

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

Subject Inspection of English

REPORT

Margaret Aylward Community College

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Margaret Aylward Community College. 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

Margaret Aylward Community College is a small all-girls community college under the management of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC). The school provides English in the Junior Certificate (JC), Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and Leaving Certificate (LC) programme, and English and Communications in the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. There are currently three first-year groups, two each in second and third year and one group in each year of the senior cycle programmes (LC, LCA). Class numbers are generally low and this is a considerable advantage enabling students to receive individual attention.

Timetabling allocation for English is good in the junior cycle with five periods of English in each year. In the LC programme, years one and two, allocation is very good with six lessons in fifth year and six in sixth year. LCA students are allocated three lessons and this is adequate to meet syllabus requirements.

Distribution of lessons is good specifically in the case of LC students and in year three of the JC programme. However, in a few cases, distribution is very poor and does not provide optimal conditions for teaching and learning. This is a matter that must be remedied in future timetabling. All students should have contact with English on each day of the week to ensure continuity of learning, to improve skills and to help increase uptake of higher-level English.

Uptake of higher-level English is very low and contextual factors should be taken into consideration. However, the school as a whole and the English department in particular should carry out a review with the aim of adopting a strategic long-term plan to raise academic expectations and to increase uptake of higher level English. A range of interventions should be considered and implemented. Absenteeism and poor punctuality are constant challenges facing the school and these militate against continuity of learning and successful learning outcomes. It is noted that examination outcomes at ordinary level are good and may suggest that some students are over-achieving at ordinary level. Access to higher and ordinary level is currently determined by pre-entry testing, examination results and ongoing teacher monitoring, including tests, observation and discussion with parents and students. There is also liaison with the school's care team to gather information. The school adopts a flexible approach and students can change levels as appropriate. Where possible, students retain the same teacher throughout a programme in order to maintain continuity.

This year the number of students opting for Transition Year was insufficient to provide the programme. Instead, the school decided to concentrate resources in the fourth year on the provision of a special year-long immersion programme for its increasing cohort of students whose first language is not English. The school is offering this discrete group a limited curriculum with six English lessons per week in addition to lessons in information technology, photography, Art, Mathematics and personal development. The aim of the immersion programme is to help students access the

senior cycle curriculum for the 2008/09 school year. There are a small number of Irish students in the group. To develop this worthwhile initiative further, additional English lessons should be strongly considered. The school timetable should be amended to reflect the fact that the group is not a Transition Year group. Those who are speakers of other languages are following Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) modules in English. In general, the school is highly commended for the manner in which newcomer students are supported and integrated into school life and the creative and positive way the school has responded to the challenges and opportunities generated by its newcomer students.

Provision for students with additional learning needs is very good and the school adopts a caring approach. Students are allocated to small groups. Some groups are in the JCSP programme. The school also ensures that there is one special needs assistant (SNA) with each class in this ability range. Margaret Aylward Community College has a very committed care team that co-ordinates learning support and other services and this reflects the school's holistic approach to the care and education of students. The school has two qualified learning-support teachers and three resource teachers. There is very good liaison between those involved in learning support and the teachers of English.

Resources for English are generally quite good. English teachers have access to audio-visual equipment. A book-rental scheme is in operation. The school has a library and a staff member provides a service at lunch time and also opens the library by prior arrangement with teachers. There is no specific annual budget but requests for resources are met favourably as far as possible. The English department should carry out a needs analysis of its resources in order to plan for future development.

The school has a computer room that can be accessed. Information and communications Technology (ICT) resources are scheduled for development and it is projected that the school will have three additional data projectors and laptop computers in the short term. This will be a considerable enhancement of existing provision and should therefore allow all teachers further opportunities to integrate ICT into the teaching and learning of the subject. Students' poems appear on the school website and this is highly commended. It is reported that there are plans to develop the website further and this could create further opportunities for students to showcase their work.

The school values extra-curricular and co-curricular activities and students are provided with opportunities to learn in other settings besides the classroom. Students have been brought to the local Ballymun library where they had the opportunity to meet a writer in residence. It is reported that this visit stimulated great interest and was a stimulus to students' own creative writing. Students have also attended plays and have participated in essay and poetry competitions. Guest speakers and drama groups have been invited to the school. Students have successfully competed in public-speaking competitions organised by CDVEC.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The school has engaged with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The English team meets formally twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of the academic year and these meetings largely deal with administrative matters. Because the school is small, the English department has not felt a pressing need to engage in formal collaborative planning in a concerted manner since the teachers of English report that a great deal is done on an informal basis and that the teaching team has a strong collegial spirit. The role of convenor has been undertaken hitherto on a voluntary basis by a staff member and this is commended. An outline plan has been formulated based on the SDPI template. The teaching and learning of English would benefit from a more formal approach to planning. Robust structures need to be instituted. A co-ordinator should be chosen, perhaps on a rotating basis to distribute leadership and build up expertise. The role should be agreed by the teaching team and the tenure should be of sufficient duration to allow individuals develop experience in the area of co-ordination. There should be a minimum of three formal meetings per annum. Agendas should be drawn up, full minutes of meetings maintained (notes of the most recent meetings are very brief) and action plans developed. A vision for the development of English in Margaret Aylward Community College could be discussed and agreed by the team as a preliminary step. To inform future planning and give impetus to endeavour, the department should consult *Looking at English*, a report published by the Department of Education and Science in November 2006. The syllabuses in each programme should be central to the English plan and the integration of the teaching of language and literature should be emphasised in all programmes. The chief examiner's reports on English available at www.examinations.ie are also useful. Meetings should be used not only to develop planning and policies but also to share and disseminate good practice. A timeframe for syllabus delivery should be agreed at departmental level. Management should facilitate formal planning.

