An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

St Enda’s Community School
Kilmallock Road, County Limerick
Roll number: 91446G

Date of inspection: 14 January 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Enda’s Community School 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

St Enda’s Community School is a co-educational school which participates in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Department’s action plan for educational inclusion. The following curricular programmes are provided: Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the Leaving Certificate, and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). There is good timetabled provision for English in the school. In the past English teachers have rotated between levels and cycles and it is anticipated that this practice will resume in the near future. This is positive as such an approach is necessary to maintain a wide skills-base among teachers in the English department.

Incoming students are assigned to base class groups on the basis of students’ general ability. Class groups for English are timetabled concurrently in first year. It was reported that there is limited movement between these class groups for English. While it is clear that there remains a significant range of abilities within some class groups, the school is encouraged to review its current system of arranging classes for English in first year. In particular the opportunities offered by assigning first-year students to mixed-ability groupings for English with in-class support or team-teaching along with appropriate withdrawal should be trialled and assessed in the context of this review. Such a model would ensure students are exposed to a variety of language models. These adjustments should be made with a view to encouraging higher examination aspirations for candidates, one of the school’s objectives as part of its involvement in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan.

The school has a JCSP demonstration library. The library comprises a very strong learning environment. It incorporates a ‘different space’ and includes an eclectic and exciting selection of books. It is very positive that students’ views have been accessed to aid the selection of texts, thus increasing the likelihood that students will engage with the reading process. The librarian actively encourages links with local primary schools and other JCSP schools. English teachers bring their students to the library at set times during the week. The library is also open at lunchtimes. The English department, the librarian, the JCSP co-ordinator and the home-school-community-liason co-ordinator have been involved in organising a wide range of literacy initiatives over the last
number of years. A teachers’ section of the library has been developed which facilitates teacher modelling of reading and borrowing. The expansion of this section of the library to incorporate books with an educational focus, particularly dealing with the area of literacy might also usefully be considered. English teachers are very positive regarding the impact the library has had on strengthening students’ interest in reading. The librarian tests and re-tests students’ reading ability at the beginning and end of each school year. This information is shared with the principal. It is suggested that these scores be presented in an interpreted form to staff, to raise awareness of developments in students’ literacy levels, thus aiding whole-school literacy planning and review. As a further support to students with English as an additional language (EAL), the addition of some books in students’ home languages to the library should be considered to support their literacy. The library should be viewed as a key tool in developing a cohesive approach to whole-school literacy development.

Currently, English teachers are provided with base classrooms. This is positive. There is good access to audio-visual equipment in the English department. Desktop computers have been provided in English teachers’ base rooms and a data projector has been provided in one base room. Senior management indicates a willingness to equip the second English base room with a data projector and this is very positive.

Some use of information and communication technology (ICT) was observed during the evaluation, with a reading of a poem by the relevant poet being played for students during the course of a lesson. This was positive as it provided an opportunity for students to harness their listening skills. It is recommended that the use of ICT in English should be expanded. ICT should be viewed as a significant opportunity to promote students’ engagement and literacy skills in English lessons. Areas which are of relevance in this regard include the use of images to encourage students less motivated by purely verbal presentations, explicit modelling of writing by teachers, the use of graphic organisers and the creation of a common folder for English teachers’ resources on the school network. In addition, the adoption of a universal font by all subject teachers when utilising the data projector should be considered. It is further recommended that the English department and senior management should explore means whereby first years and, if possible, other junior-cycle students can gain access to ICT equipment to aid their literacy development. Booking class time in one of the school’s two computer rooms could be considered in this regard. While the availability of resources is acknowledged as a consideration in making this recommendation, the powerful impact ICT can make on adolescent literacy should also be considered. ICT can serve to increase the relevance of writing exercises, students’ sense of self-efficacy and also their technological literacy. Beyond this, the use of word-processing packages would raise awareness of spelling, mechanics and the drafting and re-drafting process. The presentation of work by students with difficulties in literacy development would also be enhanced through the use of ICT. Some expansion in the current provision of ICT in the JCSP demonstration library may be one route to be considered in increasing students’ access to ICT for writing development.

