

1. INTRODUCTION

This Ofsted report seeks to offer answers to something schools frequently ask inspectors (who judge most schools to be good overall in English): to explain what makes a school **outstanding** in English. In what is likely to be the most interesting and helpful feature of the report, the first part focuses on **detailed 2-3 page accounts of one specific innovative aspect of provision** in each of six primary and six secondary schools. All the schools (including one special school for secondary age pupils) operate in challenging circumstances, and all are successful in helping their pupils to make outstanding progress in English.

The specific aspects of provision are:

Primary

- Creating writers: a workshop approach to writing in a primary school
- Steps to excellence: turning average readers into keen ones
- Success with pupils learning English as an additional language
- Exploiting opportunities for literacy in the Early Years Foundations Stage and beyond
- Teachers and other staff working together to create an innovative curriculum
- Encouraging pupils to read and talk well

Secondary

- Differentiating the curriculum so that all succeed
- The impact of effective subject leadership on teaching
- Trusting teachers, trusting pupils
- Success with boys in English
- Helping pupils to become independent learners
- A challenging curriculum for all in a special school

2. KEY FINDINGS

- The quality of the curriculum was the strongest indicator of outstanding provision in English in the schools selected. Teaching that is held in check by an inappropriate or dull curriculum will not inspire pupils or generate high standards. What links all the schools in the survey is that they provide innovative or creative curricula for English that are explicitly and successfully designed around the particular needs of their pupils.
- Each school developed its own distinct and original vision for English. Subject leaders were keen to develop their own schemes of work and promoted a vigorous debate about the identity of English and its importance for pupils within the school in order to achieve this. This debate, supported by highly effective subject leadership, ensured that a coherent, shared vision for English provided a clear sense of direction to subject work.
- Excellent teamwork, collaboration and sharing of best practice generated a consistency of approach, especially in the crucial area of the quality of teaching. The English teams represented in the survey observed each other's lessons, sometimes taught together, and concentrated in meetings on discussing key issues of methodology rather than administration. As a result, staff learnt from each other. This was especially evident in aspects which included the provision of a high-quality classroom environment that stimulated pupils and supported their learning, as well as teaching that engaged all the senses.
- These outstanding schools had a clear understanding of the varied needs of their different groups of pupils in English and ensured that lessons, and the schemes of work, were planned explicitly to meet this range of needs. The schools ensured that all pupils had access to the same experiences in English but that the curriculum and lessons were differentiated effectively to help all pupils to make the greatest possible progress.
- Teachers in these schools listened very carefully to what pupils said about English, what they enjoyed doing and how they learnt best. Teachers involved the pupils in constructing the English curriculum. The schools also gave teachers freedom and flexibility in devising programmes that would engage their pupils. All schools stressed the importance of motivating pupils and ensuring that they enjoyed English lessons. However, this was not because the schools provided a low-level curriculum based simply on what pupils wanted to do. In all these schools, inspectors noted that pupils were motivated by challenging work and rigorous expectations.

- Schools in the survey ensured that pupils' experience in English extended beyond the classroom. They did this first through the provision of rich extra-curricular experiences outside school, such as reading groups, theatre trips and working with creative practitioners. They also ensured that classroom activities, wherever possible, involved real tasks, purposes, audiences and issues related to the local or wider community. In this way, the curriculum matched pupils' needs and interests.
- Outstanding English teams continually seek to get better. This was particularly evident in the ways that the survey schools had responded to the areas for improvement suggested in the initial subject inspection. However, it was also built into their own approaches to review and evaluation, and was supported by a constant drive for improvement. Staff sought out feedback and reacted positively to suggestions and criticism. Follow-up visits confirmed that the schools had listened to inspectors' comments and improved provision further as a result.
- Where provision was outstanding in English, boys did as well as girls. This is in contrast to the national picture. The case studies give some insight into the schools' success with boys and one of them takes this as its central theme. The report offers no simple solutions to a complex issue. However, it is no accident that these schools all offered a lively and engaging curriculum, supported by active approaches in the classroom with substantial emphasis on discussion and well-managed group work, which led to clear and productive outcomes in English.
- Good-quality oral work engages pupils, including boys and pupils who might otherwise take little interest, and yields benefits in all areas of English. Talk happens in all English lessons but it is not always well-structured or taught explicitly. The survey schools planned carefully for pupils' speaking and listening, making good use of drama and group activities. This had a significant impact on pupils' enjoyment of English and more effective provision for speaking and listening improved pupils' work in reading and writing. Group work was often particularly well planned and effective.
- The curriculum in each of these schools gave a high profile to reading for pleasure. International comparisons indicate that although most pupils in English schools are competent in their reading at secondary school age, their interest and commitment decline substantially¹. Schools that take the business of reading for pleasure seriously, where teachers read, talk with enthusiasm and recommend books, and where provision for reading is planned carefully, are more likely to succeed with their pupils' reading. This success was seen in the survey schools, both in good test results and an enthusiasm for reading beyond the classroom.

¹ See, for example, the results of the PISA international survey; www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2009-results-what-students-know-and-can-do_9789264091450-en

The full report can be viewed/downloaded at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/100229>