

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Kinsale Community School
County Cork
Roll number: 91499E**

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**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF 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 Kinsale Community School. 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 three 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

Kinsale Community School is a co-educational school. The school has experienced a notable increase in its student population over the last number of years. This has resulted in significant space restrictions. Overall, there is good provision for English on the school timetable. Classes in first year have four English lessons per week. Optimal provision for English is noted in the Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools* as incorporating one contact point with the subject each day. Consequently, the school is encouraged to investigate the possibility of increasing its allocation in first year, if practicable. This suggestion is, however, made with a recognition of the inevitable limitations of any timetabling process. The potential for some rebalancing of the number of lessons allocated to first-year and senior-cycle English classes may offer some scope for manoeuvre in this context. There is good provision for English lessons in all other year groups. In the case of fifth year, an unusual system is in place, which involves the rotation of double lessons for students from one week to the next. This is done in order to facilitate provision for Physical Education on the school timetable. In the case of the Transition Year (TY) programme, a number of classes have two English lessons on one day, with the other two lessons on separate days. While, again, recognising the difficulties inherent in any timetabling process, it is advised that the school should seek to maximise contact points with the subject across different days of the week wherever possible. Classes are timetabled concurrently in second year, third year, fifth year and sixth year. This is good practice.

Classes in first year are of mixed ability, with an additional literacy support group for students who are experiencing difficulties in literacy development. Students are divided into different classes at the beginning of second year based on their performance in formal examinations in first year and on teacher observations. These classes are set in English with a number of class groups studying for the higher level examination, a mixed-ability group and a group studying the

ordinary-level course. The latter two classes have a lower number of students than the former groups in order to allow for more support for individual students. This is positive.

The English department is encouraged to examine the current arrangements for the setting of classes at the beginning of second year very carefully. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) publication *Pathways through the Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second Year Students* raises particular concerns regarding the assigning of students to levels in second year. It is suggested that, in English at least, there is considerable scope for this process to be delayed until later in their second-year or even their third-year studies. Such a view is consistent with the recommendations of the aforementioned Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*. This recommends that 'decisions in relation to level, and the rearranging of class groups that may arise from these decisions, be deferred until the end of second year at least. Such a policy gives more time to students when they are going through an important phase of development and encourages them to have the highest realistic expectations' (p.9). In essence, there may be scope for the widening of the current mixed-ability system in first year further into the junior cycle. This could, in turn, have a positive impact on the uptake of higher level English among the student body in the Junior Certificate examination and, ultimately, in the Leaving Certificate examination.

There is a school library which also operates as a classroom due to the significant space restrictions under which the school is currently working. The library incorporates an impressive print-rich environment as well as offering an interesting and eclectic array of reading material. It is open at lunchtimes and activities are organised to take place at that time as well. Two teachers have taken responsibility for the maintenance and development of the library. The English department has organised students' participation in the *MS Readathon* to promote reading in first year. All of this is positive. To further inform the English department's work in encouraging students to engage with reading, teachers are encouraged to explore the evaluation report of the Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project which is available at www.jcspliteracy.ie. This report includes further examples of reading initiatives such as *Wordmillionaire* and *Reading Challenge*. It is positive to note that the department has begun to investigate the possibility of organising paired reading in TY. A possible approach would be the creation of a TY paired-reading module for a number of weeks where TY students would be supported in undertaking paired reading activities with first-year students who have difficulties in literacy development.

At present English teachers have access to audio-visual equipment through a trolley system which operates on each corridor of the school, as well as through equipment located in some teacher base-rooms. This is further supplemented by generous provision of information and communication technology (ICT), with data projectors being located throughout the school building. In addition, a number of teachers have been provided with laptop computers. These developments are strongly endorsed. In a number of lessons during the evaluation simple, but very effective, use of ICT to support student learning was observed. Examples included the display of powerful visual resources, the use of a clock timer and the consolidation of points made during a lesson through the use of PowerPoint. Given the very good practice which already exists within the English department, the creation of opportunities where English teachers might exchange and demonstrate ideas regarding the use of ICT to support the subject is encouraged. Subject departmental meetings may be one possible mode through which such continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities could be organised.

