

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Scoil Dara
Kilcock, County Kildare
Roll number: 61691B**

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**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA** | **DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SCIENCE**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Dara, Kilcock, Co Kildare. 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 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

Scoil Dara, Kilcock provides English in the Junior Certificate programme (JC), Transition Year programme (TY), Leaving Certificate programme (LC), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA). Students in the LC and LCVP follow the same English syllabus.

Whole-school support is good across a number of areas. Timetabling allocation is adequate to meet syllabus requirements. First-year classes have four lessons a week, second and third years have five, fifth and sixth years in the Leaving Certificate programme also have five, while LCA and Transition Year students have three. Extra lessons are allocated to those in need of learning support. Lessons are distributed evenly over the week and can be thirty-five or forty minutes in duration.

First-year students are taught in a mixed-ability setting. Second and third years are allocated to bands and are assigned to higher-level and ordinary-level classes for the Junior Certificate examination. Access to levels is determined by examination results, teacher recommendation and student and parent preference. At the end of first year, students sit a common English exam. There are two mixed-ability Transition Year groups. In fifth and sixth year of the LC programme, students are allocated to higher-level and ordinary-level classes. In addition to the criteria mentioned above, consideration is given to student participation in Transition Year. Every effort is made to ensure that all students access the appropriate level so that clear but realistic expectations are set. Arrangements are in place to facilitate students to change level. For example, classes are timetabled concurrently within bands. In addition students and parents can make requests and teachers can also make recommendations in the light of assessment based on classroom observation and assignments. An administrative procedure is in place to enable movement. Class groups generally retain the same teacher throughout the relevant programme and this ensures continuity of teaching and learning.

Uptake of higher-level English is good in both the junior and senior cycles although there has been some slippage in the junior cycle in recent years. Contextual factors should be taken into consideration. The school as a whole and the English department in particular should monitor the uptake of higher-level English in the junior cycle on an ongoing basis, especially among boys. Where there is an identified cause for concern, a targeted approach should be adopted and a range of strategies developed.

A significant minority of students have special educational needs and learning-support needs. The school has an additional allocation of just under six whole-time equivalent posts to support these students, along with the standard allocation of one learning-support teacher. Learning support is provided through a combination of small classes, withdrawal and the provision of additional lessons for those who have exemptions from Irish or do not study French. The withdrawal model is currently being re-examined. The learning-support department is well resourced. Students with additional needs are identified through psychological assessment, consultation with feeder primary schools and parents, and referral from class teachers. A standardised test such as Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT) 3 is used in addition to teacher assessment. Circular 0099/2007 provides a list of tests approved for second level schools that might prove useful in the context of future planning. Communication with parents is made both at individual level and at parent-teacher meetings. There is good liaison, formal and informal, between English teachers and the learning-support department.

A small number of students present with additional language needs and the school has an allocation of one whole-time equivalent post to cater for their needs. Two teachers have qualifications in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and the school is in the course of recruiting a part-time teacher. In addition, attempts are being made to create a multi-cultural environment in response to its changing student cohort. As with learning support, language support is provided through a combination of small classes, withdrawal and the provision of additional lessons for those who do not study Irish or another subject. There is scope for development in the area of supports, however, and in the first instance, it is recommended that Scoil Dara liaise with Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT). Information is available from their website at www.iilt.ie.

The school has a very committed teaching team that is well balanced in terms of experience, age and gender. Teachers are deployed in line with their subject specialisms. The continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers is supported by the school. The department should identify the CPD needs of English teachers on an ongoing basis. Information on courses available and those attended by individuals could be included in the department planning folder.

The English department has access to a good range of teaching resources, such as audio-visual equipment and books. The department has made application to management for a centrally located notice board designated for English and it is reported that this will be provided in the short term. As the department is large and a great deal of information needs to be disseminated, this would prove a useful asset. When the e-portal system is up and running, it should prove possible to use this for communication purposes also.

