An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Deerpark Christian Brothers’ School
St Patrick’s Road, Cork
Roll number: 62540I

Date of inspection: 12 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 Deerpark Christian Brothers’ School (C.B.S.) 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 four 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

Deerpark C.B.S. is an all-boys secondary school participating in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan. The school offers the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) as part of its curriculum. There are four lessons provided for English classes in first year. This provision is adequate. It is recommended that the number of lessons in first-year English should be increased to five lessons per week, as recommended in the Inspectorate publication Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools. Given the school’s identification of literacy as a priority target area under the DEIS initiative, this adjustment would be appropriate and would provide support for the literacy skills of new first-year students at a challenging transition point. In addition, this approach would conform to the best practice of allowing for one contact point with the subject at least once per day. English classes in second year and in third year are provided with five English lessons per week. This is good provision. In one instance, two teachers are timetabled separately to provide instruction to one English class. This arrangement is not ideal and should be avoided in the future. Four English lessons per week are provided in TY and five English lessons per week in fifth year and in sixth year. There are four English and Communications lessons each week in the LCA 1 and LCA 2 classes. English classes are timetabled concurrently in first year, second year, third year, fifth year and sixth year. Overall, there is good timetabled provision for English.

English classes in first year are of mixed ability until Christmas. Following this, classes are set into three class groups with one higher-ability group and two mixed-ability groups. Students are assigned to these groups on the basis of progress in the subject and teacher observation. Students’ placement is subsequently reviewed at the end of first year in light of students’ results in the summer examinations. The English department is encouraged to re-examine and review, with great care, its current system of arranging classes in first year. This should be done in light of findings by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) regarding the potentially negative impact of determining student levels at such an early stage in their
development. Recommendations in the previously mentioned Inspectorate publication should also be considered in this regard. The possibility of mixed-ability class groups throughout first year is worthy of examination, in combination with a literacy support class, team-teaching or other forms of additional support for students experiencing difficulties in literacy development. In any case, the current system should be regularly interrogated to identify what its aims are, whether these aims are legitimate and, in turn, whether they are being supported by the system in operation.

Students are assigned to levels in fifth year on the basis of achievement and teacher observation. It is suggested that criteria for the assigning of students to classes and levels in both junior cycle and in senior cycle should be noted in the subject plan in order to ensure transparency and accountability. Students with difficulties in literacy development are identified through the administration of standardized tests prior to entry in first year as well as through information provided by their primary schools and, in some cases, through psychological assessments.

There is a school library and some mini-libraries have been developed in teacher base rooms. A number of very positive initiatives to support student reading have been planned or are being undertaken. These include Make-a-Book, Wordmillionaire and the use of readalong texts. Retesting of students’ literacy is also undertaken and an area which may be worthy of investigation is the occasional and appropriate linking of retesting to particular reading initiatives so that their impact may be measured. Such an approach may also provide a worthwhile affirmation of staff efforts. Teachers should carefully consider the optimal number of initiatives which should be organised so that their impact can be maximised. The library currently stands as a ‘different space’ to the rest of the school environment. This is appropriate. Possibilities to support the further development of the library include the display of peer reviews of texts, the organising of literacy events in the library, the provision of readalong texts and the expansion of the range of genres currently available. The website www.jcspliteracy.ie contains a range of useful resources regarding the use of school libraries to promote student reading and students’ literacy skills. The library should be regarded as a key tool to support literacy and the English department is encouraged to continue to develop library facilities.

A special educational needs literacy programme has been developed. This incorporates a focus on the modes of delivery of literacy support for students with special educational needs, liaison with the JCSP programme, literacy in senior cycle, and examples of literacy initiatives undertaken. In addition, processes for assessing students’ levels of literacy development are set out as well as provision for retesting. All of this is very positive.

It is recommended that a whole-school literacy plan should now be advanced as a matter of priority, building on the good work already undertaken. A whole-school literacy committee should be formed, linked to the school’s DEIS-planning process. This committee should include representatives from the English department and the special educational needs department, but should also include a number of representatives of other subject departments, as well as a representative of senior management. The involvement of other members of the staff such as the home-school-community-liason (HSCL) co-ordinator should also be considered. The committee should develop clear baseline data and from this work towards specific time-linked targets with clear success criteria. It must be pointed out that much of this work has already been undertaken in collating the special educational needs literacy programme. 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 students’ literacy. In addition, the 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.

