Report on the Quality of Learning and Teaching in Business Subjects

Subject Inspection Report

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Cashel Community School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in business subjects and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of these subjects 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

Subject Provision and Whole School Support

In Cashel Community School, Business Studies is offered to students at junior cycle. In the optional Transition Year programme (TY) there are business-related modules and in Leaving Certificate all three business subjects are offered to students. The school also provides the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) at senior cycle and the enterprise module of this programme is delivered by business teachers. In addition, students of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) study Office Administration and Customer Care.

Business Studies is a core subject on the first-year curriculum. At the end of the year students indicate their subject preferences and these form the option bands for subject choice in second year. Uptake of the subject is good for the remainder of the cycle. A similar process occurs for students entering the Leaving Certificate. Currently, there is no fifth-year Accounting class as it was not the favoured option of students but there is very good uptake of Business and Economics.

For the duration of first year, Business Studies is timetabled for two class periods and thereafter for four class periods with some class groups concurrently timetabled. While this provision for first-year Business Studies is less than normal, the good practice of subject sampling allows students to make an informed choice in the selection of subjects for second year and affords all students the opportunity to attain some financial life skills.

The compulsory ten-week modules of Accounting, Business and Economics in TY are provided with a double period each week and Enterprise has a triple period. Timetabling for Leaving Certificate business subjects is very generous over the two-year cycle. All Business lessons are concurrently timetabled.

First-year Business Studies students are taught in mixed-ability groups. For the remainder of junior cycle students are placed in ability groups for the subject based on first-year results and teacher observation. In Leaving Certificate there is one class group of Accounting and Economics and a number of Business classes. Accounting and Economics are taught in mixed-ability groups.
but Business students are divided into higher and ordinary level classes. This division is based on the outcomes of the Junior Certificate. However, these are not always a reliable indicator of future competencies due to the predominance of book-keeping elements in the syllabus at junior cycle.

Setting is uncommon in business education as the syllabuses are designed for mixed-ability teaching. Its effect on student motivation, attainment and opportunity should be considered with reference to the commentary on ‘ESRI research into student experiences’ on the NCCA website. Furthermore, the skill and capacity to differentiate for students of varied ability and to direct teaching accordingly is evident in current practice in Accounting, Economics and first-year Business Studies. In this context, the formation of mixed-ability groupings for Business Studies in at least the first two years of junior cycle and for Business in the first year of Leaving Certificate is recommended.

All business teachers are subject specialists with up-to-date subject knowledge. At least one member of the business subjects department attends BSTAI meetings and conferences and reports back to the whole department. Senior management is proactive in the provision of whole-school continuing professional development, facilitates attendance at in-service and gives support for professional development activities. Some business teachers have completed an Enterprise certificate course and attended in-service courses provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers. In the observation of lessons it was evident that teachers used strategies and teaching resources from these in-service courses in their pedagogical practice.

Each business teacher has a designated base classroom. There are some examples of good print-rich environments displaying information in a visually attractive manner. There is scope in some business classrooms for the further development of stimulating visual environments for business education. Each business classroom has good information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. Two teachers are based in two of the school’s computer rooms and this facilitates immediate individual student access and use of ICT.

The school’s management responds on a needs basis to teachers’ requests regarding the acquisition of additional resources. Resources including equipment and paper-based resources are stored in teachers’ own classroom. It is recommended to compile an inventory of all available resources and their location and include it in planning documentation so as to facilitate shared use within the business subjects department.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The business subjects department meets formally twice a year and informally as the need arises. Good records are kept of these formal meetings. Co-ordination of the department’s activities has been the responsibility of one of the teachers for a number of years. It would be prudent to rotate the post of co-ordinator among the business teachers as this would promote the development of leadership skills and expertise within the business subjects department.

A comprehensive business subjects plan has been developed. The plan has all the elements of good planning as outlined in the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) template. The business subjects department is commended on the development of its own mission statement and aims and in its setting of yearly goals that are focused on development and review of best practice in teaching and learning. The current work in progress to develop ICT resources for use in lessons and choose a platform to share resources within the business subjects department is good practice.
There are curriculum plans for each business subject offered in the school. The curriculum plan for Business Studies may need to be reviewed. Currently many of the book-keeping related topics are included in the latter half of the cycle. The introduction of book-keeping elements earlier in the cycle will facilitate the integration of book-keeping elements with the theory aspects of the curriculum. To develop the curricular section of all plans, they should articulate the learning outcomes, the resources available and the range of assessment and teaching methodologies that can be employed in the delivery of each topic. The strategies used to differentiate teaching should also be noted. A collaborative team approach will facilitate the sharing of best practice and knowledge and will ensure that students receive a similar learning experience at the various stages of their business education.

The curriculum plans for the TY business-related modules indicate the teaching methodologies that are used in the delivery of the programme. While they seek to develop key skills, it is advisable to introduce co-operative learning into the Accounting module.

