

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Irish  
REPORT**

**Larkin Community College (Coláiste Pobail Uí  
Lorcáin)**

**Champions Avenue, Dublin 1**

**Roll Number: 760770**

**Date of inspection: 17 February 2011**



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF  
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION  
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

# **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 Larkin Community 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 three 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 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**

Larkin Community College is a co-educational post-primary school under the trusteeship of the City of Dublin VEC. There are four hundred and twenty students enrolled in the current school year 2010/11, approximately sixty per cent of them boys. There is a team of four teachers teaching Irish.

The time allocated on the timetable for Irish in the junior cycle and in the senior cycle is satisfactory and in accordance with syllabus recommendations. The manner in which this provision is made is particularly challenging, in that each lesson on the timetable lasts one hour. As a result, the amount of time provided for Irish in first year is very limited. The provision for that year group is two hours on only two of the five days in the week. That arrangement means that first year students do not have regular contact with the subject. The provision and distribution in second and third year is three hours on three days per week. While this time provision is good, the frequency of contact with the language available here is limited also. Absenteeism may adversely affect learning in the subject due to these arrangements.

School management seeks the best arrangements to support learning and it was clear that the above-mentioned restrictions are acknowledged. A good case was made concerning the big improvement in the operation and smooth running of the school due to the provision of one-hour classes. The frequency of contact with the target language is extremely important for the learner in second language acquisition, however, and the current arrangement of the timetable does not in the first instance benefit the second language learner.

It is recommended that the current arrangement by which all classes last one hour be reviewed, taking into account the learner's experience together with attainments in the subject. This is a whole-school matter. If the outcome of this review adheres to the current arrangements the Irish department should devise a different approach from that currently in place, for teaching and learning in the classroom. The management of the lesson must be measured extremely accurately for a class of one hour's duration as opposed to forty minutes in order to avoid tiredness and a reluctance to learning.

The particular challenges to the status of Irish in this school include the matter of exemptions from the subject, held by nearly thirteen per cent of the students. In addition there is a

proportion of students with special educational needs and the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) is prominent on the school curriculum to provide for them. JCSP statements for Irish have been set out for all the students, in keeping with best practice. In the case of students with exemptions from Irish, however, they must be present in the Irish class in the absence of alternative arrangements for them. Every effort should be made on a whole-school basis to provide other resources for those students, if so entitled, when Irish is on the timetable.

The acting principal is supportive of efforts to launch improvements and to present the subject to the students in a more positive way. Good efforts are being made in the Irish department to develop information and communications technology (ICT) resources specifically for this. One of the teachers is heavily promoting e-learning and computer-assisted learning and the school's e-learning platform *Moodle* is utilised for that so that attractive resources in Irish are used on a regular basis in the classroom - this is commended. The pioneering work being done on an individual basis in the department regarding the promotion of e-learning and computer-assisted learning in teaching and learning the subject in the classroom should be developed further.

There is a need to address the deployment of the Irish teachers and to professional development in the subject. Two of the four Irish teachers are very involved in teaching the subject and teach nearly eighty per cent of the Irish classes between them. The school has helped these teachers to attend Second Level Support Service for Irish (SLSS) courses. The situation differs for the other two teachers, however, and in one of those cases the teacher does not have an appropriate qualification in the subject. In the other case the teacher has a major role in administering the school's soccer scholarship programme. These duties can interfere with the teaching duties in Irish and may result in a peripheral part in the work, despite excellent qualifications in Irish. Management is urged to look again at the imbalance and deficit noted in the staffing of the Irish department during the subject inspection with a view to remedying this.

In order to improve the subject's standing in the school it is recommended that the students be presented with greater expectations in the subject. Enticing a greater proportion of students to higher level would be a good reward for the school's efforts. One way to do this would be a review of the timetable and having more classes running concurrently, in the junior cycle to begin with. At the moment the Irish classes are held in parallel in third year only and this arrangement only applies to two of the three classes in that year. Therefore, by far the majority of classes in the school are mixed ability classes throughout. Benefits can be attributed to such an arrangement but in this case the range of ability is considered too wide. It is recommended that more of the classes be run concurrently specifically to better serve those students with potential for higher level. This presents a real challenge concerning the amount of support required by the students in Larkin Community College and these efforts will succeed better in discrete classes or in classes with limits to the range of ability.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

There is good co-operation among the members of the Irish department and planning meetings are held regularly. The minutes of these meetings were provided as evidence of this. Departmental planning matters need to be improved, however.