A DEIS planning committee has been formed. The committee includes the DEIS planning co-ordinator, the JCSP co-ordinator and one of the core special educational needs teachers. Some DEIS baseline data regarding literacy achievement and practices has been gathered and some targets have been set in the area of literacy. It is recommended that the DEIS planning committee’s work incorporate the implementation of whole-school-literacy strategies as a specific key function. The committee should recognize the significant expertise in the area of literacy already present in the school community and should harness this to advance students’ learning and teachers’ professional development in this area. With this in mind, the current committee’s membership should be expanded to include members of the English department, the JCSP
A prime function of the committee should be to focus the numerous initiatives connected to this area which are currently underway and to ensure that their impact is maximised. The committee should have a clear self-evaluation function regarding school efforts in literacy development. Complete baseline data should be collected and interrogated regarding what elements of current practices are working and which are not. Clear targets which are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-based) should be set on a whole-school basis. The committee should provide regular input to staff at formal staff meetings regarding progress in achieving its targets, while also highlighting the role to be played by each subject department in improving students’ literacy. Possible targets could include increasing the level of junior cycle students’ access to ICT to support literacy and developing the print-rich environment on the school corridors. A useful resource to support the committee’s work is Resources for Developing a School-Wide Literacy Plan which may be found on the website www.jcspliteracy.ie.

In the past, there has been a post of responsibility linked to the induction of new teachers. Currently, subject-specific induction in English is informal. It is suggested that a subject-specific induction policy be devised. The subject plan should form a central plank in this induction process. This formalisation of the induction process in English will be of importance as the department further develops its focus on supporting students with particular difficulties in literacy development.

English teachers have accessed continuing professional development (CPD) but there has been limited CPD in the area of literacy support. It is recommended that CPD in this area be accessed by members of the English department. Senior management will have an important role in supporting this CPD process internally and in formally requesting supports from outside providers. In particular, the JCSP support service may be relevant in this area and there are significant resources for teachers to access at www.jcspliteracy.ie. However, as well as external providers, the expertise available within the school should also be availed of. Formal sessions during subject department meetings with, for example, members of the behaviour-support team could be very useful as a sharing point for both teams. It is suggested that the primary school curriculum and accompanying teacher guidelines be referenced in the English subject plan. These are available on www.curriculumonline.ie and a further suggestion for CPD would be the inviting of a local sixth-class teacher to an English department meeting to outline the work undertaken and the methodologies used in English prior to students entering post-primary school. This could be an important curricular link to aid students’ transition from primary to post-primary education and to support their continued literacy development.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

At present there is no subject co-ordinator due to the small size of the English teaching team. The assigning of a co-ordinator’s role on a rotating basis should, nevertheless, be given some consideration in the future, as experience of leadership in the department should be developed. The focus which a co-ordinator can bring to the work of a subject department is also important. There are two formal subject departmental meetings each year. This number should be increased to aid the English department in developing provision of the subject and its own practice, as well as in supporting the achievement of key literacy targets. At present, minutes of formal departmental meetings are not maintained. This practice should be adopted and facilitated through the use of ICT to compile and store these records.
A subject plan has been created. This includes a common plan for each year group, syllabus documents, a list of literacy initiatives undertaken by the English department, relevant circulars and the Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*. Documentation relating to the whole-school literacy targets agreed in the DEIS plan should also be kept in the English subject file, as well as in other subject department files. As a further extension of the work already undertaken, it is recommended that the common plan be developed to incorporate skills-based, time-linked plans with clear literacy and learning goals. Such an approach should be utilised to refocus the department’s efforts in equipping students with key literacy and life skills. It would also provide clear direction in assessment practices going into the future. In addition, the common plans should include a clear indication of the importance of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses. Beyond this, individual teachers’ planning should also incorporate an integrated approach to the syllabuses, whereby texts are used as platforms from which students are led to develop key literacy skills, as well as aesthetic awareness of the power of literature.

A novel is studied in each year of the junior cycle. This is very positive. It is suggested that the department explore ways in which it can expand the number of plays currently studied during the junior cycle. The texts studied conform to syllabus requirements, with three comparative texts studied in each Leaving Certificate group. Beyond this, it is positive to note that a Shakespearean play is studied in the higher level junior cycle group. These points, along with the study of a play in the ordinary level class group, should be noted in the subject plan as departmental policy and practice. There is limited variation in text choice in junior cycle and in senior cycle. This should be adjusted, within syllabus guidelines, so that texts are chosen to suit class contexts and to offer further professional development opportunities to teachers. In this context, the input which can be accessed from the school librarian regarding suitable young adult fiction should be seen as a very valuable resource available to the department.

