

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

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Castleknock College
Castleknock, Dublin 15
Roll number: 60100Q**

**Date of inspection: 8 May 2006
Date of issue of report: 15 December 2006**

[Report on the Quality of Learning and Teaching in English](#)

[Subject Provision and Whole School Support](#)

[Planning and Preparation](#)

[Teaching and Learning](#)

[Assessment and Achievement](#)

[Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations](#)

Report on the Quality of Learning and Teaching in English

This Subject Inspection report

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Castleknock College, 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 deputy principal and the subject teachers.

Subject Provision and Whole School Support

The timetabling of English in fifth and sixth year is in line with best practice both in the number and the distribution of lessons. All classes are timetabled concurrently for English, and have an English lesson every day. The situation with fourth year, a compulsory transition year, is not quite so good, in that the four lessons of English per week are distributed over four days for two class groups and over three days for the other two class groups. Nonetheless, four lessons is a generous number in transition year.

However, the timetabling of English in the junior cycle is not satisfactory. The optimal number and distribution for each year of junior cycle is also a lesson every day, but this is the case only in third year in Castleknock College. First- and second-year classes have just four lessons per week. In the case of one first-year and two second-year class groups, English is timetabled on only three days, with a clustering of lessons at the beginning of the week for the

first years and at the end of the week for one of the second-year classes. This poor distribution should be addressed as a matter of urgency to ensure that it does not occur in next year's timetable. On the issue of number, while it is acknowledged that there are pressures on the junior cycle timetable, this report strongly recommends the timetabling of an English lesson every day, at least in first year. This recommendation is based on the fact that the skills which form the key learning outcomes in first year English have relevance across the whole curriculum.

A further issue arises in relation to the current situation in third year. Classes are of mixed ability in first and second year and the practice has been to set them in ability groups in third year. In the current year, a difficulty with timetabling has meant that teachers see these set classes on two days of the week, and see the mixed ability groups on the other three days. This has proved unsatisfactory. In discussing future provision for English in third year, management and staff might consider retaining the second-year class groups and creating an additional class for those students who will take the Ordinary level paper in the Junior Certificate. This appears from the timetable to be the practice for Mathematics and it would be sensible to extend it to English.

Eight teachers are involved in the delivery of English in Castleknock College and five of these teach more English than any other subject. This consolidated delivery of the subject facilitates collaborative planning and the building up of expertise within a department. In the interests of continuing professional development (CPD) and of broadening and deepening the pool of experience and expertise in English, it is considered best practice to timetable teachers with a majority of English classes across a wide range of class groups and ability levels. It is recommended that this be taken into account when making allocations of teachers to classes in future.

English is well resourced in the college. Most classrooms have easy access to audiovisual equipment and teachers have access to photocopiers and ICT facilities in one of the staffrooms. A major building programme is in train which has involved some re-arrangement of classrooms. The library is also in temporary accommodation but, even with much of the stock in storage, it is still a very fine resource with a librarian, good arrangements for access and a high level of use. The stock of fiction is considerable and should encourage the students to see the library as a place for private reading for pleasure as well as a research facility.

An impressive range of co-curricular activities is offered in the college. These include debating and public speaking which are promoted for all year groups and which form part of the timetabled programme for Transition Year. This commitment to developing oral communication and presentation skills is commendable. Regular dramatic productions also take place, directed by various members of staff. On occasion, plays that form part of a prescribed course are performed, adding an extra dimension to the study of the text. This is very good practice. Regular theatre and cinema visits are arranged, and there is also a strong tradition of inviting guest speakers including writers and critics to the college. Some interesting cross-curricular work, involving English and Art for example, takes place in Transition Year. In addition, students are encouraged to enter creative writing competitions and to write for the Chronicle, and a number of students contribute regularly to the local newspaper. The involvement of the English teaching team in all of these activities is considerable and commendable.

