

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Oaklands Community College
Edenderry, Co. Offaly
Roll number: 725400

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A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Oaklands Community College, Edenderry. 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 one day 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 deputy principal and subject teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The current provision of four English lessons weekly for each year of junior cycle is barely adequate, and efforts should be made to improve this provision, especially given the literacy difficulties of some students. Provision improves for fifth and sixth years as they have six or five lessons respectively each week. Provision of three lessons weekly for Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Post-Leaving Certificate students is satisfactory; and LCA students also have two lessons of Drama each week.

In an effort by management to raise achievement, students in first and second year are placed in either one top class of higher ability or one of two other classes of mixed ability, based on results in incoming assessments. Third-year students are currently streamed although the school reports that this practice will be discontinued. It is recommended, in keeping with the recommendation in the whole-school evaluation report, that the school adopt a policy of mixed ability in first year. While it was reported that students do not make a final decision as to the level they take in state examinations until after the 'mocks', students who were not in the top class were deemed by teachers either to be ordinary or foundation level students earlier in junior cycle. There is a need for a concerted effort among English teachers to reduce the number of students taking foundation level and to increase the numbers taking higher level. In senior cycle, there is a top fifth-year class and two mixed-ability classes. Students in the top class were following the higher-level syllabus and students in the mixed-ability classes were following the ordinary-level syllabus. There is currently one sixth-year class group, all of whom are following the ordinary-level syllabus.

English teachers are fully qualified to teach English to the highest level. However, one teacher currently teaches all the higher-level class groups. All qualified English teachers should be provided with the opportunity to teach higher level on a rotating basis.

Teachers have their own rooms in which were displayed samples of students' work, key words and relevant posters relating to English. Many of these rooms are equipped with data projectors and computers and more will be shortly. Management provides very good support to teachers in relation to resources. Continuing professional development opportunities are availed of.

Students in need of literacy and learning support receive supplementary teaching mainly through withdrawal but some team teaching has also been introduced. This is commended. It was reported that liaison between the English department and the learning support department is good. Teachers who teach class groups with students who are participating in the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) should ensure that the relevant statements are filled in by students so that they gain a sense of an incremental approach to learning. In this regard, where JCSP students are mixed with non-JCSP students, all students should be encouraged to fill in these statements.

The very pleasant school library contains a reading corner and a good range of books. Students participate in the Readathon and are also encouraged to become involved in writing competitions. Some teachers also encourage students to write reviews of books they have read. Teachers could also organise book boxes in their classrooms to encourage the reading habit and they could designate a specified period of time for purposeful reading with their pupils. Students are brought to the theatre to see productions of dramas on their course, and visiting drama groups and speakers are invited to the school to perform for the students, all of which is very good practice.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Management provides time for subject departments to meet three to four times each year and it was reported that a lot of informal meetings also take place among the English teachers. The English teachers recognise the need to align course content in junior cycle to allow for common examinations and to facilitate withdrawal of students for extra support. Work on this common approach has begun in first year and is to be encouraged, especially as management provides concurrence on the timetable for English in second, third and fifth year to allow for movement of students between levels. However, such movement is not possible or desirable if it means working on a whole new range of texts.

Care must be taken that the texts documented in the English plan are a true reflection of the work of the department as opposed to a list of texts available for study. The department plan submitted should reflect in more detail the skills or learning outcomes that students should acquire from year to year. The NCCA has worked to rebalance the Junior Certificate English syllabus and has included the learning outcomes necessary for students from first to third year. This document is available on www.ncca.ie and it might be useful to the English department in referencing the learning outcomes to be achieved by each year group. In addition, in devising a programme of work for students, care should be taken to ensure continuity and progression in learning from first year through to sixth year. Currently, different practices prevail in relation to the number of texts taught in junior cycle. Best practice occurred when a literary text was taught in each of first, second and third year. The texts taught in some junior cycle classes need to be more challenging and these class groups should study a broader range of texts in each year of junior cycle. In addition, film should not replace drama at ordinary or foundation level. All senior cycle students following the Leaving Certificate English programme must study three comparative texts.

The plan of work submitted for LCA English and Communication students was good. Likewise, English teachers' individual plans of work were generally detailed and clear. Some individual plans outlined appropriate methodologies and learning outcomes and these could form the basis of an overall department plan.

