

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Irish  
REPORT**

**Clongowes Wood College  
Naas, County Kildare  
Roll number: 61720F**

**Date of inspection: 28 April 2010**



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS  
AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA** | **DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION  
AND SCIENCE**

**REPORT**  
**ON**  
**THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Clongowes Wood College. 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 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 the deputy principal. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Irish enjoys a very high status in the school and a very good level of provision and support is allocated to it in the school curriculum. The Irish teaching team consists of five teachers all of whom have Irish to degree level and the great majority of whom have a very good level of proficiency in speaking the language. The management provides a high level of support for the continuing professional development of teachers both in the subject itself and in other areas of education which benefit teaching and learning in the school. As indicated by their timetables, teachers are given opportunities of teaching Irish at the various levels in both cycles. This is good practice.

The school has embraced the good practice of assigning students to mixed-ability classes at the beginning of first year and their progress is carefully monitored. It was reported that they are sometimes re-assigned to streamed classes during the first term, about the time of the mid-term break. This year, for example, students were retained in mixed-ability classes for the full year, which is praiseworthy. In second year and third year, two higher level mixed-ability classes are formed, together with one other class group in which students study the subject at ordinary level. Students are divided into streamed classes in senior cycle, including Transition Year. However, the streamed approach is not in keeping with the philosophy of the Transition Year programme. It is recommended that this practice be reviewed.

The time allocation for Irish on the school timetable and the distribution of classes throughout the week are very good in respect of all classes. Class periods are timetabled contemporaneously in the case of all year groups. This arrangement facilitates making available to students a class at a level which best meets their needs.

A very high level of provision is made for teaching aids and resources for the subject. A substantial collection of reading and reference books in Irish, as well as newspapers, are made available to the students in the school library, the stock of which is being augmented on an on-going basis. Almost all teachers have their own assigned classrooms and these are well equipped.

Posters, printed matter and other materials relating to Irish language and culture were on display in the classrooms. These displays should be enhanced by adding further examples of the students' own work.

It was reported that nineteen per cent of the students enrolled are exempt from the study of Irish. The management acknowledges that this percentage is very high. Almost half of these students were of foreign extraction or had returned to Ireland from abroad. In keeping with good practice, learning support classes for eligible students are timetabled to coincide with the Irish classes.

Events and competitions, of a very high standard and having a very high status, are made available for the participation of students during the school year. These enhance greatly the status of the subject and extend substantially the experience of students of using Irish outside of formal classes. Teachers and management are to be congratulated on their work in this area. There is a strong tradition in the school of participating in debates and in national and in-school competitions which create opportunities for the students to demonstrate their competence in the language and of developing it further. In addition, specific recognition is given to the students' capacities in writing by means of competitions such as *Duais Bhonn an Reachtair* (the Rector's Medal Award).

#### **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The Irish department convenes meetings regularly. The duties of co-ordinator, a position which is filled in turn by the teachers, are clearly specified. Copies of minutes were not available but a yearly plan for the meetings, incorporating the items that were to be debated at each, was viewed. While the subject plan contains a general policy on teaching methods, it was indicated that neither methodologies nor teaching and learning strategies are discussed at the meetings. In the interest of sharing experience and good practice in this area, it is recommended that methodologies and teaching and learning strategies, including assessment, be put on the agenda for the meetings. In addition, it would be worthwhile arranging that the teachers who attend an in-service course outside of school would present a report on the workshop or in-service session at a departmental meeting. In view of the fact that class periods are timetabled contemporaneously, teachers could avail of this arrangement to practise team teaching and to try out and share teaching practices.

The plan for Irish is of very good quality. It incorporates an appropriate range of policies or guidelines laid out by the department in order to support the implementation of the Irish curriculum in the school and is entitled "*Plean uile-scoile i leith na Gaeilge*" (A Whole-School Plan for Irish", together with long-term plans for the subject in all year groups. However, the same plan covers both second year and third year and makes no differentiation for the development of learning in these two years. One of the main strengths attaching to these plans is the content set out in them in relation to the teaching of grammar. The staff is to be commended on furnishing a common plan for first year, an approach which creates an opportunity for agreeing on learning objectives and assessment criteria.

It is recommended that a short-term plan, laid out on a termly basis for each level in every year group, be drawn up. It is recommended that use would be made of a template which, in addition to naming the subject content or the item from literature being considered, would also include a description of the expected learning outcomes. These should be based on the language functions listed in the syllabuses and on the main language skills to be developed. They should include an account of the methodologies and the teaching strategies to be employed to achieve the learning outcomes, and of the teaching aids and resources drawn on in support of the work. In addition, the

plans should outline the thematic integration of the development of the language skills and of the various aspects of the courses.

The plan for Irish in Transition Year should be developed comprehensively. The aims laid down are good. It is commendable that the programme is agreed with the students and that it is reviewed each term. The content agreed upon with the students should be noted in the document. As matters stand, the same plan applies to both higher level and ordinary level, despite the classes being streamed. If the plan were to contain a description of subject content, including the subject matter of projects, together with a differentiation in respect of the learning objectives, it would be entirely suitable for mixed-ability classes. The plan gives no indication of how cross-curricular learning is to be developed, a central element of the Transition Year programme.

Very good planning and preparation had been undertaken for the majority of classes observed. In the case of a minority of classes, it is recommended that much more careful planning be done for the tasks to be completed by the students, in order to ensure the efficient use of time in the interest of learning.

#### **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning is a significant strength in this school. It was apparent in almost all classes that the teachers had very high expectations of their students', in keeping with their capacities, as regards learning.

