

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Midleton College
Midleton, County Cork
Roll number: 62370J**

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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 Midleton College. 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 examined students' work. 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. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Midleton College is a co-educational school. Timetabled provision for English is optimal. Great praise is due to management for its efforts in this area. Members of the core English teaching team are assigned to levels and cycles on a rotational basis, thus ensuring the maintenance of a wide skills base across the subject department.

English classes in first year are of mixed ability. Students with difficulties in literacy development are identified on the basis of standardised tests which are conducted in the first week of their first term in the school. It is suggested that these tests might usefully be conducted prior to students arrival in the school. Such an approach would allow for earlier identification of students who may be in need of support. A setting system is used to assign students to different levels in second year and in third year. The use of concurrent timetabling to ensure ease of student movement between levels and classes in each of these year groups is good practice. It is suggested that the English department should examine the stage at which students are assigned to levels. This should be done in order to avoid the possibility of making such decisions at too early a stage in a student's personal development, as well as in light of the difficulties transition into secondary level can pose for first-year students. Some findings of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) study *Pathways through the Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second-Year Students* are also relevant with regard to these decisions. Transition Year (TY) classes in English are organised on a mixed-ability basis. Classes in fifth year and in sixth year are set, based on students' achievement in the Junior Certificate examination, house examinations and their own preferences with regard to level.

Teachers of English have very good access to audio-visual equipment, which is available in each English classroom. Teachers of English are provided with baserooms. This arrangement is strongly praised. There is also very good provision in the area of

information and communication technology (ICT). This includes wireless internet access in almost all rooms and the installation of data projectors in almost all English baserooms. The staff workroom also includes ICT equipment which is utilised by staff. In addition, staff development in the area of ICT has been accessed and the school has provided financial support for teachers for the purchase of laptop computers. A supervised ICT room is also made available for students' use on three afternoons of the week. Some student work completed with the support of ICT was observed during the evaluation. Beyond this, the subject plan for English includes a list of useful websites. Excellent use was made of ICT resources in a number of English lessons observed. Teachers' efforts and the school's support in this area are praised.

There is a school library with a full-time librarian who manages the provision of books, periodicals, magazines and newspapers in liaison with the subject co-ordinator for English, other members of staff and students. The library is open throughout the school day. A book club, open to all students, has been organised this year by a member of the English department. The library incorporates a 'poetry pillar', student projects and has internet access. This is all most positive and it is suggested that the English department should develop a reading policy to consolidate and, potentially, expand upon current practice in the use of the library for the promotion of literacy and reading for pleasure. A resource which may prove useful in this regard is an evaluation report published in connection with the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) Demonstration Library Project which may be accessed at www.jcspliteracy.ie. The importance of English to the school culture in Middleton College is clearly expressed in the support afforded to the school library. A further physical expression of this aspect of the school's ethos may be found in a recently renovated sunken garden which incorporates a stonework engraved with an extract from Yeats' 'Song of Wandering Aengus', thus focusing even students' leisure hours on the aesthetic power and value of language.

There are subject-specific induction procedures for English to support student teachers undertaking the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). Classroom observation is included as an element in this process which is positive. It is suggested that this good induction practice should be set down briefly in the subject plan as English departmental policy. The policy might also provide for a formal discussion of what has been observed in class between the mentor and inductee. It should be noted that the current provision for student teachers to be facilitated in accessing English resources and through regular meetings with their mentor are already very positive aspects of practice in this area.

