

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of English  
REPORT**

**Mount Sackville Secondary School  
Chapelizod, Dublin 20  
Roll number: 60120W**

**Date of inspection: 10 December 2010**



**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**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Mount Sackville Secondary School. 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 of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Timetable provision for English is very good in the senior cycle. Optimal provision for English is a lesson per day, and this is achieved or exceeded in the provision in fifth and sixth year. The provision of four lessons in the compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme is generous also, and supports the delivery of a varied and challenging English programme. The provision of four lessons per week in each year of the junior cycle is adequate though not generous. The rationale for a fifth lesson in first year, to provide a firm foundation of knowledge and skills in the first year of the Junior Certificate programme, was discussed during the evaluation and is commended to school management for further consideration. Concurrent timetabling in second, third, fifth and sixth year facilitates student movement between class groups, collaborative practice and the organisation of whole-year activities. Concurrence in TY might be considered, to open up the possibility of modular delivery of the English programme.

Students are placed in mixed-ability class groups in first year and are taught English in these groups. Ability sets are created for second year and students are placed in these on the basis of first-year summer examination results and the recommendations of first-year teachers of English. There are, typically, two top groups, two middle groups, and a much smaller group some of whom take Junior Certificate English at ordinary level. These groupings continue into third year. There are possible negative consequences in placing students in ability groups as early as the beginning of second year: expectations may be lowered among students not in the top groups; a less stimulating class dynamic may also result; and assessments of students' potential may be premature, given the rapid development taking place at this stage in their lives. It is therefore recommended that mixed-ability classes be retained until at least the beginning of third year, when a discrete ordinary level group might possibly be formed. School management might bear in mind that many schools of similar type retain mixed ability to the end of the junior cycle. The reversion to mixed-ability class formation in TY is commended.

The English department has considered the best basis for class formation in fifth and sixth year. Up to 2010, a rigorous assessment based on higher-level criteria was administered early in fifth year and all students were assigned to ranked class groups based on their performance. However, teachers were concerned that this had a demoralising effect on students who had already opted for

ordinary level English. The system currently in place involves assessment during TY. While this has certain merits, it is suggested that teachers reintroduce an assessment in fifth year but only for students intending to take higher level English. It would give these students a useful measure of the level and nature of the work required, and would not impinge on those students who have chosen the ordinary level course. As the present system may also have the unintended consequence of creating class groups of significantly varying sizes, the relative sizes of the four higher level class groups in fifth and sixth year should be monitored, and there should be a clear rationale for significant variations.

The English department comprises nine teachers. Their deployment is satisfactorily consolidated in that six of the nine teach English to at least three class groups, and most teachers of English are deployed in both junior and senior cycles. This pattern supports the delivery of the subject as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first year to sixth. In this regard, deployment should support the view that first year is viewed as an integral part of the junior cycle programme, and teachers of first-year English can expect to take their class groups through the full cycle. It is good practice for teachers to teach a range of class levels, so as to extend their experience and repertoire of teaching skills. Teachers of English are generally deployed in this way, and it is worth ensuring that teachers are not identified with particular ability groups.

Excellent resources are in place to support the teaching and learning of English. The school has a very fine library managed by a fulltime librarian who ensures that it serves students' research needs and also encourages private reading for pleasure with a large stock of classic and contemporary fiction and non-fiction. The library hosts regular readings and supports reading initiatives, including MS Readathon. Most teachers of English have their own classrooms, which have been developed as very stimulating teaching and learning environments. Information and communication technology (ICT) is used extensively in the English department both in generating and storing resources and in teaching and learning activities within the classroom. Continued sharing of expertise in ICT and its application to English is encouraged.

The school supports initial teacher education, offering teaching experience within an organised mentoring structure to student teachers. Continuing professional development is also supported through school-based in-service and teachers' participation in relevant external in-service courses. It is suggested that the English department renew contact with the subject association, INOTE (The Irish National Organisation of Teachers of English) as a means of sharing its expertise, and learning from the experience of other professionals.

