Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Castlepollard Community College
County Westmeath
Roll number: 71420W

Date of inspection: 27 January 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING OF IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Castlepollard Community College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of the teaching and learning of 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 of the school 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

Castlepollard Community College is involved in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme. The last subject inspection of Irish in the school was carried out in 2004.

Although there is good support for Irish in the school, there are weaknesses in some aspects of the provision. A new senior management team was appointed in the school at the start of the current school year and they recognise that there are areas for development that must be focussed on.

The Irish teaching team comprises two teachers one of whom teaches all but one class group. This teacher has gained long teaching experience, has appropriate qualifications and a very good level of competence in oral Irish. The second teacher has neither Irish as a degree subject nor sufficient competence in oral Irish to teach the language. The management recognises that this is not a satisfactory situation and that it is always necessary to take account of a teacher’s qualifications and competence in Irish when allocating classes. Management stated that the current arrangement would be reviewed for the coming school year. The teacher in question has been advised to take advantage, in the interim, of the services available to improve his/her language skills.

A very good provision of aids and resources is available for the teaching and learning of Irish. Among these are a laptop for every teacher, a data-projector which is permanently based in one of the dedicated rooms for Irish, storage space and a collection of reference books and reading material in Irish for the students. Besides, one of the teachers has developed an impressive range of teaching and learning resources in various media, to adapt subject content to the needs of the students in the school. This work is really praiseworthy. To facilitate planning for and maintenance of the aids and resources provided, it is recommended that an inventory of what is already available be drawn up and kept in the subject plan.
The number of students availing of the second-level provision in the school is low and the vast majority of the students, at both cycles, take Irish at ordinary level. There is one class group in first year, second year and in fourth year (first year of the established Leaving Certificate) which results in these classes being of mixed ability. The students are divided into two groups in each of the year groups taking the certificate examinations this year. The amount of time provided for Irish on the school timetable is quite meagre. Four class periods per week is the allocation for all junior cycle classes and for fourth year. Furthermore, the foundation-level students in fifth year (second year of the established Leaving Certificate) have only three class periods per week. In 2004 it was recommended that the number of class periods for Irish in junior cycle be augmented and it is again recommended that an absolute minimum of one extra class period for one year of the cycle be provided. It is vital that a fifth period be allocated to fourth-year students and extra time should also be provided for students taking the foundation level because it is important that a regular input be available to them. All classes have a single Irish class per day, a praiseworthy distribution of the time allocated.

One fifth of the total enrolment at second level is exempt from the study of Irish. Half of these students have recognised learning difficulties. The management schedules learning support classes, resource classes, or classes in English as an additional language, to coincide with Irish classes, as far as possible. This is commended. As observed in the classes, some students who have exemptions, but are interested in the language, are studying Irish. Great credit is due to the teachers for providing the opportunity and support offered these students in learning the language.

The management provides professional development opportunities for the teachers, on a whole-school basis, and support is offered to facilitate their attendance at workshops offered by the Second Level Support Service for Irish.

As previously reported, although the school and its Irish teaching team is small, the teachers succeed, with the support of management, in providing many opportunities for the students to extend their experience of the Irish language and culture. Seachtain na Gaeilge (Irish Week) is celebrated, Gaeltacht scholarships are made available, and students are taken to attend plays based on their courses of study, as appropriate. The department of Irish is highly commended for the work done in this area and the management deserves great credit for its support. Details of the various co-curricular and extra-curricular events provided should be included in the subject plan.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The teacher who is permanently in the department of Irish acts as co-ordinator and most of the planning work is undertaken by this teacher. It is evident that the recommendation made in the last evaluation report regarding developing a plan for Irish was acted on and a plan of good quality was devised. The teachers recognise that this work is a continuous process. The department holds regular meetings, agendas are set out and minutes kept: this is good practice. The management made a start on convening a meeting of all language teachers earlier in the school year, to discuss subject planning. This approach, which helps to share good practice, opinions and experience across the language curricula, is highly commended. It is a whole-school objective to raise student expectations and the department of Irish, too, is working towards this.

As recommended, the subject plans for the various year groups were laid out on a term by term basis. When the plans for the different year groups are being reviewed, it is recommended that some emendations be made to the template being used so that it will be more suited to the language. It is recommended that the column headings in use at present be revised and that extra
columns be included as appropriate, specifying the expected learning outcomes, the language functions to be covered, and the teaching and learning methodologies and strategies to be used to achieve the learning outcomes. Language awareness and syntax should be stressed under the guidance of the language functions, as mentioned in the syllabuses, when the material is being organised in the plan. In addition, the area of assessment should give due recognition to the assessment requirements of the various language skills. It should be remembered that the plans are working documents and any planned monitoring and review of those plans should be mentioned in the documentation. It is also recommended that the management and general classroom language the students would need be part of the first year Irish programme.

The planning and preparation undertaken for all classes was of very good quality. Individual planning based on the subject department’s plan was done in one case for the various year groups. This is praiseworthy and every teacher should follow this practice. Particularly impressive was the work done in one case in developing resource material such as worksheets and PowerPoint slides for the different classes, to adapt the material to the students’ needs.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The teaching and learning of Irish was of good quality. A roll was called and answered at the start of classes, a few minutes were spent discussing the weather in the majority of cases and the objectives of the classes were communicated to the students. These practices are truly commendable. In accord with the recommendation made regarding the inclusion of the expected learning outcomes in the plan, it is recommended that, when sharing these with the students in class, the teachers should use language that would let the students know what they would be able to do at the end of class.