It is reported that decisions on texts are made jointly and that there is variation from one group to another. In practice, individual teachers choose texts. First-year texts are chosen on the basis of suitability and availability. The reading of a class novel in first year is at the discretion of individual teachers although practice is more consistent in the second and third year of the junior cycle. Individual teachers promote reading in different ways. It is reported that students participate in the MS Readathon competition. It is recommended that a comprehensive policy on reading be developed and implemented in all class groups. Choice of texts should also be reviewed in the junior cycle to ensure that students are reading from a wide variety of genres and are not dependent on anthologies which should be viewed as a resource only. The syllabus should guide choice of texts and care should be taken to ensure that texts are sufficiently interesting and challenging for students. To avoid the risk of staleness, choice of texts should be regularly reviewed in the junior cycle. The department should access the primary curriculum (www.curriculumonline.ie.) and liaise with feeder primary schools to help inform choice of first-year texts and ensure that there is no overlap.

There is no plan for English in Transition Year. The programme was not offered during this academic year. However, in anticipation of future provision, the teaching team should collaboratively plan for English in the TY programme. Planning for LCA English and Communication is very good and ICT is fully integrated into teaching and learning.

In tandem with the development of a comprehensive plan for English, individual teachers should develop long term schemes of work for classes that are linked with the plan. The teachers of English have conscientiously engaged in planning for their individual classes. In all cases, plans could be more detailed and reflect a broad range of skills as prescribed in the syllabus.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Lesson content was appropriate to syllabus and programme. Topics included drama, poetry, fiction and media studies. In some classes visited, very good practice was observed in the area of lesson planning (to include preparation of resources). The initial stage of lessons was used for management purposes, to check and review homework assignments and to indicate the general topic of the lesson. Very good practice was observed where explicit links were made with earlier learning. It is recommended that clear and achievable learning outcomes be shared with students and written on the board at the outset of all lessons. In this regard, very good practice was observed in one lesson visited.

The pace of lessons was good in most cases. The closure of lessons should be reviewed in some cases to ensure that whole-class activity affords an opportunity to check if learning objectives have been achieved. Good practice was noted where students were given sufficient time to write down homework assignments and were also given clear instructions regarding the presentation and maintenance of resources such as handouts or worksheets.

The creative use of resources such as props to assist learning was noted. Visual material was exploited effectively as a teaching aid to clarify understanding and indicated a very good level of advance planning. Individual planning documents also indicated a commitment to the use of a good range of resources. The good practice observed in a few lessons should be extended to all. In all cases, a good range of resources should be used to include ICT and audio where relevant.

The board was very well used in some lessons. However, in a few, it was underutilised and this is a matter that should be remedied since the board is the most convenient and useful resource available for teaching if used to advantage. Good practice was noted in some cases, for example, the recording of exemplars of effective language use.

While there was no direct use of ICT in the classes visited, there was evidence that the integration of ICT into teaching and learning was routine in one senior cycle lesson observed and this is highly commended. Learning activity during the lesson was directly linked to follow up tasks set both for homework and succeeding lessons. Students were instructed to source visual images using the Google search engine to match images to the poem they were studying. Students knew how to use the search engine. The purpose of this research was to ensure that students clearly understood the nuanced images of the poem and this was particularly helpful since, for many of the students, English was not their first language. It is recommended that good practice of this kind be extended and the use of ICT should be full integrated into the teaching and learning of English in all cases.

The development of students' vocabulary was commendable in a lesson observed. It is also very commendable that a junior cycle class practises writing in different genres, including poetry. Teacher modelling of reading and language was good in lessons observed and, for example, teachers read poems to the class. Good practice was noted where there were follow up readings by students. More should be done however to encourage students to document an immediate personal response to literature and students should maintain a personal response journal. Students should also be encouraged to share responses with learning partners and the "think, pair, share" process could be used more in some classes.