There are good, informal provisions for the induction of new teachers of English. New teachers and student teachers participating in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) meet with

the co-ordinator at the beginning of the academic year. They are provided with access to the subject folder and common schemes of work. In the case of PGDE students, classroom observation may be undertaken by a post-holder with responsibility for whole-school induction. It is suggested that, as a further addition to these arrangements, the observation of student teachers of English could also be undertaken by a member of the subject department. This process could also operate in reverse, with the student teacher observing a more experienced subject colleague on occasion. Given the good practice already underway in this area, the addition of a brief formal induction policy specific to English could usefully be added to the subject folder.

The English department maintains links with the relevant subject association and English teachers have participated in a range of subject-specific and whole-school CPD opportunities. The school is supportive of teachers' engagement with CPD. This is positive. The department is particularly encouraged to utilise and maintain an awareness of subject colleagues' expertise to inform their own planning and classroom practice.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A subject co-ordinator has been appointed. Formal meetings of the department are organised on a termly basis, along with numerous informal meetings throughout the year. Minutes of formal meetings are recorded. It is suggested that, in future, ICT should be used when noting the minutes to facilitate both ease of storage and any adjustments which may need to be made. The recent focus of formal departmental meetings has been on the division of classes, results in the certificate examinations, schemes of work and timetabling. It is suggested that a teaching-and-learning element should be adopted as a focus for subject departmental meetings. A recommendation dealing with a potential area for exploration is contained in a later section of this report.

A comprehensive subject plan has been developed which highlights considerable dedication on the part of English teachers. The subject folder contains a range of material relevant to the teaching and learning of English. This includes syllabus documents, circulars, lists of resources available in the department and reports from the Chief Examiner. It is suggested that the primary curriculum and teacher guidelines could usefully be added to the subject folder, along with the previously mentioned *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*. The latter publication contains useful material dealing with the subject-planning process in English, along with other areas of good practice in schools and is available in the Inspectorate section of the Department of Education and Skills website at www.education.ie.

Common plans for English have been and are being developed, with a number of reviews and draft documents in place. It is clear that much thought has gone into the development of the plans, which are time-linked and user-friendly. In addition, the need for an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses is highlighted in one yearly plan. It is recommended that the importance of an integrated approach to both the language and literature elements of the syllabus and to the teaching of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing should be noted in all of the plans. The adoption of an integrated approach should also form a clear, strong element in individual teacher planning. Learning outcomes also form an element in some of the plans and this is good practice. It is recommended that the current common plans should be further developed with a focus on learning outcomes, while adhering to a time-linked, skills-based focus. Adherence to clear guidelines in the common plans regarding the coverage of material and of learning outcomes should be viewed as a very important element in teachers' practice in all year groups. A useful starting point for work on the development of

skills-based plans can be accessed on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie which contains the *Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus* for junior cycle English.

English teachers are involved in organising a range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. These include visits to the theatre, debating, public speaking and visits to the cinema. In addition, creative writing workshops have been organised, in co-operation with the *Writers in Schools* scheme organised by *Poetry Ireland*. All of this is very worthwhile.

A range of texts is studied in junior cycle and in senior cycle. The English department has begun to investigate the possibility of undertaking the study of a number of new texts in junior cycle. This positive development is supported by the school through the purchase of class sets of the texts in question. It is suggested that the department should remain vigilant regarding the choice of texts to ensure students have not previously encountered them during their primary education. Support in the choice of texts for junior cycle can be accessed in the English area of the website of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) at www.slss.ie. The development of common plans based on learning outcomes will facilitate teachers in suiting their choice of text to particular class contexts, although there will remain some need for synchronicity in text choice. For example, poetry studied in higher-level class groups in senior cycle will need to take cognisance of the need to facilitate some students who may need to move levels over the duration of the course. Beyond this, the study of a representative sample of poems from eight poets should be noted in common plans for classes undertaking the Leaving Certificate course, in order to reflect syllabus requirements. It is recommended that the study of three comparative texts at ordinary level in the Leaving Certificate should be explicitly noted as policy and practice in the subject plan. Such an approach will not only reflect the requirements of the syllabus, it will also expose students to as wide a range of literature as possible during their Leaving Certificate studies.