Co-curricular activities that extend students' engagement with English are very well supported by the school management and the teachers of English. Debating, public speaking, writing competitions and the production of school magazines and year books all provide rich opportunities for students to develop subject-related skills.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The English department is co-ordinated by a senior teacher of the subject who carries out the role as part of a post of responsibility. Regular minuted meetings take place throughout the school year, and focus not only on organisational matters but also on collaborative development of teaching and learning processes. In this way, a good balance between established and innovative practice has been achieved. The co-ordinator role has a commendable emphasis on student learning and attainment, and on subject development to provide challenge and stimulus to students. As part of long-term planning for the subject, it is suggested that co-ordination as a

voluntary and rotating role be considered, in order to decouple it from the post structure and to offer all members of the department the opportunity to lead subject development planning.

The planned programme for junior cycle English is grounded in the Junior Certificate syllabus and seeks to exploit its openness and scope to develop a wide range of skills and knowledge. Students encounter a rich variety of poetry, fiction and drama, and an integrated approach is taken to the development of writing and comprehension skills. Teachers work to broadly similar first-year plans, with scope for variation in the choice of texts. It would be prudent to ensure as great a commonality as possible in the first-year programme if the system of ability-setting in second year is continued, so that students in all class groups can be assessed using common agreed criteria at the end of the year. Since common assessments support a skills-focused approach to subject planning, their use wherever possible is advised. The issue of planning a junior cycle programme for mixed-ability class groups was discussed with the subject department during the evaluation. An approach that centres on very clearly described learning outcomes is advocated, and these can be helpfully differentiated in terms of the skills and knowledge that students must, should and could acquire over the course of the programme.

The school's English programme for TY provides opportunities for students to experience a variety of texts and genres and for teachers to deliver modules of particular interest to them. However, while the introduction of concepts that are of relevance to the Leaving Certificate programme is in keeping with the Department's *Transition Year Guidelines for Schools*, points of reference that are exclusive to Leaving Certificate preparation, (Paper 1 work, for example) are not appropriate, and may serve to narrow the focus of what should be a rich and unrestricted experience of language and literature in a variety of forms. The TY programme and plans should therefore be carefully proofed with reference to the guidelines.

The planned programme for Leaving Certificate reflects the principles underpinning the syllabus. The English department is commended for choosing texts ranging from the canonical to the contemporary, and for endeavouring to ensure that students are familiar with English classics in a range of genres. However there is scope for development in planning for students taking ordinary level. The English department should discuss a programme that empowers these students and enables them to develop as independent learners. The course should be accessible yet challenging, meeting all syllabus requirements and focusing on developing students' key skills.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Ten lessons were observed during the evaluation, involving almost all members of the English department. The lessons covered all years, levels and programmes with the exception of TY, as TY students were on a week of community work. The quality of the teaching in the lessons observed was good or very good, and excellent practice was noted in a number of instances. Teachers displayed an authoritative grasp of their material, a desire to enthuse their students, and familiarity with a range of effective methodologies. They engaged positively with the evaluation process and were open to any suggestions for improvement.

Lessons were well planned and structured. Very good links were made with relevant prior learning at the outset of lessons, and the purpose of the lesson was made clear. Learning activities were generally timed well so that students could achieve the desired outcome. Occasionally, the feedback phase of group work in junior cycle classes took rather too much time, and it would be worthwhile to emphasise to students the importance of reporting key points only. A substantial amount of material was covered in all lessons, and a sense of forward movement was maintained.

Particularly effective pacing was noted in lessons on poetry, where a staged approach and successive readings helped students to arrive at a range of valid interpretations and responses.

Topics covered in the lessons observed included poetry, drama, the comparative study, fiction, and creative writing in a range of genres. Resources were well selected and used effectively. In a lesson on *Hamlet*, students were given a list of contrasting pairs of adjectives to stimulate discussion of the main characters, and students enjoyed engaging with the complexities of characterisation through this simple and effective resource. Audio recordings of poems and songs were used to excellent effect. The board was used consistently to record points made in class and group discussion and, more importantly, to organise and structure them. The practice that teacher writing led to student writing was generally observed, and its importance should be emphasised to students to encourage good note-making habits. Good use of ICT enabled the projection of visual images for a variety of purposes.

