An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Saint Tiernan’s Community School
Balally, Dublin 16
Roll number: 91343T

Date of inspection: 23 November 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Tiernan’s Community 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 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

St Tiernan’s Community School has a socially mixed catchment area and provides a very wide range of programmes to meet the needs of its students. English is a core subject in all the programmes offered and it is generously provided for in the timetables. A lesson per day is provided in each junior cycle year and in the Leaving Certificate programme. Students in the optional Transition Year (TY) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programmes have four lessons per week.

The school has a large teaching resource, including a number of teachers qualified in the area of special educational needs, and it seeks to deploy these strategically and supportively. All students requiring additional literacy support are very well provided for, with timetabled lessons for this purpose in addition to their mainstream English lessons. Students following the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) are integrated into junior cycle base-class groups, not placed in a discrete JCSP class. This practice is commended. Students learning English as an additional language (EAL) receive timetabled language support from a teacher with relevant experience, which is organised and delivered in a targeted manner.

While very good supports are in place for students with literacy and language needs, the school is concerned to ensure that it sets suitably high expectations for all students, including more able students. To this end, some modification of the present method of class formation for English in the junior cycle may be helpful. At present, the general pattern is of mixed-ability class groups for junior cycle English, and English is concurrently timetabled for all class groups in each year. At the beginning of third year, all students wishing to take English at higher level are assigned to one class group for English, but it remains a mixed-level group. If the teaching resources available permit it, it would be very worthwhile to create a discrete higher level group in third year to give these students the best opportunity to achieve their potential.

In the senior cycle, three class groups are formed for Leaving Certificate English. While a majority of students take English at ordinary level, students aiming to take higher level are placed in the same class group. Again, a discrete higher level group would be the optimal arrangement
but, if this cannot be achieved, some suggestions on planning a mixed-level programme of work are given in the next section.

Eight teachers form the school’s English department, and there is a good balance between experienced and more recently qualified teachers. Just four of the eight teach English in both junior and senior cycle, and two teach only one class group. Deployment which ensures that teachers teach a range of years, levels and programmes deepens the pool of expertise available to the department, and should be aimed at as far as possible. Teachers who provide literacy support work closely with the English department.

English is well resourced in the school. Most teachers of English have their own base classrooms, many of which have been developed as stimulating learning environments for English. The display of current students’ work was especially noted, and is encouraged as a form of publication and an affirmation of students’ efforts. Many classrooms have data projectors, and all have access to audiovisual equipment. The provision of information and communication technology (ICT) to assist teaching and learning is of a high level and includes a mobile unit with laptop computers for student use. The school has a ‘cinema room’ with a booking system, which is an admirable facility to support film studies. There is a central library and class libraries have also been developed. A quiet room with comfortable seating has been created and is used very effectively by literacy support teachers as a reading room for small groups of students.

School management is supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development. School-based staff development has included courses on assessment for learning and ICT. The English department is encouraged to share its expertise by renewing its links with the subject association, INOTE (Irish National Organisation of Teachers of English).

**Planning and Preparation**

Regular scheduled meetings throughout the school year facilitate subject planning. One of the long-serving teachers of English has chaired the English department meetings and co-ordinated the subject for a number of years. A high level of professional collegiality and respect within the English department was noted, which is reflected in records of meetings and decisions. To build on this strength, the department could draw up a description of the co-ordinator role that would include not only an organisational but also a developmental aspect, and in that context could consider rotating the role to offer all members of the department experience of co-ordination.

The current subject plan contains schemes of work for each year. Many of these give details of learning outcomes and activities as well as topics and timeframes. In further developing this good work, the department should revisit the learning outcomes to ensure that they are sufficiently detailed and measurable to inform the choice of teaching and learning methods and assessment modes. In addition, the references to note-taking or transcription in the section on course materials should be modified, as they suggest a passive style of learning not borne out in the classroom practice observed. References to helping students develop an organised approach to their work through the proper maintenance of copybooks and folders are commendable.

The planned programmes are substantial. The junior cycle English plan exploits the possibilities offered by the open syllabus to give students a broad experience of novels, plays, poetry and media. This is highly commended, as it provides students with a rich resource through which their literacy skills and ability to respond to literature can be fostered. The year plans for TY and LCA are in line with the programme objectives. The planning of the Leaving Certificate programme has to take account of the mix of levels in one class group. It may be worthwhile, in devising a
common programme for fifth year, to focus on language work, the common elements of the poetry course, and the comparative study rather than the single text. School management could consider the possibility of forming a discrete higher level class group in sixth year for all or some lessons, to facilitate the study of the single text most suited to each class group. This arrangement would, it is hoped, encourage more students to take higher level English and help them to manage the course successfully.

The subject plan reflects the close co-operation between the English and learning support departments in the school. It contains sections on supporting students with special educational needs, EAL students and all students who will benefit from differentiation strategies, outlines of which are contained in the plan. Copies of the school’s learning support programme and EAL plan are kept with English planning documents. They are well structured and indicate a high level of reflective practice.

The English department has worked collaboratively to build up a very impressive bank of resources. These are stored to be easily accessible, and many are available in electronic format. The English plan explicitly refers to the use of ICT as a tool for effective teaching and learning. An initiative in the school to develop a ‘virtual learning environment’ is a model of the sharing of good practice across departments. The English department has begun to transfer a range of presentations, notes and templates to this shared site for the benefit of students. The many possibilities of such a resource should provide a useful focus for forward planning.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Twelve lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all years, levels and programmes offered, and involving all members of the subject department. The lessons observed also included an EAL support lesson and literacy support lessons, including one involving team teaching. Overall, the quality of teaching observed was very good, and many instances of innovative and supportive classroom practice were noted. Classroom management was of a high standard, and was linked to the very good knowledge of the students shown by teachers in their interactions and choice of approaches.