The planning done ensured that the class work was very well structured. The development of the students’ ability in oral Irish was appropriately emphasised. Particularly praiseworthy was the work being done in the junior classes. In these cases, very effective use was made of images on PowerPoint slides to revise vocabulary and help the students to understand new vocabulary. The work done on the correct use of tenses and of the copula is highly commended. Also praiseworthy are examples observed of opportunities created for the students, through the use of various tasks requiring them to question one another in pairs, in both cycles. There is scope to further develop such methodologies, to develop co-operative learning among students and to give them greater responsibility for their learning.

A very good example of differentiation was observed, where two groups in a class were preparing for an examination at different levels. Work common to the two groups was undertaken first and different tasks were then set for the students to complete. When assigning tasks, a time limit should be communicated to the students and adhered to. Differentiation should be further developed also, to ensure an appropriate learning challenge for the students, according to their ability, by, for example, preparing questions at different levels for different groups of students, on the content of the class.

Teachers ensured that all students participated in all classes and good use was made of questioning to that end. There was a very positive atmosphere in all the classes and the students were actively involved in their learning. Most of the students were making satisfactory progress in their learning.
In most of the classes, there was very good use of Irish as the language of instruction and class management. It is very important to use the target language consistently because the students are entirely dependent on the input they receive in the language at school and because it accords with the basic principles of the syllabuses. In certain cases, the teachers succeeded in avoiding overuse of translation to English by, for example, adapting their questions, linking the subject matter to the students’ own experience and by making clever use of the aids and resources available in the classroom.

**ASSESSMENT**

The school has an assessment policy and a draft homework policy and the teachers of Irish implement both. The draft homework policy, which is to be approved by the board shortly, is of a very good standard. It specifies objectives and the responsibilities of all the partners in implementing it and indicates the various kinds of homework tasks that could be assigned to support the development of the different language skills.

An appropriate range of assessment modes is used in the case of the majority of class groups. The teachers realise that all the language skills should be taken into account in the assessment of every class. Such practice, in which account is taken of all the language skills in the assessment, accords closely with the aims and objectives of the syllabuses. As part of the extra development recommended to be undertaken on the subject plan, it is recommended that the expected learning outcomes be used as criteria for the assessment.

Examples of students’ journals, copybooks and folders were reviewed. Homework is regularly assigned and corrected. It was noticed that much of the work was based on translation tasks. Although English, as the mother-tongue of the students, has a role in the teaching of grammar, the number of tasks based on translation should be reduced. It is worth remembering that the students will not be required to do translation in the certificate examinations. There were dates and notes of praise on the samples of students’ work. In accord with the input the teachers got earlier in the year on Assessment for Learning (AfL), it is recommended that the principles involved in it be taken into account when the teachers are agreeing an approach to corrections. It would be worth taking such principles into account also in the draft homework policy. Further information of AfL can be accessed at [www.action.ncca.ie/ga/afl](http://www.action.ncca.ie/ga/afl).

The teachers are commended for the very good records they keep on the different examinations taken by the students and on their achievements in those exams. A start was made this year on analysing student results in the certificate examinations. This development is praiseworthy. The management and teachers are also commended for the development, as part of the DEIS scheme, on keeping a continuous account of the learning progress being made by every student. The results of any analysis done should be kept in the subject plan and used when the plan is being reviewed.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a very good provision of aids and resources for the teaching and learning of Irish, among them ICT resources, and a good range of teaching and learning resources in
various media has been developed by one of the teachers, to adapt the material to the students in the school.

- Many opportunities are provided to broaden the students’ experience of the Irish language and culture.
- The subject plan for Irish was of good quality and the teachers recognise that this work is a continuous process.
- It is a whole-school objective to raise student expectations and the department of Irish is also working towards this.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good. The students’ oral ability in Irish was appropriately stressed, work was undertaken on the correct usage of tenses and of the copula and opportunities were created for students to question one another.
- The draft homework policy, to be approved shortly by the board, was of a very good standard and homework is regularly set and corrected.
- Very good records are kept of students’ achievements in the various tests they take and a start has been made on analysing student achievements in the certificate examinations.

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

- It is recommended, as already done in 2004, that the number of class periods provided for Irish at junior cycle be increased and that an extra period be allocated to the provision in the case of the first year of the established Leaving Certificate also.
- It is recommended that, when allocating classes to teachers, the management ensure that the teachers’ qualifications and ability in oral Irish are satisfactory.
- It is recommended that the expected learning outcomes, the language functions and the teaching and learning methodologies and strategies to be used, be included in the subject plans for the various year groups.
- It is recommended that expectations regarding what they themselves would be able to do by the end of class be shared with the students and that differentiation and co-operative learning be further developed.
- It is recommended, as is already the norm in certain classes, that it be the normal practice to assess the four main language skills in the case of each class group.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Irish 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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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

1. The management is in the process of planning the timetabling process to allow for a greater allocation of class periods per week to Irish, both at junior and senior cycle.
2. An additional teacher of Irish will be appointed to the school in September 2010.
3. Subject planning in September will take into account the recommendations made in this report.