

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

North Monastery Secondary School
North Monastery Road, Cork
Roll number: 62530F

Date of inspection: 25 November 2010



AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS

REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in the North Monastery 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 three 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 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

North Monastery Secondary School is an all-boys school which participates in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan. There are four English lessons per week for students in first year, second year and third year. It is recognised that the duration of these lessons is somewhat longer than the lesson periods which are utilised in the majority of schools. Consequently, students are receiving more instruction time in the number of periods noted here than might typically be the case. Nevertheless, the school is encouraged to investigate the possibility of expanding its current provision in junior cycle to five lessons per week, as is recommended in the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate study *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools* (2006). This study noted that, of seventy-five schools evaluated, a minority of schools were found to provide only four lessons of English per week in all three years of junior cycle. In addition, the study noted that optimal practice would ensure one contact point with the subject on each day of the school week. This is of particular relevance in a context where a significant number of students display difficulties in literacy development and, consequently, greater frequency of contact with the subject would be of considerable benefit. In addition, the current length of class periods could be reconsidered, alongside the constraints which the consequent eight-period day places on possible provision for English. The duration of lessons should also be examined in the context of the effectiveness with which teachers can ensure student engagement for longer periods of time. It is recognised that this may involve wider questions regarding the organisation of the whole-school curriculum. Four English lessons per week are assigned for students in Transition Year (TY), while English classes in fifth year and in sixth year are provided with five lessons per week. This is good provision.

A streaming system is used to place students in class groups in first year. This is based mainly on the results of their entrance assessment, results of a reading test conducted shortly after the entrance assessment, contacts with their primary schools and, where necessary, contacts with parents. The entrance assessment is conducted in Irish, English and Mathematics. It is

recommended that the current system for assigning students to streamed classes in first year should be reviewed and adjusted. This should be done in light of findings by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), in their publication *Moving Up: The Experiences of First Year Students in Post-Primary Education*, regarding the potentially negative impact of determining student levels at such an early stage in their development. In particular, findings regarding the impact of streaming on students' literacy should be carefully considered. Recommendations in *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools* (2006) should also be considered in this regard. In addition, questions should be asked of the extent to which current assessments in English, conducted as part of the entrance assessment, reflect the primary school curriculum and, consequently, whether they are accurately assessing students' learning up to this point in their education. Beyond this, the possibility of this English assessment merely acting as, at best, a duplication of standardized tests administered to new students should be considered. The possibility of mixed-ability class groups throughout first year should be examined, potentially in combination with a smaller literacy-support class in English, team-teaching or other forms of additional support for students experiencing difficulties in literacy development. The system for assigning students to class levels should be regularly and strongly interrogated to identify what its aims are and, in turn, whether students are being supported by the system in operation. Students are assigned to levels in fifth year by English teachers and on the basis of levels taken in the Junior Certificate, examination results and student choice.

The majority of English lessons are delivered by teachers who have specialist qualifications in English. Due to recent changes in personnel available to the school, however, in a number of instances, English lessons are delivered by teachers who do not have such qualifications. The school recognises that this situation needs to be adjusted and that this is a key area for development in the English department. It is very important that greater capacity in the subject should be developed in future years and it is recommended that the school should continue to pursue this goal. English teachers are assigned to class groups on the basis of maintaining continuity of students' educational experience and this is good practice.

The school library is currently in need of refurbishment. However, very good work has been undertaken in organising reading initiatives by members of the English department. These initiatives have included *Wordmillionaire*, *Reading Challenge* and involvement in the *One Book, One Shandon* project. In addition, a literacy week is being organised in the near future. This includes the placing of motivational posters around the school corridors and a sports personality visiting the school to encourage students' engagement with reading. Students in each junior-cycle year group are retested at the start of each year and again later in the school year. It is suggested that testing might usefully take place following a reading initiative in the future. This could prove to be affirming for those teachers and students involved and could also serve to highlight progress being made to other members of staff. It would also help in identifying which initiatives are most effective in supporting students' literacy. Significant literacy resources have been collated to support the needs of students participating in the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). These include sets of novels, DVDs, a camera and dictionaries. In addition, the school is involved in the *Writer in Residence* programme. All of this is very worthwhile. There is an aspiration within the English department to incorporate a paired reading programme in TY. This would be a positive development, particularly if such a programme could be included on a modular basis on the school timetable. It is suggested that actions to promote reading among the student body should be set down in a reading policy as part of the subject plan.