There are two information and communication technology (ICT) rooms. Most subject classrooms have internet access. It is anticipated that there will be a significant expansion of ICT provision in subject classrooms in the very near future. The installation of smart boards in a number of rooms is being advanced. In addition, the provision of laptops for all TY students is being pursued. This is positive and the English department is strongly encouraged to adopt ICT as a key element in its practice. Students in the LCA were observed to use ICT in connection with their work in English and Communications. This is worthwhile. Students in first year have ICT lessons as part of their curriculum. A worthwhile area to explore would be the linking of work in these lessons to some of the genre writing and process writing that students undertake in English lessons. The use of word-processing packages for students’ own writing is a very useful means of highlighting the drafting and redrafting process. The English department is strongly encouraged to grasp the opportunities offered by ICT as a support for students’ reading and writing. The use of data projectors to support teachers explicit modelling of reading and writing, as well as the development of graphic organisers and writing frames should be considered. Efforts currently underway to introduce a universal font to be used in all subjects across the curriculum are very worthwhile. The adoption of a range of ICT software by the special educational needs team to support students’ literacy was also noted as a positive development during the evaluation.

New teachers assigned to the English department are included in the subject-planning process and work closely with colleagues. Student teachers are assigned a mentor and have an induction programme. The induction process for new teachers and for student teachers should be clearly set out in the subject plan. Further consideration should be given to how these two groups are introduced to teaching English. In particular, the implementation of consistent methodological approaches will be important, particularly where students are in need of additional literacy support from their English teacher. Exploration and discussion of these strategies should form a key element in the induction of both of these groups in English.

English teachers have participated in continuing professional development (CPD) in English and Communications as part of the LCA programme and through whole-staff in-service education sessions. In addition, a number of teachers involved in learning support have engaged in CPD. Where this has occurred, information regarding the relevant course has been brought back to members of the English department. English teachers are strongly encouraged to seek out further possibilities in this area. In particular, the JCSP support service may be worth consulting, particularly in the area of supporting students’ literacy. Other useful resources include the website of the English support service at www.slss.ie and links with the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English, the website of which may be found at www.inote.ie.

A number of cross-curricular activities are organised as part of the LCA and JCSP programmes. In addition, there is a very active drama programme which includes an annual Dramafest with student involvement in the production of Shakespearian scenes. This is organised by a retired member of staff and is commendable as a means of enhancing students’ self-esteem and the development of student oracy.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

While in the past a subject co-ordinator has been appointed on the basis of seniority, the subject co-ordinator is now appointed on a rotational basis. This is good practice as it will facilitate the development of a wide leadership-skills base in the English department. This approach should be maintained. There are regular English departmental meetings and there is frequent communication between English teachers regarding the teaching of their subject. Minutes of meetings are recorded and are stored using ICT. This is good practice and should be continued.

A subject plan has been developed. Significant work has been undertaken in developing yearly schemes of work which are included in the subject plan. There is a focus on developing skills in some year groups. This is positive. It is recommended that the plan should be further developed. At present, in a number of year groups particular areas of study are approached in an isolated manner. Here, an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses should be developed, whereby the study of language is closely linked to or grows from the study of specific texts. It is recommended that the common plan should be developed to incorporate skills-based, time-linked plans with clear literacy and learning goals in all year groups. Such an approach should be utilised to refocus the department’s efforts in equipping students with key literacy and life skills. It will also provide clear direction in assessment practices in future. In senior cycle, a holistic and consistent approach to the study of particular texts should be adopted so that, for example, a novel is studied for a distinct period of time, although this might incorporate the use of the text to inform students’ awareness of and interaction with a variety of language areas delineated by the syllabus. Once these changes in the subject plan have been made and given practical effect in teachers’ practice, further areas to develop with reference to the school’s whole-school-literacy plan should be pursued.

