

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science**

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Blackrock College
Blackrock, County Dublin**

Roll number: 60030V

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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 Blackrock College, County Dublin, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision of English lessons is very good in Blackrock College. Each year group has an English lesson timetabled on each day of the week with the exception of every second Wednesday. This means that each English class group in the school has nine English lessons a fortnight. English lessons are forty-five minutes in length. Transition Year (TY) class groups also complete modules on debating/public speaking and film studies which complement their English programme. All TY students are also involved in the production and broadcasting of Blackrock College Radio (BCR) which goes out on air for a week each year and which was rated by students as one of the highlights of the year so far.

The school operates a fixed timetable. Therefore, English lessons are timetabled at the same time of the day for each day of the week. It is useful that English is timetabled for all junior cycle and TY class groups in the morning and that it is not timetabled for the last period on any occasion. In addition, there is an even spread of English lessons across the week, which is commended. At the time of the evaluation, however, some fifth-year students miss English once a fortnight to attend practical lessons in the Sciences. This is an unsatisfactory arrangement for students and teachers and should be addressed.

Students are set into ability groupings for English throughout their years in the college with the exception of in TY where they are placed in mixed-ability class groups. The latter is an entirely appropriate arrangement. The organisation of students into second-year class groups for English is done by English teachers in the feeder first-year school. The concurrent timetabling of all English classes within each year group allows for movement of students if they are deemed to be inappropriately placed and regular testing of students takes place to ensure that they are in the appropriate class group. As the vast majority of students in the school take higher-level English examinations, mixed ability would be a more appropriate basis for class formation in junior cycle. This would prevent the necessity of any movement of students from one class group to the next, which could have a negative or demoralising effect on students.

There are eight English class groups in each year and there are fifteen teachers currently teaching English in the college. All English teachers are fully qualified to teach English to the highest level. Management allocates teachers to each class and year group which is appropriate practice. Priority is given to ensuring continuity of teachers for students from second year into third year and from fifth year into sixth year and this too is good practice. Senior management does not deploy teachers on a rotational basis to each ability group, arguing strongly that teachers are deployed to class groups according to their strengths. While this has merits, the fact that certain teachers may not have the opportunity to teach the top groups in each year may be demoralising. The English inspectors consider

best practice to be fair rotation of teachers across all levels and abilities, unless there is evidence of underperformance. Senior management should give further consideration to such rotation.

The resources available to support effective teaching and learning in the college are excellent. Management has installed a computer and data projector in each classroom in the college and provided training for staff in the use of information and communication technology (ICT). This is exemplary practice. The English teachers are commended for the manner in which they have embraced ICT as a teaching and learning tool. All classrooms are student based. Features of these classrooms included the bareness of their walls and their general tidiness. However, it would be useful if the classrooms themselves were used as a teaching resource and as a source of stimulation for students. It would be helpful to students if key words and quotes pertaining to English were on display in these classrooms and if the students' work, for example in relation to media studies or their own poetry, was displayed/published on classroom walls or notice boards.

There is a spacious library in the college and management funds the payment of a librarian to run this resource. The library is under-utilised despite the best efforts of the English department to make it more of a going concern in the college. It is recommended that suggested reading lists be compiled for all year groups in the college and that the library host events that would familiarise the students with this excellent resource and encourage them to use it more. The School Library Association of Ireland website www.slari.ie could be consulted for ideas on how to develop the library.

There was evidence of very good liaison between the special educational needs (SEN) department and the English department. The SEN coordinator attends English department meetings and has shared strategies for teaching SEN students with the department. The lower-ability class groups in each year are smaller in number. The likelihood is that these class groups may have SEN students and this allows them to receive more individual attention. In addition, supplementary teaching in English is offered to SEN students in second and third year if the student has an exemption from Irish. Likewise, additional English support is provided in small groups to students with lesser needs.

