

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Millstreet Community School
County Cork
Roll number: 91390F**

Date of inspection: 30 November 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**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Millstreet 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 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 principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Millstreet Community School is a co-educational school. There are four English lessons provided for students in first-year classes. The school is encouraged to examine the possibility of expanding the number of English lessons in first year to ensure students have one contact point with the subject on each school day. Such an arrangement would provide appropriate support for students at this important transition point between primary and post-primary education. However, in making this observation, it must also be noted that the school currently operates a 'taster' programme for first-year students, with inevitable implications for the number of lessons available to each subject. The practical limitations of the timetabling process in such a context must, therefore, be acknowledged in suggesting this increase in the number of lessons provided for English in first year. Students in second-year, third-year, fifth-year and sixth-year classes are provided with five English lessons per week. This is good provision. Students in Transition Year (TY) classes have four English lessons per week. This provision is also good. Concurrent timetabling of English classes is used in all year groups, apart from first year, which is good practice. Overall, timetabled provision for English is very good.

Classes are of mixed ability in first year and in second year. Students with difficulties in literacy development and other special educational needs are identified through contacts with primary schools, teacher observation and standardized tests. Students are assigned to set classes in English in third year on the basis of their performance in school-based assessments, teachers' evaluations and consultation with students and parents. The delay of the selection of levels for the Junior Certificate examinations until later in students' experience of the subject in junior cycle is good practice. Students are assigned to levels in fifth year on the basis of their performance in the certificate examinations, on teacher evaluations, on their performance in TY, and on students' and parents' choices.

English teachers have developed class libraries to encourage students' reading. The school has been supportive of teachers' efforts in this area. In addition, a link with a local newspaper has been established, through which students submit book reviews which are published a number of times each year. The English department also highlights World Book Day for students. All of this is good practice. It is suggested that the English department could consolidate this work through

the development of a reading policy in the department. This process could, in turn, present an opportunity for the department to discuss further initiatives to encourage students' reading. In particular, the improvement of boys' engagement with reading might be considered in this forum, as this issue has been highlighted through the department's own reflections and conforms to national findings. Useful ideas can be accessed through the website www.jcspliteracy.ie which includes examples of a number of reading initiatives, one of which could be used in first year or second year.

ICT facilities have been upgraded in the recent past. There is good access to audio-visual facilities and to information and communication technology (ICT) for English teachers. A data projector is shared within the department and teachers also use their own laptop computers to support teaching and learning. The English department has also begun to use ICT to support students' writing skills, with a group in junior cycle currently engaged in a project on famous writers. Beyond this, ICT has been used in developing a student magazine, as well as supporting the use of power-point presentations in English lessons. E-learning and its benefits have begun to be examined. The good work already underway in this area is very positive. It is suggested that, in parallel with their own exploration of this area, English teachers could also seek inputs from other subjects regarding their own engagement with e-learning. The use of word-processing packages as a means of increasing students' awareness of the drafting and redrafting process and as a support for students' awareness of spelling should also continue to be developed.

The school is supportive of teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). English teachers have participated in a number of in-service education courses, as well as whole-staff professional development. The department has contacted the Irish National Organisation of Teachers of English (INOTE). This link is worthwhile.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There is good collaboration and communication within the English department. A formal departmental meeting is organised each term, along with numerous informal meetings. Minutes of formal meetings are recorded and it is suggested that these might now be undertaken with the support of ICT to facilitate recording and storage. The focus of recent meetings has included discussions regarding the school magazine, planning content to be covered in lessons at different points in the year, and web-based resources. At present, a subject co-ordinator has not been appointed. While it is suggested that a co-ordinator could be appointed on a rotational basis, it is recognised that, given the limited size of the subject department, current arrangements are working well. In the context of the good work currently being undertaken, it is recommended that the English department should adopt a specific area to focus its discussions regarding teaching and learning over the medium term. This might, in turn, facilitate discussions with other subject departments, thus supporting the formal exchange of ideas regarding teaching and learning. One area which may be worthy of consideration here, given the recent upgrading of ICT facilities, is e-learning. It may also be possible to link to other areas being explored in a whole-school context.

