

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of English  
REPORT**

**Cnoc Mhuire Secondary School  
Granard, County Longford  
Roll number: 63730S**

**Date of inspection: 21 April 2010**



**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**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Cnoc Mhuire Secondary School, Granard. 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 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 provision of four English lessons each week for all junior cycle class groups is adequate but not generous provision. Provision improves in fifth and sixth year as students have five English lessons weekly. Management provides an extra English teacher on the timetable for each year of junior cycle to create additional class groups which contain students who have learning support or special educational needs (SEN) as identified from the incoming first-year assessment, or who have English as an additional language (EAL). These class groups follow the English course at a slower pace. Students with SEN also receive extra literacy support in withdrawal classes if they have an exemption from Irish. Management should consider introducing co-operative teaching to support these students in mainstream classes. The other class groups in each year of junior cycle are mixed ability in composition and a large proportion of these students take English at higher level in state examinations. While it is laudable that concurrency is provided on the timetable for all year groups, which means that students can move classes if deemed appropriate, it would be better if all students were placed in mixed-ability classes until at least the end of first year. It is therefore recommended that management along with the English department review the formation of the lower class group, especially in first year and should consider allowing all students to remain in mixed-ability classes until at least the beginning of second year.

Fifth-year students are divided into two higher-level class groups of equal ability and one ordinary-level class group. Because of concurrency on the timetable, movement between levels is facilitated. However, English teachers do not commence fifth year by teaching the same texts or topics and this makes it hard for students to move from one level to another. Teachers need to plan more collaboratively to ensure that students are not disadvantaged if they change levels.

The provision of three English lessons for Transition Year (TY) students is adequate provision and students also have timetabled lessons in Media Studies. The first half of the school year is taken up with practice for the school musical so that students do not really commence their English programme until February. It is recommended that Drama be timetabled separately to

English, perhaps on a modular basis with Media Studies so that students have access to English for the entire school year, have time to practise for the musical during Drama and are then afforded dedicated time in Media Studies to write and prepare for the laudable school publication “Féach”.

English teachers are all fully qualified to teach English to the highest level and they are suitably deployed. There is appropriate rotation of levels and programmes between teachers.

English teachers have designated a space for storage of common resources and are also in the process of setting up shared access to electronic resources. There was evidence that there is good provision of resources for the subject as each teacher-based classroom was well equipped with a television, DVD and data projector. The board of management also gave a subvention to teachers to assist in the purchase of laptops. Internet access is available throughout the school. Many rooms were stimulating learning environments and had displays of students’ English work and relevant posters. The fact that many English classrooms are located close together is good practice as it facilitates cooperation.

Many teachers, particularly of first-year students, encourage reading by allowing them to read privately once a week during English. In this regard, the building up of resources such as book boxes is commended. The best practice reported in this regard was when students had one reading class weekly for a limited period of the school year and students had to present book reviews or projects at the end of the period of reading. It is not appropriate that one class each week for the entire year would be taken up with private reading and it is recommended that this practice be discontinued.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The aims of the English department as outlined in the subject plan are worthy and include developing in students an awareness of the value of literature. Further efforts should be made to implement the aim of developing oral skills fully in English lessons.

Teachers have made good efforts to plan collaboratively and to teach similar texts to each year group. However, there is a need for more collaboration within the English department so that all teachers ensure that all students cover all genres in each year and that the same learning outcomes are achieved. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) have ‘rebalanced’ a number of junior cycle syllabuses including English to include the learning outcomes for each year group and these can be downloaded from the NCCA website [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie).

The TY English plan documents how students develop their writing, reading, debating and presenting skills. These skills will stand to students for life. However, it is recommended that students also study some literary material in class to keep them in touch with the study of literature. In addition, it is suggested that a TY copy or portfolio be maintained by all students as a record of all their work in English over the year and, perhaps, as the basis of their end of year evaluation.

English teachers meet on a termly basis and minutes of meetings provide discussion on issues such as placement of students and suitable texts. A recent change in practice to be commended is that now students, as opposed to teachers, identify the level that they should take in state examinations. Students study a novel in each of first and second year and study a play in third year and a good range of work is covered in junior cycle. This year for the first time one class

group will study a Shakespearean text. The study of Shakespeare at junior cycle should be seriously considered by all English teachers as it will help students to bridge the gap between junior and senior cycle. In addition, good practice suggests that all students should have some exposure to Shakespeare and mixed-ability class groups should not dissuade teachers from teaching Shakespeare. Teachers should at the very least expose students to Shakespeare in some genre.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning was generally good. There were some examples of exceptionally good teaching observed and one example of poor practice.

The purpose of most lessons was clearly established from the outset. A feature of effective lessons was the solid content covered and the very good orientation for examinations where appropriate. Students had, in almost all instances, covered a good range of work. Explanations were clear and the pace of lessons, in most instances, was appropriate.