Planning and Preparation

English in Castleknock College benefits from a strong department structure and a well-established culture of subject planning, involving both forward planning and review. The present subject co-ordinator took up the position at the request of management. Since the position involves a number of duties and also offers an opportunity for useful professional experience, it is suggested that it be rotated after a term of office agreed on by the teaching team. Meetings are held regularly, with one at the beginning of the academic year and at

least one per term thereafter. They are usually held at lunchtime and either the principal or deputy principal attends if possible. Minutes are held and these assist in continuity and in tracking progress on various matters arising. All of these arrangements are most commendable and reflect well on the commitment of the staff. Meetings over the last year have dealt with timetabling, text choices, co-curricular activities and student placement. Good reflective practices are given a formal framework at these meetings as teachers discuss what has worked and what has not.

The English programme is planned collaboratively and agreed schemes of work are drawn up and distributed by the co-ordinator. It is good to note that change and flexibility are emphasised from the beginning, suggesting that programme planning is quite properly viewed as a supportive framework rather than a straitjacket. The subject plan divides the academic year in two and sets out work to be covered in the areas prescribed by the syllabus. It is commendable that the plan gives a number of desired learning outcomes in each area. It is suggested that, in reviewing the plan for next year, consideration be given to a more detailed expression of some of these outcomes, particularly in relation to key skills in first year. For example, the statement "every student will be able to write three well-structured and clearly-linked paragraphs" creates a more measurable outcome than a general statement about writing skills and is appropriate in different ways to both the hesitant and the talented writer.

The planning of the Transition Year Programme was discussed in some detail with the team during the course of the inspection. While the existing programme provides an appropriate bridge between junior and senior cycles, and is innovative in giving formal time to areas such as film studies, public speaking and drama, it might be timely to investigate a modular programme as a way of developing the approach already being taken. This would permit a properly planned rotation of teachers and class groups and would also give teachers the opportunity to deliver modules on their areas of particular interest to different class groups throughout the year. It would also encourage further "thinking outside the box", which is one of the hallmarks of a vibrant Transition Year Programme. In any event, Transition Year should continue to be regarded as a year for the development of skills that will be of value in fifth and sixth year, but it should maintain a distance from prescribed Leaving Certificate texts. A modular programme clearly has implications for the whole Transition Year Programme, not just English, so it would need to be discussed in the context of whole-school planning.

There was evidence of a considerable level of individual planning both in the documentation reviewed and in the lessons observed. Very useful handouts had been prepared for students in a number of cases and, more importantly, considerable planning had also gone into the sequencing and presentation of various topics in order to engage and challenge the students. The ease with which teachers drew on background information and the wide range of reference also spoke of commendable preparation.

Teaching and Learning

Eight lessons were observed during the inspection, covering all years and a range of levels. The evidence of planning and preparation has already been mentioned. Lessons were generally well structured, and began in most cases with a brief outline of the material to be covered, thus focusing student attention. A less orthodox but successful opening strategy was used in other lessons where the topic was introduced obliquely in a way that piqued the students' interest. For example, the topic of narrative was introduced by asking students to consider the link between the Bible, the animated film *Beauty and the Beast* and a Frank Sinatra CD. Where a "quirky" introduction is linked carefully with the material following, as was the case here, it is an excellent strategy.

The pacing of lessons was generally good, although occasionally a little rushed. Because students are constantly moving between the two main school buildings, lateness to class and a delayed start to lessons occurred regularly. This clearly has an effect on pace and meant that in some cases there was perhaps a tendency to attempt to cover too much in one

lesson. Good material had been prepared for each of the lessons observed and students were for the most part responsive and willing to rise to the challenges set. Placing the emphasis on the skill to be developed rather than on the material to be covered would assist in judging the appropriate amount to cover in one lesson.

In a number of cases, imaginative use was made of resources, in particular the use of music to accompany visual texts and to suggest a mood or attitude. Students responded well to this strategy, although it is important that the pace be slow enough to allow for adequate listening time and a thoughtful student response. Film was also used effectively as a stimulus for student writing and to encourage students towards more engaged and original thinking. An overhead projector (OHP) was used to present key points in relation to diary writing so that they could be discussed while the whole class was focusing on them. Well-chosen advertisements and press photographs proved stimulating visual texts, although it is suggested that students should always be shown the original text, especially if it is in colour. A collection of such images, colour-photocopied onto acetate for use with an OHP, would be a useful resource and would ensure maximum visual impact. The board, a more basic but often underused resource, was used efficiently to gather points made in class discussion and to give assignments.