A subject plan has been developed. The subject folder contains a wide range of materials relevant to teaching and learning in English. These include syllabus documents, marking schemes, reports from the Chief Examiner, relevant circulars and the Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*. Common plans have been created for each year group. These plans are time-linked. As a means of building on the very good work already undertaken in this area, it is recommended that the current common plans should be further developed to incorporate syllabus-based, skills-based learning goals in each year group. A

useful resource in adopting such an approach is the *Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus* for junior cycle which is available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie. An integrated approach to planning around the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing should be included in the plan. In particular, such an approach should highlight the manner in which texts are used as models for students' writing in particular genres, as well as to support the use of particular techniques in their own writing.

English teachers are involved in organising a range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities, including a TY drama production, participation in a number of drama competitions, trips to theatrical performances, a school magazine and the Young Scientist Exhibition. Work in the Young Scientist Exhibition has included an examination of the influence of the Irish language on the development of the English language. The school magazine, in particular, contains numerous examples of students' writing, and the magazine is viewed as moving from its position as a chronicle of school life to an opportunity to display and commend students' writing. All of this is very positive.

A novel is studied by students in each year of the junior cycle. This is good practice and it is suggested that the department could also expand its current practice to incorporate the study of a play in first year. Texts are varied in junior cycle and in senior cycle, within syllabus guidelines. It is suggested that some exploration of possible new texts to be studied in junior cycle might prove worthwhile in the context of the very good range of young adult fiction currently available to suit different students' interests and abilities.

A subject-specific TY English programme has been developed. The programme is appropriately varied and includes a number of imaginative approaches to support students' oral and writing skills. These include TY students' work on the school magazine, their engagement in drama activities and the development by students of oral presentations. As a means of supporting this very good work, it is suggested that the written programme should be further developed to incorporate clear, learning goals which are time-linked. Beyond this, the inclusion of an English-specific portfolio as a key element in the assessment of students' work throughout the year could be pursued. This might incorporate a range of genre exercises which could then form part of students' overall assessment and would focus TY students on the importance of drafting and redrafting when developing written work. Oral and other elements of the programme could also be represented in the portfolio in written or in visual form.

There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs department. English teachers are provided with students' education plans and communicate with the special educational needs department on a regular basis. Support is generally provided through a withdrawal model, although a recent in-service education session dealt with the area of team-teaching. The English department is encouraged to engage with this area, where practicable and appropriate, in the context of students' particular needs. A further area which should be developed in the English subject plan, as a means of focusing discussion regarding current and future good practice in the department, is that of supporting students with difficulties in literacy development. It is recommended that areas such as the use of Directed Activities Related to Texts (DARTS), the explicit modelling of reading and writing, the use of graphic organisers and of guided reading should be discussed, developed, implemented and then consolidated in written form in a specific literacy-support section of the subject plan. It must be emphasised that such an approach will serve to build on the very effective practice already undertaken by the department.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed. Teachers displayed high expectations of their students. Lessons were well-planned in all cases. English teachers have built up considerable subject-relevant materials to support their practice. Objectives for each lesson were clear. Particularly good practice was observed where the learning goal of the lesson was explicitly delineated for students at the outset. Lessons began, variously, with a review of work previously undertaken, question and answer sessions and a pre-reading activity which linked students' prior experiences to a new topic which was to be studied. All of these provided a good basis from which the lesson could progress and students could acquire new knowledge and understanding. Varied and imaginative methodologies were used in lessons which increased student engagement and ensured appropriate pacing was maintained.

English lessons incorporated the use of a wide range of resources to support teaching and learning. In particular, the regular use of visual resources was very worthwhile as a means of engaging students' attention and supporting their understanding of particular topics. In addition, the utilisation of a dictionary and thesaurus was observed. The appropriate use of such texts is strongly encouraged as a means of highlighting, for students, the importance of precision and imagination in their use of language.

A variety of reading and writing activities was undertaken in lessons. These included pre-reading activities, silent reading, scanning activities and teacher modelling of reading. In one lesson, a considered approach to the reading of a poem was undertaken where students were introduced to the relevant themes through the use of visual resources. They were then encouraged to consider the poem themselves through a silent reading activity. The lesson moved on to students discussing and analysing the language used in the poem in pairs. In another lesson, students viewed a film excerpt and subsequently discussed their thoughts regarding the social setting of the piece. Here, some scaffolding through the use, for example, of a guided reading exercise could have been considered as a further support while students were viewing the film. Good practice in the use of DARTS activities to support student reading and writing was observed and, as previously highlighted, the department should use some subject planning time to discuss and share the strategies teachers use to support reading and writing. Areas to discuss, as a means of consolidating and building on good practice, include notes grids, text-marking, guided reading and the explicit modelling of reading and writing. Very good practice was observed in one lesson where the homework set for that evening was explicitly linked to writing models which had been provided during the lesson.

