

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Portmarnock Community School
Portmarnock, County Dublin
Roll number: 91324P**

Date of inspection: 21 April 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 Portmarnock 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. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the deputy 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

Portmarnock Community School is a co-educational post-primary school with a current enrolment of 476 males and 398 females. Programmes on offer include the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), and the established Leaving Certificate.

Junior-cycle students of English are placed in banded class groups for each of the three years of their course. At the time of this inspection, the first band comprised two mixed-ability class groups who were being prepared for higher-level Junior Certificate examinations in the majority of their subjects. Three class groups in the second band were of mixed-ability. Students' progress is monitored throughout first year and, where indicated, changes are made so that students are working to their potential. This arrangement is working well for students of English. Uptake of the subject at higher level for the Junior Certificate examination is good and achievement at ordinary level is very good. 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 Leaving Certificate examinations and uptake of the subject at this level is good.

There is very good support for the subject in the school. Timetabling provision for English is very good on all three programmes. All of the teachers in the English department have specialist qualifications in the subject and they are given the opportunity to teach a variety of year groups and subject levels. Teachers are generally assigned to their own base classrooms and in some of those visited a very supportive and stimulating visual environment had been created.

A very good range of resources is available to support teaching and learning in English. These include audio-visual resources and information and communications technology (ICT). Portmarnock Community School has operated an e-learning facility, *Moodle*, since 2007. This provides a forum for sharing ideas and resources and allows teachers to post notes and other

learning materials which can be accessed by students. Many of the classrooms have fixed data projectors in place and it is intended by school management that all classrooms would have the same ICT resources by the end of the current academic year. During this evaluation, very good use was made of the ICT facilities both to prepare teaching materials and to deliver lessons.

There is a school library which is staffed by a dedicated librarian. The library is open from 9.30 to 2.15 four days a week. Teachers of English may bring whole class groups to the library and students working on individual research projects across the curriculum may also access the library during class time, when they are supervised by the teacher who acts as librarian.

School management is supportive of continuing professional development (CPD). English teachers have been facilitated in attending subject-specific in-career development courses. They have also benefited from whole-staff in-service courses on differentiated learning and on ICT, for example.

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

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Currently, there are eight teachers of English and two Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PDGE) students working in the department. Their work is co-ordinated by a member of the English teaching team. Management currently supports subject planning and development through the allocation of time for department meetings on at least a termly basis. It was reported that the teachers of English also meet frequently, though informally, to support each other and to share resources. Formal meetings are minuted and it is very good practice that copies of the minutes are forwarded to the principal. This ensures open communication between the subject teachers and school management. A meeting to discuss subject department planning was scheduled and this was attended by the deputy principal. It was reported that a subject department plan has been developed. Neither this plan nor the minutes of department meetings were available for inspection.

Observation of practice suggested that the teachers of English have agreed schemes of work for Leaving Certificate classes which specify the order in which aspects of the course are studied. This is good practice because it facilitates students who may wish to change levels, and therefore class groups, in fifth year. Flexibility regarding text choice was also noted and this is good, as it allows teachers to design a programme of study in line with the interests and abilities of their students. The subject plan for both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate English courses should go beyond these arrangements to identify a list of the learning outcomes that students should achieve from their study of each aspect of their courses for each year group. Progression should be clearly apparent from first year onward for the development of students' writing skills, reading skills and oral communication skills. Notes on appropriate teaching and learning methods should be included, along with information on the assessment strategies to be used. It is suggested of the subject-planning process should also identify a specific teaching and learning focus in English for year groups in junior cycle. For example, the development of reading and note-taking skills in first year might be considered.

It was noted that one class group in second year has been assigned two teachers for English. Collaborative planning for the delivery of the English course is particularly important in these circumstances. A thematic approach should be adopted for planning rather than teaching each

genre in isolation so that the integration of the study of language and literature recommended in the syllabus is maintained.

Transition Year in the school is optional but it is a very popular choice with the majority of students opting to take the programme. Four class groups have been formed in the current year. No subject-specific TY plan was presented. In reviewing students' work, some collaboration between the four TY teachers was evident. This comprised preparation for a common assessment on a drama text, including project work and performance. TY students are engaged in a shared reading project with a local primary school and are also offered courses in Film Studies and Drama in addition to their English course. This suggests a very practical orientation in the TY programme which has the potential to provide students with valuable learning experiences.