The school has a well-organised school library that is available to students. There is also a librarian. Reading is encouraged by the teachers of English, and many students participate in MS Readathon. Provision of information and communications technology (ICT) is good and formal training and informal coaching have been provided for staff members. The computer room can be booked and it is recommended that a booking form be made available in the staffroom for this purpose. Student use of ICT is, for the most part, in the form of independent research for projects.

There is scope for extending student usage, and strategies to ensure this should be developed at departmental level in the context of the development of the department's policy on ICT.

Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities extend and enrich students' experience of English beyond the classroom. Students are taken on theatre and cinema visits and take part in public speaking. Senior students have been and continue to visit the Gerard Manly Hopkins Summer School. There are plans to invite guest speakers to the school.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Scoil Dara has a departmental structure. The role of co-ordinator is rotated on an annual basis and this gives all members of the department an experience of leadership while at the same time distributing the responsibility and workload. It is highly commendable that six meetings occur on average during the school year since this facilitates planning and the exchange of ideas as well as ensuring the smooth running of the department. There is a very good level of collaboration within the department. A good plan has been put in place that includes aims, objectives and long-term schemes of work for each year group. The English planning folder also includes information regarding students with additional learning needs. It is commendable that the plan includes a document on a culturally diverse society and this indicates the school's commitment to inclusivity. There is scope for development in relation to the materials that are suggested.

Core texts are agreed at departmental level but individual teacher preference is also factored into selection of texts for classes, based on knowledge of the particular group. It is reported that texts do not change significantly from year to year and this is a matter that should be examined, since there is a risk of staleness should the same texts be taught over a long number of years. Generally, two to three plays are read over the three years of the junior cycle and one novel in each year. Short stories and poetry are accessed through the core anthology in the junior cycle and teachers also supplement these resources themselves. This represents a thorough approach and it is laudable that the department seeks to expose students to a wide variety of genres. To build on this, access to Shakespeare should be widened so that as many students as possible have the opportunity to read or see a play. A variety of resources and accessible texts are currently available to support the teaching and learning of Shakespeare. First-year texts are chosen for their appeal to a broad spectrum of ability and interest. Information on the texts read in the senior classes of the feeder primary schools would help inform choice. The department could also access the primary curriculum that is available through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) website at www.ncca.ie.

In the context of future planning, the English department should access *Looking at English* (2006) a composite report from the Department of Education and Science on the teaching and learning of English in post-primary schools and a copy of this is available in the school library. As areas for development, the subject evaluation has identified some priorities. A formal reading policy should be documented and practices should be consistently implemented in all year groups. Strategies for improving students' expressive and receptive use of language should be documented in the plan. The department should develop a policy with regard to the full integration of ICT into the teaching and learning of English. Specific practices and procedures with regard to differentiation for students at both ends of the ability spectrum should be outlined.

The Transition Year programme is stimulating and has the capacity to be innovative and to provide a good bridge between the junior and senior cycles. Students are involved in the

production of a magazine and the TY plan also includes a module on film studies. Ongoing review of the Transition Year programme should take place as part of the planning process.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of lesson preparation was very good in the lessons observed. In the majority of cases, individual lesson plans were presented. A good range of resources had been prepared, including handouts, cards, film clips and PowerPoint slides. Students also had their set texts. Content of all lessons was appropriate to the relevant syllabuses and ranged over fiction, poetry, film study and drama. In a minority of cases, lesson plans suffered from being overambitious so that there was insufficient time to consolidate learning. All lesson planning should document clear and achievable learning outcomes and these should be shared with students.

A clear line of development was followed in almost all cases. Resources were appropriately used. The board was a focal point in many lessons, and was used very effectively to register the key points of the lesson so that students knew the headings under which they were to concentrate their textual explorations. Recording students' answers was another effective use of the board. A spidergram was a useful aid to help students map their thinking process. Teacher instructions were clear and lessons were purposeful.

In general, much more emphasis needs to be placed on the integration of language and literature in all lessons. Strategies to develop students' use of language both orally and in writing should be included in all lessons. While knowledge of language was developed through vocabulary checks in some cases, there was no follow on to ensure that students transferred understanding to personal usage.