Pair and group activities were undertaken in English lessons, with a number of opportunities for students to report on their findings or to provide input through question and answer sessions. In one lesson, students engaged with the language used in a model of a particular genre on an individual basis initially and were then instructed to share their findings with a partner. This was a worthwhile approach and worked well. As a further support for the development of students' oral and aural skills, the department is encouraged to further investigate closely organised strategies for pair work and group work such as *envoy*, *snowball* and *placemat*. In particular, the use of co-operative learning strategies to enhance students' skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing should remain an important focus for the English department. Support in this may be accessed through the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

There was a very good atmosphere in all English lessons observed. A very good relationship between teachers and students was also evident. Teachers regularly affirmed students' efforts. Learning was evident in all lessons through significant student engagement, considered feedback

from students regarding work which had been undertaken, and an awareness on the part of students of key terms, alongside an ability to apply them where this was required.

Stimulating print-rich environments have been developed in English base-rooms. This is very good practice, providing both motivation and support for students' literacy development. The incorporation of displays regarding specific authors, keywords, graphic organisers and student work regarding particular characters was very worthwhile. As a means of consolidating this very important element in English teachers' practice, it is suggested that the creation of a print-rich environment should be noted as policy and practice in the English subject plan.

ASSESSMENT

Homework was appropriately assigned and monitored in lessons observed. The adoption of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the course was suggested in one lesson as a means of providing greater motivation and a clearer sense of purpose with regard to students' written assignments. Alongside this, the adoption of a folder system to store students' work and notes may be worth exploring in some classes. The appropriate use of comment-based assessment to inform and support the improvement of students' work was also observed. The use of the rubrics employed in the certificate examinations was noted in one senior cycle lesson and this was good practice. To augment the very diligent practice with regard to comment-based assessment which was evident during the evaluation, it is suggested that the further development of self assessment and peer assessment on the part of students might also be considered.

There was some use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in the homework assigned. It is recommended that the use of an integrated strategy should be more widely and consistently adopted on the part of English teachers. This recommendation is made in conjunction with an earlier recommendation regarding teacher and departmental planning which is contained in this report. The wider use of an integrated strategy when assigning homework should incorporate the exploration of a wide range of genres and language techniques. Where a particular genre is assigned for homework, rubrics could be set out for the completion of the homework exercise which draw students' attention to the features of the genre which they will need to adhere to, as well as to particular language techniques that they may be required to include. This approach should be viewed as an opportunity to expand students' macro-language and micro-language awareness, as outlined in the *NCCA Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English: Leaving Certificate English Syllabus*. The further development of differentiated strategies to support students engaging in written work should also be undertaken, with a particular focus on the use of explicit teaching and modelling of reading and writing strategies by teachers, along with a variety of DARTS and other activities.

Formal house examinations are organised for all year groups in February and at the end of the academic year. Mock examinations for those students who will participate in the certificate examinations are organised at the same time as the house examinations in February. In addition, in-class assessments are conducted in October to assess students' progress. Students' performance in the certificate examinations is analysed and compared with national norms and is used to inform teaching and learning. In this context, it is suggested that the English department could align patterns it has identified in student achievement, for example regarding boys' progress, and evaluate this pattern versus those identified in national statistics.

Reports regarding students' progress are communicated to parents in October, February and at the end of the academic year. One parent-teacher meeting is organised each year for each year group

apart from third year and sixth year. In the case of these latter groups, two parent-teacher meetings are organised, one following the October assessments and another following the mock examinations in February. In addition, the student journal is used to facilitate communication between the school and students' homes and arrangements are in place whereby parents may meet individual teachers by appointment.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed.
- Class libraries have been developed and a number of initiatives have been organised to promote reading.
- The English department has begun to actively engage with the use of ICT to support students' learning.
- There is good collaboration and communication within the English department.
- A subject plan has been developed incorporating common plans for each year group.
- Stimulating print-rich environments have been developed in English base rooms.
- Very effective use of visual and other resources to support student learning was observed.
- There was a very good atmosphere in lessons.

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

- The current common plans should be further developed to incorporate skills-based learning goals in each year group.
- A specific teaching-and-learning focus should be identified by the English department as part of the subject-planning process.
- A specific section addressing strategies to support students with difficulties in literacy development should be discussed and included in the subject plan.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of English and with the principal 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; a response was not received from the board.

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