English teachers are provided with base classrooms. This is a significant resource. Currently there is adequate access to audio-visual equipment for English teachers, with a trolley system operating

on each floor. It is important that this access should be improved for English teachers. An opportunity to expand this access will be presented by the anticipated increase in the number of data projectors and computers as a result of the *Smartschools* initiative funded by the Department of Education and Skills. Classrooms are connected for broadband internet access. Again, English teachers are encouraged to grasp the opportunities which greater availability of ICT equipment in English classrooms will present. A consideration for the whole school is the adoption of a universal font to be used when presenting materials across all subject departments. Such an approach will be helpful for students with literacy difficulties and, indeed, for all students. Members of the English department should use parts of future departmental meetings to discuss ways in which they have adopted and adapted their use of ICT over a period of time. Given the clear literacy support needs of a range of students in different class groups, the school should begin to consider the ways in which ICT can be used to enhance students' reading and writing. The use of, for example, word-processing packages to increase students' awareness of the drafting and redrafting process, should be considered. Along with this, ICT will enhance the presentation skills of these students. Consequently, it is recommended that the accessing of ICT facilities should be prioritised, in a planned manner, for students with difficulties in literacy development.

Schools participating in the DEIS action plan are required to undertake action planning in a number of defined areas. It is recommended that this process should begin to be undertaken in the key area of student literacy. This work should inform the creation of a whole-school literacy plan and should be advanced as a matter of priority, seeking to build on good work which is already underway in the area of student literacy. A whole-school literacy committee should be formed, linked to the school's overall, nascent, DEIS-planning process. This committee should include representatives from the English department and from the special educational needs department, but should also include a number of representatives from other subject departments, as well as a member of senior management. The committee should develop clear baseline data and work from this towards specific time-linked targets with clear success criteria. The committee should be provided with regular opportunities at staff meetings to report to staff regarding developments and to involve staff in relevant initiatives. Both external and internal providers of in-service education should be considered to inform the work of the committee and, indeed, of the whole staff in this vital area of their work. The website www.jcspliteracy.ie provides significant resources to support subject departments in engaging with student literacy. In addition, the JCSP Support Service publication *Resources for Developing a School-Wide Literacy Plan* is very valuable as a tool to inform the planning process in this area. The selection of a number of actions to be taken over the short to medium-term should be of particular service in this regard. Such actions should be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, targeted) and set within clear timeframes. Further guidance in this area is set out in the body of this report. The JCSP support service should also be of considerable relevance in this area.

There is an informal subject-specific induction process for new teachers of English which includes an introduction to the departmental folder and attendance at subject department meetings. This is worthwhile. As the department begins to further develop its strategies to support student literacy, it will be important that specific induction processes are formalised and set out in the subject plan. In particular, key methodologies to support student literacy should be highlighted, along with common plans which include key learning goals to be achieved.

The school is supportive of teachers' professional development. English teachers have engaged in a number of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities in the areas of behaviour and literacy through both the JCSP support service and in a whole-school context.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A subject co-ordinator has been appointed on a rotational basis. This is good practice as such an approach will encourage the development of a wide leadership skills base within the English department. Formal, termly meetings of the subject department are scheduled to facilitate collaboration. Minutes of departmental meetings are maintained using ICT. This is good practice and should be continued.

The subject-planning process is in the early stages of development. A subject plan has been created. The plan includes circulars from the Department of Education and Skills related to the Leaving Certificate syllabus, information regarding support for students' literacy skills and common plans. It is positive to note that the plan includes a note that a dictionary and thesaurus are to be used in lessons. It is suggested that this worthwhile practice should be implemented across the subject department. As further additions to the current plan, it is suggested that the aforementioned Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools* which may be found in the Inspectorate area of the Department of Education and Skills website at www.education.ie should be included, along with the current plan, in a subject folder. It is recommended that the current common yearly plans should now be further developed to incorporate a clear learning-goals based approach. The plans should be time-linked and should be drawn from the syllabuses. These plans should aid all teachers in focusing on the development of students' literacy skills, and, initially, the development of the plans should have a strong focus on junior-cycle groups. Beyond this, common plans of this type should provide a strong support for teachers with a more limited background in English teaching. A possible model to inform this work may be located at www.ncca.ie through the *Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus* for junior cycle. It is also recommended that the adoption of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses should be incorporated as a key element in both these common plans and in individual teacher plans.