Texts are varied in senior cycle and there is some variation of texts in junior cycle. This is positive and teachers are encouraged to continue to explore new possibilities in junior cycle to suit students’ interests and to act as a further element in their own CPD. Beyond this, two novels are studied over the course of junior cycle. It is suggested that this might be further expanded to include another short novel in order to ensure that a wide range of different genres are explored in all junior cycle years, as suggested by the syllabus. The pursuit of some curricular links with primary schools could also be worthwhile, particularly in supporting consistent approaches to the development of student literacy as well as avoiding duplication of texts with those encountered in sixth class. While it is recognised that the current practice of studying excerpts from Shakespearean plays during junior cycle is within syllabus requirements, the department is encouraged to explore an entire Shakespearean play with students studying the higher-level course in junior cycle. This should act as a useful bridge to senior cycle, could be linked to the school’s dramafest, and might be studied with strong scaffolds for students where necessary. The novel chosen for study in English and Communications in the LCA programme was appropriate, providing sufficient challenge while also linking to students’ interests and experiences. It is recommended that specific areas should be noted as policy and practice in the English subject plan. These include the study of three comparative texts in ordinary level classes in the Leaving Certificate, as required by the syllabus. Beyond this, the number of poets studied by Leaving Certificate class groups should be noted as at least six. All syllabus requirements should be complied with, so as to encourage high expectations and to promote a consistent approach to the subject in all class groups.
Planning for English and Communications was presented during the course of the evaluation. It is recommended that the current plan for English and Communications should be expanded and delineated in more detail in a number of areas. The sequence of modules to be studied should be noted, as outlined in the subject syllabus, and implemented in practice in the teaching of the programme. A policy regarding the storage of students’ key assignments should be set out and should include the recording of the completion of key assignments by both the subject teacher and the programme co-ordinator. Note should also be made in the subject plan of the key assignments which need to be undertaken over the two years of the English and Communications course. All key assignments required should be completed. It is suggested that the English department should review the amount of time currently assigned in English and Communications lessons towards the completion of student tasks. While some cross-curricular involvement is laudable, current arrangements may be somewhat excessive. Key assignments for English and Communications are currently stored using ICT and this is appropriate. A further positive feature of work in English and Communications was the use of writing frames developed by the teacher to support student literacy, combined with a process approach towards written assignments.

A subject-specific programme for English in TY was presented during the evaluation. This is positive. The plan should now be further developed, as outlined in the case of other common yearly plans, to incorporate clear learning goals. Useful links between these learning goals and drama lessons organised as part of the TY English programme could also be explored. In addition, the use of a portfolio to support student writing in TY is positive. With this good practice in mind, it is suggested that the portfolio should now be included as a key element in students’ overall assessment in the subject during TY. Such a portfolio could include a number of major genre exercises developed during the year. This will provide students not only with a clear view of the importance of the drafting and redrafting process, it will also provide a means of publication and a new sense of audience. The current inclusion of the development of student oracy as part of the TY English programme is very worthwhile. Indeed, an exercise focusing on the development of students’ oracy could also be represented in students’ English portfolios.

There are a number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). A language-support room has been provided for use by the language-support department. The room incorporates checklists, maps and includes references which acknowledge the importance of students’ home languages. A wide range of resources to support EAL students has been collated. Significant work has been undertaken in planning for English language support. This includes the use of the *English as an Additional Language Post-Primary Assessment Kit*, the development of a scheme of work to support EAL students and links with mainstream subject teachers. Individual student profiles have been developed with detailed information relevant to the student. The language-support department is also aware of the importance of developing students’ academic language in English, as opposed to merely their social language skills. A very worthwhile effort which has been undertaken is a presentation to the whole-staff regarding the needs of EAL students. The NCCA *Action website* at [www.action.ncca.ie](http://www.action.ncca.ie) contains very worthwhile material which would further inform both the work of the language-support department and mainstream teachers in facilitating EAL students in accessing the curriculum. A further useful resource to advance teachers’ understanding of the needs of bilingual students is *Learning in 2+ Languages* which can be found on the website [www.ltscotland.org.uk](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk). The school should seek to maintain and consolidate capacity in the area of EAL. The identification of key staff who will be, or have been, upskilled in this area will be central to achieving this aim. This might be aided by the attendance of these staff members at CPD provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and by maintaining links with the English Language Support Teachers’ Association (ELSTA) whose website may be found at [www.elsta.ie](http://www.elsta.ie).
The English department has very good links with the special educational needs department. In recent years the school has begun to move from a model of support for students mainly based on individual and small group withdrawal from mainstream classes towards a greater reliance on in-class support and team-teaching. This is a positive development. The special educational needs department undertakes presentations to staff as well as a variety of initiatives to support students’ literacy, already outlined in this report. The exchange of expertise between the special educational needs department and the English department is important and should continue to be developed.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was a good standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed. However, in some instances, a greater emphasis on supporting students’ engagement with texts and the development of literacy skills would have added significantly to student learning and the efficacy of teaching approaches. In most lessons the aim of the lesson or the outline of the lesson was noted on the whiteboard. This is worthwhile, providing students with a sense of the lesson and could be added to still further through the further development of this approach to include the delineation of clear learning goals for the lesson at the outset. Discussion or explanation of keywords for the lesson at this point could also be considered. Individual planning was evident in all cases. Pacing of lessons was good.