There was very good continuity between the classes observed and the preceding classes. At the beginning of class, homework was checked or previous learning was revised by means of oral questioning and, in certain instances, a conversation on general topics was initiated. In the case of most classes, the students were informed of what the subject matter was to be and, in some cases, what tasks or activities were to be undertaken. It is recommended that the implementation of this practice would be extended more widely.

In most classes an appropriate range of methodologies and teaching strategies was practised. In these cases, a variety of tasks based on the various language skills was completed and these were linked by a common theme. This is a very good practice which creates opportunities for integrating the development of the different language skills and for responding to the diverse learning styles of the students. Pair work and group work were introduced in a number of classes observed but there is further scope for extending the use of both techniques. However, it will be necessary to pay greater attention to structuring the task, to specifying the roles of participants as was done in some classes, and to gathering feedback from the groups.

One exemplary instance was observed of the use of ICT as a means of facilitating the students' learning. In this case, students made a presentation to the class of material which they had put on *PowerPoint* slides. While one student made the presentation, his classmates were required to prepare questions to be put to him at the end. This generated many opportunities for the students of using the language.

In keeping with the planning for the subject, the students' attention was drawn to grammar as was appropriate in the classes. A very good example of the formal teaching of grammar was observed. The majority of students were well capable of taking part and they questioned the teacher on the rules and the examples. While the written tasks to be completed by the students so as to consolidate learning are commendable, and while they created opportunities for the students to

reflect on their learning, it would be worthwhile basing one of the tasks to be done during class on a reading or listening text, for example.

Irish was used as the language of teaching, communication and management in all classes and only Irish was to be heard in almost all classes. In a small number of classes, the teachers made use of a vocabulary of a very high standard which posed appropriate challenges in learning and contributed to the richness of the students' language. The implementation of this practice should be extended. In one class, however, translation was overused and it is recommended that alternative strategies would be employed instead, as was done in other classes. As is laid down in the departmental plan, care is taken with developing the students' cultural awareness, and singing is utilised, as was demonstrated in one of the classes observed, as is an extensive array of other resources in order to assist this learning.

Very productive use was made of questioning in the majority of classes. Where a range of questions was employed ensuring that open questions were posed as an appropriate challenge to students, this constituted excellent practice.

A very strong work ethic characterised the students in all the classes observed. The majority of them were making very good progress in their learning. Students in almost all classes demonstrated a very high level of competence in the language.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The Irish department has identified and developed very effective assessment practices in various areas, but it is essential that they would be implemented on a whole-department basis. The school has assessment and homework policies and these have been adapted to the requirements of the subject by the department. The students' progress is regularly assessed and carefully monitored. Appropriate methods of assessment are used in the case of most classes. In these cases the four main language skills are included in the assessment. It is recommended that this good practice, which closely reflects the aims and objectives of the syllabuses, be adopted as common practice across the department and that the policy would be revised accordingly.

While certain class groups study the subject at the same level in different year groups, and while common plans have been prepared, a common examination is not always administered. It is recommended that the department would review this practice. As regards assessment in Transition Year, it was intimated that an investigation is in train as to the feasibility of giving the students an opportunity of attaining the European Certificate in Irish. They would benefit from a system such as this, which would offer them the opportunity of identifying learning objectives and of developing their understanding of themselves as language learners and their skills as independent learners.

The school's homework policy is of very good quality. In accordance with this policy, and as observed during the evaluation, homework is regularly set and corrected. It is recommended that a description of the kinds of corrections to be done should be included in the next revision of the adaptation of the school's policy made by the Irish department. Very effective correction practices were noted in samples of copy books examined in senior cycle classes. In these cases, the way in which marks had been earned was clearly indicated to the students and they were given guidance as to the aspects which would need to be improved if they were to make better progress. Guidelines on this approach to correction which is supportive of learning should be

incorporated into the department's policies. It was clear from a review of the copy books that students receive generous praise for their work.

Very detailed and very regular records are kept of the students' achievements and reports are regularly issued to parents. Attainments in the in-house and certificate examinations are analysed and used as a basis for the review of teaching and learning. The students' levels of participation and achievement at the higher level in the certificate examinations are very good.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Irish enjoys a very high status in the school and a very good level of provision and support is allocated to it in the school curriculum.
- The events and competitions, of a very high standard and having a very high status, which are made available for the participation of students during the school year, contribute greatly to the standing of the subject and to the use of Irish outside of formal classes.
- The plan for Irish is of a very high quality.
- The quality of teaching and learning is one of the defining characteristics of this school.
- In the majority of classes an appropriate range of methodologies and teaching strategies was practised, including singing, questioning and ICT.
- It was apparent in almost all classes that the teachers had very high expectations of their students as regards learning, in keeping with their capacities. The majority of students were making very good progress in their learning and they evinced a very high level of competence in the language.
- Irish alone was used as the language of teaching, communication and management in almost all classes and in a small number of classes, the teachers made use of a vocabulary of a very high standard which posed appropriate challenges in learning and contributed to the richness of the students' language.
- The school's homework policy is of very high quality and homework is regularly set and corrected. Very effective correction practices were noted in samples of copy books examined in senior cycle classes.
- The students' progress is regularly assessed and carefully monitored. Appropriate methods of assessment are used in the case of most classes.

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

- In the interest of sharing experience and good practice in this area, it is recommended that methodologies and teaching and learning strategies, including assessment, be put on the agenda for the departmental meetings.
- It is recommended that a short-term plan, laid out on a termly basis for each level in every year group, be drawn up; in this context, a comprehensive plan should be developed for Transition Year.
- It is recommended that the policy of dividing students into streamed classes in Transition Year be reviewed.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and deputy 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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