A range of texts is studied in junior cycle and in senior cycle. This is appropriate and the English department is encouraged to vary texts studied to suit class context and ability, while also maintaining cognisance of the need to challenge students and advance their literacy skills. Currently, three comparative texts are studied by ordinary level Leaving Certificate classes. This is appropriate and within the requirements of the syllabus. The study of three comparative texts in ordinary level Leaving Certificate class groups should be noted as policy and practice in the subject plan as a means of consolidating and maintaining this approach. Clarity regarding poetry to be studied in ordinary level class groups should also be supported through the subject plan which should highlight the requirements of the syllabus in this regard. It is recommended that the study of a drama as part of students' junior cycle course in ordinary level class groups should also be noted as policy and practice in the subject plan. This should be done in order to ensure students are exposed to a wide range of genres and that they are engaged by appropriately challenging material which will enhance key literacy skills to be set out in the department's common plans. The English department is also encouraged to utilise a SMOG test to inform the selection of textbooks for different class groups in the future as a further means of ensuring that students are appropriately challenged in lessons by tasks commensurate with their literacy skills.

A subject-specific TY programme for English has been developed. Further development of the programme for English should now be undertaken, as outlined in the case of other yearly plans. Clear learning goals should be delineated and these should be time-linked. In addition, it is suggested that an English-specific portfolio should be included as a key element in students'

overall assessment in the subject during TY. The portfolio should include a number of major genre exercises developed during the year through a process approach to writing. This will not only highlight for students the importance of drafting and redrafting work before it is presented, it will also provide a means of publication and a sense of audience with regard to their written work. The current inclusion of the development of students' oracy in the programme is very worthwhile. Indeed, an exercise focused on the development of oracy could also be represented in students' English portfolio. There are plans currently in place to move from a mixed-ability system in TY English to a higher level and ordinary level class group. This move should be examined very carefully, particularly in the context of the overall aims of the TY programme.

There are a number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). Currently, the school is augmenting resources provided by the Department to support these students with tuition hours provided by its own funds. Planning in the area of EAL is in the early stages of development. Planning should continue to be developed and a number of areas are suggested that may help the school in optimising its resources for EAL students and in building capacity. A staff member should be identified to take responsibility for English language support and should be encouraged to pursue professional development in this area. This approach will allow the school to build and maintain professional capacity in EAL. In particular, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) provides CPD for EAL teachers. A further useful resource is the website of the English Language Support Teachers Association (ELSTA) which can be located at www.elsta.ie. A key resource, as noted in circular 15/2009, to assess EAL students and to track their progress in English language proficiency is the *English as an Additional Language Post-Primary Assessment Kit* which may be accessed at www.ncca.ie. Beyond this, whole-staff awareness of the area of EAL could be raised through the creation of an EAL policy as part of an over-arching inclusion policy. Such a document would recognise the place of students' home languages in school life while also highlighting good practice that teachers could adopt in mainstream lessons.

Models of support for students with special educational needs include withdrawal groups and team-teaching. While withdrawal groups have, in the past, been organised in November, it is anticipated that this process will take place at an earlier point in the school year in the future. Communication with English teachers and other mainstream teachers is facilitated through the use of a notice board in the staffroom. This is an effective approach, once the necessary considerations regarding confidentiality are taken into account. The school is encouraged to explore further means which would maintain and enhance awareness among mainstream teachers of supports they can offer to students with special educational needs.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning observed ranged from very good to satisfactory. However, in the latter instances note must be made of the need for significant development in teachers' practice in order to support those students who are experiencing difficulties in improving their literacy skills in mainstream English classes. In these instances there is a need to focus on specific learning and literacy goals relevant to students' needs and this should be approached in the first instance through teacher planning, as outlined at an earlier point in this report. In particular, explicit instruction and modelling of reading and writing activities would be of great relevance in all year groups, but especially those in junior cycle.

It must be noted that positive moves in this area have already begun with agreement in the English department to focus on improving students' spelling. This was evident in many instances,

with teachers beginning lessons with spelling tests or a revision of key spellings already encountered. It is suggested that further strategies to support students' spelling might now be profitably explored. Some examples include the display of spelling prompt charts in all classrooms, the development of student-created dictionaries of keywords in all classes where teachers feel additional support for students is required, the use of proofing sheets and peer correction, and the adoption of strategies such as *look, cover, spell, check*. In addition, the learning and application of spellings in connection with a text being studied or through activities of immediate relevance to students is strongly advocated. Good classroom management and good relationships with students were observed throughout the evaluation. In one instance, in particular, exceptional classroom management skills were observed.

