

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Mount Seskin Community College
Tallaght, Dublin 24
Roll number: 70141N

Date of inspection: 21 September 2010



AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | 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 Mount Seskin Community College, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision of English lessons for senior-cycle students is very good. Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students have four lessons of English and Communication weekly, fifth-year students have five English lessons weekly and sixth-years have six lessons weekly. The provision of four English lessons each week for junior cycle students is poor, especially as many of these students need additional support in literacy. It is therefore recommended that management work towards providing five lessons a week at least in first year and, if possible, throughout junior cycle.

There is an even distribution of English lessons across the week on the timetable. However, all second years and one third-year group that follows the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) have all of their English lessons in the afternoon. It is recommended that in future years management timetable some English lessons in the morning also.

Students are currently streamed from second year. However, the school community is commended for recently introducing mixed-ability into first year. Two of the three first-year classes are mixed-ability and the third class is a standalone group of students with additional learning needs. It is suggested that this class group be timetabled concurrently with the other first-year class groups to facilitate any possible movement of students from the class group. The school community is considering setting as the manner of placement of students from second year and this is a better system of organisation than strict streaming. Class groups within a year are concurrently timetabled from second year and this facilitates movement of students across levels. Management is commended for the teaching resources that it provides for English. For example, there is an additional teacher provided in third year, which has led to the creation of a smaller class group, and team teaching is common practice among the English teachers.

Students with literacy needs are well supported by the special educational needs (SEN) department, by the English department and management. There was evidence of very good liaison between the SEN and English departments and a clear communication of strategies that work well for SEN students in the classroom as well as other key information including baseline data. It was reported that students are regularly tested during their time in the school to ascertain improvements. Literacy initiatives in the school include Drop Everything and

Read, a Paired Reading programme between first-year students and fifth years, the use of audio books and an Accelerated Reading programme. Other interesting initiatives introduced by teachers of English include JCSP students producing a film version of a Shakespearean play and first-years writing book reviews for the school website. It is commendable that much thought goes into identifying students who may follow the JCSP in first year. Students with English as an additional language (EAL) are well integrated across a range of class groups in the school.

The JCSP library is a lovely and well resourced space that is well utilised in the school. JCSP students are all working on their library statements and all students in the school join the library. An array of useful resources is available in the well stocked and well maintained English resource room. A shared electronic folder for English resources could also be created on the school's intranet.

All English teachers are fortunate to have their own classrooms and these are truly print-rich environments which are attractive and bright. Students' work was displayed in many rooms including project work, and the classrooms are well resourced with information and communication technology (ICT) equipment, televisions, cassette recorders and other resources for learning and teaching.

All English teachers are fully qualified to teach the subject to the highest level and they are also appropriately deployed. Continuing professional development is facilitated by management. Teachers have arranged for students to be brought to see performances of plays on the English course and for guest presenters to speak to the students.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The position of co-ordinator of English is rotated every three years and there was much evidence that the subject is well coordinated. Meetings are held on a termly basis and minutes of these meetings show evidence of discussion among English teachers on organising literacy strategies, discussing examination results and other relevant matters. The English department might also consider sharing effective teaching strategies during some of their meetings.

There was evidence of very good collaboration among the English department. Teachers teaching the same year group follow a broadly similar programme of work. Fifth-year teachers agree a common programme to facilitate movement and commence the year with a focus on developing language awareness and skills. It is suggested that if the single texts are different for higher and ordinary level courses, the teachers should delay the study of this text until the classes are fully established.

The English subject department plan and planning folder are comprehensive and contain most of the documents relevant to the subject. The schemes of work within this plan show very good collaboration and a major and highly commendable encouragement of reading. The fact that both first-year and second-year students study two novels, and that third-years study another novel, as well as students in all year groups in junior cycle studying drama and all other genres on the English syllabus is very good practice. A range of suitable and challenging work is covered in each year. In addition, the library is utilised by teachers of junior-cycle English in particular to encourage reading. The full range of comparative texts is taught in fifth and sixth year and a novel is taught to LCA students. Oral presentations, debates and making speeches could also be encouraged. The practice of assigning regular longer pieces of written work was in evidence and it is recommended that that English department develop an assessment policy for English to complement the homework policy of

the school. This assessment policy could stipulate the frequency that each class group should receive longer pieces of writing to ensure consistency of practice.

The English department has identified assessment for learning (AfL), differentiation and ICT in the classroom as areas for development in the coming year. Much good practice in these areas was observed and it is commendable that teachers recognise the importance of these areas to further enhance their teaching and students' learning.

The quality of individual planning was also very good. Careful preparation of lessons reaped the reward of high quality teaching and learning. The element of review of lessons observed among some individual plans is evidence of reflection and self evaluation. Overall, the members of the English department are commended for their commitment to their students and to the subject.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There are five teachers currently teaching English in the school and four teachers were observed during the evaluation as the other teacher was absent. High quality teaching and learning was evident in the seven lessons observed. Lessons were interesting and enjoyable and they all had a clear and realisable purpose which was communicated to the students from the outset. Teachers had a range of resources to hand which enhanced the lessons. These included handouts and use of ICT. More opportunities for involving students in using ICT during lessons perhaps through students making presentations could be explored. Effective use of a range of teaching and learning strategies was observed.