It would be in keeping with best practice to appoint a subject co-ordinator before the start of the academic year as opposed to in the middle of the year as at present. It would be good that the subject co-ordinator would take the lead in devising a development plan for the subject so that the department members could agree and implement improvements together during the

co-ordinator's term. It is not clear from the department's current 2010/11 plan, for example, what is being prioritised for improvement in the current year.

It appeared that the compilation of the subject plan was mostly the work of one teacher. That work should be discussed and agreed collaboratively. The subject plan should be reviewed so that it contains worthwhile and up-to-date information. Among the items which should be developed is a description of the current status of the subject in the school as a starting point. Statistics on the students' participation at the various levels in the subject in the certificate examinations would enhance this account. As another step, it would be worth specifying development targets in the subject, in the short term and in the medium term, together with a strategy for their achievement.

A discussion of the teaching methodologies should be included in the department's planning activities in order to spread knowledge of best practice. It would be easy and worthwhile to collate the teachers' timetable for the current year on one page in the plan as a guide for the subject allocation and to promote co-operation actively among the teachers. For example, it would be worth planning in advance to bring two classes together on occasion to promote particular practices together. Above all the subject plan would benefit from the inclusion of guidelines on the best strategies to develop the language skills, based on the teachers' own experience. The sharing of personal experience in teaching the subject is the very essence of co-ordinated planning.

Work schemes set out for the various years were reviewed. A common template was in use for this. Certain series of plans displayed a better insight and understanding in these schemes, particularly as regards the recording of teaching methods. For the most part the emphasis in the work schemes was on the material to be covered in the lesson more than on the learner's lesson objective and on the way in which that objective would be achieved.

An integral part of the planning work to be implemented is setting out of clear learning objectives for the learners year by year in the subject plan. The objectives for the subject as recorded at the start of the Irish department's work 2010-2011 are not sufficient. These are general desirable aims which are set out in the syllabus as a starting point. The Irish department in the school is advised to take their own students' ability into account at the outset and then to note down the level of ability which will be attained by the students under the four language skills by the end of a year's course. These objectives should vary from year to year and from level to level.

It is not clear either that all of the team has decided the level of use to be made of ICT resources. It is clear that a lot of work has been done to develop a store of valuable electronic resources on the school intranet and the school's *Moodle* is being similarly developed. These developments will not succeed, however, if these responsibilities fall to one person and it would be better for all the department's members to become involved in this work.

Planning for the Transition Year Irish programme must be reviewed and adapted more for that programme's objectives. The programme content contained in the work schemes was greatly influenced by content that might be expected in an Irish studies programme. Transition Year is a bridge between the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate and a main objective of the programme for Irish should be to build on the students' capacity to use Irish. That programme should be designed and reviewed by the subject department collaboratively.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Six lessons were observed which covered classes in the junior cycle and in the senior cycle. The teaching was performed diligently in all the lessons but there was a clear difference

observed in the quality of teaching and learning in those lessons. The greatest gap between the most successful and least successful lessons emerged in the teaching methodologies, the use of a range of resources, variety in the work for the learner and commitment to the use of the target language and its promotion among the students. There was also considerable variation in the quality of Irish in use in the teaching. In certain cases that quality was good, in another case the quality of Irish used would need to be improved and in a particular case the amount of Irish used in the lesson was found to be lacking and the quality of language defective.

The above assessment illustrates how teaching would benefit from providing opportunities for the teachers to observe their colleagues' practice in the classroom. This is referred to in the section on planning. Significant strengths were noted in certain lessons and it would be good for the teachers to learn from their fellow-practitioners. This depends on the collaboration and co-operation that applies in the Irish department. Team teaching could be a starting point for such activity.

In the most successful lessons the learning objectives were presented clearly at the start, referred to during the lesson, and reviewed at the end to confirm the level of progress made. In other cases no objective was listed for the lesson and work was commenced without presenting a context for it or identifying reference points in the learning for the students. This flaw can be easily corrected. To this end, it is recommended that the normal practice should be to use clear learning objectives as the basis for lessons.

Active learning was to the fore in the best examples of teaching observed. This meant that the teacher was not constantly disseminating information and talking throughout the lesson but that the work was shared with the students and that they were given the opportunity to express themselves in the new vocabulary being developed with them and were encouraged to do so. By contrast, in other classes, students were writing and listening for the most part. Evidence of learning was limited in those cases where the students were learning passively.