Lessons began, variously, with the taking of the roll, a recapitulation of topics previously studied and with spelling tests. As an extension of these activities, it is suggested that teachers should briefly outline learning goals for students at the beginning of each lesson. These could be delineated on the whiteboard as a means of providing students with a 'map' of the lesson and thus providing them with increased confidence and ownership of their own learning. This suggestion is of particular relevance in the context of a limited number of lessons where learning goals lacked clarity.

A range of resources was used to support teaching and learning in English lessons. These included the whiteboard, spelling sheets, the textbook, a compact disk recording and resources developed by the JCSP support service. The use or availability of dictionaries to support student learning was also evident in a number of classes. The extension of the use of this resource to all class groups is strongly advocated, alongside the introduction of a thesaurus as a key tool in supporting students' speaking and writing activities. The use of these texts will support the expansion of students' vocabulary, while also raising their awareness of the importance of imagination and specificity in their use of language. A further area which is worth exploring further is the use of visual resources to support the learning of students who are less motivated by purely verbal presentations.

Very good practice was observed in supporting students' reading and writing skills in one lesson where a teacher successfully incorporated a variety of effective strategies. These included cloze tests and a model to support students in writing a curriculum vitae. Particularly worthwhile was the distribution of a 'proofing sheet' which noted key features of letter writing as a means of reactivating students' previous experiences of this topic. Beyond this, a writing frame was distributed to support students' written homework. This incorporated an appropriate movement from fully supported to semi-independent work in the context of the lesson and was consistent with a very well-paced lesson. In other lessons, the use of keywords to aid students in accessing particular texts was also observed, along with some teacher reading, student reading and silent reading. In the context of students being asked to read to peers, this should be managed sensitively and incorporate clear aims with regard to students' learning. This focus should also be applied where students are set to silently read texts in lessons. Further strategies that might successfully be adopted by English teachers to support student reading and writing include guided reading, teachers' explicit modelling of reading and writing, the explicit teaching of skills such as skimming and scanning texts, and a range of Directed Activities Related to Texts (DARTS). The use of a *Dictogloss* strategy to enhance students' comprehension skills is also worth exploring. It is recommended that the further development of strategies to support literacy in the context of teaching and learning should be undertaken across the English department.

Questioning was used effectively in a number of lessons. For example, in one lesson a visual representation of the relationships in a novel was developed and noted by students on the basis of

both their and their teacher's contributions. Overall however, some consideration should be given to the rebalancing of teacher and student talk in lessons as a means of developing students' oracy. In this context the use of tightly organised co-operative learning strategies, such as *placemat*, *envoy* and *jigsaw*, could be considered. In particular, these approaches should be viewed as a means of integrating and informing the development of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Opportunities to extend students' responses should also be grasped wherever practicable.

Examples of very strong teacher affirmation of students' efforts were observed during the evaluation. In one instance the good practice of differentiating text choice for an EAL student was observed. Overall, students displayed good knowledge of texts and areas they had studied during the year. As previously identified however, the written work of some students displayed significant limitations, while in some lessons some gaps in students' knowledge of the course were apparent. As previously outlined, these areas should be addressed through individual and subject planning, with clear literacy and learning goals, linked to the syllabuses, being highlighted and pursued. Beyond this, teachers might be further supported through the provision of further CPD in the area of literacy, alongside further development of departmental approaches to this area.

In a number of cases a print-rich environment, supportive of the development of students' literacy skills and of an 'English atmosphere' in classrooms had been developed. This included the display of keywords, student genre writing, useful acronyms, key quotes and examples of newspapers and other media. All of these are effective and worthwhile strategies. Such an approach will provide genuine opportunities for publication of work by students, thus increasing their engagement with the drafting and redrafting process while also supporting their self-esteem. The English department should further extend the development of a print-rich environment to include all English classrooms. This should be set out as policy and practice in the English subject plan as a support for all students' work in English.