There are informal links with the special educational needs team. In addition, information regarding students’ needs is provided to teachers. Some formalisation of links between the special educational needs team and the English team should be created. At present support for students with literacy difficulties is provided through a withdrawal model of support. Some team-teaching has been undertaken in the past and it is suggested that the English department examine the possibility of team-teaching as an element in its future practice, where practicable. In addition, the school’s behaviour-support team is involved in providing support to students with literacy difficulties. Formalisation of contacts with the team around this issue are also worthy of pursuit.

There are a number of students with English as an additional language (EAL) in the school. Informal links exist between the English department and the teacher who provides EAL support. These links should be formalised as part of the development of an overall whole-school intercultural policy. Useful resources for the English department to consider are the website [www.elsp.ie](http://www.elsp.ie) as well as the *Inclusion* area of the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie). A further useful resource to aid the understanding of the experience of bilingual learners is *Learning in 2+ Languages* which may be found in the *Supporting Learners* area of the website [www.ltscotland.org.uk](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk). English teachers should remain cognisant of the importance of particular strategies in supporting the English literacy development of EAL students. These include speech extension activities, writing frames, graphic organisers and the use of home languages. It is important that careful consideration is given to the classes to which these students are assigned so that they are provided with appropriately challenging cognitive activities, as well as good language models among their peers.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teachers’ planning was available in respect of all lessons visited. In one instance, there was a need for more cohesion with regard to the study of specific texts. Lessons began with the calling of the roll and recapitulation of work already undertaken as a means of reactivating previous knowledge. This is good practice. In one instance a teacher set out the pattern which was to be explored in the poem being studied in the lesson. This is worthwhile. This approach could be slightly modified through the noting of key questions about the poem on the whiteboard so that a guided reading approach could provide a scaffold for students’ initial engagement with the text in question. Objectives were clear in each lesson. It is suggested that the English department expand its practice so that key learning goals of each lesson are outlined for students at the outset. Such an approach would provide students with a sense of security about their learning, and would provide a structure for the lesson and aid assessment by the teacher.

A number of resources were used to support students’ learning in English lessons. These included the whiteboard, photocopied resources, ICT and the textbook. English teachers should further expand their use of visual resources. The use of these resources would serve to engage students who are less motivated by purely verbal and written presentations. In particular, the use of a dictionary and thesaurus in English lessons should be pursued. These texts would support students’ awareness of the need for precision and imagination in their use of language, while also aiding the expansion of their vocabulary. In the case of EAL students, a bilingual dictionary should be a key element in their classroom equipment.

Teachers presented material in lessons in a strong and dynamic manner. In all cases, there was strong classroom management and lessons proceeded in an orderly manner with teachers regularly affirming their students. A good relationship was observed between teachers and students. While students contributed readily when called upon, in the main these responses were not extensive and ‘teacher-talk’ predominated. An adjustment in this approach should be undertaken, not only to provide for variations in style of presentation and pacing, but also, and more importantly, to provide for and support the development of students’ oracy. The incorporation of well-planned and strongly structured co-operative learning strategies is one way in which such a development might be achieved. Providing space for the extension of students’ responses is also important. Support in this area may be accessed through the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), the website of which may be found at www.pdst.ie. Based on evidence gathered in a number of lessons, consideration should also be given to the manner in which material is consolidated during lessons. The use of DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts) strategies such as graphic organisers and notes grids might be considered in this regard, along with explicit instruction in note-taking or note-making during the course of a lesson. These materials could then be stored in folders specifically assigned for this purpose. This approach could also be of benefit in providing variation in the pacing of lessons while also ascribing responsibility for their own learning to students themselves.

