REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ballinteer 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 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, deputy principal and subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Ballinteer Community School is a co-educational school serving an outer suburban area in south Dublin. The school has recently moved into a spacious new building with a range of facilities used by students and the wider community. It provides the Junior Certificate; the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), offered to a small cohort in the junior cycle; an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, which has a very good uptake; the Leaving Certificate, taken by most senior cycle students; and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. English is a core subject in all these programmes.

Five teachers form the English department in the school and all have the subject to degree level. All members of the English department are at a relatively early stage in their teaching careers. School management is conscious of the importance of whole-school support for teachers in this significant phase of professional development and has facilitated teachers’ attendance at centrally delivered in-service programmes. An active subject association, INOTE (Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English), exists within the teacher professional network, and the school’s English teaching team should consult its website at www.inote.ie for details of membership and events. The team has much to contribute to the association and should also find the inputs of others helpful.

There are strengths and weaknesses in the timetabled provision for English. Senior cycle timetabling of English is good both in the number and distribution of lessons. A lesson per day is timetabled in fifth and sixth year, and English is concurrently timetabled to facilitate student movement between levels. English is also concurrently timetabled in TY, and four lessons are provided. The provision for LCA of four lessons in both years meets the recommended allocation of time. However, the provision in junior cycle of four lessons for all years and classes is not generous, and is not satisfactory for students with deficits in literacy skills. The provision of a fifth English lesson for all first-year classes should be prioritised. The concurrent timetabling of
English in the junior cycle should also be considered, and it was noted that Irish and Mathematics are concurrently timetabled.

Students are streamed on entry to first year, on the basis of tests in core subjects and, where relevant, information and reports from primary schools. The attainment tests were reported to be generally reliable but some changes to them are planned for next year. All testing to decide on student placement must make a distinction between attainment and ability. The system used for streaming, and its rationale, should therefore be kept under rigorous review. All standardised tests used should be selected with reference to the list of approved tests available on the Department of Education and Skills website. Some language support and ‘extra English’ lessons are provided for students not taking Irish. Some of these students are learning English as an additional language (EAL), and others are receiving resource teaching, and the needs of the two groups are different. School management should ensure the targeted use of the school’s EAL teaching allocation.

Students are also placed in streamed classes in TY. The Department’s guidelines for the programme (see www.slss.ie) clearly indicate a mixed-ability setting as the one most appropriate to its aims. Again, the rationale for the current system of class formation should be examined, along with the impact of class placement in TY on student progression and on uptake of higher and ordinary level Leaving Certificate English. Students in the Leaving Certificate programme are placed in class groups according to levels of attainment and application. Where teacher availability allows, it is recommended that discrete higher and ordinary level class groups be formed, as this assists the planning and delivery of appropriate programmes. Class formation should seek to ensure that students are encouraged and challenged to take English at the highest appropriate level and to set their sights on the highest outcomes that they can achieve.

Teachers are assigned to classes on the basis of continuity. There was also evidence that teachers have some opportunity to teach a range of years, levels and programmes. This pattern of deployment is recommended and should be extended wherever possible, because it assists teachers to view the subject as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first year to sixth. It also allows teachers to develop and extend a repertoire of teaching and learning approaches that can be used appropriately with different groups and settings.

Teachers have base classrooms, which are well resourced with ready access to audiovisual equipment and information and communication technology (ICT). Classrooms are generally spacious and provide scope for flexible seating arrangements, and for the display of subject-specific material and students’ work in English. The English department has space to store shared resources in the school’s study hall and a resource room. Further development of electronic folders for English resources is recommended, to facilitate the creation and sharing of material. The school has a fine library but its use by outside groups has restricted student access. In the interests of underpinning a school-wide approach to literacy, as envisaged for example in the JCSP Between the Lines project, greater access to the school library should be prioritised.

The school supports initial teacher education through a policy of offering teaching experience to student teachers. Two student teachers are currently engaged in teaching practice in the English department, although lessons remain formally assigned to qualified teachers. This places considerable responsibility on members of the English teaching team with regard to collaborative delivery and mentoring, at a relatively early stage in their careers. School management should oversee the placement of student teachers and ensure that it is in the best interests of students.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**
There has been considerable change in personnel in the English department in recent years owing to retirements and subsequent new appointments. At present, the longest-serving member of the subject department undertakes the co-ordination of English on a voluntary basis, although a rotation of the co-ordinator role is envisaged. The present arrangement is sensible in that it provides a degree of continuity at a time of change. However, it would be helpful to plan for the rotation of the role, for example by agreeing a term of office and a rota for taking the co-ordinator role. It would also be worthwhile for the department collectively to discuss the role and draw up a description encompassing both organisational and developmental elements. Taking on the role would provide all members of the department with an opportunity to extend their professional experience and to promote and share good teaching and learning practices.