In the instances of exceptional teaching, the relationship between teacher and students was particularly good and very good probing questions led to interactive and enjoyable lessons which brought the studied texts to life for the students and led students to understand the text more clearly. In these instances the enthusiasm of the teacher motivated the students and led them to fully participate. Where poetry was being taught, students were enabled to see for themselves the effect that poetic techniques have on the mood of a poem. Students were also enabled through probing questions to not only understand the purpose of the poem but also the purpose of poetry. They were encouraged to develop their answers verbally and in writing.

Questioning was best when teachers asked questions of named students as opposed to relying on those with their hands up to answer and when there was a mix of higher and lower-order questions asked, which challenged all abilities. There was a need for more questioning of students in some lessons and there were also instances where the teachers asked lower-order, recall-type questions only which did not challenge the better able students. In TY, students are given a range of opportunities to develop their verbal skills through participating in drama, debating and making presentations.

In a few lessons there was scope for more opportunity for students to participate in the lessons as students were inclined to be given information as opposed to being asked for their opinion. While these lessons were focused, with a very good delivery by the teachers, there is a need to develop students' ability to discuss and participate more fully in their learning. The practice of co-operative learning was observed in a couple of lessons. Such practice is commended. It is, however, recommended that the teachers move around to ensure that the students are on task during group work. Management has facilitated in-service on differentiation and there was evidence of good use of differentiation in some cases but, as outlined above, there was a need for more in some lessons.

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) was observed in some lessons and this is commended. In a couple of instances ICT was used through PowerPoint presentations which provided good information to students although opportunities for student engagement were sometimes lost. In another instance, a poem was displayed on the whiteboard from the data projector which meant that the teacher could highlight aspects of the poem in an interactive way with the students.

Good links were often created between different aspects of the course and between the studied text and the students' own lives, thus putting learning in context for students. Links could also be further created between the language and literature sections of the course.

Students were observed to be pleasant and focused on their work in almost all instances, but in one case they were restless and lacked respect for their teacher. In this lesson, the pace was not appropriate and there were serious gaps in students' learning. There was little evidence of any genre other than the novel being covered. The students had hardly any written work done despite the fact that opportunities for students to write are so important. This poor practice should be immediately rectified.

In all other classes observed, the students' written work was very good and students had covered a range of appropriate work.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Students are continuously assessed for their Christmas report home and first, second and fifth years sit formal tests during the summer. Good practice occurs in that classes of similar ability sit common examinations. Students not only receive a mark for their performance in overall examinations on their reports, they also receive a mark depending on the quality of their homework. This is good practice.

The English department homework procedures are good and are clearly linked to the school's homework policy. Longer assignments are regularly given by most teachers and there was evidence that almost all teachers assign frequent homework. These were generally well corrected with good feedback given by many teachers on where students need to improve, although more constructive feedback could be given to students by some teachers. Students are also well profiled. Senior cycle students use hardback copies and these were very well maintained with a lot of interesting and appropriate work covered.

Results in state examinations indicate the consistent achievement of very good results by most students. It is recommended that school management, along with the English department, analyse results in state examinations on an annual basis to identify trends.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Students are encouraged to aim for higher level in state examinations.
- The quality of teaching and learning was generally good.
- In the instances of exceptional teaching, lessons were interactive and enjoyable.
- ICT was used in some lessons observed.
- Learning was frequently put in context for students.
- Students, in most instances, were observed to be pleasant and focused.
- TY students are given a range of opportunities to develop their verbal skills through participating in drama, debating and making presentations.

- In almost all lessons, the quality of students' written work was very good and the students had covered a range of appropriate work.
- Good assessment practices are in place among most English teachers.
- Good practice occurs in that classes of similar ability sit common examinations.
- Results in state examinations in English at both Junior and Leaving Certificate are very good.

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

- Management, along with the English department, should consider allowing all students to remain in mixed-ability classes until at least the beginning of second year. The introduction of co-operative teaching to support SEN, EAL or learning-support students in mainstream classes could be considered.
- Teachers need to plan more collaboratively to ensure that fifth-year students are not disadvantaged if they change levels, and to ensure that all students cover all genres in each year and that the same learning outcomes are achieved.
- It is recommended that TY Drama be timetabled separately to English so that students have access to English for the entire school year. TY students should also study some literary material in class and maintain a copy or portfolio for their work.
- The current practice of some teachers dedicating a reading class once a week for the entire year for private reading by students should be discontinued.
- Further efforts should be made to implement the aim of developing students' oral skills fully in English lessons. This could be achieved through encouraging more discussion and asking more questions in some lessons.
- The study of Shakespeare at junior cycle should be seriously considered by all English teachers.
- There was a need for more use of differentiation in some lessons.
- It is recommended that school management, along with the English department, analyse results in state examinations on an annual basis to identify trends.

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.