ASSESSMENT

Homework was regularly assigned and monitored in classes observed during the evaluation. It is suggested that, where teachers have monitored or corrected homework, a date should be included alongside other signs of monitoring. In almost all classes observed there was evidence of the use of comment-based assessment to inform the development of students' written work. Good practice was observed where students were made aware of the marking rubrics applied in the certificate examinations. In other cases the use of peer assessment and positive affirmation of students' efforts was evident. In a number of instances an increase in the use of comment-based assessment was highlighted as an area for development in teachers' practice.

Staged questions were frequently set as written homework tasks in English classes observed. A limited number of tasks requiring students to take an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses were set as homework. It is recommended that tasks requiring this integrated strategy should be more widely and consistently utilised by English teachers. The selection of such tasks should be informed by individual and departmental plans. Homework exercises should lead students through an exploration of a wide range of genres and language techniques. Texts should be used to model particular genres, language techniques and skills which then inform students' written work. Where a particular genre is assigned for homework, rubrics should be set out for the completion of the homework exercise, directing students' attention to the features of the genre to which they will need to adhere, as well as to

particular language techniques that they may be required to include. Clear comment-based assessment of students' work can then follow as a result of their completion of this written work. Alternatively, peer-assessment or self-assessment could be developed based on such rubrics. The adoption of an integrated approach, in combination with other strategies such as staged questions, should be viewed as an opportunity to expand students' macro-language and micro-language awareness, as outlined in the NCCA *Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English: Leaving Certificate English Syllabus*. The inclusion of such an approach will also make written exercises more meaningful and relevant to students.

The use of writing frames to support students experiencing difficulties in literacy development was observed in one instance. This is an effective approach and teachers are encouraged to explore the wider use of differentiated strategies to support written tasks assigned both for homework and for classwork. The use of DARTS should be more widely used within class groups where students require greater support. Further advice on such strategies may be accessed at the website www.jcspliteracy.ie.

Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas and at the end of the academic year. Classes in third year and in sixth year participate in mock examinations in the early spring. Currently there is no analysis of students' performance in the certificate examinations versus national norms. The English department should adopt this as part of its practice. Students' performance could, for example, be measured over the course of a number of years to ensure that the department's analysis is not overly influenced by occasional variances due to the performance of an isolated year group. It is suggested that, where students are to be provided with Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations (RACE), these might be appropriately reflected in house examinations in the future, where practicable.

There is one parent-teacher meeting per year group each year. Parents receive written reports regarding students' achievement following the Christmas and summer examinations, while the parents of third-year and sixth-year students receive reports following students' mock examinations. The student journal is also used to facilitate communication with students' homes.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Teachers are assigned to class groups on the basis of continuity.
- Rooms are broadband connected. The school has received funding which should help in further developing the ICT infrastructure.
- Very good work has been undertaken in organising reading initiatives by members of the English department.
- Relevant in-service training in the areas of behaviour and literacy has been accessed by teachers in both the JCSP and in a whole-school context.
- A co-ordinator has been appointed in the English department on a rotational basis.
- Teaching ranged from very good to satisfactory.
- Good classroom management and good relationships with students were observed during the evaluation.
- In a number of cases a print-rich environment, conducive to the development of students' literacy skills had been developed.
- There was a consistent emphasis on the development of students' spelling skills.

- The use or availability of dictionary / thesaurus was observed in a number of classes.
- In a number of instances, comment-based assessment was in evidence.

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

- The current system of assigning students to classes in first year should be reviewed and adjusted to ensure a greater mix of student's abilities in English lessons.
- The collection of baseline data and the development of a DEIS action plan should be undertaken in the area of literacy.
- The current common yearly plans should be further developed to incorporate a clear learning goals based approach. These learning goals should be time-linked and should be drawn from the syllabuses.
- An integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses should be incorporated in departmental and individual teachers' planning. This approach should be implemented in both classwork and homework tasks assigned.
- A play should be studied as part of students' junior cycle course.
- The appropriate use of explicit strategies to support students experiencing difficulties with literacy development should be expanded across the English department.
- The school should plan to increase access to ICT facilities for students with difficulties in literacy development.

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.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board welcomes the affirmative nature of the report.

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

- All English lessons are now delivered by teachers with special qualifications in English
- The School Library has been refurbished and is currently being re-stocked.
- All classrooms have been equipped with I.C.T. hardware. We are currently sourcing suitable software to support literacy initiatives.
- A DEIS Committee is currently undertaking action planning in a number of areas i.e. literacy, numeracy and attendance.
- 1st Year classes have been restructured in the timetable to facilitate the movement of students to levels appropriate to their needs and ability range