

An An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Saint Mary's Secondary School
Ballina, County Mayo
Roll number: 64520M**

Date of inspection: 5 May 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Saint Mary's Secondary School, Ballina. 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. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision of English lessons is good for first, fifth and sixth-year students as they have five English lessons weekly. The provision of four English and Communication lessons for Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students is also good. The provision of four lessons each week for second and third years is satisfactory but not generous provision. Likewise, the provision of three lessons each week in Transition Year (TY) is satisfactory. TY students also have two lessons weekly of Drama and the aim of the Drama lessons is to foster an interest in drama and theatre, which complements English.

There is a good spread of English lessons across the week for all year groups and there is a good system for the organisation of English classes. The general principle of mixed ability applies in first year and TY. However, smaller 'nurture' class groups have been formed for students with English as an additional language (EAL) and for Traveller students in both first year and TY. Management has a clear rationale for this arrangement. Students with special educational needs (SEN) are supported by team teaching in English in first year and this is very good practice. A system of setting is in place in second and third year and fifth and sixth year, with the higher-level students mixed equally across the top sets. Management generously provides teachers to create additional English classes in each year. Management also timetables English lessons concurrently for all years except first year to facilitate movement across sets and this is good practice. There was evidence that this concurrency is used very well in TY to provide a modular approach to the subject. However, this facility could be better used to benefit the students in all other years, through the practice of organising whole year activities for example.

A range of co-curricular activities is in place for TY and other years. These include participation in the Writers in Residence scheme where TY students are involved in writing a novel via blogging, the annual school musical and the organisation of Drama day.

There is limited space in the school and this makes it difficult to organise teacher-based classrooms which would be more preferable for English teachers. It is suggested that at least one classroom be designated as the English classroom where materials relating to English could be stored and where teachers could be timetabled on a rotating basis as is currently the case for SEN teachers. Some classrooms, especially for junior cycle students, had key vocabulary relating to English and samples of students' work on display which enhanced the learning environment in these rooms.

The school library is not fully functioning but there are book cases in the first year and TY area which contain sets of books for these year groups. Teachers have been supplied with laptops from school management and there is wireless access to the internet in most rooms. Not all rooms have data projectors; there are ten currently in the school; and this is an area that management should investigate, although it was reported that there is a reluctance to invest in any more information and communication technology (ICT) equipment in the current building while awaiting the building of a new school. A common electronic folder for English on the school's ICT system might be worth establishing so that teachers could exchange notes and resources electronically. There is currently a designated common resource area for hardcopy English resources.

Almost all of the eight English teachers in the school are fully qualified to teach English to the highest level and most have a good spread of English lessons on their timetables. Many teachers have attended in-service courses relevant to teaching English. Management has yet to provide in-service to all teachers on areas such as assessment for learning and differentiation.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

It was reported that in the "interests of equality" there is no coordinator of the subject. Instead, teachers rotate the chairing of each English meeting. There was no evidence of minutes of English meetings and no record of decisions taken. There is a need for the English department to work much closer together to plan collaboratively for the development of the subject and in the interests of their students. In addition, the English plan submitted during the evaluation seems to have been created in preparation for the English inspection.

There was no clear rationale for the choice of texts, particularly in junior cycle. For example, some teachers teach a novel to first years, others do not although it was reported that a common first-year curriculum is followed. Some teachers only teach one novel and play throughout the three years of junior cycle. This is a very narrow focus for students and is not likely to develop a love of or foster an interest in the subject. This is compounded by the statement in the plan that second-year students should focus on examination papers at the start of the year. It is recommended that the English department consider what it is they want their students to achieve in each year. All students should study a novel in first year while maintaining the practice of encouraging private reading at home; the number of novels should be reviewed in junior cycle and students should be taught at least two novels and one play over the course of junior cycle. Teachers should agree the number of poems that are taught to each year group and introduce poetry in second year as opposed to leaving it all until third year as is outlined in the plan. Students should engage in the study of a novel and/or play in third year as opposed to the current focus of it being mainly a revision year. Overall, it is recommended that more literary texts be taught in junior cycle and that the teaching of these be integrated with the teaching of writing and other aspects of the course. For example, the current plan states that students focus on writing and grammar at the start of first year. This should be integrated with other aspects of the course in

order to nurture an enjoyment of the subject and broaden the focus away from the narrow focus on examinations.

In senior cycle, it is recommended that teachers review their policy of teaching poetry in sixth year only so that students study each genre in each year of Leaving Certificate. In addition, all ordinary-level as well as higher-level class groups must study three comparative texts.

The organisation of TY English is commended. It is arranged on a modular basis so that students study a range of genre and are exposed to four different teachers during the year. The choice of texts for LCA students is also commended as students study a novel and film as well as a range of poetry and songs.

The subject plan should be the basis of teachers' work and should assist all new teachers in familiarising themselves with the workings of the English department. This plan should also incorporate English and Communications. In order to develop subject planning in English, it is recommended that the English teachers examine the draft 'rebalanced' junior cycle English syllabus available on www.ncca.ie which itemises the learning outcomes that should be achieved for each year of junior cycle and ensures an incremental approach to the development of skills each year.

It is recommended that English teachers agree a coordinator of the subject on a rotating basis and that the role of coordinator would be clearly defined. This would allow for continuity in planning and would enable review and change to be implemented. It would also allow for the sharing of teaching methods at the planning meetings that are facilitated by management on a termly basis.

