

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Coláiste Cholmcille
Ballyshannon, County Donegal
Roll number: 91506V**

Date of inspection: 19 March 2010



**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 Coláiste Cholmcille. 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. 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Programmes on offer in Coláiste Cholmcille include the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme.

Junior-cycle students of English are placed in mixed-ability class groups for each of the three years of their course. This is very good practice. Currently, the subject team and senior management are considering a move towards co-timetabling of English, Irish and mathematics from the beginning of second year. This would facilitate the formation of classes in those subjects at higher level and ordinary level from that time. The decision about the level at which students should take certificate examinations in English should be delayed as long as possible. The current mixed-ability arrangement allows students time to develop and demonstrate their abilities in the subject. Co-timetabling of lessons in English for all third-year class groups would facilitate setting for English at that stage.

First-year class groups are timetabled for three periods of English each week. This level of provision is inadequate and is less than is available to students in most other schools, as outlined in the recent Department of Education and Science Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*. The potential for students to achieve to their potential is impacted upon if there is not enough time allocated for the subject to allow students to explore in sufficient depth. Students in second and third years are timetabled for English four times per week. This is adequate provision. The school should investigate the possibility of expanding the number of English lessons to five per week for each year of junior cycle, within the limitations of the timetabling process. At a minimum, an additional English lesson per week for first-year students is recommended. In the senior cycle, English is timetabled three times a week for TY students, five times per week for students in fifth and six times a week for sixth years. Students are set for English at the beginning of fifth year and English lessons are

timetabled concurrently within each band in fifth year and sixth year to facilitate students' choice of course. Students are encouraged to take the higher-level course in English for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations. Uptake of the subject at the higher level in both certificate examinations is good.

All teachers of English are given the opportunity to teach a variety of year groups and subject levels. This is good practice. It supports the continuing development of a wide skills base across the English department and provides teachers with opportunities to develop and maintain their familiarity with the subject at all levels.

There is a school library. Currently, it is used as an English classroom, but it is available to teachers for whole-class work through a swapping arrangement. One of the English teachers acts as librarian in a voluntary capacity. Good work has been done to acquire and maintain a wide variety of reading material and a small research section. The availability of information and communications technology (ICT) in the library supports students' independent research work. Students are encouraged to use the library which is open to them during the school week at lunch time. It is commendable that TY students in the school oversee the management and the lending of books during these times. The opportunity to acquire a variety of skills in the course of their work in the library is a very valuable learning experience. A shared-reading programme is in place for all first-year students, in collaboration with TY students who have received training to support them in this work.

Teachers have their own base rooms, and many of these contained attractive displays of books, picture and word posters; texts of poems; charts and notices relating to grammar and punctuation, and some examples of students' work. Audio-visual equipment is available in all of the English classrooms and there are a number of rooms which also have fixed data projectors. Subject department resources have been gathered and are available to all relevant teachers in a dedicated space next to the library.

Management is supportive of continuing professional development (CPD) and has facilitated members of the English department who have attended subject-specific in-service courses on teaching film and drama. In addition, whole-staff training events on assessment for learning and on special educational needs, for example, have been organised.

Students are provided with opportunities for a range of co-curricular activities in English. There is a debating and public speaking club in the school and students have participated in a number of related competitions. Teachers arrange trips to the theatre so that students may see professional productions of the plays being studied for examinations. The TY students contribute to the 'Local Notes' section of the local newspapers and participate in the production of the school musical. The homework club also provides valuable support to students of English. Senior management expressed appreciation of the work done by individual teachers who provide additional tuition in English during lunchtimes and after school to students. All of this speaks well of the commitment of their teachers to their students and to the subject.

In summary, there is good whole-school support for English in this school.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Management facilitates formal departmental planning time at the beginning of the school year and following staff meetings. Agenda are agreed in advance for these meetings and formal minutes are recorded and maintained in the subject department folder. This is available to the principal in

the staffroom. These arrangements are very good. The principal noted that informal meetings of the department are frequent. Co-ordination of the work of the department is shared by all members on a rotating basis. This is an effective means of developing a wide leadership skills base in the department.