Teaching strategies were thoughtful. Question-and-answer sessions were used to review material and form a bridge with earlier lessons. Questioning was also used to assess the level of understanding and to clarify. Higher-order skills were developed in many cases and this represents very good practice. Students were encouraged to evaluate the quality of texts through comparative analysis. It is highly commendable that in some lessons, students were directed to supply textual or other support for their opinions. In the best lessons, there was a good balance between global questioning and questions targeted at individuals. This is good practice since an overemphasis on global questioning noted in a minority of cases tends to elicit choral answers or to encourage the more confident and articulate students. Directing questions at individuals ensures that all are on task.

Active learning methodologies were used in many classes. Group and pair work involved students in a variety of tasks while affording teachers the opportunity to circulate and monitor individuals. Discussion was also encouraged in some instances and this is commended. Drama was the subject matter of some lessons. There was very good emphasis on drama as performance, for example, students had to suggest props and sound effects for a scene. Acting out a scene would be very useful in giving students a real experience of drama.

Most lessons were student centred and there was a good balance between teacher talk and student participation. In a minority of cases, there was too much teacher talk: in such cases, lessons should be reviewed and care should be taken to ensure that all students are fully involved in the learning process. Overall, there was a very good level of student engagement in the lessons observed. Students were purposeful in their work and had a clear understanding of the tasks set. Some asked questions in addition to answering. In one very good example, a section of the lesson

consisted of a formal response to a series of questions raised by students in a previous lesson. This was evidence of a very strong level of student interest in the topic. To capitalise on such enthusiasm, students should be assigned research projects that they themselves could present to the class either as individuals or in groups. Copybooks indicate that, in most cases, a good range of writing activities is practised.

The atmosphere in classes was supportive of learning and very good practice was noted where students were affirmed and encouraged. Classrooms had a print-rich environment for the subject in many cases. Teaching aids, in addition to stimulating posters, were mounted on the walls. The display of students' own work in classrooms is commended and this good practice should be extended to all classrooms. In all lessons observed, there was a good rapport between students and teachers and classroom management was effective.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment of learning takes place in house exams and class tests. Examination classes also sit "mock" examinations. While common tests are set, there is no common marking scheme and this is an area that should be addressed, particularly where test outcomes are used as one of the mechanisms to determine access to level. The state and in-house examination results are analysed.

Assessment for learning takes place both in the classroom through on-going monitoring and through the assessment of written homework assignments. The school has a draft homework policy. Homework was regularly set and conscientiously corrected in almost all cases. Good practice was noted in some cases where the correction of homework was dated allowing students and teachers to track progress. The quality of written feedback provided to students was very good in almost all cases. Positive comments that affirmed effort and directed learning are particularly commended. It is commendable that the discrete criteria required for the Leaving Certificate English examination were used to examine students' work in a senior cycle set of copybooks examined.

The English department should develop a subject-specific assessment policy and the range of assessment should cover a broad skill set, including oral communication skills. Assessment objectives should be written into all long-term and short-term schemes of work. Helpful information is available through the NCCA.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Whole-school support for English is good across a number of areas.
- There is a good collaborative ethos and both long-term planning and short-term planning are good.
- There is very good support for those with additional learning and language needs.
- The Transition Year programme is stimulating and has the capacity to be innovative and to provide a good bridge between the junior and senior cycles.
- Lesson preparation was thorough and there was an imaginative use of resources to reinforce learning.

- A good range of teaching strategies is deployed to assist learning.
- Students are purposeful and engaged in their learning.
- Assessment is thorough and conscientious.
- A very good range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities enriches students' experience of English.

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

- The department should review planning in a number of areas.
- The school as a whole and the English department in particular should monitor the uptake of Junior Certificate higher-level English, particularly among boys, and strategies should be developed where a perceived need is identified.
- In the junior cycle, access to Shakespeare should be widened to include as many students as possible, taking into account the variety of resources and texts that are currently available to support the teaching and learning of Shakespeare.
- Clear and achievable learning outcomes should be shared with students.
- Language and literature should be fully integrated in all lessons; strategies to develop students' use of language both orally and in writing should be included in all lessons.

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.

