagrams and relevant media posters. All of these strategies will support students with special educational needs, EAL students and, indeed, all students in their engagement with the subject and in the development of their literacy skills.

**ASSESSMENT**

Homework was regularly assigned and corrected in lessons observed during the evaluation. A particularly positive element was the very frequent use of comment-based, formative assessment in teachers’ correction of students’ homework. This practice is worthwhile and conforms to the principles of assessment for learning.

There was some evidence of the use of an integrated approach towards the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in the homework which teachers assigned. This was positive. Overall, the English department should increase its focus on the use of an integrated strategy. This should be approached through the vehicle of teachers’ individual planning and should incorporate the exploration of a wide range of genres and language techniques. Texts being studied could then serve as models for students’ writing. Where a particular genre is assigned for homework, rubrics
should be set out for the completion of the homework exercise which draw students’ attention to the features of the genre which they will need to adhere to, as well as to particular language techniques that they will be required to include. This should be viewed as an opportunity to expand students’ macro-language and micro-language awareness, as outlined in the Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English: Leaving Certificate English Syllabus.

Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas and at the end of the academic year. In addition, students who will be undertaking the certificate examinations participate in mock examinations during the course of the year. Students with RACE (Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations) are facilitated in the mock examinations. This is good practice. Generally, common examinations are not organised within year groups. This practice should be adopted wherever practicable in the future. Not only will common examinations serve to give a clear view of student achievement across each year cohort, they will also serve to obviate unnecessary duplication of work within the English department. There is one parent-teacher meeting per year group each year. In addition, parents receive reports regarding students’ progress following formal examinations. These arrangements are worthwhile.

Senior management conducts an analysis of students’ achievement in the certificate examinations each year. This is good practice and the English department should also conduct an analysis of students’ performance and uptake of levels versus national norms on a regular basis. This may best be achieved by taking an average of these statistics over a number of years. In the context of Regina Mundi College, this practice should prove to be affirming of teachers’ efforts.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed.
- There are good informal links between the English department and the SEN department.
- There is a school library and a postholder has been appointed as librarian.
- The use of ICT to enhance the learning experience of students was observed on a number of occasions during the evaluation.
- There is variation of texts in senior cycle, within syllabus guidelines.
- There is very good informal interaction and collaboration within the department.
- English teachers are involved in a wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities.
- The use of pair work and group work was observed frequently during the evaluation.
- A clear and strong emphasis on language was a very positive element in the department’s approach to the subject.
- Homework was regularly assigned and corrected, with the use of comment-based assessment frequently in evidence.
- In some cases, a print-rich environment had begun to be developed.
- A universally positive relationship between students and teachers was observed.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• The English department should now begin to develop common, time-linked, skills-based plans with clear learning goals.
• The English department should adopt a teaching-and-learning focus to be advanced and incorporated into teachers’ practice over the medium term.
• The range of genres explored in all year groups should be expanded and this should be reflected in the subject plan.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with school management at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

It is the policy of the English Department in RMC to include the study of a novel in first year, as well as in second and third year. Special circumstances prevailing in the first year class visited by the inspector (which could not be explained due to the work to rule at that time) did not allow for the study of a novel with that particular first year class. This is not the norm in RMC.

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