An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed / Gaelcholáiste na Siúire
Thurles, County Tipperary
Roll number: 72490C

Date of inspection: 21 April 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed / Gaelcholáiste na Siúire. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching 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 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

Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed / Gaelcholáiste na Siúire is a community college which incorporates an Aonad LánGhaeilge (an all-Irish Unit). The Aonad LánGhaeilge is a most valuable resource for the college and for the teachers of Irish as it creates a small Irish community within the school. It also indicates that a significant number of members of the teaching staff are proficient in Irish, which consequently creates possibilities for cross-curricular links. It was stated that the number of students in the school undertaking Irish-medium education has decreased in recent years. At the time of the inspection visit various parties from the area who are especially interested in Irish-medium schooling had come together on a formal basis to address this particular issue.

The timetabled provision for Irish is strongly supportive of learning and teaching. All students have regular contact with the target language. Students are allocated to classes in order to ensure that students of different abilities are all learning together. This approach is commended.

A total of forty-one students have an exemption from studying Irish. Thirty of these students have learning difficulties and the remainder are students who have received their early education outside the state. Some of these students take part in the Irish classes and teachers who encourage this participation are commended. It is recommended that all information relating to exemptions should be stored electronically so that details may be updated as is necessary. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to include a copy of this document in the subject plan for Irish.

The majority of teachers of Irish have their own dedicated classrooms located in the Aonad LánGhaeilge. In addition to the classrooms there are two extra rooms; one of these facilitates small groups and the other is used as an office and as a central store for resources. Teachers have made efforts to create a print-rich environment in the rooms through the display of relevant points
of information and examples of student work. Despite these efforts, it is considered that many of these rooms would benefit from a more modern appearance. Provision of easy access to information and communications technology (ICT) is strongly recommended in order to facilitate its widespread use. To this end the rooms should be equipped appropriately. It is very useful to have the two additional rooms available and, if the Aonad LánGhaeilge is to remain in this location, it is recommended that the extra rooms be fitted out so that the aids and resources stored there are easily accessible to everyone. It would be a good idea to furnish one of these rooms as a meeting room for parents of students in the Aonad, for visitors and for other groups who work to promote Irish in the area.

Teachers are very aware of the importance of continuing professional development (CPD) and they welcome opportunities to attend courses which will enhance their skills as teachers. They consider the workshops organised jointly with the local schools in the town to be very helpful since they provide an option for them to attend the workshops which are most appropriate to their own professional needs. Teachers regard the content of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) courses to be most useful and at the time of the inspection teachers were looking forward to the visit of one of the SLSS Regional Officers to the school. In the future when specific supports such as this are available to teachers, it is recommended that they focus on two particular aspects of their practice: (a) to ‘stretch’ students in the Aonad LánGhaeilge to the extent where they consider the content of Irish lessons to be challenging and (b) how to create as many opportunities as possible for interaction among students of Irish.

It was reported that Seachtain na Gaeilge, when various competitions are organised, is an significant event on the school calendar. It would be worthwhile for teachers to reflect on the benefits to be gained from entering students for some of the national competitions organised during the school year. Participation in short film, literature or debating competitions would enhance the standing of Irish in the school. Such competitions could frequently be used as content material for class, an approach which would introduce variety into the study of Irish for students. A number of students attend courses in the Gaeltacht during the summer and North Tipperary Vocational Education Committee (VEC) provides two scholarships each year to encourage students to participate. It is recommended that regular use be made of the Irish notice board in the Assembly Hall where every event or achievement, no matter how small, relating to Irish would be publicised, perhaps using photographs of the occasions.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The coordinator for Irish is selected on a rotational basis, an arrangement that is commended. Members of the department have collected a large number of documents and these are available in different folders. With regard to the subject development plan, the template provided by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) is filled in by hand each year. Teachers are reminded that this template is merely a guide and that the subject plan should be adapted to the context in which they work. It is recommended that a copy of the plan be made available electronically and a hardcopy stored in a separate folder. Furthermore it is recommended that individual folders or files be maintained for correspondence, resources, schemes of work and documentation relating to the Aonad LánGhaeilge. In addition, use should be made of the shelves and the cupboards in the extra rooms to store Irish syllabuses and other publications.

The schemes of work set out for the different year groups were reviewed. It was noted that, in certain cases, the links between activities and the topics to be covered were identified. This is an excellent idea and it would benefit all teachers to use the same framework in the schemes they set
out for each year group. In addition to creating as many opportunities as possible for the use of ICT, teachers when designing these activities, should be mindful of the importance of creating a balance between the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. With regard to the scheme for transition year (TY), the emphasis placed on cross-curricular links is commended and it is recommended that a functional language programme be set out which would bring more formality to the those links which develop the language, research, presentation and interpersonal skills of students.