Neither the minutes of meetings nor the subject department plan were available for inspection. Nevertheless, observation of practice and discussions with the principal indicated that a good level of collaborative planning has been established within the department. This has resulted in agreement regarding text choice, for example. The school operates a book rental scheme and a significant bank of English texts has been built up over time. It is appropriate that the teachers of English make good use of the flexibility this provides to choose texts which are both appealing to and suitable for their class groups. An examination of students' copies and folders does suggest that, in junior cycle, there is scope for some expansion of the number of texts studied. However, the constraints imposed by the current number of lessons allocated to the subject in first year are recognised in this regard.

It was not clear that collaboration within the subject department has extended to the development of agreed plans of work for each year group. Plans should include reference to course aims and objectives, time allocation and suggested methodologies and modes of assessment. Progression should be clearly apparent from first year onward for the development of students' writing skills (pre-writing, drafting, proofing, editing, and modelling strategies; spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing competencies; and the planned expansion of students' vocabularies), reading skills (word and text-attack techniques, library layout and usage, and dictionary and thesaurus usage), and oral communication skills. The draft rebalanced Junior Certificate syllabus and section 4 of the Leaving Certificate syllabus, both of which are available on www.ncca.ie, provide guidance on the appropriate learning outcomes across the four language domains.

TY is an optional programme in senior cycle in the school and is very popular. Two class groups were formed this year. In the absence of planning documentation, it was not clear whether the curriculum plan for both class groups is the same. It is recommended that planning for TY English should engage the whole English department so that there is agreement of the learning focus for that year group. This is important as class groups in fifth year include both those students who have completed TY and those who have not taken the programme. The English plan for one of the TY class groups is very action and research focussed and this is a considerable strength. It can provide students with a variety of opportunities to implement in very practical ways the knowledge and skills they are acquiring through the study of English. It is suggested that this work should be more carefully annotated by students and that planning for the assessment of their progress should include a portfolio of their work. This could comprise reports on projects, participation in drama and their own writing, for example.

In future developments of the subject plan, it is suggested that a specific teaching and learning focus in English should be pursued as part of the subject-planning process. For example, the development of oral skills in first year, or the greater integration of ICT in teaching and learning across all year groups, might be considered.

Planning for individual lessons was good. Teachers had prepared a range of resources, handouts/worksheets and notes which were used to support learning. This good practice offers students a variety of texts for study and ensures that there is not an over reliance on the textbook.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was some very good evidence of careful preparation for teaching and learning in the classrooms visited. Lessons were clearly structured and were presented in a competent manner. Good opening routines were established, including roll call and the correction of homework. In most cases, the lesson opened with a general statement of purpose for the lesson and this was helpful in terms of providing a focus for students. It is recommended that this practice should be extended to include a specific learning outcome which is to be achieved during the lesson. Communicating learning outcomes to the students in this way provides a structure for the lesson contextualises classroom activity and facilitates effective assessment of learners' progress.

Teaching and learning took place in a positive and supportive environment. This was characterised by appropriate affirmation of students' efforts, mutual respect and a good rapport between students and their teachers.

Generally, there was a good balance between teacher input and student activity in the lessons observed. This was achieved through good use of questioning strategies to generate student discussion of images used to create characters in a poem, for example, and by pair work in another lesson which required students to compose rhyming lines in iambic pentameter. In some lessons, however, students were quite passive, involved only when offering short, undeveloped responses to teacher questions. Whilst this may in part be due to an understandable reticence in the presence of an inspector, it is important that questioning strategies encourage students to engage with one another in finding the answer. Sufficient wait time should be provided to support this process. Students should be prompted to develop their answers, for example, by referring to a text in support where appropriate. This was done in some instances and enabled students to learn from one another. The management of the discussion in class should provide students with good opportunities to articulate, clarify and extend their knowledge, understanding and response to texts.

In some of the classrooms visited, teachers had prepared notes on studied texts and sample answers to examination questions to supplement the work done in class. This is a very helpful and supportive strategy. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that students do not become overly dependent on this material and lose confidence in their own critical judgement. An examination of some students' copies did suggest that this may be happening. Good practice in this regard was evident in some lessons, for example, in a senior-cycle poetry lesson, where the handout used provided students with a 'frame' for tackling an unseen poem. In junior cycle, the copies of students' in one class group revealed how 'sample' or model texts were used as starting points for their own writing. In both these instances, the materials used were adequately detailed to provide good direction to students and suitably brief not to intervene between the student and his or her own interpretation of the task.