There is a subject-specific TY plan. The English department plans to review the current plan during the next school year. This is worthwhile and the review should focus, as with other yearly plans, on the development of clear learning goals for English in TY. Support in this area can be accessed through the Transition Units available at www.ncca.ie. The plan could, ultimately, be shared with students at the start of their year in the programme in order to scaffold and provide direction for their work during the year. In addition, the inclusion of an English-specific portfolio as a key element in students' overall assessment in the subject during TY, should be advanced. 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. Indeed, an exercise focusing on the development of students' oracy could also be represented in such a portfolio. Planning for the English and Communications course in the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme was presented and included appropriate records of student progress.

There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs department. This is facilitated through some crossover of personnel between the two departments. The special educational needs department sometimes provides information at English departmental meetings and also gives inputs at whole-staff meetings. Education plans for students with special educational needs are being developed and are available if requested. Consideration could usefully be given to a wider distribution of these plans, within the confines of necessary confidentiality and with cognisance of what information will be most useful to mainstream teachers in supporting these students. The school has moved to include team-teaching in English as one of the additional supports from which students with difficulties in literacy development

and other special educational needs can avail. Relevant whole-staff training in the area of special educational needs has also been provided in the past. All of this is positive.

The English subject plan includes a section dealing with support for students from different cultural backgrounds and those students with English as an Additional Language (EAL). A number of English teachers have undertaken training in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and in English as a Second Language (ESOL). Very good practice was observed in one mainstream English lesson where students' home languages were recognised and specifically used to support their learning in English. It is suggested that a school-wide policy in the area of EAL should be developed. This should incorporate a consistent approach to the acknowledgement and appropriate use of students' home language to support their learning in mainstream classes. In addition the role of Directed Activities Related to Texts (DARTS) in scaffolding EAL students' engagement with English language texts should be considered. The use of writing frames to support extended writing activities is of particular relevance in the case of the subject, English. A useful resource to inform teachers regarding the strengths of bilingual learners can be found at www.ltscotland.org.uk which contains the publication *Learning in 2+ Languages*. In addition, whole-staff in-service training may be accessed through the website www.pdst.ie, the website of the Professional Development Service for Teachers.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was a good standard of teaching and learning overall. Lessons began, variously, with the taking of the roll, question and answer sessions to recapitulate previously encountered material, and, in one case, a pre-reading exercise as an introduction to a new poem. Particularly good practice was observed in a number of lessons where the learning intention was clearly delineated for students at the outset. A further development of this approach was encountered in one junior-cycle lesson where the outcome at the end of the lesson was also emphasised. Both of these strategies provided students with a clear path through the lesson and a consequent scaffold for learning. In almost all instances individual planning was evident and this served the structure and pacing of lessons well. Where planning was less evident, it is suggested that the further development of the common plans and a stronger focus on the development of language skills will serve to enhance students' learning and engagement with the syllabuses.

Lessons were frequently well-structured and, in the main, the pacing of lessons was well managed. At the core of the success of these lessons was teachers' clear planning with regard to shifts in methodology and the engagement of students' interest. Questioning was regularly used in lessons both as a strategy to advance teaching and learning and as an assessment tool. On a number of occasions, a shift to the use of more active methodologies interspersed with question and answer sessions was advocated. Such moves would serve to push more responsibility onto students for their own learning while allowing for a greater focus on student talk over teacher talk, thus undermining student passivity which was evident in some lessons.

A wide range of resources was used to support teaching and learning in English lessons. These included ICT, differentiated worksheets, newspapers, visual resources and the whiteboard. In one senior cycle lesson, the use of prints of 'The Nightwatch' succeeded in grasping students' attention and ensured strong student responses, along with the development of their visual literacy skills. English teachers are encouraged to share their expertise in the use of resources with each other so that the very good practice in the department can be expanded and consolidated in all classrooms. In particular, a focus on the use of visual resources should be maintained across the department, especially where ICT equipment is available to support such an endeavour.