The learning support co-ordinator is a member of the English teaching team, facilitating good communication between both departments. Additional lessons in English are provided to students who have been identified as needing support. These are provided by a team of resource teachers, some of whom are also members of the English department. The school has recently purchased software to help improve students' reading speed and comprehension. Students who do not have English as their first language are also supported through the provision of lessons in English as an additional language. These lessons are timetabled against Irish.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all classes visited, lessons were well structured and purposeful and there was evidence of good short-term planning. The pace and content of each lesson was generally appropriate to the class group with time being efficiently used. Teachers had prepared and used a number of resources, including handouts, worksheets and PowerPoint presentation to support learning. In this way, an over-reliance on the textbook was avoided. Good links were made with previous learning during the opening phases of the lessons observed, which included roll call and the correction of homework. Teachers generally made a statement of purpose for the lesson and provided very clear directions when assigning learning tasks. It is recommended that the specific learning intention for the lesson should be shared with students when lessons begin. This can be helpful in heightening students' awareness of the purpose and direction of their learning and facilitate effective assessment of learners' progress.

Observation of lessons provided a number of examples of very good teaching. A particular strength was the emphasis on the active engagement of students in the majority of the lessons seen. This was achieved through the setting of learning tasks which encouraged students, either individually or in pairs, to read and respond to texts in imaginative ways. For example, in one junior-cycle class, students began planning their own cover designs for a fiction text which they had recently finished reading. The teacher acted as facilitator and prompter to support students as they identified themes in the text which might be illustrated. In another lesson, in senior cycle, students had previously composed letters to an agony aunt in the persona of a character in one of their fiction texts and these were discussed in class. The effectiveness of these strategies was evident in the confidence with which students discussed their texts and their ease in referencing them to support their own ideas. Opportunities for independent work were noted in other lessons, particularly the use of projects in junior-cycle and TY classes to encourage research. Care should be taken to push TY students beyond unprocessed use of web-sourced material. This was achieved in the junior-cycle classes through clear pro-forma research reports which required students to address specific issues. Consideration should be given to whether a similar arrangement would be helpful in TY.

There was a very positive emphasis on providing good models for students' oral and written work in all lessons. Teachers' language was clear and key concepts and vocabulary were clearly explained to the students and repeated adequately. The encouragement given to students to explore and infer meaning in texts for themselves was very good. In one of the lessons observed, students were encouraged to focus on richly textured language in a text. Working independently, they identified phrases which appealed to the senses. They were supported in this work by a handout which specified the task and provided prompts if required. As the lesson developed, students were asked to plan their own piece of descriptive writing, mimicking the style of the text examined in class.

The pacing of lessons was well-used to ensure that students remained on task and where necessary, proximity management and gentle admonition were used to re-direct students' attention. Teaching and learning took place in a positive and supportive environment, characterised by appropriate affirmation of students' efforts, mutual respect and a good rapport between students and their teachers.

Good attention was given in the majority of classrooms to developing students' sensitivity to language and their imaginative engagement with what they read. In a junior-cycle lesson on unseen poetry, students working in pairs were encouraged to come to grips with a text supported by a prompt sheet and each other. Skilful questioning elicited thoughtful responses not just from volunteers but from the more reticent and the teacher acted as recorder, using the whiteboard to annotate their ideas. In the other lessons observed, teachers asked challenging questions, appropriate to students' ability and they encouraged detailed and reflective answers. It was good to note that where students were led in small steps through texts by the use of closed questions, they were also encouraged to proffer opinions on the themes and characters as they emerged.

Class discussions and students' written work reflect their ability in the subject. In all lessons observed, opportunities to speak were provided to students and, in general, their contributions were delivered confidently and revealed a good knowledge of their texts. At the higher end of the ability range, these contributions were often sophisticated and evidenced the encouragement given to students to use the appropriate critical vocabulary accurately when discussing their texts. Less able students were less fluent and often limited their responses to single words or very short phrases. In all instances, students were encouraged to express and support their personal responses to the course work. It was noted that few students had difficulties applying the knowledge gained in the lessons observed.

There was a good standard of presentation and organisation evident in the majority of copies examined. In some instances, however, a small minority of students are unmotivated and their folders and copies are poorly organised and exercises and notes were missing. Some of these students are working well below their potential. What written work was available from these students was short and undeveloped, with little evidence of a sustained effort to achieve the task set. This has implications for their revision work and impacts negatively on their achievement in the subject. The encouragement and support offered in the lessons observed demonstrated the commitment of the teachers of English to all their students. A department-wide agreement on standards regarding the organisation and maintenance of notes, implemented consistently, is suggested as a supportive strategy. It is also suggested that the inclusion of a written task within each lesson would ensure that students practise their writing skills in an encouraging environment.