In all lessons, the language used by the teachers was appropriate to the class group being taught so that the lessons were communicated in a way that was understood by all students. In some instances, good modelling of the appropriate critical vocabulary by the teacher was a very useful support to students. This was particularly evident in a junior-cycle drama lesson where students were guided through a consideration of stagecraft. In the ensuing class discussion, students' understanding of the characters' feelings was explored and their developing appreciation of the role of the director in shaping their reactions was reinforced.

As noted earlier, students were reticent in many of the lessons observed. Their contributions in class were generally good, reflecting the full range of abilities in the school. Students are familiar with the texts they have studied and many used the appropriate vocabulary accurately and with assurance when engaged in critical analysis. Students' copies indicate that some good work has been done and it was clear that they had achieved a good understanding and mastery of the concepts and skills appropriate to their abilities. Commensurate with their abilities in the subject, students' confidence and competence when writing varied considerably. In some cases their work was short and under-developed. This could be addressed through strategies such as more frequent use of writing frames, sentence stems and skeleton answers for less-able, reluctant, writers. Including a written exercise to be completed during each lesson period may also be helpful. There were many examples of fine work done by students, demonstrating good control of their writing and a facility in using their knowledge of studied texts to good effect.

Students in LCA are making very good progress through their assignments and are well-prepared for assessment at the end of the year. The teaching/learning approaches employed have been effective in supporting students as they develop task attack and completion strategies. This is evident in the completed assignments in their folders.

ASSESSMENT

It was clear from students' notebooks and copies that English teachers regularly set a broad range of writing exercises for students to complete as homework. These provide students with opportunities to practice newly acquired skills and to check their understanding of work done in class. Feedback on the exercises completed is generally very good. In the majority of cases, it comprised of careful annotation of students' work, both identifying strengths and providing clear guidance on how they might improve. It was reported that some teachers also arrange one-to-one interviews with sixth-year students so that they can discuss their progress and strategies for improvement. This is generous provision and has the potential to be very supportive of students as they prepare for examinations.

Reports on student progress are issued to parents at the end of the Christmas and summer terms or, for examination classes, following the mock examinations. It was not clear that common papers are set for class groups within each year. The setting of common papers is good practice as it would allow for comparison of students' progress across the mixed-ability class groups in junior cycle and provides a strong basis for recommendations regarding choice of course for examination. This practice should be an element of the proposal to move to setting in third year.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Junior-cycle students of English are placed in mixed-ability class groups for each of the three years of their course.
- The subject is well-resourced. There is a school library, very good information and communications technology (ICT) facilities and audio-visual equipment is available to teachers in their classrooms.

- Students are provided with opportunities to engage in a range of co-curricular activities in English.
- A good level of collaborative planning has been established in the department. Planning for individual lessons was good.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed was good.
- English teachers regularly set a broad range of writing exercises for students to complete as homework. The quality of feedback provided is generally very good.

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

- An additional English lesson per week for first-year students is recommended.
- Planning for TY English should engage the whole English department so that there is agreement of the learning focus for that year group.
- Statements of lesson purpose should be extended to include a specific learning outcome which is to be achieved during the lesson.

A post-evaluation meeting was held 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

The Board of Management acknowledges the professionalism of the inspection process and is pleased that the many strengths of Coláiste Cholmcille's English Department have been noted and outlined in the WSE report.

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

The Board considers the report to be a significant resource in terms of the strategic development of the English programme in Coláiste Cholmcille. Regarding implementation, the key recommendations are already in place for this academic year – 1st year students receive 5 periods of English per week and all English classes in 3rd year are 'set'. To make the most constructive use of this development, all students follow a common course in 2nd year including common assignments and exams.

In addition, the Board of Management are satisfied that there is a high level of collaboration in the Department, including whole school TY planning, and point out that industrial action directives from the teacher unions prevented meetings and the sharing of documentation which would have illustrated this clearly.

The report will be utilised constructively in prioritising and informing future programme development.