Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

St. Mary’s Secondary School
New Ross, County Wexford
Roll Number: 63620L

Date of inspection: 30 September 2010
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 Secondary School, New Ross. 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 and to the subject teachers. 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

The classes in St. Mary’s in first year are mixed-ability classes. The students are divided between ordinary and higher-level classes for Irish and Mathematics in second year based on the results of examinations at the end of first year. All the Irish classes are timetabled concurrently in order to ensure access to the various levels for the students. It was reported that every effort is made to encourage the students to remain studying Irish at higher level as long as possible. There are three higher-level Irish classes in second and third year and one ordinary-level class. The classes are mixed ability classes in Transition Year (TY), an arrangement which is in keeping with the philosophy of Transition Year. In fifth year there are two mixed ability classes and one ordinary level class. Attempts are made to encourage the students in the two mixed classes to stay at the higher level and this approach is highly commended. In sixth year there are two higher-level classes and two ordinary-level classes. The teachers’ efforts in encouraging as many students as possible to take Irish at the higher level in the state examinations is highly commended.

Four periods per week are provided for the first-year students. Five periods per week are available for second and third-year students. Three periods per week are provided in Transition Year and five periods in fifth and sixth year. The provision for Irish on the school timetable is satisfactory in general but the school management are advised to investigate the feasibility of providing a fourth period in Transition Year if possible.

There are four teachers involved in teaching Irish in the school. All have the appropriate qualifications and classes are allocated to teachers on the basis of continuity and on a rotational basis though one teacher prefers to focus on students who have difficulties learning the language.

Forty seven students have an exemption from studying Irish, from a total enrolment of five hundred and forty seven students at present. Twenty two students from abroad have exemptions as do twenty five students with learning difficulties.

Good efforts are made in the school to develop and foster the students’ experience of Irish as a living language by organising various activities during Seachtain na Gaeilge. TY students are awarded fáinní at the certificate awards night at the end of the year. Certain efforts are made also to develop cross-curricular links with other subjects such Home Economics and
Music. This cross-curricular work could be built on gradually and links established between learning Irish and other subjects. It was reported that there is a cúinne na Gaeilge in the canteen at lunchtime but it is rarely used except before the oral examination for sixth year. The work being done to promote Irish in the school is commended. However, it is recommended that this work be built upon by organising a programme of interesting activities and spoken Irish events throughout the whole school year. Input could be sought from students, especially those in Transition Year, as well as teachers in the other subject areas about cross-curricular links. It is also recommended that cúinne na Gaeilge be developed and that the corner be available for a specific year group each day or each week and that leaders be appointed to it under the direction of the Irish teachers and the management. Assistance could be provided by students who act as leaders in Gaeltacht colleges or even those who have spent some time on these courses. Some advice was given during the inspection about visitors who could be invited to the school as well as advice about possible activities which could be organised. An attractive extra-curricular and cross-curricular programme for Irish strengthens the teachers’ efforts in the classrooms and helps greatly to develop the language’s profile in the school among the students themselves.

It was reported that an annual budget is provided to buy resources for the teaching and learning of Irish. The Irish teachers have an annual meeting to discuss their requirements. It is recommended that a list be compiled of the resources available for teaching the language at the moment and that an accurate up-to-date list be part of the plan for Irish. Broadband is now available throughout the school. Laptop computers and data projectors are available in some classrooms at the moment and it is intended that such will be provided in each room before the end of 2010. It was reported that a some Irish teachers had done the course in information and communications technology (ICT) provided by the Second Level Support Service for Irish, as preparation for the use of ICT in the classroom. The teachers’ diligence in this respect is commended and it is recommended that continuous professional development continue in this area. A visit from the Service to the school could be sought in the third term, to receive more assistance in this highly important area.

**Planning and Preparation**

The teachers meet as a group once per term and more often on an informal basis. Minutes of these meetings are available in Irish and they indicate that a wide range of subjects are discussed during the meetings including the allocation of classes, students changing levels, examination results, books, the Transition Year visit to the Gaeltacht, the oral examination and school activities dealing with Irish. A coordinator of planning for teaching and learning of the language is nominated from among the teachers each year. This approach is greatly commended as it gives each teacher the chance to take the lead in developing Irish in the school.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish was provided during the inspection. The plan covered the aims and objectives of the Irish department, the layout of classes, teaching methods, resources for teaching the language and assessment methods. Work schemes were also provided based on the various topics to be covered and laid out on the basis of school terms. Aspects of grammar to be covered with different year groups and aspects of Irish culture are mentioned. The work completed to date on planning in the Irish department is commended. It is recommended, however, that the plan be developed further and that the methodologies, use of resources and teaching methods are integrated into the work schemes. The use of ICT in the Irish classroom should form part of the plan for the teaching and learning of the language.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in the Transition Year was provided during the inspection visit. It is clear from the plan that good efforts are made to follow a broad and interesting programme in Irish during Transition Year. The work completed on the plan is
commended. It should be ensured, however, that emphasis be placed on Irish as a contemporary language as well as investigating Irish as an ancient Celtic language.

