

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Mercy Secondary School
Inchicore, Dublin 8
Roll number: 60872A**

Date of inspection: 10 May 2011



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH**

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

Dates of inspection	9 and 10 May 2011
Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of relevant documents• Discussion with principal and teachers• Interaction with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of teaching and learning during six class periods• Examination of students' work• Feedback to principal and teachers

MAIN FINDINGS

- Overall, the quality of teaching was good, and some exemplary practice was observed.
- There was evidence of student learning and a good level of engagement and application in all lessons.
- Teachers set high standards and in general maintained a good balance of affirmation and challenge.
- Timetable provision for English is good in the senior cycle but an English lesson per day is not provided in any junior cycle year.
- While some good individual planning was noted, there is limited collaborative planning.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- The provision of a fifth English lesson for first-year students should be prioritised, and the possibility of increasing provision in second and third year should be explored.
 - Subject planning, class organisation and assessment practices should be directed towards raising students' expectations and levels of attainment.
 - Planning should be undertaken collaboratively and should focus on skills and knowledge to be acquired, rather than on the material to be covered.
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INTRODUCTION

Mercy Secondary School is an all-girls school with an enrolment of 168 students. In addition to the Junior and Leaving Certificate, it offers the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), a Transition Year (TY) programme, and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. The school participates in DEIS, the Department's initiative to deliver equality of opportunity in schools.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Six class groups were visited during the evaluation, covering all years except first year, and all programmes and levels. A substitute teacher took one of the lessons. Varied styles of teaching were noted and the quality was good overall, with instances of admirable practice. All teachers effectively communicated a sense of the subject's value and appeal.
- The lessons observed covered examination preparation with the relevant class groups; the comparative study with an emphasis on social setting; media studies involving critical and creative work; and the reading of classic literary fiction. All lessons had a clear focus and direction, and in one instance the learning intention was explicitly stated in terms of what students would be able to do. This clearly had a motivating and confidence-building effect and is a practice worth extending. Lessons were well planned.
- Class groups are relatively small, allowing teachers to interact with all students in the course of a lesson. A good balance between teacher and student talk appears to be the norm. Although students were perhaps a little more silent than usual, teachers approached class discussion as a conversation, and were clearly accustomed to a good level of student participation. This approach was particularly effective in two lessons where it elicited very engaged response even from less confident students. Teachers modelled sophisticated language use very effectively.
- Students worked on writing tasks in a number of lessons, while teachers circulated to guide and advise. Some direction was given to the whole class beforehand; in the case of Leaving Certificate students this could have been amplified to support them in working independently without further assistance. The Leaving Certificate criteria of assessment should be used to provide a helpful reference point for students engaged in examination preparation. Junior Certificate students worked independently on written answers to a comprehension passage having read and discussed it together. Most interpreted the questions correctly and stayed on task.
- Students generally interacted well with each other, most effectively through organised pair and group work, and sometimes through less formal discussion and helping each other. Strategies to encourage and develop co-operative learning would be well worth extending, and would be particularly helpful in developing speaking and listening skills.
- Student learning was evident in all lessons, and many students were able to respond well when asked by the inspector to explain work they were engaged in. Varied volumes and standards of work were noted in the copybooks and folders inspected. Some exemplary feedback affirming students' efforts and making constructive suggestions was noted. An instance of unhelpful comment was also noted; the school's assessment policy should commit to practices and procedures that provide affirmation and guidance towards improvement to students. Monitoring of students' progress while they are working through lengthier assignments would also be helpful.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Four English lessons per week are provided in each year of the junior cycle. A lesson per day would give more scope for a student-centred approach to the development of oracy and literacy skills. It would also support the school's commitments under DEIS, and its policy of integrating the JCSP in the junior cycle curriculum. The provision of a fifth lesson in first year, the foundation year for the post-primary English syllabuses, should be prioritised. Provision for English in other programmes is good.
- Class formation in junior cycle is in transition from a part-streaming to a mixed-ability system. The change arises from a commendable concern that streaming may have a negative impact on students' self-confidence and expectations. It will require other changes also to ensure that the needs of students across the range of ability are met. These could include team-teaching to provide differentiated in-class support, and a fresh look at text choices and teaching and learning approaches to ensure their appropriateness to the mixed-ability context.
- The uptake of foundation level English is commendably low, while uptake of higher and ordinary level English varies from year to year. Some very able students were noted in an ordinary level group in the senior cycle. Every effort should be made to increase students' confidence in their ability to succeed at the highest appropriate level. This should be seen as the guiding principle of the school's assessment policy.
- All five teachers in the English department have the subject to degree level. One teaches English as a main subject, and all teachers take at least two English class groups. Whatever scope there is to give teachers experience of teaching a range of years, levels and programmes should be availed of, so as to extend expertise and foster a sense of the subject as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first year to sixth.
- The school is facilitating two teachers to pursue qualifications in special educational needs. Renewed involvement with INOTE (the Irish National Organisation of Teachers of English) would assist the sharing of good practice.
- English classrooms and the school library are attractive learning environments.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- The English planning folder reflects more individual than collaborative planning and, in many instances, planning focuses on course content to be covered, rather than on the students' acquisition of skills and knowledge. However, some good shared planning is occurring in the junior cycle, and a skills-focused approach is evident in TY and LCA planning.
 - It would be worthwhile to use some planning time to facilitate a greater level of collaborative planning. The focus should be on the development of year plans that set out what students must, should and could know and be able to do by the end of each year. This planning model is recommended as it takes account of differentiation to suit the spectrum of ability and ensures that the development of students' skills is to the fore when programmes of work are being designed.
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The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.