Individual teacher lesson planning was good in the lessons observed.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Ten lessons were observed as part of this inspection. They included Business Studies lessons in each year of the junior cycle and Leaving Certificate lessons of Accounting, Business and Economics. A TY Enterprise lesson was also observed. Overall teaching and learning was good. There were examples of very good teaching and learning in some lessons. However in a small number of lessons students were not sufficiently challenged and were passive participants. In these lessons there was very little questioning or student interaction, too much note-taking and too slow a pace of delivery. To enhance the learning experience for all students, it is recommended that active learning methodologies, including the use of ICT and higher-order targeted student questioning, be used by all teachers in lessons where appropriate.

Most teachers used an appropriate blend of active and traditional teaching methodologies which included good use of graphic organisers, questioning, whole-class discussions, use of ICT, group and pair work. In all lessons teachers’ and students’ use of business language and terminology was good. Teachers made good references to local, national and international business people and situations. Students were encouraged to keep abreast of current economic and business developments by taking an interest in news items, researching on the internet and watching relevant television programmes. This good practice assists in the development of business knowledge, understanding and applied business skills.

Resources used in lessons included textbooks, notes, handouts and prepared ICT resources. Lessons had a good structure; learning outcomes were outlined at the start of lessons and a review of homework followed which often provided the link with previous learning. The introduction of new material matched learning outcomes and in some lessons a recap of both was conducted at the end of the lesson.

ICT was used in most lessons. It was most effective where it enabled students to experience business education as a dynamic subject with a real-life focus through the viewing of case studies, extracts of television programmes, informative and visually attractive PowerPoint and access to pertinent websites. In these lessons ICT engaged students in their learning and facilitated the sourcing of current and up-to-date relevant business knowledge. This is of particular benefit to senior cycle students. It is advisable as part of business subjects planning that experience in the
use of ICT form part of the discussion on the range of methodologies to be employed in all year groups.

Questioning was used frequently to review, clarify and elicit information. In most lessons, a range of global, targeted, higher-order and lower-order questions were employed. Students’ answers were positively affirmed. However, in a small number of lessons questions were often addressed to the whole class and the more confident students respond more readily. In the majority of lessons good questioning strategies challenged students to critically analyse, interpret, explore and apply information. There was good use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies in some lessons. These good practices should be promoted in all lessons to develop higher-order thinking skills and class discussions.

Students in TY are afforded a small taste of the three business subjects in Leaving Certificate and an Enterprise module. The content of the Enterprise programme is good. However, the length of the model at ten weeks is somewhat short for students to successfully complete a full life-cycle of a product or service. The length of the module may also deter all students from taking part in mini-company competitions. Consideration should be given to expanding the duration of the module. In a visit to an Enterprise lesson it was evident that the programme befits the ethos and aims of the TY programme.

Classroom management was good; an atmosphere of respect exists between students and teachers. Pair and group work was used in a number of lessons and is an effective way of promoting student co-operation and ownership of learning. There is scope to expand this good practice in some lessons. Students were affirmed and supported in their interactions in the classroom. Classroom seating arrangements facilitated group work and of teacher movement in the classroom to support students and observe students’ work.

ASSESSMENT

In each lesson observed homework was assigned. Good practice was noted where teachers ensured that students’ homework was completed and where evaluative comments were noted. However, there were inconsistencies in the amount and type of homework assigned to students in the same year groups, notably in junior cycle. It is desirable that all students experience an appropriately challenging level of assignments. Therefore it is recommended that the business teachers discuss and decide on what type and quantity of homework is appropriate for each subject in each year, so that all practices are consistent within the business subjects department.

Students are formally assessed twice a year. There are also informal class tests of which teachers maintain records. Students’ outcomes in tests and progression in business subjects are communicated three times a year via a written report to parents. Each year group has a parent-teacher meeting which facilitates discussion on students’ progress in business subjects.

Student attainment in state examinations is good at all levels. Results achieved in certificate examinations are analysed and compared to national norms by the principal and communicated to the general staff and board of management. It is advisable that the business subjects department conduct its own analysis and review of state examinations outcomes, as this will assist the business subjects department in its own self-evaluation.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good provision of business subjects on the school’s curriculum and there are good subject selection procedures in place.
- Teachers willingly partake in continuing professional development.
- The provision of ICT is very good in classrooms and in many lessons it was effectively used.
- A comprehensive business subjects plan has been developed, and the process of planning is one that evaluates and reflects on best practice.
- Teaching and learning was good overall with very good practices in some lessons.
- Outcomes in state examinations are good and the introduction and use of assessment for learning is good practice.

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

- The formation of mixed-ability groupings for Business Studies in at least the first two years of junior cycle and for Business in the first year of Leaving Certificate is recommended.
- All business-related resources should be catalogued and listed in planning documentation.
- The curriculum plans for each topic in every business subject should include details of its specific learning outcomes and the methodologies, resources, differentiated teaching strategies and assessment modes that can be used to support teaching and learning.
- Where appropriate in lessons there should be a blend of traditional and active learning methodologies, including the use of ICT and higher-order targeted questioning.
- The business subjects department should discuss and agree the type and quantity of homework to be assigned for each topic in each year group for all business subjects.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Business subjects 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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