There was comprehensive planning for all the classes observed. Notes and worksheets were prepared for distribution to students in the classes.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The use of Irish as the language of management, teaching and communication was very good in the vast majority of classes observed and the teachers’ commitment to the use of the target language during the Irish lessons is commended. One case was observed, however, in which too much translation from Irish to English was used in order to ensure the students’ understanding of the lesson material. It is recommended that the Irish teachers have an agreed policy to avoid translation except where the students would have a real difficulty in understanding a particular aspect of the lesson. Various strategies can be used to avoid the use of translation and these strategies should be employed as appropriate.

Group work and pair work was used in certain classes observed and the use of such strategies is recommended to facilitate the speaking of Irish among the students. It should be ensured, however, that the aim of the activity is being achieved, i.e. that the students have the chance to use the target language in the class. Activities such as writing exercises are not the same as communications strategies. Every student should have the chance to speak Irish for a while in each class, during different class activities, apart from answering the teachers’ questions.

A certain number of resources were observed in use in the Irish classes to support learning and the students’ understanding of the lesson content, including images displayed on the overhead projector, worksheets, charts and the whiteboard. Though the use of these resources is commended a much wider range of resources must be used to make the content of lessons interesting and relevant to students and to contextualise the literature courses in a contemporary way. It is recommended that use be made of the internet, music, photographs, pictures, podcasts, films, television programmes and DVDs. The Irish-language communications media, including TG4, magazines, newspapers and Raidió na Gaeltachta are wonderful resources and they should be used regularly.

Questioning was used continuously during the lessons observed, including closed questions and open questions. Complete sentences were sought as answers to questions, as opposed to single words, most of the time and this approach is highly commended. Students need to be given additional experience of the syntax of Irish by composing sentences, even very simple ones, on a regular basis.

Best teaching practice was observed in the lessons where teachers used stimulating approaches. In one case students were asked to illustrate images from a poem on the course as pictures, which encouraged them to consider the poem’s meaning and themes. In another case the students were put to work in pairs on practising the verbs in various tenses. The implementation of recommendations from the Second Level Support Service for Irish in-service courses in a couple of the lessons observed was highlighted and this is highly commended.

Grammatical errors and pronunciation errors were corrected on a regular basis in a good many of the classes observed. It is recommended that this approach apply in all the Irish classes. There was very strong emphasis on the correct basic structures of the language during one lesson observed and the familiarity of the students with the correct use of the copula “Is” was highlighted.
Teachers moved around the classrooms offering encouragement and support to the students. All the students were working diligently during the lessons and discipline was excellent. The teachers showed patience and understanding with students who had difficulties with learning the language and this approach is commended.

**ASSESSMENT**

In-school examinations are organised twice a year at Christmas and in the summer. Continuous assessment applies in the first-year classes. Reports are sent to parents after these examinations. Parents are also kept informed via parent-teacher meetings and via the use of the school diary.

The students’ communications skills in Irish are assessed during Transition Year when they undergo an oral examination for the Fáinne. Oral examinations are set for fifth and sixth years also and this approach is commended. It was reported that the school management and teachers are investigating at present the possibilities of trying the optional oral examination for the Junior Certificate. It is recommended that each student in the school undergo an oral examination from first year onwards. In addition, the students’ parents need to be informed about the changes in the Irish examination in the state examinations and reminded of the additional emphasis on the spoken language in these examinations. It is recommended that the results of the oral examinations be shown as a separate item in the reports sent to parents.

It was clear from the copybooks observed that homework is regularly assigned and corrected. There was a considerable amount of written work to be seen in the copybooks. There was a variance of practice, however, in the correction of copybooks. Some of the copybooks were corrected extremely carefully, with a mark or grade and reference to the quality of work but it was not clear in other cases who corrected the work - whether it was the teacher or if peer correction was employed. The teachers are advised to discuss a copybook correction system which would ensure that the students learn from their mistakes. In certain cases the correct answers could be displayed on a screen in the class so that, if peer correction is used, it is done correctly.

It was reported that an annual analysis is done in relation to the state examinations results and this is a good practice. The number of students taking the higher-level papers in the state examinations at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate levels is quite satisfactory and the students’ attainments at both levels are good.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school’s approach to mixed-ability classes in Irish in fifth year in order to encourage as many students as possible to attempt higher level in sixth year is commended.
- The teachers’ efforts in celebrating Seachtain na Gaeilge as well as other efforts to raise the profile of Irish in the school are commended.
- The work completed to date on planning for teaching and learning the language in the school is commended.
- The way in which pair work and group work was used in some classes observed to create communications opportunities for students is commendable.
- Some examples of best practice in relation to teaching were observed in the Irish classes.
- The number of students taking Irish at higher level in the state examinations is good and the attainment in those examinations is satisfactory also.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- The school management are advised to investigate the possibility of providing an additional period per week for Irish in Transition Year.
- It is recommended that an extra-curricular and cross-curricular programme be planned for Irish to support learning the language in the classrooms.
- It is recommended that a list of the resources and materials available for teaching and learning of Irish be compiled and available as part of the plan for Irish in the school.
- It is recommended that details of methodologies and use of resources be integrated into the work schemes. It is recommended that the use of ICT in the teaching of Irish be shown in the plan for Irish and also in the work schemes.
- It is recommended that a wider range of resources be used in the Irish classes.
- It is recommended that the students’ communications skills be assessed from first year onwards.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the Irish teachers and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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