A range of resources was used to support teaching and learning in English lessons. These included the whiteboard, photocopied resources, a World War One poster, a newspaper and an overhead projector. This is worthwhile. The English department is encouraged to further expand its use of resources, with a particular focus on visual resources. These latter items may be more interesting for students less motivated by verbal or written presentations. Teachers are encouraged to utilise a dictionary and thesaurus in English lessons. This will serve to highlight for students the importance of imagination and precision in their use of language while also serving as aids in expanding their vocabulary.

Effective use of group work was observed in one lesson. Here, students were organised for a brainstorming exercise to develop a newsletter. Specific tasks were assigned to each group and an ‘editor’ was appointed to co-ordinate the group’s efforts. In addition, students were instructed to assign individual roles within each group to aid in the completion of the task. Group work was organised energetically and effectively by the teacher. In light of this good practice, the English department is encouraged to explore the use of pair work and group work more extensively as part of its practice. Strategies such as *placemat, envoy* and *jigsaw*, among others, may be useful in this regard. Co-operative learning will offer numerous opportunities for students to support each other in English lessons. Beyond this, it will encourage the development of student oracy which will further inform their literacy skills. The potential role to be played by pair or group activities in developing the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing should be carefully considered by English teachers when setting co-operative learning tasks.

Reading and writing activities featured in most lessons. Good practice was observed in a number of instances where DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts) were used to support students’ engagement with texts. These included the use of a notes grid in one instance to record the qualities of a number of characters students had encountered. In another lesson, a *spidergram*, in combination with model essays, was used effectively to support the development of student writing. As an extension of this approach, the use of visual supports and strategies, like keywords, to enable students to engage rapidly with important ideas could be considered. The use of realia, in a senior cycle lesson, to motivate students in a written task was also positive. A teacher reading
of a text was a feature in another lesson. The adoption of guided reading or text-marking were further additions which could have aided student engagement in this instance. Overall, the English department should expand the explicit modelling of reading and writing by teachers for students. This could be aided through the use of ICT when provision for this resource has been expanded further across the school. A wide selection of strategies to support students’ reading and writing should be noted in the subject plan. In one lesson, where the language used in a text was examined, this was handled well and the discussion of ‘sound’ in the poem could even have been dwelt upon for a slightly longer period. While the questions which arose from this discussion were appropriate, an integrated approach where students would be expected to use, for example, alliteration in their subsequent written work would have been even more advantageous.

Classroom management was good in all cases, with examples of very good practice. There was a good relationship between students and teachers. In particular, team-teaching worked well in lessons where individual student needs were attended to with great rapidity and the lesson flowed well. In individual cases, teachers’ knowledge and understanding of students was a very positive element of lessons. Teachers were affirming to students and often appealed to the interests of their students. While student learning was evident, a clear area for the English department to focus on is supporting those students with difficulties in literacy development. In particular, a keen awareness of the literacy and learning goals in lessons should serve to enhance this element of teachers’ practice, along with the further development of other areas of practice touched on in this report.

In one instance, a print-rich environment had been developed, incorporating keywords, motivational posters and students’ genre exercises. This is very worthwhile. It is recommended that, as part of the advancement of a whole-school literacy strategy, the English department should focus on the development of a print-rich and text-rich environment in other teacher base rooms. As well as those strategies already listed, other elements which could be incorporated include graphic organisers, writing frames, character diagrams, examples of paragraph structures, and examples of student work developed using the process approach to writing, and media posters.

**ASSESSMENT**

Homework was regularly assigned and monitored in classes observed during the evaluation. It is suggested that the dating of teachers’ monitoring of student work should be considered in order to ensure transparency and accountability in the future.