A range of methods and approaches was observed and teachers clearly sought to choose those that were best suited to the learning outcome and the class group. A particular strength noted was the focus on close and careful reading. In a number of lessons, teachers provided an excellent model of critical reading and response, using approaches such as tracing a network of related images through a poem. Technical terms were introduced appropriately so that the emphasis was on understanding the purpose and effect of the technique, rather than on learning the terms. In encouraging students to read closely and to engage with the texts, teachers linked literature to students' own experiences and emotions. New material was presented engagingly, inviting students to see connections with other writers and to note points of contrast. In many instances where the focus was on critical reading, students responded most thoughtfully and proffered interpretations that reflected a deep level of engagement. In this context, teachers should ensure that they do not seek a preferred response but remain open to all that are valid.

A high level of co-operation between students was noted. Teachers ensured that this good dynamic was directed purposefully, and pair and group work and other forms of co-operative learning were effectively managed. A junior cycle class, for example, worked co-operatively to create the plot outline of a short story in a way that reinforced aspects of plot structure. The class was attentive to each other's contributions, and this receptiveness to each other was noted consistently in the lessons visited. A 'think, pair, share' approach can be effective when students are not sufficiently confident to engage in whole-class discussion. Students can then be encouraged to incorporate others' views in their own responses.

In the lessons observed, students were for the most part articulate, motivated and willing to participate. Expectations were appropriately high with regard to most class groups observed. However, there was cause for some concern that the creation of ability sets early in junior cycle may have an impact on some students' confidence and readiness to engage. Students in the middle sets were observed to be capable and articulate, if sometimes hesitant, and the focus of teaching and learning is best directed towards helping them to structure their own responses. Over-reliance on prepared notes should be avoided and students should be encouraged to take ownership of, and responsibility for, their own work.

A very warm and supportive atmosphere prevailed in the English classrooms visited. Good knowledge of individual students was particularly evident in the small class groups and good rapport was evident in all lessons. Plentiful displays of up-to-date students' work affirmed students' efforts.

## **ASSESSMENT**

All teachers were vigilant in monitoring students' participation and understanding. A range of questioning strategies tested students' recall and grasp of key points, prompted students to link previously learned and new material, and assessed higher-order skills of analysis and inference. Students' responses were affirmed, and follow-on questions were effectively used to tease out difficult concepts.

Students' copybooks and folders contained a substantial volume of work. Assignments set were generally of very good quality, with a commendable emphasis on extended composition. Care should be taken to ensure that questions, especially those drawn from junior cycle textbooks, lead to meaningful written work. A high quality of developmental feedback is given to students on substantial assignments, and students were attentive to suggestions for improvement.

Common assessments are set in many instances where applicable, and this is especially appropriate where the agreed programme of work has a focus on skills development. The practice of using the Leaving Certificate English criteria of assessment when marking students' work is helpful. Work on agreeing the criteria to be applied to junior cycle work and applying them consistently is ongoing. For all years, teachers should communicate the criteria of assessment clearly to the students, in line with the principles of assessment for learning.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Excellent resources are in place to support the teaching and learning of English.
- Co-curricular activities that extend students' engagement with English are very well supported.
- Good planning structures and a co-ordinator role with a developmental remit are in place.
- The quality of the teaching in the lessons observed was good or very good, and instances of excellent practice were noted. A particular strength was the focus on close and careful reading.
- A high quality of developmental feedback is given to students on substantial assignments, and students were attentive to suggestions for improvement.

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

- Mixed-ability class groups for English should be retained until at least the beginning of third year.
- The basis and mechanism of class formation in fifth and sixth year should be reviewed.
- Texts, materials and teaching methods chosen should empower and challenge all students appropriately.
- While the introduction in TY of concepts relevant to the Leaving Certificate programme is in keeping with the Department's *Transition Year Guidelines for Schools*, points of reference and approaches that are specific to Leaving Certificate preparation are not appropriate and should be removed from the TY plan.

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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