Students were encouraged to participate in lessons through question and answer sessions, brainstorming activities and pair work. The active involvement of students in lessons is commended and this good practice should be extended to all lessons. Good practice was observed where questioning was used to check understanding of concepts, review the effectiveness of earlier learning and prepare for new material. It was also used well to encourage students to think for themselves and to express their ideas. Questioning was used very effectively to encourage students to review their thinking, to develop confidence and to develop the skills of evaluation and analysis. Opportunities to challenge and test students through this sort of questioning should be generated as often as possible.

Interactions between teachers and students were good. Evidence from class work and copybooks indicates a good body of work has been covered. Work on texts in the senior cycle is very thorough. JCSP students take part in the "Make a Book" competition.

In a very small number of cases, students were told the meaning of the text rather than being guided to an understanding through careful collaborative exploration. Other strategies should replace a didactic approach. Students should also formulate their own notes and summaries after clear guidelines have been given, and dictation or the issuing of summaries to students should be avoided since these practices encourage over dependence and discourage independent thinking and spontaneity. In one lesson observed, very good practice was noted and students were encouraged to make their own notes having been advised on the use of headings by the teacher.

Students were encouraged and affirmed when they responded in lessons. They learn in a warm, intimate and positive environment and there is an excellent rapport between students and teachers. Most classrooms were conducive to the teaching and learning of English and one in particular was an example of very good practice with attractive and well-organised displays of books, posters and students' work. A very strong effort was made to develop a multi-cultural environment. Differentiation was incorporated into teaching strategies and there was a strong consciousness of students with learning and language needs. This is highly commended.

ASSESSMENT

It is very commendable that the school has prioritised the development of a homework policy and in January 2008, the policy was in draft stage after consultation with staff. A copy was made available to the inspector. It is not clear that there is general consensus among those consulted concerning the nature of record keeping although all agree that records should be kept. Since record keeping is essential for the maintenance of accurate student profiles and enables teachers to impart useful advice and information to students, parents and relevant professionals, it is of great importance that all teachers keep full records of homework and assessment as well as attendance. While good record keeping was noted in many lessons observed during the course of the evaluation, it was not universally practised. It is recommended that full and accurate records of attendance, homework, class work and assessments be maintained for every class group.

In tandem with the development of the school's homework policy, and in line with the final ratified document, the English department should develop its own policy on homework and assessment. A full range of assessment modes should be outlined and assessment for learning should inform policy and practice. Information is available through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) website at www.ncca.ie. Policy and practice should ensure that students are aware of the importance of presentation and maintenance of their written work. The need to share assessment criteria with students should be emphasised, and in the case of students preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination, the discrete criteria should be used when marking students' work particularly in the last phase of their preparation so that as much information as possible can be communicated to students.

Assessment of learning takes place through class and in-house tests and state examinations. Where possible, common assessment should be practised, for example, a common in-house summer examination for first year students should be set, and common end of year examinations for the relevant levels (ordinary or higher) in fifth year. There should be a commonly agreed marking scheme with appropriate moderation.

Assessment for learning takes place through homework marking and class questioning, and the monitoring and observation of students involved in tasks, for example, group work. Good practice

was observed where quality feedback was written to direct learning. However, in a small number of cases, there was little feedback so that students would not have learned from the writing exercise. Good practice was observed in a junior cycle class where students were rewarded with stickers for good effort.

Assessment of homework and class work was used to inform teaching strategies in some lessons observed and this is highly commended. Teachers used the information they had gathered from both the marking of homework and the observation of individuals and groups involved in learning activity during class and were thus able to give helpful feedback and advice to the whole class. Good practice was also observed where information gathering allowed the teacher to develop a very good teaching aid in the form of an excellent handout that was designed to clarify concepts and reinforce learning. This is highly commended.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A good start has been made in planning and there is a good level of informal collaboration.
- Allocation of lessons is good on the whole and there are additional supports for those who need them.
- Resources are quite good and set to improve with additional ICT provision. A website has been developed and it hosts poems written by students.
- Learning and language support is well organised, there is a planned approach to provision and creative solutions are sought to meet challenges.
- Students learn in a very caring atmosphere.
- Homework is regularly set in most classes and the quality of feedback is good in the majority.
- Students' experience of English is enriched through co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.
- The LCA programme in English and Communications is well planned, co-ordinated and delivered.
- A positive intercultural climate is created in the school.

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

- The distribution of lessons should be reviewed and timetabling should ensure that students have contact with English on each day of the week.
- Formal collaborative planning for English should take place within a framework of formal planning structures and meetings should be used to discuss good practice. The department should develop policies on reading and assessment, should review current practice with regard to the range and quality of texts being studied in the junior cycle and should collectively agree the pace of syllabus delivery. The department should plan strategically and agree targets with a view to moving more students to higher level in the junior cycle.
- Learning objectives should be clearly communicated to students.
- Good practice observed in relation to the use of active learning methodologies and the creative use of resources should be extended to all classes.
- Accurate records of assessment and attendance should be kept in all cases.

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.

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