

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**St. Mary's College
Rathmines Dublin 6
Roll number: 60560E**

Date of inspection: 10 December 2009



REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Mary's College, Rathmines, Dublin. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Irish and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day 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. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

First year classes are mixed ability in St. Mary's College. The students are divided into two higher-level and one ordinary-level class for second and third year based on the results of final year examinations in first year, the wishes of teachers and students and the opinions of parents. The students are divided into four groups for Transition Year (TY), and for fifth and sixth year. TY has three higher-level and one ordinary-level class. The number of higher-level classes falls to two higher-level groups in fifth year and to one in sixth year where those year groups have three ordinary-level classes. A very high percentage of students take the higher-level papers in the Junior Certificate examinations and there is a high rate of achievement. The numbers taking higher level for the Leaving Certificate are very low and somewhat disappointing especially when very high numbers of students undertake higher level Irish until TY. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish and school management prioritise this issue and discuss the ways in which higher numbers of students could be encouraged to stay in higher-level classes for the Leaving Certificate.

All the classes in junior cycle have four periods a week. It is recommended that school management examine the possibility of adding an extra period for at least one year group at junior cycle. In general, very satisfactory provision exists for TY students with four periods a week and for fifth and sixth year students with five periods a week.

There are five teachers of Irish in the school. Most of them are graduates of Irish and they have years of experience in teaching the subject. All teachers are afforded the opportunity of teaching all classes and levels and this is good practice for those who are qualified to teach up to Leaving Certificate higher level.

Twenty two students have exemptions from studying Irish out of four hundred and forty four students in the school overall. Fifteen of these are as a result of learning difficulties. Students who lived abroad until they were eleven years of age account for five exemptions and the other two are students from abroad.

It was reported that a large number of students go to the Gaeltacht at least once during their time in secondary school and it was borne out through interaction with students during the inspection that a large number had attended an Irish course. The students were confident in their ability to speak Irish as a result. It is recommended that the school continue informing parents and students about Irish and Gaeltacht courses and about the advantages of attending one of these.

Some efforts are made in the school to present Irish as a living language during Seachtain na Gaeilge. Table quizzes and a poster competition are organised as well as Irish crosswords and other games in the classes. The teachers' work in this regard is commended but it is recommended that this aspect of teaching and learning the language in the school be further developed. It is recommended that the teachers discuss the establishment of a co-curricular and extracurricular programme during the entire school year thus affording students the opportunity to experience Irish as a living language.

A small number of posters, maps and grammar charts were visible on the walls of the Irish classrooms. As most of the Irish teachers have their own rooms, it is recommended that a better effort be made to create a stimulating learning environment in the classrooms. An Irish environment facilitates acquisition of the language over time and posters and other material make useful aids which can be put to effective use in the class to foster students' understanding of and interest in learning the language.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The Irish teachers meet together formally more than once a year as a group. There were no minutes of these meetings available on the day of the inspection. It was reported that the teachers often meet together at lunch time to discuss matters arising. The most senior teacher in the Irish department is nominated as the coordinator of planning for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school, on an unofficial basis. At present there are no specific responsibilities connected to the role of coordinator.

Various sections of the plan for Irish made available during the inspection. Teachers provided notes and plans for their own classes. It was not clear if there was an agreed common plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school in general. There was a common plan for first year which is a common course taught to classes of mixed ability. The first year plan referred to the following: course aims, educational resources, content and teaching methods, systems of reporting, cooperation and assessment. Part of the plan is based on units from the textbooks and on the amount which is to be covered in each school term. The work carried out on the first year plan is commended, however, it is recommended that the plan be developed so that the year's work is laid out in the form of learning objectives as well as references to units from the textbook. It is further recommended that more details be included in the plan about teaching methodologies and various resources which could be used in class.

The first year plan should be extended, if this has not already been done, and the teachers should combine their individual class plans into a unified Irish plan for the school. This plan should include descriptions of each class, departmental approaches towards teaching methodologies, use of the target language and other organisational details of the Irish department. It is recommended that the work to be covered with the various levels and year groups be included as well as details of resources suited to a variety of class themes along with a description of methodologies and modes of assessment. It would be far more beneficial for all the Irish teachers to work together on aspects of a unified plan rather than working on plans for their own individual classes.

A plan in relation to the teaching and learning of Irish in TY was provided during the inspection. There were interesting aspects contained in the plan, such as the section referring to composing and recording short dramas. However, in general the plan was quite academic. TY affords the teachers the opportunity of teaching subjects in innovative and creative ways. It is recommended that the Irish teachers review the plan for TY and that they design an attractive, interesting and stimulating programme for teaching and learning Irish during that year so that students experience Irish as a living language.