The school is supportive of continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers of English. The English department maintains strong links with the relevant subject association and has engaged in numerous professional development opportunities. A website which may be of interest is that of the newly formed Irish National Organisation of Teachers of English (INOTE) at www.inote.ie.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The English department is well-organised, with a subject co-ordinator who is appointed on the basis of seniority. The co-ordinator's role has been clearly defined. Formal meetings of the English department are held on a monthly basis. Time is also provided for subject departments to meet at each of the three whole-staff meetings held each year. Minutes are taken of formal meetings. The recent focus of subject department meetings has been on examination results, a review of TY modules, resources and a number of theatrical excursions. It is good practice that students' performance in the certificate examinations is analysed in comparison with national norms. It is recommended that a teaching and learning focus should be adopted as part of the subject planning process. A useful area for the department to examine would be assessment for learning, material on which can be accessed through the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) and the NCCA websites at www.slss.ie and www.ncca.ie respectively. This approach could include external inputs from the support service followed by teachers' own experimentation with identified elements of assessment for learning. Teachers could then discuss their experiences with the relevant methodologies at departmental meetings. This could be followed by teachers adopting other approaches in advance of the next departmental meeting. Given the good practice already present in the department such a sharing of professional expertise and experience should prove of great benefit. After a suitable time the assessment-for-learning approaches which have worked well in the department could be consolidated through the creation of a new assessment policy and the department could move on to a new teaching-and-learning focus.

A comprehensive subject plan was presented during the course of the evaluation. This included lists of texts used in each year group, circulars relevant to the teaching of English, syllabus documents and relevant information regarding students with special educational needs. It is suggested that the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools* should be added to the subject folder. This document contains useful information regarding the teaching and learning of English and can be located in the Inspectorate section of the Department's website at www.education.ie. Further potentially useful publications are the English curriculum for primary schools and the English teacher guidelines for primary school teachers. These are available at www.curriculumonline.ie. Common planning is also utilised in the English department. Good practice in relation to the development of common plans suggests the creation of syllabus-based, skills-based plans with clear learning goals incorporated. This latter element, in particular, aids teachers in setting meaningful and useful assessment tasks while also serving to focus planning on important areas. It is suggested that each common plan should clearly outline the use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses as being of central importance.

Teachers of English are involved in the organising of a wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. These include the previously mentioned book club, visits to the theatre, the *MS Readathon*, the TY newsletter and the involvement of students in a variety of competitions. This work is laudable.

The English department is deserving of strong praise for grasping the possibilities afforded by both the junior cycle and senior cycle syllabuses with regard to text choice. The emphasis which is placed on studying a novel in each year of students' post-primary education is very positive. Beyond this the department varies text-choice, within syllabus guidelines, thus allowing for the use of texts which may be of particular interest to individual class groups, while also facilitating teachers' CPD in this regard. The department is urged to continue with its professional approach towards text choice.

An innovative approach has been adopted towards the organisation of TY English. A modular system is used for different sections of the course. Students rotate to different teachers of English on a four weekly basis. This allows for sustained contact with particular genres. A plan setting out areas covered in each module was presented during the evaluation. These areas included drama, film and creative writing. All of this is worthwhile. As has been suggested previously, it is important that the plan should incorporate clear learning goals for students in both language and literature. Useful resources to inform the further development of the plan can be accessed at the NCCA website which includes a selection of Transition Units. It is recommended that, as part of

assessment strategies utilised in TY, a portfolio of work comprising a number of key genre exercises completed by students should be included. This should inform students' overall grades for the year and constitute a 'centre of excellence' for student writing. The portfolio would act as an additional motivation for students' writing activities, while also focusing them on the drafting and redrafting process and on a potential audience for their work.

There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs department, including some crossover of personnel. A list of students with special educational needs is provided to the English department at the start of each school year. There is a special educational needs co-ordinator. A learning support document has been developed which sets out key elements of practice with regard to students with special educational needs in Midleton College. This is worthwhile and the school is encouraged to further develop its work in this area to include the creation of a special educational needs policy. This should be informed by the Department of Education and Science publication *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines*. Withdrawal is the main mode of providing support for students with special educational needs, although support personnel have worked together in withdrawal groups on occasion. This is positive. It is suggested that the school should examine the employment of co-operative teaching in mainstream classrooms as a further element in the menu of supports which may be utilised for these students.