In a number of lessons very good practice was observed in the use of pair work and group work. In one instance, specific roles were assigned to members of each group, with tasks set out clearly, incorporating clear time restrictions. Students worked diligently and effectively on the work they had been assigned. Groups fed back to the teacher regarding aspects of the text they were studying and this work was consolidated on the whiteboard. In another lesson, groups were given a set period of time to fill in notes on a sheet which provided support through a 'prompt' question. Each group's sheet was numbered so that their responses could subsequently be collated and incorporated in the overall notes for the entire group on the texts being studied. The very strong practice observed in these lessons should be emulated across the English department. In particular, the assigning of specific roles to each student should be considered in the planning of group work and pair work. Beyond this, a focus on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing should form an element in teachers' planning for using these approaches. Strategies such as *placemat*, *envoy* and *snowball* may be of particular relevance in this area.

Reading and writing activities featured frequently in English lessons. Very good practice was observed where teachers provided explicit support for students' engagement with writing. In one instance, keywords were highlighted for a class prior to their beginning of a note-taking activity and this scaffold was further supplemented through the provision of a notes grid projected using ICT. This notes grid provided structure for the work of a number of students with difficulties in literacy development. In another instance, students were provided with notes regarding the texts they were studying through a PowerPoint presentation. While acknowledging the visual appeal of this form of presentation, it is suggested that, in future, students might be invited to contribute their own thoughts which could then be represented through ICT. This would not only focus them on the text under consideration but would also provide an explicit model for the interrogation and analysis of the text. In another instance, students were provided with a writing frame around which they could structure their thoughts regarding a poem. An addition to the good work already being undertaken could incorporate the explicit modelling of the writing exercise in question by the teacher. This would involve vocalizing the thinking process behind this work as well as the transparent drafting and redrafting of the exercise as the lesson progressed.

A strong focus on the analysis of writers' use of language formed a key element in a number of lessons. In one instance, a strong visual resource led to the teacher exhorting students to engage in a piece of descriptive writing which would appeal to the senses. Students were particularly directed towards the use of adjectives to support their creation of pieces incorporating sensual language. This worked well and the potential for this very worthwhile approach to be further extended through the subsequent use of peer assessment was suggested. In another lesson students were asked to note the language features in a newspaper article. Students responded well to this task. As a further development of this work, it is suggested that the use of text-marking at the initial point in the exercise could have further added to students' engagement with the text. Discussion and analysis of the use of language in texts studied should be pursued across the department and this should be approached so that, where students read or discuss language techniques during a lesson, this work is subsequently reflected in the written work they undertake, where practicable and appropriate.

A good relationship between students and teachers was evident in all lessons observed. Teachers were affirming of students' efforts. Classroom management was good and, in a number of instances, teachers used humour effectively as a management tool which added to the safe and well-ordered atmosphere in lessons. In almost all cases, there was evidence of a good level of student learning. Students responded well to questioning and engaged well with exercises set during lessons. A good level of knowledge regarding the texts they had studied was also evident.

In one instance, responses were somewhat more limited regarding elements of the texts covered and of other areas of the syllabus. Here, recommendations were made regarding planning and the use of differentiated resources. The implementation of these recommendations is important in order to ensure students reach their full potential in the subject.

The development of a print-rich environment was evident in a number of teacher base-rooms. This was variously exemplified through genre displays of students' work, images linked to texts and a number of other devices. This was good practice. In other instances teachers were somewhat constrained in their ability to develop this area of their practice due to the space restrictions which obtain in the school at the present time. Nevertheless, there were examples of moves towards developing print-rich classrooms by some teachers who did not have base-rooms. The English department should now note the development of a print-rich environment as policy and practice in the English subject plan. Further development of strategies such as the display of keywords and character diagrams to support students' literacy is encouraged. These approaches will enhance the experiences not only of students with difficulties in literacy development and EAL students, but of all students.

ASSESSMENT

A homework policy has been developed and assessment procedures are noted in the subject plan. Homework was regularly assigned in English classes observed during the evaluation. As noted earlier in this report, a teaching-and-learning focus could usefully be added as an additional element in the subject-planning process. With this in mind, it is recommended that assessment policy and practice in English should be further developed. Such a focus could be usefully informed through an engagement with training in the area of assessment for learning. This training could be accessed through an external source initially but, ultimately, expertise and knowledge already present in the English department should be the central pillar upon which this advance is developed. Advancing the implementation of assessment-for-learning strategies should be viewed as a medium-term aim in English. An assessment-for-learning policy which is specific to the needs of students in Kinsale Community School can then be consolidated and noted in the subject plan. A further teaching-and-learning focus for subject planning could then be selected.