English teachers have moved towards setting common tests, where appropriate, in first, second and fifth year and this is good practice. They have also agreed the single text in fifth year and have freedom of choice in relation to the comparative texts.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Ten lessons were inspected as part of the overall evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning. The purpose of each lesson was clearly stated to students from the outset and, in some cases, was written on the board. In almost all lessons the pace was appropriate. Clear and purposeful work was in evidence and links were created between English and the students' own lives, with prior learning and with other subjects in many lessons, which put learning in context for students. The fact that some teachers do not abide by the current English plan and, for example, teach poetry in second year is appropriate.

The quality of teaching and learning was generally very good in the lessons visited. There were many examples observed of good student participation in their lessons, be it through answering questions, working cooperatively or being involved in discussions. In many lessons, very good teacher questions led to very good learning as the posing of higher-order 'why' questions challenged students and made them think more deeply about their lesson content. In the best cases in this regard, effective questioning led to very good discussion on the part of students where they were able to argue and to defend their arguments. This was apparent when interacting with the inspector at the end of each lesson.

In some classes, students worked cooperatively in pairs or groups to discuss aspects of drama, comparative texts or poetry. Such discussion and use of independent learning opportunities are

commended. The teachers generally moved around when this work was assigned. Best practice was seen when group work was well organised with time given for a plenary discussion. In a few lessons, there was little differentiation observed so that the range of students' abilities was not recognised. In these lessons, there is a need for a greater range of questioning techniques in order to challenge the better able student. There is also a need to ask questions directed to individual students instead of encouraging the practice of chorus answering so as to ensure that all clearly understand the content of the lesson. In addition, there is a need to give students time to formulate answers to questions as opposed to the practice observed in some cases of the answers being given to the students. Best practice in the teaching of poetry was observed when students were asked general questions on the poem to elicit the response of students first, prior to analysing the poem in detail.

Good use was observed of ICT in a number of lessons and this was particularly good for visual learners. Recordings of poetry and film were also played for students. Other resources used included handouts, worksheets, CD players and the board and, in one lesson, props were used to make the lesson content in relation to media studies more real for the students and to generate discussion.

The quality of the students' copy and folder work was generally very good and there was a very good focus observed on the development of students' writing skills. There was evidence of the integration of language and literature in some classrooms such as where students had to write diary entries from the point of view of characters in a text.

Teacher-student relationships were good in all lessons. Students were very well behaved and seemed to be engaged in their lessons. Teachers were generally competent and some lively and enjoyable lessons led to good learning.

ASSESSMENT

There was evidence that students are assigned frequent work in most lessons including longer pieces of writing and essays. In a couple of lessons the homework was either from the textbook and there was little evidence of longer pieces of work or else there was very little written work assigned. Students should be assigned longer pieces of work on a regular basis. It is therefore recommended that teachers agree a policy in relation to the frequency of assignment of longer pieces of work and essays in each year including TY.

Students' work was generally well corrected and there was some very good feedback given to students on where they needed to improve in many lessons. This is much better practice than simply assigning a tick or a good/very good comment. Some teachers also use the discrete criteria of assessment when correcting senior cycle work which is appropriate. Students' copies were generally well maintained and the good practice of students having separate copies for separate parts of their coursework was seen in most cases.

TY students are assessed through their portfolio of work in the summer and by continuous assessment at Christmas. Non-examination classes sit formal examinations at Christmas and summer and 'mock' examinations are held for examination classes.

Results in state examinations are very good with a steady and increasing uptake of higher level in both Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations and a good level of achievement. Management

analyses results in state examinations and it was reported that this is used to inform planning and resource provision.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good provision and support for English by management in the school.
- Timetabling arrangements are good and there is a clear rationale to the organisation of classes.
- TY is taught on a modular basis and students study a range of genre.
- The quality of teaching and learning was generally very good in the lessons observed.
- Learning was put in context for students.
- There were many examples of good student participation in their lessons. In many lessons, very good teacher questions led to very good learning.
- Students were assigned frequent work in most lessons including longer pieces of writing and essays and this was generally very well corrected.
- Results in state examinations are very good with a steady and increasing uptake of higher level in both Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations and a good level of achievement.

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

- There is a need for the English department to work more closely together to plan collaboratively for the development of their subject and in the interests of their students. The subject plan should be the basis of their work and should incorporate English and Communications. The draft 'rebalanced' junior cycle English syllabus available on www.ncca.ie should be consulted in reviewing the English plan in order to achieve an incremental approach to the development of skills each year.
- It is recommended that more literary texts be taught in junior cycle and that the teaching of these be integrated with the teaching of writing and other aspects of the course. In senior cycle, all students must study three comparative texts. In addition, it is strongly recommended that teachers review their policy of teaching poetry in sixth year only.
- It is recommended that English teachers agree that one would take on the position of coordinator of the subject on a rotating basis and that the role of coordinator would be clearly defined.
- In a few lessons, a greater range of questioning techniques should be used for the purposes of differentiation and to involve more students. In addition, there is a need to give students more time to formulate answers to questions.
- Teachers should agree a policy in relation to the frequency of assignment of longer pieces of work and essays in each year.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

Published, December 2010