Formal meetings of the department take place at least twice a year. In the current year, three meetings were held, and a meeting per term is desirable. Brief minutes of meetings are written, and the co-ordinator sends copies of minutes to school management. The minutes of recent meetings indicate that advance planning and organisational matters are discussed. Review and reflection with regard to current practice also takes place, and it is suggested that this be recorded in rather more detail, so that an account of the concerns identified and possible courses of action considered is available for reference from one meeting to the next.

The subject department focused on English in the junior cycle as an area for discussion at a meeting this year. In addition to putting forward the desirability of concurrent timetabling for junior cycle English, the subject teachers considered ways of raising expectations and a sense of challenge among able students, and identified grammar and accurate language use as areas requiring specific initiatives in 2010/11. School management is also aware of a need to address key reading and writing skills early in the junior cycle. A whole-school approach to this issue is advocated, so that consistent practice can be established for all subjects in first year regarding the layout and presentation of written work, and the reinforcement of accurate language use.

A substantial and well-organised planning folder for English was made available to the inspector during the evaluation. Detailed individual folders and programmes of work were also presented. It was evident from these that much of the planning of the junior cycle English programme takes place on the basis of individual teachers devising schemes of work for their classes. Given the department’s shared interest in achieving certain outcomes for junior cycle students, it would be very helpful to collaborate on a programme of work with agreed learning outcomes for each year. These are most useful when expressed in terms of what students must, should and could know, thus providing a framework for a common approach with differentiated elements. While it is not essential to choose common texts, it is crucial that teachers agree on “what students must know”.

Planning for the Leaving Certificate is in line with syllabus requirements, although it should be noted that three texts are to be studied comparatively for the ordinary as well as the higher level course. In further developing the planned Leaving Certificate programme, it is suggested that all opportunities to integrate the study of language and literature be availed of. Students should be encouraged to read accessible comparative texts themselves, and approaches that assist students to read independently should be taken wherever appropriate. The English plans for TY and LCA are suitable for the relevant programmes’ aims. It is recommended that a year plan of assignments be included in the TY programme and that all students be given a copy, as a means of supporting learner autonomy and ensuring the completion of a solid body of work during the year.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**
Eight lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all junior cycle years and levels, the LCA programme and a Leaving Certificate group, and involving almost all members of the English department. TY students were working away from school during the evaluation. The quality of teaching in the lessons observed was satisfactory, and instances of very effective and innovative practice were noted. These were characterised by openness to the subject and the students, which promoted lively classroom interaction and demonstrated to students an enquiring and creative engagement with English. However, there were a few instances of over-reliance on repetitive, low-level tasks that lacked a meaningful context. While attention to accuracy of language use is vital, the relevant skills are best taught through purposeful reading and writing activities that harness and develop students’ personal responses.

Lessons were well planned, and the necessary materials, equipment and learning activities had been carefully prepared. Lesson pace varied but was for the most part appropriate to the class group and ensured that a satisfactory amount of material was covered. Occasionally, too little time was allowed for students to grapple with and absorb new learning, for example with regard to developing an understanding of the power of figurative language. Where good learning activities have been planned, they should be exploited to the full and this requires considerable time in the classroom context. Where there was a good balance between forward movement and consolidation of learning, students in all ability groups responded well and worked purposefully.

Classroom resources were used well. Good use of the board to gather points from class discussion and to reinforce key terms was noted. This was observed to be most effective where the points made were organised on the board in various categories, ensuring that students were encouraged to structure their observations. This approach provided a good pre-writing activity, preparing students to write more coherently. Audiovisual and ICT resources were also used to good effect. LCA students prepared a theatre programme for a production they had seen, and worked in the computer room to do so. In junior cycle lessons, the data projector was used to display an advertisement so that the symbolism of colour could be explored, and a CD player was used to play a song as part of a well-managed listening comprehension. Teachers are advised to consider all possible uses of the resources available and the materials they have devised to extend and deepen learning activities.

Teachers generally selected suitable teaching and learning approaches for each class group observed and a wide variety of teaching methods was noted. Active learning rather than teacher exposition was the predominant approach taken, and this was observed to be effective, especially where activities were well structured, the desired outcomes were clearly communicated, and a high but realistic standard was set for student learning. Some very good strategies to allow students to transfer their learning were noted. For example, a sweet-tasting exercise required a junior cycle group to focus on sensory description, and this led to a discussion and description of the sensory impact of two different genres of film that the class had seen. Creative strategies noted included group work where the task was to choose a significant scene from the studied novel and make a collage-type pictorial representation of it. Both activities were stimulating and aimed to extend students’ creative and critical responses. However, teachers should consider that some students may interpret such tasks on a very literal level. Very clear instructions as to the desired end product are required, and tasks should link with students’ actual experiences as readers of texts.

