

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

De La Salle College
Newtown, Waterford
Roll number: 649500

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A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in De La Salle College, Waterford. 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, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

De La Salle College is a large, long-established school in Waterford city with a current enrolment of almost 1100 students, all but a small number of whom are male. It offers the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), an optional Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate and, every other year, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. English is a core subject in all programmes offered.

English has a generous allocation of six lessons per week in each year of the Leaving Certificate, and four lessons per week in LCA. The provision of three lessons in TY is adequate, but lessons should be more evenly spaced throughout the week. Junior cycle provision for English should be reviewed, as it may appear to favour examination preparation more than skills development. All class groups in first and second year have just four lessons; in third year, all except the JCSP class group have five. A daily English lesson for all class groups in first year would enable students to consolidate the fundamental skills applicable to post-primary English, and is advised.

On entry, most students are placed in mixed-ability class groups and are taught English in these class groups throughout the junior cycle. A separate JCSP class group is formed and follows a discrete timetable, including a range of practical subjects. Although many of these students have been identified with poor reading and writing skills, JCSP class groups have just four English lessons in each year. Provision for English in the JCSP should be reviewed, as students with literacy deficits would benefit from a daily English lesson in each year of the programme.

In the senior cycle, English is taught in a mixed-ability context in TY. Class groups designated as higher or ordinary level are formed in fifth year, on the basis of previous performance and application. Uptake of higher-level English is satisfactory. Unusually, the higher-level class groups are smaller than the ordinary-level class groups, with an average of twenty-one and twenty-eight students respectively. School management should arrange a more equitable deployment of the available teaching resource to ordinary-level class groups in fifth and sixth

year. The fact that all English class groups are concurrently timetabled in fifth and sixth year will facilitate such a rebalancing.

Eighteen teachers are involved in the delivery of English, and not all have the subject to degree level. Notwithstanding the size of the school, this is an extremely large number, which could easily be reduced, as nine of the eighteen teachers are teaching the subject to one class group only. This pattern of deployment, if sustained, will leave the main teachers of English with much less contact with the subject across the range of years, levels and programmes than is desirable. Even at present, only one teacher teaches English to all years, and just seven of the eighteen teach English as their main subject. To the greatest possible extent, deployment of teachers should support the delivery of English as a continuum of skills and knowledge development from first year to sixth. This continuum approach should inform the teaching of English in all programmes and at all levels. School management is therefore urged to review this dispersed pattern of deployment in the interests of developing and sustaining a high level of expertise and experience within the English department.

The school is in a fine old building with additional accommodation to cater for increasing enrolment over the years. Most teachers of English have their own base classrooms. Their further development as stimulating learning environments for English is recommended. Classroom seating generally comprises integrated chairs and desks, and these limit the possibilities for group work and active learning. Audiovisual equipment was available or readily accessible in many classrooms visited. However, information and communication technology (ICT), such as data projectors and laptop computers, was not much in evidence.

A storeroom with teaching and learning resources for English has been developed and is accessible to all teachers. An up-to-date inventory of its contents would be useful, as would collaborative planning for the expansion of resources, particularly of audio recordings of plays, novels and poetry. The old school library is no longer used as such, although some teachers have set up class libraries to encourage private reading for pleasure. The reinstatement of the library could be viewed as a longer-term aspect of whole-school development.

In summary, while aspects of subject provision are good, there is considerable scope for development of provision and whole-school support for English.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

An English planning folder and other subject-related documents were reviewed during the inspection. The most recent subject plan dates back four years, although there are records of more recent meetings of members of the English department. These dealt with book choices and class sets of books, and aspects of class formation and the assignment of teachers to classes and levels. The folder also contained submissions to school management relating to these areas. The role of subject co-ordinator is voluntary, and there has been some rotation of the role among members of the department, although not recently.

The documents seen indicate a willingness to engage in planning and a recognition of its value, although logistical and other issues have affected the level of collaborative planning in recent times. This finding points to the desirability of regular organised time for subject planning during the school year which should, at the least, involve all teachers of English with a substantial English teaching timetable. It would be useful in this context to discuss and agree a description of the role of co-ordinator that would include both organisational and developmental

responsibilities, and a rota could also be agreed, so that all teachers have the opportunity of leading subject development planning.