The 'Back to Basics' approach, involving a stronger focus on grammar, spelling and punctuation is commended, especially when this approach is integrated with the teaching of other aspects of the course. The use of dictionaries in lessons is also commended. As part of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) planning, a whole-school approach to

literacy is currently underway and good work has commenced in relation to testing students and planning literacy strategies.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning was generally good and was very good in some cases. All lessons opened well and the intended learning outcomes were shared with students. Teachers were good communicators and instructions and explanations were clear. There was a good structure and variety to lessons. In a couple of instances, the pace was too slow and more work could have been covered which would have catered for the better able students in the lesson and challenged the less able students. Good preparation of resources enhanced teaching and learning and ICT was well used. Students were sometimes put working in pairs to answer assigned questions or to work together on a given task but other opportunities for active learning could have been exploited. In some lessons, more time should have been assigned for discussion and eliciting of students' response verbally before asking students to write. The very good practice of organising the board to record new vocabulary was observed. Good practice was also seen when key points were repeated and reinforced and when new vocabulary and points of grammar and techniques of language were taught in an integrated manner as opposed to in isolation and when language and literature were integrated.

A particular feature of all lessons was the very good individual attention that was given to students when they were working on a set task for a part of the lesson. Most class groups contained students with English as an additional language or students in receipt of additional support and these were well accommodated in the lessons through this individual attention and other techniques including use of differentiated worksheets and dictionary work.

Questioning of students was generally good and was best when teachers named students to answer questions rather than waiting for hands up and when students were asked higher-order questions which extended them and made them think more deeply about what they were learning. In lessons where there was frequent questioning of students very good responses were elicited.

Students' copies varied in standard. A review of students' copies and homework journals provided evidence of students being regularly assigned homework by some but not all teachers. In addition, more frequent assignment of longer pieces of work, such as personal writing, should be introduced by all teachers. Students should be encouraged to draft and redraft their work and correct their mistakes from first year.

Students were well managed and well behaved and a very good student-teacher relationship was in evidence. Students displayed good knowledge of their course in lessons observed.

ASSESSMENT

The introduction of common assessment of first-year students is commended and, in time, will hopefully extend to other year groups as appropriate. Students sit formal examinations at Christmas and in the summer, and first years also receive a progress report in October based on continuous assessment. This is good practice.

There was evidence that students are encouraged to correct spelling in some classes, but a closer correction of homework including spelling and grammar mistakes was absent in other classes. Best practice in correction of homework was seen when students were given written comments on where they should improve. The school has a very comprehensive homework policy in place and the English department should also agree a policy in relation to the

assignment of homework including frequency of assigning longer pieces of work and the correction of same. In addition, teachers should record homework on the board for students to take down clearly. LCA students were progressing well with their key assignments. The use of hardback or manuscript copies in some classes is commended.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Management provides very good support to teachers in relation to resources.
- Some good strategies for the development of students' literacy are already in place.
- The English department has begun to work on a common approach to teaching first years.
- The 'Back to Basics' approach involving a stronger focus on grammar, spelling and punctuation is commended.
- Teachers were good communicators and instructions and explanations were clear.
- Good preparation of resources enhanced teaching and learning and ICT was well used.
- A particular feature of all lessons was the very good individual attention that was given to students.
- Questioning of students was generally good.
- Students were well managed and well behaved and a very good student-teacher relationship was in evidence.

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

- It is recommended that efforts be made to increase provision of English lessons at junior cycle.
- It is recommended, in keeping with the recommendation in the whole-school evaluation report, that the school adopt a policy of mixed ability in first year.
- The English department should work to incorporate learning outcomes into their plan. The department should also ensure continuity and progression in learning from first year through to sixth year by ensuring that texts are suitably challenging and that a broad range of texts is covered in junior cycle. In addition, film should not replace drama at ordinary level.
- All senior cycle students following the Leaving Certificate English programme must study three comparative texts.
- There is a need for a concerted effort among English teachers to increase the numbers aiming for higher level and reduce the numbers taking foundation level.
- It is recommended that all teachers be provided with the opportunity to teach higher level and the other programmes offered by the school, on a rotating basis.
- More opportunities for active learning should be provided.
- It is recommended that students be introduced to the writing process from first year. The English department should agree a policy in relation to the assignment and correction of homework.

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

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