Reading and writing activities featured in all lessons. In one lesson, keywords in the poem had been pre-taught. This was good practice. It is suggested that the impact of this strategy could have been further increased through the highlighting of these key words for students on the whiteboard or on a projector. Such an approach could also have served as a very effective recapitulation exercise. In another lesson, students were exhorted to text-mark words in a poem, an effective strategy to aid engagement with the text. In one instance, a Leaving Certificate examination question was distributed to students and ideas which would be needed in an answer to this question were explored during the lesson. It is suggested that the distribution of a graphic organiser at this point could have placed further responsibility on students to approach this idea
based on their own ideas, which could then have been consolidated and added to on the whiteboard. Such an exercise could then be followed by an initial modelling of the writing of a paragraph by the teacher as a scaffold upon which students could build their own writing of a subsequent paragraph. The continued exploration of these and other strategies to support students’ reading and writing is strongly advocated. Possible developments in this area include varied approaches to reading in class such as paired reading, group reading, pre-reading and explicit modelling of reading. Similarly, approaches such as process writing, explicit modelling of writing and the use of writing frames should be useful in the future. A very positive feature of teachers’ practice was the strong emphasis placed in all lessons on highlighting writers’ use of language for students, with a particular emphasis being placed on the use of particular techniques. This should provide a good platform from which students may inform their own work in reading and writing in the future, once supported by other strategies that have been outlined.

While the quality of students’ learning was satisfactory in lessons, significant difficulties in the development of students’ literacy were observed. These are a serious concern. The school’s and the English department’s efforts to address this area of students’ learning are acknowledged. Nevertheless, it is recommended that a greater emphasis on teaching and learning strategies to support students with difficulties in literacy development be incorporated in teachers’ practice. This is of particular importance in the area of homework, which is dealt with in the next section of this report, but also with regard to work undertaken during lessons, as outlined in previous paragraphs.

Strong print-rich environments have been created in English teachers’ base classrooms. These incorporate keyword displays, student projects, posters related to English, news articles and JCSP posters. This is positive. In the case of keywords relating to language techniques, it is suggested that examples of the techniques in question also be displayed. Beyond this, the display of process-generated exemplars of students’ genre work would be worthwhile. This would provide a sense of audience for students, as well as highlighting the importance of drafting and re-drafting in the creation of written work.

**ASSESSMENT**

Based on the evidence obtained in the classes visited, homework is regularly assigned and monitored in lessons. Comment-based, formative assessment was also in evidence, with the use of the rubrics of the certificate examinations evident in one lesson. Teachers are very diligent in providing students with written feedback regarding their work.

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. This is good. However, the use of graduated questions, questions from past certificate examinations and summary exercises predominated. While acknowledging the validity of these strategies, it is recommended that tasks requiring this integrated strategy 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 which they will need to adhere to, as well as to particular language techniques that they may be required to include. This 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. It will also aid teachers in giving very clear feedback to students. Consideration should always be given to the manner in which the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are being addressed.

In setting homework tasks, there is also a need to adopt a differentiated approach 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 (Directed Activities Related to Texts) can be of service. For example, where students need support in creating extended written exercises writing frames can be a useful support. Some good practice in the use of notes grids was observed in some students’ copies and this, with other types of graphic organisers may also be worth pursuing.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good timetabled provision for English.
- ICT equipment is provided in English base rooms.
- The school has a JCSP demonstration library. English teachers are very positive regarding the impact the library has had on students’ learning.
- A wide range of literacy initiatives is undertaken through the English department, the JCSP programme, the JCSP librarian, the JCSP co-ordinator, and the home-school-community-liaison co-ordinator.
- As part of its work, the school’s DEIS planning committee has gathered some baseline data regarding literacy achievement and practices and some targets have been set in the area of whole-school literacy development.
- A subject plan has been created which includes a common plan for each year group.
- In all lessons observed there was good classroom management.
- A good relationship was observed between teachers and students.
- A strong print-rich environment has been developed in English teachers’ base rooms.
- Teachers were dynamic and energetic when presenting lessons.
- Homework was regularly set and monitored in classes observed, with evidence of comment-based assessment.

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

- The membership of the DEIS committee should be extended to include members of the English department, the JCSP librarian, and a member of the behaviour-support team. Complete baseline data should be collected and clear targets should be set on a whole-school basis. The implementation of whole-school-literacy strategies should be incorporated as a specific key function of the committee.
- Continuing professional development for teachers with a strong focus on strategies to promote students’ literacy development should be accessed by the English department.
- The use of ICT to support students’ literacy should be expanded in English lessons. The school should explore means whereby first-year and other junior-cycle students can gain access to ICT equipment to aid their literacy development.
• The current subject plan should be further developed to incorporate syllabus-based, skills-based, time-linked plans with specific literacy and learning goals.
• The English subject plan should incorporate a clear indication of the importance of an integrated approach to the syllabus. This integrated approach should be implemented by the department in teaching and learning.
• Strategies to support students with difficulties in literacy development should be incorporated in teachers’ practice.

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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