The reinvigorated subject planning envisaged above should focus on the collaborative development and review of yearly plans for English that identify the skills and knowledge to be acquired by each year group. These agreed learning outcomes should inform decisions on the texts to be studied, and be linked in the plans to appropriate methods, resources and forms of assessment. Approached in this way, planning should become a dynamic and reflective process that supports effective classroom practice. Given the mixed-ability nature of junior cycle class groups, it would be useful to consider learning outcomes in terms of what students must, could and should know and be able to do. This approach enables differentiation based on the levels of skills and knowledge to be acquired, rather than simply on the texts to be studied.

Individual teacher planning was often very good, and there was evidence of close co-operation between some teachers teaching different class groups in the same year. An increased level of collaboration will have practical benefits in the shared preparation of good teaching resources and the distribution of routine tasks among subject teachers, to avoid duplication of work. In this regard, the setting of common assessments is recommended both to rationalise work and to underpin the collaborative work on agreed learning outcomes referred to above. More significantly, it will help to ensure a consistently high standard of teaching and learning for all students, through the dissemination of the very good classroom practice observed.

The planning folder contained outline programme plans for JCSP and TY. While teachers of TY English teach a range of other years, teachers of English in the JCSP and LCA have little other contact with the subject, which is regrettable. Very good individual teacher planning for JCSP was noted. However, English within these programmes should also be a focus of subject department discussion, as an integrated approach to the delivery of English to the full spectrum of students is desirable.

Informal co-operation and communication between the English and the learning support departments was reported. In the context of enhanced subject planning systems, it would be good practice to have the learning support co-ordinator attend English department meetings so that consistent and effective approaches to supporting students with literacy difficulties can be planned and monitored.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Ten lessons were observed during the evaluation. Third-year and sixth-year students were sitting mock examinations, but lessons in all other years and programmes were observed, involving ten teachers, including all those with a substantial English timetable. The teaching observed was of a good quality, and often displayed inventive and stimulating approaches to the subject. Instances of exemplary practice were noted. Teachers showed enthusiasm for the subject and commitment to their students and, where aspects of practice that could be improved were identified, they were open to advice and suggestions.

While the focus of the lessons observed was not always explicitly stated at the outset, most lessons were characterised by a good sense of purpose and direction. An explicit statement would however be useful, especially if it expresses the purpose of the lesson in terms of learning outcomes for the students. Lessons were for the most part well planned and included some instances of very good sequencing of activities and exemplary use of instructional time. For

example, junior cycle students studying a complex poem were taken in stages through progressively more subtle readings, enabling them finally to discuss images and symbols in considerable depth. Pacing was generally good.

Teachers had prepared a variety of resources to assist students in their learning and in most cases used them effectively. They included examples of writing in different genres for students to model, images and group tasks shown on data projector, questionnaires and worksheets. These were used most purposefully where the related tasks were clearly explained and students had a good grasp of what they were required to produce at the end of the task. The board was used as a stimulating resource for group work, for example in a pre-reading exercise where students were asked to create a plot outline using key words written on the board. Where the board was used to record points made in class discussion or to outline an assignment, the students generally did not need to be told to make their own notes from it, but did so as part of normal class activity, and this is good. With regard to note-making and annotation, it would be useful if teachers asked students to identify the important points, rather than telling students what they should highlight, as this would require them to analyse and select. While ICT was little used, its potential as an engaging teaching and learning tool was evident, and collaborative planning to develop and support its application in the classroom is recommended.

A good range of teaching methods and approaches was noted, including both traditional and innovative practice. Traditional teaching methods such as direct whole-class instruction and teacher-led discussion were often effective; teachers had a command of the subject, conveyed their knowledge clearly, and invited open discussion and even disagreement, leading to some lively and stimulating exchanges. Very good practice was noted where teachers modelled an open and enquiring approach to literature. All teachers should be vigilant to maintain an open mind to students' responses, encouraging students to support their views and affirming all valid opinions. Some students were observed to be struggling somewhat with the language of Shakespearean drama and therefore limited in their responses. Good-quality recent audio recordings rather than film might be the most appropriate way of accessing the play for these students, encouraging them to complete the picture themselves.

