REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Moate Community School, 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, two deputy principals and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Subject provision and whole school support is good in Moate Community School. Timetabling allocation is good in all programmes with five lessons in years two, three, five and six and four each in first year and Transition Year (TY). Resources are good: teachers are generally classroom based and have good access to information and communication technology (ICT) equipment and storage of resources. The school does not have a library but has developed good links with the local library service.

In the junior cycle, classes are organised in bands according to ability: band one has two groups of roughly equal ability, band two has two groups of equal but lower ability in comparison to the first, while the third band comprises the weakest students and is subdivided into very small class groups. Additional teaching resources are concentrated in this area. However, it is noted that the weakest group has two teachers in first year which is not ideal. The school reports that this arrangement is anomalous. It is of great importance that planning is seamlessly co-ordinated for this particular class group, given the learning challenges they face. It is an advantage that the group is very small. English is taught in a mixed-ability setting within these bands for the first two years. In the examination year, further and usually minor readjustments take place, usually downwards. At the time of the evaluation, there were three designated ordinary-level classes in the third-year group and three higher-level classes. It is noted that uptake of junior cycle higher-level English is below the national average in three of the last four years. In the senior cycle, students are allocated to higher and ordinary level classes. Uptake of higher level is below the national average in two of the last four years in the case of the senior cycle. While a number of factors may be at play, it is suggested that the school reassess class organisation in the junior cycle to identify if current structures are militating against greater uptake of higher-level English in the junior cycle and with consequent effects in the senior cycle. The school should also review uptake of ordinary level among male students: of the weaker-ability English classes visited, boys were in the majority in all cases. It is recommended that all aspects of provision be examined with a view to increasing uptake of higher-level English for both boys and girls. It is commendable
that lessons are timetabled concurrently in second and third year allowing considerable flexibility and opportunities for sharing learning.

The school’s team of subject teachers is committed and conscientious and a professional approach to the teaching of English was noted in the course of the evaluation. Teacher deployment is good in the main but there is scope for development. A team of eleven is large notwithstanding the size of the school enrolment. Currently over half of the team has fewer than two class groups for English. It is commendable that a core team of five subject specialists currently has considerable contact with the subject. While the complexities of timetabling are acknowledged, and circumstances may vary from year to year, nonetheless, the school should aim to ensure that each member of the teaching team has significant contact with English in line with the good practice recommended in the composite report from the Department of Education and Science (DES), *Looking at English* (2006). It is very positive that continuing professional development (CPD) is encouraged at whole-school level and a number of useful events have been organised for all staff. There is also evidence of the commitment of individual teachers of English. The team has capacity and scope for development to a high professional level over the next few years given current evidence of engagement with the teaching of the subject.

The school provides many opportunities for students to engage in extracurricular and co-curricular activities that complement the teaching and learning of English and the teaching team is particularly commended for its support of activities such as theatre and cinema visits, debating and writing articles for local newspapers.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Good planning structures are in place. The role of co-ordinator rotates according to accepted procedures and the department meets regularly and records minutes. There is also a good deal of informal interaction. The team has been proactive in its collaborative approach and a shared electronic folder to which resources can be uploaded already exists. Some good illustrations of the promotion of reading are the local library links and the recent establishment of a book club. A reading policy should be developed that is implemented in all class groups throughout the school and that involves parents in their children’s reading and learning. This policy should be an essential strand in a range of whole-school literacy approaches.

The subject plan is structured on the state examinations and not the syllabuses in both the Leaving Certificate (LC) and Junior Certificate (JC) programmes. It is recommended that the department review subject planning as a priority. The JC plan should be informed by the approach taken in the draft rebalanced syllabus currently on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) website. Learning outcomes in the three core literacy areas and covering the four skill sets (speaking, listening, reading and writing) for each year group in the junior cycle should be written up. A review of junior cycle texts should take place to ensure that these are sufficiently challenging and varied to meet the full requirements of the syllabus and that they do not duplicate fiction that is commonly read in the primary schools. The range currently studied is narrow and this does not lay down the best foundation for the LC programme. The LC should also be informed by the syllabus and planning should focus on the achievement of specific learning outcomes as outlined therein; planning for LC should also clearly reflect the syllabus aspiration, “the development of oracy”. While the TY programme had an innovative range of texts in practice, its broad aims are commendable and there is evidence of the promotion of public speaking, the programme outlined is characterised by a LC approach. The teaching team should
review planning in the light of the TY guidelines currently available on the Department of Education and Skills website.

The teaching team has begun to collect data from the examinations and this is a positive step. The collection and analysis of reliable data, including level uptake and recorded outcomes from internal examinations should help the team to identify trends and to highlight areas for development so that a targeted approach to subject delivery can be implemented.

Individual planning was conscientious and some good practice was in evidence in the majority of lessons observed; written evidence of lesson planning was provided in some cases and this is commended. While planning was student centred in most cases, in a minority of instances, some review of individual teacher planning is needed to prioritise the needs of the learners, to allow for greater differentiation and to bring more coherence. The quality of preparation for learning was very good in all. It is reported that the English department has well-developed links with the learning support department and this is commendable.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Lesson content was appropriate to the classes and levels in all cases. All lessons were well paced and purposeful. In only a small minority of cases was lesson planning flawed and this was due to lack of connection between learning intention and planned learning activity, lack of variety in methods and resources deployed or lack of focus on student-centred learning. The learning intention was clear in most classes visited but it should be written on the board at the outset in all cases. In one lesson, good practice was noted in this regard. Resources used were varied and interesting and designed to engage student interest in the vast majority of lessons; there was not an over-reliance on text. Examples noted were film clips, PowerPoint presentation slides, handouts to scaffold learning (for example graphic organisers), a wall map in addition to interesting text. The board was used well, for example, to record group feedback.