The school has established a link with St Patrick’s College, a third level institute in the town. This year a work-shadowing week was arranged when trainee teachers came from the institute to the school on teaching practice. Members of the department are commended for facilitating the development of teaching skills of these third-level students. This link offers numerous possibilities to enhance the teaching skills of all the teachers. For example, a team-teaching scheme could be established whereby a formal review of classroom practices could be carried out. It is suggested that such a scheme would stimulate resurgence in the subject development planning process and would encourage even further cooperation among teachers of Irish.

All teachers had made satisfactory preparation for the lessons observed. In certain cases, lessons were set out so as to ensure that students were fully engaged from beginning to end of the lesson. Particular commendation is due to these teachers. In other instances however, it was apparent that teachers could demand greater effort from students through setting them more varied and more challenging tasks. Teachers are encouraged to identify, in advance, the language elements students will acquire during the lesson and to devise appropriate tasks which will enable students to practise, repeat and revise the newly acquired phrases and vocabulary.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Irish was the primary language in use in the lessons observed in so far as teachers addressed students in Irish. Many students had a reasonably good understanding of what the teacher said and some students made commendable efforts to speak in Irish. Opportunities for students to speak Irish were created primarily by open discussion or direct questioning. The terminology, relating to a literary work, which one group of students had acquired was particularly noteworthy. This vocabulary and the competence of the students to use it during the comprehensive oral discussion that ensued on that same literary piece were considerable. This teacher had achieved significant success in extending the students’ vocabulary range and in enriching their Irish. It would be most beneficial if all teachers were to set students with high levels of ability the challenge of improving the accuracy and richness of their Irish.

A positive, friendly atmosphere prevailed in all Irish lessons observed and, on the whole, good work was in progress. Effective learning outcomes were most evident in lessons where students were set a variety of activities. It was common practice for some teachers to create regular opportunities for student interaction and these students gained significant benefit and enjoyment from working collaboratively. It is recommended that more widespread use be made, throughout the entire lesson, of pair work and other strategies which facilitate communication among students. The understanding shown by one particular teacher of the different abilities of the students in her care was noted. The differentiated practices used during this lesson whereby tasks were designed so that every student was enabled to make progress, are commended.

Teachers are commended for their efforts in trying to avoid the use of English in class, especially when explaining vocabulary. To this end, effective use was made of visual resources such as
The examples of student work displayed in the classroom were also very helpful for students in recalling previously acquired elements of the language. Teachers are commended for the attractive atmosphere created in their classrooms. However, it is felt that more widespread use should be made of modern equipment such as computers, data projectors, DVDs and mp3 players. Students live in a technological era which teachers must engage with if they wish to motivate their students to participate.

ASSESSMENT

The school operates a homework policy. The guidance given in this policy to teachers regarding the type and regularity of homework assignment was noted. Emphasis is placed also on giving worthwhile feedback to students and this is commended. Students had fulfilled a variety of tasks as homework in so far as they had completed written tasks of different types in their copybooks. In addition many students had completed a good number of listening tests. Teachers are asked to consider other homework tasks which would give students more practice in the four skills. There are many ideas and sample exercises available on websites such as www.slss.ie/gaeilge or www.scoilnet.ie

Student progress is formally assessed by class tests and house examinations. These are chiefly written tests. Teachers are reminded of the increase in marks to be allocated to oral examinations in the certificate examinations and the need therefore to amend their assessment system. Short oral examinations could also be administered to students on a regular basis in addition to awarding a mark for their efforts to speak Irish in class. Such a system of continuous assessment would provide excellent motivation for students to speak Irish.

 Teachers maintain records of student attendance and achievement in their diaries. Reports are sent home twice a year in order to keep parents informed of student progress. In addition, parent-teacher meetings are held once a year.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Timetabled provision supports the study of Irish in the school.
- Efforts have been made to create a stimulating learning environment.
- Some of the schemes of work identify the learning activities that match the topics to be covered.
- Irish was the principal language in use in the lessons observed.
- Worthwhile work was in progress in the classes.
- A positive, collaborative atmosphere was evident in the classes observed.
- Effective use was made of visual resources.
- A number of opportunities for students to speak Irish were created.
- The school operates a system of assessment which keeps participants informed of student progress.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• It is recommended that efforts to enhance the status of Irish in the school be continued.
• It is recommended that more formality be introduced into the subject development planning process.
• It is recommended that more widespread use be made of ICT by students and teachers.
• It is recommended that greater use be made of teaching, learning and assessment practices that create balance between the four language skills.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Irish and with the principal at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.
Appendix

School Response to the Report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The report is comprehensive and accurate. We would like to compliment the Inspector on her engagement with Senior Management and the Gaeilge Department thus ensuring a positive and beneficial experience for all involved.

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

- The teachers have downloaded Wingléacht and 6th year students have availed of the programme in researching vocabulary.
- Subject Department team will be formalised and the teachers have begun to input minutes of meetings, exemption lists, relevant documentation, subject plans in electronic format.
- Transition year students will use ICT in research for projects and become familiar with the many websites there are “As Gaeilge” to access information.
- The Gaeilge Department has requested funds to fit out the Gaeilge room with digital projector and laptop to facilitate learning.