The content, pace and structure of each lesson were appropriate. There was good reinforcement of prior knowledge. It was also good to see connections made with the students' own world and the contemporary world as this puts learning in context for students. The integration of the course as seen in many lessons is highly commended.

Instructions and explanations were clear and it was evident that students are used to participating in their lessons from the quality of their responses. A feature of many lessons was the active student involvement. When observed, cooperative learning was well organised and led to very good student participation with a good balance between teacher and student talk and much purposeful student discussion. It was clear that students were used to working this way. Occasionally, the teacher was inclined to over-instruct the students as opposed to inviting them to suggest meaning and this led to too much teacher talk. More class participation in these instances was recommended. Texts were very well interrogated with an appropriate focus on key moments. Students displayed good knowledge of their course.

Particular attention was paid in many lessons to the correction of mechanical errors and the extension of students' vocabulary. Students have keyword notebooks where they record new and frequently used words, and dictionaries were in use in some lessons. An appropriate emphasis was seen in some lessons on students correcting their own mistakes, on focusing on purposeful writing and on writing for a particular audience, in a particular register and on drafting and redrafting their work. In many lessons, extended pieces of writing had already been assigned. The practice of integrating the language and literature elements of the course ensured that English was seen as an integrated whole as opposed to a series of genres taught in isolation. For example, students wrote diary entries from the point of view of characters in the novel. It was good to see students being assigned challenging work which extended them and made them think. This was also seen in the type of questioning being employed by teachers. Overall, high expectations from teachers led to good quality and challenging work in the lessons.

Some very good examples of differentiation were observed. For example, much individual attention was given to students when work was assigned. Questions were often directed at individual students and the practice of mixing abilities during group work allowed for students to assist each other.

Homework was assigned in all lessons and best practice in this regard was seen when it was assigned before the end of the lesson and written on the board to ensure that all students recorded it.

The English department conducts an analysis of results in state examinations. It is recommended that the department should analyse the uptake of foundation, ordinary and higher-level courses from year to year and set targets on an annual basis, for example to reduce the numbers taking the subject at foundation-level or to increase the numbers taking higher-level. The introduction of mixed-ability class groupings will hopefully increase the numbers who ultimately take higher-level English and ordinary-level English in certificate examinations.

Lessons took place in a structured and orderly environment and all activities were extremely well managed. A respectful, affirmative atmosphere was prevalent in all lessons. Students are assigned specific seats. A very positive student-teacher rapport was in evidence and interpersonal relationships were very good. Students were engaged in their learning and were very well behaved.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on a regular basis in English. Common examinations have been introduced for the two mixed-ability class groups in first year and this is good practice. The homework journal showed evidence of frequent assignment of work. Many teachers encourage the use of hardback copies for English and the quality and maintenance of students' work was generally good. An analysis of students' copies showed that the work assigned was well corrected with formative and constructive feedback given to students including comment only marking and highlighting of students' mistakes. The focus on purposeful writing and longer pieces of work seen in some lessons is highly commended. The introduction of the criteria of assessment in sixth year when correcting students work is also appropriate.

There is a study skills programme provided for all students and senior-cycle students are encouraged to participate in the Accessing College Education (ACE) programme. Finally, it is clear that all the recommendations from a previous subject inspection of English have either been implemented or else no longer apply.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Students are well supported by a range of literacy initiatives in the school
- The JCSP library is a lovely and well resourced space that is well utilised in the school, and English classrooms are truly print-rich environments
- The quality of planning was very good both as a subject department and on an individual basis. There was evidence of good collaboration and review

- The focus on encouraging reading and the comprehensive programme of work for each year group are highly commended
- There was high quality teaching and learning in evidence
- Lessons were interesting and enjoyable and they all had a clear and realisable purpose which was communicated to the students from the outset
- The integration of the course as seen in many lessons is highly commended
- A feature of many lessons was active student involvement
- Students displayed good knowledge of their course
- Particular attention was paid in many lessons to the correction of mechanical errors and the extension of students' vocabulary
- High expectations from teachers led to good quality and challenging work
- A respectful, affirmative atmosphere was prevalent in all lessons. Students were engaged in their learning and were very well behaved
- The members of the English department are commended for their commitment to their students and to their subject
- Homework was assigned frequently and an analysis of students' copies showed that the work assigned was well corrected with formative and constructive feedback given to students

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

- Management should provide five lessons a week at least in first year and, if possible, throughout junior cycle and timetable some English lessons for all class groups in the morning. The first year standalone class could also be timetabled concurrently with the other first-year classes to allow for possible movement
- The English department should develop an assessment policy for English which stipulates the frequency that each class group should receive longer pieces of writing
- The department should analyse the uptake of foundation, ordinary and higher-level courses from year to year and set targets on an annual basis with a view to reducing uptake at foundation level and improving uptake at ordinary level or higher level

A post-evaluation meeting was 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.

Published, October 2011