Students in the college have many opportunities to participate in a range of co-curricular activities pertaining to English. There is a long-established tradition of drama in the college and two major drama productions are staged each year. Students are also trained and entered for junior and senior cycle debating and public speaking competitions and the college hosts its own public speaking competition in conjunction with past pupils. Students are also entered into writing competitions organised both in-house and externally. For example, last year, third-year students won the Irish Times School Magazine competition. These extra activities, which complement English, are commended.

The English department reported good whole-school support from management for English. In this regard, a designated English resource area is available for the English department and there are plans to upgrade this area with extra shelving for storage of resources. This resource area is available to all English teachers and contains audio-visual resources, books and files of useful teaching and learning resources for all aspects of the English course. The work that went into preparing these files is highly commended. In addition, very good practice takes place in that common electronic folders, which contain useful teaching resources, have been established on the college intranet system. There was evidence that these are constantly updated.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The quality of planning among members of the English department is very good. There is a head and an assistant head of English, paid by the college, who share responsibility for the co-ordination of the subject. There was much evidence that they co-ordinate English very well despite the challenges posed by a very large subject department. Management provides termly meetings for subject planning and these meetings are well planned with an agenda prepared prior to each meeting and minutes of meetings recorded. The co-ordinators of English are the conduit between the English department and management and there was evidence of interesting and frank discussion on a range of issues identified by the English teachers. Very good practice takes place in that the English department prepares an annual report on English for management. This report, which identifies strengths and issues in English, is commended as it is a good step on the way to self-evaluation by the English department.

In addition to subject planning meetings provided by management, the English department has also met to discuss aspects of the courses and to share methodologies. For example, it was reported that teachers met to discuss the work of a particular poet on the Leaving Certificate syllabus. Such collaboration is highly commended and encouraged. Teachers also share experience gained from correcting of state examinations and from attendance at relevant in-service. In this regard, English teachers have attended a number of in-service courses in relation to English.

The English subject plan is commended for its broad and commendable aims which move beyond preparing students for success in examination preparation and also aims to prepare students for life. The mission statement of the English department expresses the hope that students' time "in our classes will be remembered fondly and that the things they have learned will enable them to be better, wiser and more sensitive adults."

All second-year class groups follow the same programme of work, which is important given the possibility of movement of students between class groups in this year. Teachers are then free to choose their own texts for study with their class groups in third year. This ensures that a good balance is achieved between prescription and flexibility. Very good practice occurs in that all genres are covered in all years and that the Junior Certificate programme devised by the English department is suitably challenging to prepare students for the even greater challenges of senior cycle. In this regard, students study a novel and play in each of second and third year and all higher-level students study a Shakespearean play. A good range of poetry and short stories is also covered in these years and it is laudable that students study poetry thematically and study a number of poems by the same poet. In addition, the English department ensures that there is no overlap between the texts covered in the feeder first-year school and Blackrock College. The rebalanced Junior Certificate English syllabus available on www.NCCA.ie may be a useful guide in planning for each year of junior cycle English, as it identifies the learning outcomes that should be achieved for students from first to third year. This would further help with planning between Blackrock College and the main feeder first-year school. The very good practice of sharing with the students the programme of work for the entire year was seen in relation to some class groups. This was clearly in evidence in the student folders examined.

The TY English programme is wide ranging and covers a broad range of modules including modules on short stories, Shakespearean drama, reading, functional writing and poetry. The aims of the programme are commended and focus on students having to take responsibility for their learning. Students have to complete a number of assignments after each module. For example, they are given a reading list and must read and review a novel as one assignment. Students complete entries into a log book in relation to various aspects of their TY programme of work and also keep a portfolio of their best work. The log book contains reports on other aspects of the TY programme as well as English but is monitored by the English teachers. It was reported that the TY English programme is due for review this year. In reviewing the programme, it is recommended that a separate English folder become a

requirement for TY students so that they can keep a portfolio of their year's work specific to English as well as resources and handouts received during the year.