Careful and comprehensive planning was evident in all classes observed. Pre-prepared worksheets and teachers' notes were distributed to the students as necessary.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Very good use was made of Irish as the language of classroom management, communication and instruction in most of the classes observed. Genuine efforts were made not to rely on direct translation from Irish to English to ensure that students understood the lesson content. The teachers are to be commended for their dedication and diligence in using the target language in the Irish classes. A few cases were observed however, when use was made of English on a continual basis to ensure that students understood what was going on in class. It is understood that students require explanations sometimes but one should not always depend on translation to meet this requirement. It is recommended that the teachers discuss teaching strategies for use in classes who do not understand Irish well so that they can avoid, as much as possible, the use of translation while still ensuring that students understand the content of the lesson.

A high standard of oral Irish was observed among students in some classes. In those instances, the students had an unusually high level of confidence and of presentation skills which were pleasant to see and hear. In some cases pronunciation was suitably highlighted and the students were corrected as necessary. Moreover, repetition was used to ensure that the students could correctly pronounce new words and phrases. This is good practice as it instils confidence in the students when they are sure of the correct pronunciation. It is recommended that this practice be extended to all classes. In some cases observed, the efforts made to develop and extend the students' command of Irish is commended. Higher order questions were used and the students were asked to come up with answers of a high standard. Good opportunities for communication in the target language were given to the students in some classes where pair work, games, and role playing were used so as to create opportunities for students to speak and practice Irish. It is recommended that this become normal practice in all classes.

Information and communications technology (ICT) was effectively used to teach a couple of lessons and to present material to the students in an interesting and attractive way and in some cases observed the interactive whiteboard was used. The use of ICT to provide students with very enjoyable and stimulating lessons is highly commended. A data projector was also used to support teaching and learning Irish and effective use was made of the whiteboard in all classes to clarify questions and answers and to show new material to the students. Apart from the abovementioned, there were very few other resources observed in use in the Irish classes. It is recommended that the use of ICT be extended in Irish classes. At present the Second Level Support Service for Irish offers courses in the use of ICT in the Irish classroom in education centres throughout the country. Staff members should take advantage of these courses. In addition, it is recommended that a broad range of resources be used in classes, such as music, films, extracts from television programmes, podcasts, pictures, photographs, posters and any

other material which would support the teaching and learning of the language. When learning Irish is made interesting and attractive for students and when lesson content is based on their contemporary world, the enjoyment and benefit students derive from learning the language is far greater. Effective use may be made of the abovementioned resources in contextualising lesson content for the students, especially prose and poetry.

The teachers were energetic and diligent in the Irish classes observed. They succeeded in encouraging the students to work in all classes, even those students who did not display much interest in learning the language. The teachers circulated around classrooms ensuring that work was being completed and that the students understood the tasks to be undertaken. Discipline was excellent. Use was made of humour in a number of cases observed and it was clearly an effective and inspirational tool for encouraging students to work.

In one case observed, some of the recommendations arising from in-service courses by the Second Level Support Service for Irish were put into practice in one case observed and these were effective student motivators. It is recommended that teachers discuss a range of communicative strategies and methodologies for use in class to ensure that the students get the greatest benefit from their Irish lessons.

ASSESSMENT

House examinations are organised in the school at Christmas and in the summer. Reports are sent home to parents after those examinations. Common examinations are organised in the school for the various year groups and levels and the teachers' work in this regard is commended. It was reported during the inspection that the students' communicative skills are assessed in those classes preparing for the state examinations. It is strongly recommended that this practice be extended so that formal assessment of communicative skills takes place from first year. It is essential that students understand the importance of speaking the language from the outset. Marks for oral skills should be included as a separate item in the reports sent to parents.

Substantial work was observed in copybooks and it was clear that homework is regularly assigned. When it came to corrections however, different practices were in operation. In certain instances, students' work had been very carefully corrected and in others it was insufficient. It is recommended that the teachers agree on a common approach for correcting copybooks which would be of most benefit to students.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The efforts made in the school for celebrating Seachtain na Gaeilge by organising a series of events for students are commended.
- The work carried out on the first year plan for Irish is commended as are the other planning documents observed during the inspection.
- Good comprehensive planning was evident in all the classes observed and those classes moved at a good pace as a result.
- Very good use was made of Irish as the language of management, communication and instruction in the majority of classes observed and the teachers' dedication in using the target language is commended.
- Some of the students observed had a high standard of oral Irish.

- The attempts made to develop and enrich students' Irish in some of the classes observed and the opportunities for communication in the target language provided by pair work and games are commended.
- The very effective use made of ICT as a support for teaching and learning the language in some cases observed is to be commended.
- The teachers are commended for their work in organising common examinations for the students.

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

- It is recommended that management and the teachers of Irish explore strategies to increase the number of students attempting higher level in the Leaving Certificate.
- It is recommended that the extracurricular and co-curricular programme for Irish in the school be further developed.
- It is recommended that an enjoyable learning environment be created in the Irish classrooms by displaying relevant material and student work on the walls.
- It is recommended that certain aspects of planning undertaken to date be further developed and that a common plan be compiled for teaching and learning Irish in the school including an inspirational and enjoyable plan for TY.
- It is recommended that regular opportunities for communication in the target language be created for students in all classes.
- It is recommended that a broader range of materials and resources be employed in the Irish classes.
- It is recommended that the students' communicative skills be evaluated from first year.

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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