REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Portlaoise College, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 deputy principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision for English on the school timetable is good for all year groups and there is good whole-school support from management for the subject. Students have daily English lessons and some class groups that need literacy support receive such support in the form of an extra English period on the timetable or additional resource teaching. The school is commended for introducing mixed ability for the current cohort of first-year students and it is planned that these students will be banded from second year. This is a much more appropriate manner of student placement than the current system of streaming which is in operation in second and third year. Class groups are banded and concurrently timetabled in both fifth and sixth year which facilitates movement of students between levels.

Students with special educational needs (SEN) are well supported and school management is commended for providing additional English teachers on the timetable to provide teaching to smaller class groups. It is suggested that the English department also consider introducing co-operative teaching to their suite of supports for students with special educational needs as this would enable students to be supported in mainstream lessons and facilitate sharing of good practice.

The school is very well resourced and is a very pleasant learning environment. Many of the English teachers are located in classrooms close to each other which allows for sharing of resources and ideas. Classrooms are very well resourced and are equipped with information and communication technology (ICT) including laptops and data projectors. There was evidence that these resources are well used by many teachers to enhance teaching and learning. Most classrooms were also print-rich environments with samples of students’ work, relevant posters and key words on display. Such practice motivates students and encourages them to take pride in their work. The use of key words is particularly commended as a strategy for supporting students with literacy and English language deficits. An annual budget is made available to the English department for the purchase of resources. There is a spacious and well maintained school library, which is quite well stocked and students are encouraged to borrow books from it or from the local
town library. It was reported that all subject departments have access to shared folders for storage and sharing of electronic resources. This initiative is commended.

There is a large teaching team of eight English teachers teaching mainstream class groups in the second-level college. There is currently little crossover between those who teach English in the second-level college and those who teach Communications to Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) students. It is recommended that teachers be timetabled to teach PLC and second-level rather than the established practice of having two distinct groups of teachers teaching in either the second-level or PLC part of the school. The practice of rotating the teaching of higher-level classes is commended. Five of the eight English teachers have just one mainstream class group for English. It would be better if there was a smaller team of teachers with more access to teaching English. Most teachers of English have English to degree level or a relevant SEN degree and only those who have these qualifications should be deployed to teach the subject.

Many teachers have participated in continuing professional development opportunities in English and teachers have also been provided with school-based in-service on the recently introduced Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and on Assessment for Learning (AfL). The school has developed links with the Abbey Theatre’s outreach programme which provides drama workshops for junior cycle students. Other literacy initiatives such as paired reading are also taking place and students have participated in the M.S. Readathon. These strategies for increasing literacy are laudable.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The English subject plan is commended for the aims it defines for teaching English, its focus on content, learning outcomes and key skills for each year group to achieve and its outline of teaching methodologies. There was evidence that all teachers are very aware of the overall plan and individual teachers’ plans are also commended. There is a co-ordinator of English, a position that will be rotated, and this is good practice. Meetings of the English department take place on a termly basis. Teachers of first-year classes follow a common programme of work and students in first year sit common examinations at Christmas and in the summer. This is very good practice as it ensures maintenance of standards and transparency. In addition, the thematic approach adopted in the first-year programme and in some other classes is commended. Teachers of first-year classes should consult with students before choosing texts for study, particularly the novel, to ensure that there is no overlap with what students have studied in primary school.

While the texts chosen for study at higher level in the junior cycle are suitable on the whole, it is recommended that teachers review their choice of texts for ordinary-level and foundation-level students to ensure that they are suitable not only for junior cycle, but also for preparing students for the greater challenges of senior cycle. An appropriate range of poetry is studied in all years. In addition, it is recommended that new literary texts be introduced in third year for all students as opposed to spending most of third year revising previously studied texts. Senior cycle students must study three comparative texts.

Management has recently timetabled a third English teacher for fifth-year students to provide a three-way divide for English. However, the two original fifth-year class groups both commenced the year by studying different texts so there was no common content covered by students in the newly established class. There is a need for close liaison among the English teachers to ensure that all students are studying the same texts or poems until such classes are fully established.
There was evidence in planning of close liaison with the special education department. Overall, while there was evidence from the minutes of English department meetings that teachers discuss formation of classes and other such issues at meetings, it is recommended that the English department also focuses in planning on one or two areas for improvement each year. These could include strategies for reducing the number of students taking foundation level or more collaboration around sharing effective teaching methodologies.

**Teaching and Learning**

The quality of teaching and learning ranged from fair to excellent in lessons observed. A commendable feature of almost all lessons was that the learning outcome or purpose of the lessons was clearly communicated to students from the beginning. There was a very good focus on integrating the teaching of language and literature, especially at senior cycle, so that students’ comprehension and composing skills were taught in conjunction with studied texts. At junior cycle, there was evidence from students’ copybooks that some teachers teach the techniques of poetry as an adjunct to the poem as opposed to teaching these techniques in the context of the poem, which would be better practice.