Approaches that were more directly student-centred were also observed. In some instances, teachers encouraged an exchange of views between students, taking a back seat themselves and acting as facilitators. As many students were highly articulate and had perceptive things to say, this approach could perhaps be used and developed further, either through formal debate, which was seen to challenge and engage students, or through less formal co-operative group work, also used to good effect in a few lessons. The good group work observed was characterised by clarity of instruction as to its purpose and the outcome required, effective assigning of roles within the group, and very well-structured feedback from the groups, during which active listening and note-taking took place. Greater use of co-operative work should be aimed for, as it suits students who have difficulty engaging with direct instruction and whole-class discussion.

A number of lessons used students' experience outside the school to provide a real context for classwork, in particular functional writing. The more real such writing assignments can be, the better. Some lessons also required students to access and apply prior learning in a conscious and reflective way. Such an approach helps students to think about how they learn, and is very valuable. In general, students displayed a very positive attitude to the subject and their written work showed diligence and application. Their contributions in class were often thoughtful and reflected a high level of engagement. Wherever the opportunity arises, and particularly in the TY programme, students should be encouraged to develop as independent learners.

Classroom management was effective, and a friendly rapport between students and teachers was maintained. Very supportive and calm management of potentially difficult students was particularly noted.

ASSESSMENT

Students' application and participation was monitored closely in most lessons. Teachers moved around the classroom when students were working, to ensure that students remained on task and to offer assistance. In the case of whole-class teaching, teachers were generally very aware of attention levels, and used targeted questions to gauge students' understanding. In a number of lessons, there was an oral review of homework assignments, yielding examples of very good work, and offering an opportunity for peer review, and learning from each other. This aspect of assessment for learning is worth further development.

A selection of copybooks and folders from the class groups visited was reviewed. While the standard and volume varied, the students' work gave ample evidence of regular setting and monitoring. In many instances, teachers gave helpful written feedback on substantial assignments, affirming students' efforts and advising them on ways of improving their work. As an element of collaborative planning, it would be useful for the teachers to consider the department's homework practice and to devise a consistent and rational approach to marking and commenting on students' work. This should aim to ensure that students develop a responsible attitude to their own work, and that the effort put into marking and commenting is resulting in improved work and raised standards.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Timetable provision for English in fifth and sixth year and LCA is very generous.
- Individual teacher planning was often very comprehensive.
- Teaching was good, often inventive and stimulating, and with instances of exemplary practice.
- Classroom management was effective, and a friendly rapport between students and teachers was maintained in the classroom.

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

- The English teaching team should be reduced in size, to increase class contact with the subject for the main teachers of English, and to support a continuum approach to the delivery of the subject.
- A daily English lesson should be provide for JCSP class groups and, if possible, for all first-year class groups.
- School management should arrange a more equitable deployment of the available teaching resource to ordinary-level class groups in fifth and sixth year.
- The practice of collaborative subject planning should be reinvigorated and supported by management.

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

The Board of Management welcomes the very positive report on teaching and learning of English at the school. It reflects the high standards and dedication of the subject department. The report was very fair and balanced and it is a comprehensive overview of the quality of teaching and learning of English at De La Salle College, Waterford. The Board of Management wishes to congratulate the College Headmaster and teaching staff of the English department.

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

The Board of Management will continue to provide the necessary support and resources that will facilitate the College Headmaster and Staff in the implementation of the findings and recommendations of the Inspection Report.

All suggestions and recommendations as per report (Page 6) will be implemented as a means of building on existing strengths and to address areas for development.

The Board also wishes to acknowledge the courteous and professional manner in which the Inspector carried out the subject inspection and is of the opinion that the inspection process and outcomes will greatly benefit the school in its SDP.