The single text and one comparative text chosen for study in fifth and sixth year are generally common to all appropriate class groups to allow for movement. The lowest-ability three class groups in fifth year follow the same programme of work which is good practice as it facilitates movement between levels over the two years. Good practice occurs in that fifth-years sit a common examination in October to ensure that they are correctly placed.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Seven lessons were observed during the evaluation. It must be noted, given the size of the teaching team in Blackrock College, that this is a small sample of lessons, but due to the commencement of Easter examinations and also due to the concurrent timetabling of English lessons it was not possible to observe a larger sample. The focus of most lessons observed was preparation for the regulation examinations in English which was entirely appropriate given that these examinations were about to commence, or in some cases had already commenced. The learning intention of the lesson was explicitly stated to each class group from the outset and in some cases was written on the board. In this way students were partners in the learning process from the start of the lesson. In almost all cases, time was efficiently utilised. There was a very good break-up of tasks in lessons observed with teachers often seamlessly moving from one aspect of the course to another in revision.

The quality of teaching and learning observed in lessons visited was very good. In all cases there were very good teacher-student and student-student relationships observed, expectations were high and teachers were hard working. A feature of all lessons was the enthusiasm of the English teachers for their subject and their genuine interest in and knowledge of the boys. This led to students responding with equal enthusiasm. Students were respectful of each other and of their teacher. For example, in one instance, students gave quite personal insights into a studied text and the secure atmosphere in the classroom, where students listened to each other and respected each other's opinion, facilitated this.

A wide variety of different teaching styles was in evidence. In all instances however, teachers displayed a thorough knowledge of the English course. In addition, very good points were made by both teachers and students during the course of the lessons. In many lessons there was an equal balance between the teacher and the student voices. In these lessons, teachers invited student contributions in pairs, groups or individually. There was evidence of classes working in a variety of contexts; for example some were used to dramatising their play, some worked together in pairs and groups and in this way were taking responsibility for their own learning. Such learning is to be encouraged as it acknowledges the ability of students to bring different perspectives to their studied texts and to learn from each other as well as from the teacher. Of note in all lessons was the fact that students' opinions were respected and there was an appropriate focus on students' personal response. In other lessons there was a predominance of teacher talk but, given the context of the lesson, which was revision of a particular topic, this was quite appropriate. As a general principle, however, care should be taken to ensure an equal balance between the teacher's and the students' voices in the lesson.

The teachers had high expectations of the students and challenged them to think more deeply about their texts in all lessons so that students had to look beyond the texts themselves and think about the factors that influenced the characters in the texts and the factors that influenced the authors of the texts.

Such use of higher-order questions is commended. Where necessary, lower-order or recall type questions were also asked as appropriate and teachers broke down challenging concepts and explained them in a clear way. For example, in a junior cycle lesson, the difficult concept of satire was explained clearly and was easily identified by students. In some instances, teachers asked global questions of all students and this led to some situations where the same students tended to answer the questions. It is recommended that the English department adopt a policy whereby teachers mainly ask questions of named individual students.

Resources such as the board and the computer and data projector were used very well to outline the learning intention of the lesson and to record key points made during the course of the lesson. ICT was also used as a teaching and learning tool in many lessons observed. Some teachers had prepared effective Power Point presentations on the studied text which were excellent revision aids, in conjunction with the accompanying worksheets for the students. In another instance, Power Point was used to demonstrate the key features of report writing. Students were also observed making Power Point presentations to their peers. This focus on students taking responsibility for their own learning is highly commended. Very good integration of new vocabulary, key points in grammar and important terminology was also in evidence.