Some very good pre-reading strategies were observed in lessons. ICT was very well used in many instances and teachers had also prepared useful handouts and resources to enhance learning; although rather than dictating notes and giving sample answers, students should be encouraged to develop their own ideas on texts. Very good use of key words to aid learning was observed in one lesson. In addition, in some instances, students were given a scaffold or outline of what might be included in their written assignment. Mind mapping was also used in some lessons and students actively worked together to complete work. The use of response journals for the novel is commended and is a better strategy than asking students to summarise texts.

The structure of most lessons was very good with a good break up of tasks in evidence and a clear and logical progression in most cases from one step of the lesson to the next. In a couple of cases there was too much teacher talk or students reading from the text for too long without teacher intervention to check understanding or discuss issues, and this led to passive students. Best practice was observed when there were opportunities throughout the lesson for student discussion and engagement with their texts. At senior cycle, students were particularly engaged in active learning.

Teachers have to cater for a range of student abilities including those with special educational needs and those for whom English is an additional language (EAL) in mainstream classes. In some junior cycle lessons and in all senior cycle lessons observed there was appropriate differentiation used by the teacher through asking questions of named individuals and through giving individual attention to students as required. In these lessons a range of higher-order and lower-order questions was posed and, in most cases, students were engaged in discussion about their texts with their teacher and with each other. In addition, students in these lessons were assigned interesting tasks and appropriately long pieces of work. It was evident that students were able to respond to the questions posed by the inspector when they were used to discussion and active participation. Some students were found not to be adequately challenged in lessons where the teachers were inclined to ask lower-order questions which failed to motivate the better able students. In addition, sometimes there was an inclination to ask for hands up as opposed to naming students to answer questions. In these lessons, the content accommodated the students’ abilities rather than challenged them. It is recommended that teachers ensure that they are
challenging all their students and actively engaging them regardless of their ability and therefore there is a need to practise differentiation in all lessons.

There was evidence from an examination of students’ journals and copybooks that students were not being assigned enough homework in some lessons. Assigned homework is vital if students’ written work is to improve. The practice of assigning homework, including longer pieces of work, should be adopted by all junior cycle teachers as currently many assignments are short.

Teachers were found to have a very good relationship with their students in all lessons and to be very caring towards them. Good practice was seen when the teachers put learning in context for students by linking the topic of the lesson with contemporary life.

An examination of results in state examinations shows a steady increase in the number of students taking higher level in English although there is still a high rate of students taking foundation-level English in the Junior Certificate examination. Senior management analyses the results in state examinations and it is clear that management is encouraging teachers to persuade more students to take a higher level in the state examinations in English. This focus on better attainment for students is justified and is to be highly commended.

ASSESSMENT

Some very good AfL strategies were seen in many lessons such as outlining the purpose of the lesson at the start of the lesson and giving constructive commentary to students on where they needed to improve. As already noted, some teachers should assign more homework to students and, overall, it is suggested that teachers should agree a policy for each year group on frequency of assignment of longer pieces of work. Teachers test their students frequently in in-class assignments. In a couple of instances, there was evidence that students’ work was not being regularly corrected. It is recommended that this poor practice be revisited.

The practice of students having hardback or manuscript copybooks for their work is commended. Many of these were well maintained and the manuscript copybooks observed in one instance were very well maintained.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
• There is good provision, timetabling and whole school support for English.
• Students with special educational needs are well supported by teachers and management.
• The school is very well resourced and is a very pleasant learning environment.
• There is a comprehensive subject plan available for English.
• The practice of all first years following a common programme of work and sitting common examinations is very good.
• ICT was very well used in many instances.
• The structure of most lessons was very good with a good break up of tasks in evidence.
• Best practice was observed when there were opportunities throughout the lesson for student discussion and engagement with their texts. At senior cycle, students were particularly engaged in active learning.
• Teachers had a very good relationship with their students in all lessons.
• There is a steady increase in the number of students taking higher level in English and management is encouraging teachers to persuade more students to take a higher level in the state examinations in English.

• Very good AfL strategies were seen in many lessons.

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

• It is recommended that teachers teach both PLC and second-level but that there be a smaller team of teachers with more access to teaching English.

• There is a need for English teachers to review their choice of texts in all years of junior cycle to ensure that: all senior cycle students study three comparative texts; junior cycle texts are suitably challenging; texts do not overlap with those studied in primary school; fifth-year students commence the year by studying the same texts until class groups are fully established; and new material is introduced into third year.

• It is recommended that teachers ensure that they are challenging all their students and actively engaging them regardless of their ability and therefore there is a need to practise differentiation in all lessons.

• Teachers should assign more homework to students in some junior cycle class groups and overall it is suggested that teachers should agree a policy for each year group on frequency of assignment of longer pieces of work.

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

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