In the majority of cases, students' written work is of a very high quality. A good balance has been achieved between text-based exercises in the form of summaries, answers to questions and practice in narrative and functional writing. Very good pre-writing work is encouraged, for example, mind-mapping a topic and creating essay outlines. This has supported the achievement of tightly focussed and coherent writing by students across the ability range. Some excellent student writing was marked by strong personal responses to studied texts.

ASSESSMENT

The school has a homework policy and examination of students' copies and folders indicated that work is regularly set across all class groups. This reinforces the work done in class and provides students with opportunities to practise writing across a range of genres. A variety of practices was evident regarding the feedback given to students on their work. Very careful monitoring of students' work was evident in some classes, with commentary on the strengths in students' work and suggestions for improvement. In others, grades or marks were allocated and encouraging words affirmed the efforts made. In some classes, the work done by students was acknowledged by a tick only and the opportunity to provide students with advice regarding their work was not taken. It is recommended that the teachers of English should work collaboratively to develop a department policy on assessment. This should address the benefits of criteria-based marking and comment-based feedback to students. Consideration should also be given to extending opportunities to students to identify relevant criteria for evaluating their work, prior to the writing phase, and to self-evaluate, using those criteria. This can help students to shape their work, practise targeted skills and monitor their own progress. It may also provide necessary support to the small minority of students who struggle to apply themselves to homework.

As no teacher notes were made available, it is not clear whether records of students' achievements are appropriately maintained.

Formal assessments are scheduled four times each year for students in first year, second year and fifth year. Examinations in some subjects are set for TY students at the end of the first term and the summer term. They are also required to present a portfolio of their work for assessment. Students in certificate examination classes sit formal tests in October and "mock" examinations in the spring term. 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 within each band in junior cycle and provides a strong basis for recommendations regarding choice of course for examination. Reports on students' progress are issued to parents following each formal assessment.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good support for English in the school. Timetabling provision is very good and a very good range of resources is available to teachers and students, including a library and ICT facilities.

- Management currently supports subject planning and development through the allocation of time for department meetings. There was evidence of some collaboration between the teachers of English.
- There was a very positive emphasis on providing good models for students' oral and written work in all lessons.
- Homework which reinforces the work done in class is regularly set across all class groups.
- Students across the ability spectrum are making good progress in English. Their oral contributions in class were delivered confidently and their written work is of a very high quality in the majority of cases.

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

- Where class groups are shared by teachers, including PDGE students, collaborative planning should reflect a thematic approach so that the integration of the study of language and literature recommended in the syllabus is maintained.
- The specific learning intention for lessons should be shared with students when lessons begin. These should also be used during the closing stage of lessons to gauge students' progress.
- The teachers of English should work collaboratively to develop a department policy on assessment. This should address the benefits of criteria-based marking and comment-based feedback to students.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the deputy 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 welcomes the report following the Subject Inspection of English and congratulates the members of the department on the very many positive comments contained therein. The BOM is conscious that the inspection took place during a period of national industrial action which resulted in the inspector not being able to access certain documentation in relation to planning and teacher collaboration, consequently it would like to address those areas of the inspection which were affected.

Subject Provision and Whole School support: Based on statistics available to the Board uptake of English at higher level for both junior and leaving certificate is excellent. Results in both of these examinations are consistently well above the national average.

Planning and Preparation: A reading policy for First and Second Year students has been in place for many years, in collaboration with parents and fully resourced with approximately 20 class sets of recommended novels. The English Department also liaises on an ongoing basis with the librarian

Collaboration: There is a very high degree of collaboration amongst TY teachers in terms of planning, selection of texts, choice of drama to be performed and studied. Furthermore, there is a high level of cross curricular integration.

In terms of general planning there is full collaboration amongst all members of the department at a formal and informal level, including timetabled meetings and unscheduled lunchtime meetings. There is a very free sharing of resources, a healthy sharing of ideas and a high level of discussion and debate in this department.

Assessment: Written work is regularly set and marked. At house examination level, there has always been common assessment at both higher and ordinary level junior and leaving certificate. Furthermore a member of the department who is a leaving certificate advising examiner regularly feeds back advice on criteria from the marking schemes. There is an acute awareness of PCLM

The board would like to thank the inspector for her very positive comments.

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

Subject Department meetings have been held to review the contents of the report with a view to implementing the recommendations.