Variety in the use of questioning strategies was noted. Open questions were posed to elicit student response, for example after an initial reading of a text. Targeted questions were used for specific purposes, as when they were formulated to help less able students by prompting them to identify...
significant details and construct responses around them. In a junior-cycle media lesson, follow-on questions elicited a more precise response from students in relation to the target audience. Where a range of valid responses was possible, these were encouraged and affirmed. As an outcome of this approach, students were happy to express differing views, and made some very perceptive and well-founded observations. Questions were also used in the context of revision, as was the case with a junior cycle group preparing for the Junior Certificate. Some of these students were a little hesitant in their responses but showed good recall of prior learning. In this context, clear affirmation accompanied by specific follow-on questions would be appropriate to encourage students to express a view and to extend and support their responses.

Emphasis was placed on the development of writing skills, although a tendency to place affective and responsive writing in one category and writing practice and drill with a focus on accuracy in another category was noted. This should be avoided, as students are more likely to take trouble to write carefully if they are trying to communicate something that matters to them. Greater use of writing frames is recommended to provide students with a structure for their writing tasks. This is likely to address some of the difficulties students have with producing more extended and developed responses to writing assignments. Writing frames also encourage greater attention to planning and drafting. With regard to writing personal responses to texts, a senior cycle group was reminded of the need to read attentively and to avoid generalised comments. This is sound advice, very much in keeping with the formation of an informed personal response. Some students, on their own initiative, took notes of points made. This good practice should be required of students, especially at higher level and in senior classes.

In many of the lessons observed, students were industrious and willing to engage with the tasks set. Even where students had difficulties in grasping or maintaining focus on a task, they applied themselves well and were co-operative. While a wide ability range was noted, students of all levels showed good evidence of learning. Classroom management was effective, and an atmosphere that was productive and had a sense of enjoyment and engagement predominated.

ASSESSMENT

In all lessons observed, teachers monitored students’ work and levels of participation carefully, moving around the classroom where necessary to give specific instruction and assistance. Where teachers’ questioning suggested that students had not fully grasped the point, the topic was reviewed before moving on to the next step. Teachers showed a good knowledge of the students and were vigilant in supporting those likely to require more assistance to remain on task.

Copybooks and folders were inspected during the evaluation. As requested, teachers selected examples that gave a good sense of the range within each group. All the groups observed have covered a substantial amount of work during the year, although some copybooks reflected this much more clearly than others. While many of the assignments set were stimulating and elicited some very good work, others lacked a meaningful context and would provide little useful material for revision purposes for example. Standards of presentation also varied and students would benefit from the consistent application of whole-school guidelines in this area.

Very good practice in giving developmental feedback to students was noted in many of the copybooks seen. This is encouraging for students as it recognises the efforts made, and also ensures that they learn through the work they do, and know what areas are in need of improvement.
It was reported that school management analyses the outcomes of the certificate examinations and that these are presented to the board of management. In keeping with the reflective practice evident in the English department’s planning, it is recommended that examination outcomes be considered at subject department level, with a view to identifying patterns of uptake and attainment. The school is commended for encouraging junior cycle students to take the ordinary rather than the foundation level wherever appropriate. The analysis of attainment should also inform all discussion of the basis for class formation.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Senior cycle timetabling of English is good both in the number and distribution of lessons.
- Teachers have base classrooms, which are well resourced with ready access to audiovisual equipment and ICT.
- There is a substantial and well-organised planning folder for English, and detailed individual folders and programmes of work.
- Instances of very effective and innovative teaching and learning practice were noted. These were characterised by openness to the subject and the students, which promoted lively classroom interaction and demonstrated to students an enquiring and creative engagement with English.
- Classroom management was effective, and an atmosphere that was productive and had a sense of enjoyment and engagement predominated.

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

- The provision in junior cycle of four lessons for all years and classes is not generous, and is not satisfactory for students with deficits in literacy skills. The provision of a fifth English lesson for all first-year classes should be prioritised.
- The system of class formation, and its rationale, should be kept under rigorous review.
- The English department should collaborate on a programme of work with agreed learning outcomes for each year.
- Examination outcomes should be considered at subject department level, with a view to identifying patterns of uptake and attainment.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of English and with the principal and 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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