Lessons were generally delivered at a pace appropriate to the class profile, maintaining forward movement while consolidating prior learning. In a few instances, the pace was perhaps slower than necessary; where students are reading a novel, for example, a certain momentum is required to maintain interest in what happens next. A calm and affirming approach was especially effective in class groups that included some potentially difficult students, and created a positive and productive atmosphere. For the most part, lessons were well structured, and learning activities were well sequenced and linked. Where the lesson plan was shared with students at the outset, it helped to create a sense of purpose and focus, and this practice should therefore be extended.

Topics covered included character development and setting in fiction; responding to poetry; different narrative forms, such as film and short story; and analysis of television listings in media studies. Teachers had prepared very good resources to help students develop an understanding of these topics. Mind-maps were distributed to students working in small groups and used effectively to develop character profiles. Extracts from the writings of Roddy Doyle and Michael Caine had been selected to illuminate aspects of longer texts being studied, and helped students towards perceptive comparisons. Effective use of the data projector facilitated the close study of images relevant to poems or stories. Where students have looked at a powerful image for one purpose, extending its use to provide a stimulus for personal writing should be considered, thus linking critical and creative work.
Teachers employed a variety of teaching and learning approaches, almost all of which were characterised by a focus on the student and on active and engaged learning. Direct whole-class instruction and teacher exposition were sparingly used. However, teachers made insightful comments on texts and topics, providing students with very good models of personal response. To complement the stimulating resources they had prepared, teachers sought to engage students’ interest at the outset and help them to connect very directly with the lesson topic. A senior cycle group was prompted to respond to visual images linked to a poem through a list on the board of simple opposites such as ‘positive/negative’. This approach prepared the group for a second, deeper reading of the poem, and ensured that the well-planned resources were used to the full. A junior cycle class studying a novel used a Facebook profile as a model for a character study, thus engaging easily with matters of motive and attitude.

A range of effective questioning strategies was observed. The purpose of many questions was to encourage students to realise what they already knew about a topic or were able to work out themselves, encouraging them to have a more confident and responsible attitude to their own learning. Probing follow-on questions were also used, to guide students towards more considered and balanced responses. Differentiated questions provided an appropriate level of challenge, from straightforward recall of key points to responses requiring analysis or inferential reading. It would be useful for the English department to consider the questioning strategies that would best support students who have difficulty with concepts and abstractions, and would help them to progress from literal to more inferential reading of a text.

The teaching and learning practices observed had a helpful focus on language development and ‘text-attack’ skills. A junior cycle group was supplied with a bank of adjectives from which to choose suitable descriptions of rival characters in a novel. This approach allowed words to be illustrated through characters’ actions and thereby better understood. Students could be asked initially to use a traffic-light system with such a list, using colours to mark words as known, somewhat familiar, or unknown, and re-marking it at the end of the lesson. Another junior cycle group looking at ‘My Papa’s Waltz’ was asked to select its key words and phrases, and this led to a good discussion of a deceptively simple poem. It is suggested that asking students to trace the pattern of positive and negative words in such a poem would help them to grasp its complexities.

The student-centred approaches taken led to a good level of student engagement in most of the lessons observed. Some very perceptive responses were noted from a range of students, including those receiving learning support. A very good concluding exercise in one literacy support lesson required the students to state one thing they had noticed in the chapter completed, and elicited some striking observations. To maintain the necessary focus on the development of students’ writing skills, teacher writing in class should always lead to student writing and should provide a model for planning and structuring written work.

**Assessment**

Teachers monitored students’ levels of participation in class activities, and gave firm but encouraging guidance to keep them on task. Questioning was used to check students’ understanding and, where required, teachers reviewed material that was proving difficult. In some lessons, an initial oral review of homework was used to link the lesson topic and prior learning. Where homework was returned in class, teachers gave oral feedback where it had general relevance. Students were asked to note all homework in their journals in the lessons observed.
A review of students’ copybooks and folders reflected varying levels of application and presentation. However, there was evidence that students in all years have completed substantial amounts of work, and some work was very well presented. Homework is assigned regularly and corrected. Best practice was noted where substantial pieces of work, such as extended compositions, were commented on so that progress was affirmed and points for improvement were indicated. This practice is in line with the principles of assessment for learning, and should be followed where applicable.

There was no undue emphasis on preparation for certificate examinations although, quite correctly, key skills identified in the syllabuses were given appropriate attention. However, it would be useful for Leaving Certificate students to become familiar with the criteria for assessment to be applied, as this will assist them when preparing and writing assignments.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
- English is generously provided for in the timetables for all programmes and is well resourced.
- Very good supports are in place for students with literacy and language needs.
- A high level of professional collegiality and respect exists within the English department.
- Overall, the quality of teaching observed was very good, and many instances of innovative and supportive classroom practice were noted.
- Teachers employed a variety of teaching and learning approaches, almost all of which were characterised by a focus on the student and on active and engaged learning.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
- Class formation in third year and in Leaving Certificate should be reorganised if possible to encourage a greater uptake of higher level English.
- Learning outcomes in the subject plan should be reviewed to ensure that they are sufficiently detailed and measurable.

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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