In all lessons observed, students displayed very good knowledge of their course. There was clear evidence of learning. Students were also encouraged in many instances to make cross-curricular links with other subjects. In addition, the quality of work and maintenance of English copies and folders was high. Best practice was observed when students had copies for different aspects of their course. At senior cycle, many class groups use manuscript copies for their longer pieces of work. An examination of these manuscript and other copies showed that students receive regular assignments in a variety of genres. It is important that students in all years and of all abilities receive longer pieces of work on a frequent basis and, in the main, this was in evidence. In addition, the majority of teachers, in marking this work, give constructive comments to students on where they need to improve. There is also a focus on students' correcting their own errors which is important if improvement is to occur. Such formative assessment practices are recommended to all members of the English department.

Good practice was also observed when the course was integrated. For example, it was observed in some copies that students had to write a letter from the point of view of a character in a studied poem or text. This is part of the Leaving Certificate English course already, but there are many opportunities for its use at junior cycle, for example, integrating media studies with the novel. Other interesting assignments observed in copies included visualisation of characters in studied texts. Copies and folders were also indicators of students having covered a wide range of genres.

ASSESSMENT

The college's homework policy is highly commended as it outlines the time requirements in relation to homework for each subject for each year group in the school. Therefore, all partners know what is expected of them in relation to homework. Very good practice was noted in the English section of the policy which stipulates the number of longer pieces of work expected from each year group. There was evidence that English students receive an appropriate amount of written work. Very good practice takes place in sixth year in that the discrete criteria of assessment are used in marking this work. At junior cycle also, some teachers have developed their own criteria of assessment which are shared with the students and this is commended.

The college assesses students on a very regular basis as seen from their weekly application cards, their monthly progress cards and their termly examinations. Very good practice also takes place in that pre-certificate examinations are corrected by the English teachers. Common examinations are set for English class groups as appropriate which is very good practice as it maintains standards and ensures transparency in the case of movement of students. Second years sit these common examinations at Christmas and in the summer and there is a common examination held for all fifth-year students in October. Detailed marking schemes are devised for marking these exams. TY students do not sit regulation examinations in English but are instead marked on a series of assignments that determine their Christmas, Easter and summer grades.

An analysis of state examination results in English shows a consistently high uptake of higher-level English at Junior and Leaving Certificate and that students achieve very well in their chosen level. Very good practice takes place in that management and the English department analyse state examination results on an annual basis.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision of English lessons is very good in the college and there is good whole school support for the subject.
- There is very good liaison between the special educational needs (SEN) department and the English department.
- Students in the college are given many opportunities to participate in a range of co-curricular activities pertaining to English.
- There is effective collaborative planning for English in the college and the subject is very well coordinated.
- The resources available to support effective teaching and learning in the college are excellent. English teachers have embraced ICT as a teaching and learning tool.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed in lessons visited was very high.
- Expectations were high, teachers were hard working and they displayed a thorough knowledge of the courses.
- A feature of all lessons was the enthusiasm of the English teachers for their subject and their genuine interest in and knowledge of the boys.

This led to students responding with equal enthusiasm.

- There was clear evidence of learning.
- The quality of work and maintenance of English copies and folders was high. Copies and folders were also indicators of students having covered a wide range of genres.
- The college has an excellent homework policy and there was evidence that English students receive an appropriate amount of written work.
- The college assesses students on a very regular basis.

- There is consistently high uptake of higher-level English in Junior and Leaving Certificate state examinations and students achieve very well in their chosen level.

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

- The current practice of some fifth-year students missing English once a fortnight for practical lessons in the Sciences should be changed.
- Consideration should be given by senior management and the English department to introducing mixed ability in second year.
- Senior management should consider the rotation of teachers across all ability groupings.
- The library should be better utilised and strategies found to encourage students to use this important resource.
- Students' work should be displayed in classrooms and these classrooms should be stimulating print-rich environments for the students.
- It is recommended that a separate English folder become a requirement for TY students so that they can keep a portfolio of their year's work specific to English.
- Care should be taken to ensure an equal balance between the teacher's and the students' voices in lessons. It is recommended that the English department adopt a policy whereby teachers mainly ask questions of named individual students.

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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