Questioning was used effectively to gauge students' level of understanding, to probe their responses and to direct their attention towards more complex aspects of a text or topic. Students responded well to questions and did not hesitate to ask questions themselves. In general, the interaction between teacher and students was much more based on discussion than on question and answer. For example, in a senior cycle lesson, a poetry question from a past paper was discussed in class and given as homework. Students were given pointers which they were asked to regard as talking points and the lesson was essentially a seminar, led by the teacher. The students expressed their opinions and asked questions readily, and were clearly accustomed to this kind of discourse. With able and articulate students, such an approach can be stimulating and productive. Students should however be reminded to jot down the points made to encourage active listening and to develop note-taking skills.

Observation of and interaction with the students showed them in general to be very articulate, lively and confident in class discussion and well informed on many aspects of current affairs. Such qualities are to be welcomed and celebrated but they pose certain challenges in the classroom, particularly with junior cycle students. Chorus answering should be kept in check by asking questions of named students or agreeing on ground rules such as a "hands up" policy. The issue of the student or students who dominate class discussion must also be dealt with and the concept of "a fair share of air time" should be inculcated in students.

In relation to all year groups, teachers should bear in mind the value of occasional silence, which would allow students to absorb the impact of, for example, a poem or a visual text and would give them space to begin to put together their own responses. Some very good practice was seen where students were asked to read silently and to ponder before responding. This good practice could be linked to a greater emphasis on writing in class, a useful means of encouraging more thoughtful reading and gauging the level of comprehension across the spectrum of ability. This strategy would complement the suggestion to develop the emphasis on specific skills already made in the area of subject planning.

Classroom atmosphere was generally pleasant with a good rapport between teacher and students, and classroom management was good. Displays of student work, material relating to studied texts, posters and other illustrative material contributed to creating a print-rich environment, and were used in various ways as resources during the lessons observed.

Assessment and Achievement

Good assessment structures and practices are in place in the college. Homework is set regularly and there is a commendable emphasis on writing helpful comments to assist

students towards improvement. It is particularly important in English to inculcate in students the practice of proofing their own work before submitting it. It is suggested that students be asked to re-read and correct work in class if necessary before handing it up. The helpful practice of writing homework assignments on the board and discussing them so that students have a bank of ideas to call on is to be commended. All junior cycle students should have at least two copies, so that they can continue to work in one when the other has been handed up.

Questioning of named students and observation of student response were the main forms of assessment used in class. These were seen to have a formative function in that there was further discussion or explanation of a point where students had not initially grasped it. Observing student writing in class will also assist in gauging the level of comprehension.

Reports are written on assessments at Halloween and Easter, and on Christmas and summer exams. The papers set by the English teaching team for house examinations are carefully prepared, and the minutes of their meetings indicate that they are frequently discussed and reviewed at subject department meetings. The extent to which assessment practices have been incorporated into subject planning is notable. This has allowed for common assessment and a schedule of setters for the various papers. The decision recorded in the minutes that the papers should be circulated to all teachers a week in advance of house examinations is sensible.

The English teaching team sets commendably high standards for the students and there is a considerable emphasis on high attainment. As a further means of assisting the greatest number of students towards the highest level of attainment of which they are capable, the English teaching team should investigate the strategies suggested for Assessment for Learning. The NCCA website has a designated area on this topic, and the Second Level Support Service will also be able to offer advice in this area (www.afl.ncca.ie) and (www.slss.ie).

Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations

The following are the main strengths and areas for development identified in the evaluation:

- Senior cycle provision for English is very good but junior cycle provision is not satisfactory.
- There is a strong English department structure with a well-established culture of planning.
- Both traditional and innovative methodologies are employed in the teaching of English.
- Assessment practices are part of subject planning and are constantly reviewed.

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

- The shortfalls identified in junior cycle provision for English should be addressed before the next academic year.
- Teachers with a majority of English classes should be timetabled across a wide range of class groups and ability levels.
- A review of the Transition Year Programme in a whole-school context would be timely.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on silent reading and on writing in class.

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.