Assessment-for-learning strategies which may be of interest include comment-only marking, peer and self assessment, the traffic-light system and the development of learning goals. A number of these approaches are already utilised in the English department, thus providing a solid foundation for this enterprise. In particular, an approach in a senior cycle lesson where students noted their own achievement with regard to specific learning goals through the ticking of different boxes as these progressed was impressive, reflecting strategies utilised in the Junior Certificate School Programme. Beyond this, comment-based assessment of students' work was often in evidence during the evaluation. In one senior cycle lesson, the sharing of the rubrics of the certificate examinations was observed, and this was good practice. The continued expansion of the use of comment-based teacher assessment of students' work, in combination with peer-assessment and self-assessment strategies is strongly advocated. In addition, regular monitoring of student homework was observed in the lessons visited during the evaluation. When monitoring or correcting student work, it is advised that teachers should clearly date their comment or mark. This should be done in order to provide a transparent record of monitoring for students, parents and teachers themselves.

There was limited use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in the homework assigned. Very good practice in this area was observed in one lesson

where students had developed a newspaper titled *The Verona Times* which was informed by the events of *Romeo and Juliet*. In another lesson, a planning scheme included diary entries and conversations which were to be developed and modelled on a comparative text being studied. Beyond these examples, the use of staged questions, questions from past certificate examinations and summary exercises predominated. While acknowledging the validity of these strategies, it is recommended that the use of an integrated strategy should be more widely and consistently adopted on the part of English teachers. This recommendation is made in conjunction with an earlier recommendation regarding teacher and departmental planning which is contained in this report. The wider use of an integrated strategy when assigning homework should incorporate the 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' homework. Where a particular genre is assigned for homework, rubrics could be set out for the completion of the homework exercise which draw 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*.

Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas and at the end of the academic year. Students in third year and in sixth year participate in mock examinations in the early spring. It is positive to note that consultation regarding special arrangements for some students with special educational needs takes place with regard to house examinations. Analysis of students' performance in the certificate examinations takes place each year. It should be noted that uptake of levels in the certificate examinations when compared with national norms should be considered a key element of such a practice.

There is one parent-teacher meeting per year group each year. Reports to parents regarding students' progress are sent to student's homes following the formal house examinations at Christmas and summer, as well as the results of mock examinations in the early spring. In addition, communication with students' homes is facilitated through use of the student journal. These arrangements are worthwhile.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Overall, there is good provision for English on the school timetable.
- There is a school library which incorporates a very impressive print-rich environment, along with an interesting and eclectic mix of reading material.
- Common plans have been and are being developed, with a number of reviews and drafts in place.
- There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs department.
- There was a good standard of teaching and learning overall.
- Good discipline was maintained in all classes.
- In a number of lessons very good practice was observed in the use of pair and group work.
- The development of a print-rich environment was evident in a number of teacher base-rooms.

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

- Assessment policy and practice in the English department should be further developed, incorporating an assessment-for-learning focus.
- The study of three comparative texts at ordinary level in Leaving Certificate should be explicitly noted as policy and practice in the subject plan.
- The current common plans should be further developed and should include explicit learning outcomes, while adhering to a time-linked, skills-based focus.
- An integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabus should be more widely adopted by English teachers and should be adopted in departmental and individual planning.

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.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

We found this to be an enriching experience and feel that the report is fair and reasonable assessment of the work that goes on in the English department. We acknowledge the professional manner in which the inspector carried out his work and our learning momentum was not interrupted.

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

We have implemented the recommendation whereby our current 2nd year English classes have not been streamed. We are also recording the minutes of our meetings using ICT. We also take on board the recommendation to study three comparative texts at ordinary level in Leaving Cert and this has also been implemented.

We do plan to further develop our common year plans and also to develop our assessment policy, incorporating an assessment for learning focus.