Teaching methods were varied in most classes visited. A mnemonic in the form of an acronym was a useful device that encouraged student learning while developing analytical skills. There was good use of active learning through group and pair work, for example. Tasks assigned were specific and time-bound. Students indicated their enjoyment of this method and the good practice observed should be adopted in all lessons. Attention should be paid to the assignment of roles in groups work. Written activity, group and pair work and reading of text received equal attention in the best lessons and this is highly commended. These lessons were also commendable for the balance struck between teacher input and students’ oral contributions. In a small number of cases, there was far too much teacher talk and this needs to be reviewed and monitored as it does not promote learning. There was some good use of questioning strategy and commendable practice was in evidence in the best lessons observed. However, even in otherwise good lesson, there was an over-reliance on closed and leading questions: this practice does not encourage higher-order thinking skills and is an area for development. Students need to be challenged more in some lessons. It is recommended that the teaching team review questioning strategy and share good practice.

Classroom management was very good in all lessons observed. Classroom atmosphere was supportive of learning and classes visited were notable for the very positive relationships that clearly existed between students and teachers. Classroom walls were used for displaying students’ work and support materials that were aids to learning. While there may be some constraints on space in some rooms, greater emphasis should be placed on the creation of
attractive book displays to stimulate an interest in reading. More dictionaries could be clearly displayed and used during lessons to encourage the acquisition of language and in general, more emphasis placed on the development of language, for example, through the development of students’ own word-banks which they should be required to build and use in orally and in writing. In one lesson it was reported that the class had visited the local library in the past and that students were encouraged to read at home with follow up activities having been implemented. Good practice on ways to promote reading at home should be shared.

In the majority of lessons observed, students were actively engaged in lessons and this was a reflection of the variety and appropriateness of the methods and resources used. For example, one junior cycle group, were well prepared for learning through a choice of visual material and questioning, and the poem that followed challenged them to express a varied and interesting range of responses. Students were familiar with texts studied in classes. Other than the normal interaction of class through discussion and questioning, there was no explicit planning or focus on the development of oral communication skills in lessons observed. It is suggested that, for example, students be encouraged to research topics and to present their findings to their peers, particularly given the availability of the data projectors in every classroom.

While examination attainment is good and above national norms in the junior cycle, the lower than average uptake of higher level is an area that needs to be examined as it may be having an inflationary effect on the overall average grade distribution. Attainment is good in the senior cycle.

**ASSESSMENT**

There was evidence of assessment for learning both during class interaction (oral feedback) and through teacher’s written comments on homework. Particularly commended are the in-depth and encouraging remarks that were noted in some copybooks. The use of positive reinforcement strategies such as reward stamps is commended in a junior cycle lesson. It is very good that assessment informed planning in a class visited: the teacher learned from examination outcomes that reinforcement was needed in a specific area and planned lesson content accordingly. Peer assessment was encouraged in a couple of lessons: a good example was noted where assessment criteria were shared with students and they evaluated their peers’ work. The quality of some students’ evaluations was very good; this approach is commended. It is important that follow-on teacher assessment takes place to ensure that errors of grammar, spelling and syntax are identified and addressed as students themselves may not have sufficiently developed competency in these areas to identify errors. Comment-only marking is a useful strategy to ensure that assessment directs learning. It should be complemented by attention to the mechanics of writing in other contexts.

Regarding summative assessment, there should be more common assessment in house examinations. In first year, a common paper for should be considered for all class groups as differentiation can be built into assessment instruments. The assessment of oracy should be considered. In second and third year, common assessment for common levels could be recommended: this would ensure greater harmonisation of syllabus delivery and ensure greater cohesion and consistency. The practice of common assessment would also facilitate the ongoing collection of reliable assessment data that will feed into subject planning. Common assessment for common levels should be the norm in the senior cycle.
Records of assessment were well maintained in most cases but there were exceptions and this is an area for development. Accurate records of assessment are very important for tracking students’ progress and these should be maintained in all skill areas. Records of attendance were well maintained in all classes visited.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school has a committed, hard-working and conscientious team of teachers of English that has a strong collaborative ethos and notable potential for growth and development.
- Good planning structures are in place.
- Whole-school support is generally good.
- Attainment is generally good but higher-level uptake is lower than average.
- A very good range of resources and teaching methods was deployed in most lessons observed.
- There was a very good level of student engagement and learning in the majority of lessons.
- Homework is regularly assigned and conscientiously corrected and assessment is underpinned by the principles of assessment for learning.

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

- The school and teaching team should review all aspects of provision, assessment, teaching and learning with a view to increasing uptake of higher-level English.
- The school should examine its teacher deployment policy to ensure that it is in line with good practice.
- Subject planning should be reviewed in all programmes.
- The team should specifically focus on questioning strategy and share good practice.
- Common assessment should be practised for in-house examinations.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of English and with the principal and two deputy principals at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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.

*Published February 2012*
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The English Department welcomes the findings of the Subject Inspection Report. The teaching team found the inspection a positive and affirming experience. Recommendations made have been taken on board and these will be implemented. The English Department would like to note that any slight gender imbalance evident in Ordinary level classes is reflective of national issues and not specific to English in Moate Community School.