There was some evidence of comment-based assessment in a number of classes. In some instances, student writing was limited in terms of skills and presentation. It is important that the English department should develop a clear approach to the setting of homework and the subsequent correction of this work. Where homework is set, a clear plan regarding the literacy and language development resulting from this work should be formulated by the individual teacher involved. Provision for some form of publication of students’ work should also be considered, supported by a process approach to writing, as is already evident in the case of some class groups. The use of ICT to support some writing tasks might also usefully be considered.

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. Tasks requiring this integrated strategy should be more widely and consistently utilised by English teachers in both individual and departmental planning and practice. 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 could be set out for the completion of the homework exercise which direct 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 Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English: Leaving Certificate English Syllabus.

In setting homework tasks, there is also a need for a differentiated approach to be adopted which acknowledges the needs of learners with less-developed literacy skills in whole-class environments. In some instances, semi-independent rather than independent work may be appropriate. Where this is the case, key DARTS will be of service. For example, where students need support in creating extended written exercises writing frames will be useful. Some good practice in the use of notes grids was observed in some student copies and this, with other types of graphic organisers may also be worth pursuing.

Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas for all year groups and at the end of the academic year for year groups who are not participating in the certificate examinations. Common examinations are organised in first year and in second year and in other year groups where practicable. This is good practice, allowing for a clear view of student achievement across year cohorts, while also avoiding the unnecessary duplication of work within the department. Students in third year and in sixth year are provided with mock examinations in the early spring. In addition, individual teacher may assign in-class assessments. Students who qualify for Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations (RACE) are appropriately supported in house examinations. This is positive.

There is one parent-teacher meeting per year group each year. Parents receive written reports regarding students’ progress following each of the formal examinations. The student journal and phone calls to parents are also used to maintain links between school and home. In addition, the HSCL co-ordinator works to enhance such links. All of this is appropriate.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a school library and some mini-libraries have also been developed.
- A range of very positive initiatives in the area of literacy has been undertaken.
- Evidence of the use of ICT by students was observed in the LCA and this focus on technological literacy was very positive.
- A subject co-ordinator is appointed on a rotational basis and a subject plan has been developed.
- There are very good links with the special educational needs department.
• Common yearly schemes of work are included in the subject plan.
• Classroom management was found to be good in all cases.
• There was a good relationship between students and teachers.
• Lessons were well-paced.
• There were examples of the use of DARTS to support students’ engagement with texts.
• There was strong affirmation of students’ efforts in all lessons.

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

• A whole-school literacy plan should be advanced as a priority.
• It is recommended that the number of lessons in first-year English be increased to five per week.
• As part of the whole-school literacy plan, moves towards developing a print-rich and text-rich environment in English classrooms should be undertaken.
• Key areas should be set out as policy and practice in the English subject plan to meet syllabus requirements in English and in English and Communications.
• The current common scheme should be developed in a more holistic manner, incorporating an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses.
• Yearly plans should be further developed to include time-linked learning-goals.

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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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
**Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report**

Some key recommendations were made following the English inspection Report. The English Department have and in some cases are in the process of implementing them in Deerpark C.B.S.

With regard to the development of the whole school literacy plan, more reading initiatives have been introduced such as the use of the **International Reading Laboratory** for our first and second year classes. Also, we have increased our use of JCSP initiatives such as statements, writing templates, keywords, verbal square posters etc. Recently, the second year English teachers linked up their lessons with the JCSP **Make a Book** initiative. During a period of English lessons, students created and performed their own raps which were then displayed in the Make a Book Project. Moreover, a set of English dictionaries has been requested through the J.C.S.P. fund.

We have implemented our schemes to incorporate a more integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses. In addition, yearly plans have been further developed to include time-linked learning goals.

The number of lessons in first year has been increased to five per week in which students study elements of the English course through the use of ICT. This extra class was achieved through converting an existing Homework Club class into an I.C.T. lesson.

Students studying Higher Level Junior Certificate English will study a Shakespeare play entitled, *The Merchant of Venice*. The current first year students will pilot this initiative.

Three comparative texts at Leaving Certificate Ordinary Level will be studied in accordance with the syllabus requirements.

Classrooms have been better equipped/designed in order to enhance students’ learning.

Finally, in relation to the English and Communications module in L.C.A., material will be stored each year starting as of now and finished tasks/assignments will be available at all times for viewing.