A number of students are studying English as an Additional Language (EAL). English language support is provided for these students through the allocation of teaching hours by the Department of Education and Science. The school also pays for additional teaching hours to aid these students in increasing their English language proficiency. A teacher has attended in-service education provided by the SLSS. This is positive as it will aid the school in building capacity in this area. It is suggested that it would be beneficial for the English department to note key methodologies which will aid EAL students in accessing the curriculum. These include the use of students' home languages to aid their English language learning and the use of DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts) to aid the development of their written work in English. The department might usefully access the experience garnered by the English language support teacher through the SLSS. Both the NCCA website, the SLSS website and the website www.elsp.ie provide further support in this area.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Overall, a very good standard of teaching and learning was observed. There is a professional and committed teaching team for English. There was evidence of individual planning in all cases. In a number of instances particularly good practice was observed with planning documentation highlighting the use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses. Lessons began, variously, with the taking of attendance, recapitulation of areas already explored and, in one instance, a game focused on increasing students' awareness and store of vocabulary. In a number of cases good practice was observed where, at the outset, the learning intention was noted on the whiteboard. This was most worthwhile. The setting out of a clear learning intention at the beginning of lessons should be incorporated as an element of practice across the English department.

A wide range of resources was used in classes observed during the evaluation. These included the whiteboard, photocopied resources, the overhead projector, ICT and a variety of props. In particular, excellent use was made of ICT in some cases. The use of ICT in one senior cycle lesson in combination with various items from the natural world was particularly involving and exciting for students. In this instance, a student was asked to link his MP3 player to the school's audio technology to play a song relevant to the poet being discussed. All of this was very good practice, scaffolding students' growing understanding of a difficult topic and ensuring their continuing engagement with the work being undertaken. It was noted that, in one classroom, whiteboard space was somewhat limited, therefore constraining its potential utility. The English department is particularly encouraged to maintain an emphasis on the use of visual resources as a support for students' work.

In all classes reading and writing activities featured prominently. These activities were generally managed very well. In one lesson a form of guided reading was adopted, with the teacher highlighting a key question on the whiteboard prior to reading part of the text being studied. This was followed by the text-marking of sections of the piece as the reading progressed. This material was then used at the end of the lesson to address the question which had been originally posed. This approach was worthwhile and ensured student engagement throughout. In another senior cycle lesson, very good practice was observed. Here photographic images accompanied by music were used as a focus for the discussion of a poet's work. The lesson worked very well, providing an access point through which students could generate personal readings of very challenging poems. Occasional suggestions arose in individual lessons pertaining to the potential usefulness of adopting teacher modelling to aid student readings, the possibility of using DARTS as a support to some students' writing and the use of DVD and 'freeze-frame' as entry points to a particular drama.

Frequently teachers placed a strong emphasis in lessons on the discussion and analysis of writers' use of language. This included points where students were exhorted to note features of a prose piece which suggested to them that the author was a poet and the noting of the use of assonance in another lesson. The highlighting of language in this manner was good practice. In one senior cycle lesson, a greater emphasis might usefully have been placed on the use of colloquial language in a play which could then have informed students' written work.

The use of pair work and group work was often observed during the course of the evaluation. This was positive, with students working together to construct meaning around different texts. This included an instance where students explored the evidence available to them regarding the qualities displayed by a character in a play, while in another lesson a focus was brought to bear on students exploring the language aspects of a text together. It is recommended that the English department should continue to advance its use of these strategies. In particular, the manner in which specific roles are assigned to students during these activities should be considered as a focus for encouraging the development of students' skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Typical approaches which may be used in support of this aim include *placemat*, *envoy* and *snowball*. More information on this and the more general area of co-operative learning can be found on the website of the SLSS and at www.co-operation.org.

Classroom management was good in all cases. There was a good relationship between teachers and students. Teachers affirmed students' efforts regularly during lessons. In one instance some suggestions were made regarding a more directed method of managing student answering to enhance the smooth pacing of the lesson. Students answered questions readily during lessons. Student engagement with work in hand was evident in a number of ways. These included diligent notetaking, commitment to pair work and, in one case, lively discussion regarding the qualities and morality of the central character in a play. In one lesson, students displayed facility in noting the use of particular techniques on the part of a writer. A move towards higher-order

questioning to extend further students' very good understanding of the piece might have proven worthwhile in the context of what was already a very good lesson.

In a majority of classrooms a print-rich environment had begun to be developed. In one classroom this was of a very high standard, including artwork, student writing and other displays connected to the study of English. The department is strongly encouraged to include the development of a print-rich environment as a key aspiration in its subject policy and practice. Such an approach will serve students with difficulties in literacy development, EAL students and, indeed, all students, in accessing and engaging with English. Key strategies which might be used include the display of students' genre writing, keywords, key quotes, character diagrams and graphic organisers.

ASSESSMENT

There was evidence that homework was regularly assigned in all classes observed during the evaluation. In addition, the use of comment-based marking was part of teachers' practice in all cases. In one instance this was of a particularly high standard and the department is encouraged to continue to expand the use of this approach, where practicable and within time constraints. Comment-based marking provides vital feedback to students in improving their written work in English. As a further addition to practice in the English department it is suggested that the area of peer-assessment and self-assessment might be explored. This would link well with the previously mentioned focus on assessment for learning that might be undertaken as part of the overall subject-planning process. A folder system was used in a number of lessons observed to facilitate students' storage of their work and resources and this was working well.

Some evidence was noted of the use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in the setting of students' homework. This practice should be expanded across the English department as a central element in teachers' practice, in combination with other elements of current practice such as the setting of summaries and staged questions. The development of a 'genre sheet' setting out key genres to be utilised in conjunction with literary texts might be one way in which the department could explore possibilities in this area. Beyond this, the use of literary texts as models for student writing is a key element, not only for the expansion of their understanding of different genres, but also as a means of encouraging their incorporation of new techniques in their own writing.

A differentiated approach to the setting of homework, in order to appeal to different intelligences and to provide additional support for students where necessary, was observed in some cases. In one instance, this involved the creation of collages and visual displays to aid students' understanding of texts. In another lesson, a writing frame for an answer was distributed to students in a senior cycle class. The English department is encouraged to examine other methodologies which might be of service, particularly in supporting those students who have difficulties in literacy development. The website www.jcspliteracy.ie provides useful resources in this area.

Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas for all year groups. Students in third year and in sixth year participate in mock examinations in the spring. Summer examinations are organised at the end of the academic year for all other year groups. The school seeks to facilitate students for whom Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations (RACE) have been granted as part of its formal house examinations wherever practicable. Common examinations are set, where practicable. This is good practice.

Reports regarding students' progress are variously communicated to parents following formal examinations at Christmas, in the spring and at the end of the academic year. A parent-teacher meeting is organised once per year for each year group. The student journal is also utilised as a means of ensuring good communication with students' homes.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good provision for English on the school timetable.
- The English department is well organised. A subject co-ordinator has been appointed.
- Teachers of English have very good access to audio-visual equipment.
- There is a subject-specific TY programme for English. The manner in which this is organised suggests a reflective approach to the programme in the English department.
- There is a school library with a full time librarian. A book club has been organised which is open to all students.
- Excellent use was made of ICT resources in a number of English lessons observed.
- The English department has created a comprehensive subject plan.
- The English department is to be greatly praised for grasping the possibilities offered in both the junior cycle and the senior cycle syllabuses with regard to text choice.
- Overall, a very good standard of teaching and learning was observed.
- Teachers placed a strong emphasis on the discussion and analysis of writers' use of language.

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

- The English department should continue to advance its use of pair work and group work, with a particular focus on how these strategies can facilitate the development of students' skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- The development of a portfolio of work comprised of key genre exercises should be incorporated in the assessment policy for TY English.
- A teaching and learning focus should be adopted as a formal element of the subject department planning process.

Post-evaluation meetings were held 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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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board welcomes the publication of the Subject Inspection Report for the teaching of English at Midleton College. The Board is delighted to note the extremely high quality of English teaching across all years and standards as reported in this Report. The high standard recognised in this Report is reflective of the expectations and standards that maintain in all subject teaching at Midleton College.

The Board would like to congratulate and thanks all members of the English Department for their generous and professional participation in the Inspection process.