The six lessons observed showed that students had very different experiences of learning Irish as regards the use of ICT resources in the classroom. In the case of two lessons ICT resources were central as teaching resources, but in other cases the textbook, whiteboard, handouts and the student's copybook were the principal resources for interaction between the teacher and the student.

Well-chosen ICT resources have the advantage of providing examples for the learners of the language being spoken by others apart from the teacher and that the teacher can guide the teaching instead of delivering it fully. In the two above-mentioned lessons in which ICT resources were to the fore excellent use was made of them. There was very good use of a seven minute item from the television soap opera for teenagers *Aifric* which was shown. The item selected was extremely appropriate as regards the challenge of the language, its inherent interest to the students, its relevance to their life experience, and as regards the length of the item. This work was intensified with a typed questionnaire which required understanding of the item shown. The students were set to work in pairs later completing the questionnaire and this work was managed effectively. To start the same lesson the singing of the National Anthem was practised by showing the words on the screen, accompanied by lively music. It was clear that the students themselves enjoyed that item and attention was paid to pronunciation accuracy at the same time without lessening that enjoyment.

In another lesson a version of the programme *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?* was used to promote vocabulary enrichment in a pleasant way. The teacher had mastery of ICT matters, the content itself was good and appropriate for the students' interests and the content was presented extremely well. These resources greatly enhanced the students' experience of learning the language. For the most part, however, ICT resources were not used in the

teaching. It is recommended that the expertise in the Irish department in the use of ICT resources be increased so that these resources are regularly in use in the classroom.

In the best examples of teaching and learning the management of the lessons themselves was in keeping with Junior Certificate School Programme practices on keyword recognition. The keywords were attractively displayed on the walls, the students' attention was directed to them during the lesson and for homework. The keyword lists were also expanded. This good practice was missing in other lessons. This was another illustration of the need to have good practice in the classroom as a common thread through all the Irish lessons. This aim should be central to the professional dialogue among the teachers.

There was a particular challenge in managing the lesson involving one hour and avoiding fatigue. This challenge was met effectively in certain cases by good management of time and activities, by moving smoothly from one activity, for example reading work, to individual writing work, to group work for talking, to listening. In other cases, however, such good management and variety in activities was not observed. As a result tiredness and boredom arose in due course and discipline started to deteriorate. In one case the students began to prepare to leave with ten minutes still remaining on the clock. The planning of this particular lesson was not successful, nor was lesson management successful throughout. The paucity of Irish in use in that same lesson was unsatisfactory.

Providing the learner with opportunities to speak the language freely should be a core objective of each Irish lesson. In the best lessons observed attention was paid to that objective to a point. In other cases, however, that objective could not be seen in the lesson, except as a secondary result of answering questions dealing with the core content of the lesson presented, or with composing written composition pieces. There was an inclination to give an English translation too soon of questions and directions given. It is recommended that the overuse of translation be curtailed and that a common practice in that regard be entered in the teaching plan.

Regarding the fundamental question in learning, that is the students' ability to make free conversation, evidence of such was limited and in certain cases non-existent. It is recommended that the focus be on devising agreed strategies to enable the students to express themselves in the spoken language at a level that is commensurate with their abilities. The progress made with this challenge will be the greatest reward for both learners and teachers.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Written homework is assigned as a regular practice consistent with the whole-school policy. The written homework gives an indication of the students' progress in the subject. The quality of the homework observed was in keeping with the students' ability as shown in the lessons. Assessment for learning is a whole-school objective in all subjects, including Irish. This is a work in progress and the evidence of this in the copybooks was quite limited. The copybooks observed showed differences in the practice. In certain cases the teacher's acknowledgement of the quality of the copybook work was clearly visible throughout. JCSP stickers were used in certain cases in order to give particular praise for the quality of work. Those copybooks were neat and tidy. In other cases the same acknowledgement was not to be seen in the copybooks and praise and advice were missing.

It is recommended that a common approach be taken regarding acknowledgement of written work. In the case of the junior cycle classes, for example, especially in first year, the students' efforts could be acknowledged more by setting a certain proportion of the in-house examinations aside for the quality of work in the copybooks. Certain students' homework diaries were reviewed which indicated that homework was assigned once per three lessons on

average. That proportion is satisfactory insofar as this is a common practice for all the teachers.

Students undergo a written examination formally four times a year and the results of these examinations are given to parents. It is recommended that the assessment of the quality of students' spoken language on a continuous basis be greatly developed. It is recommended that the optional oral examination in the Junior Certificate examination be included as part of this assessment. In preparation for this it is particularly recommended not to repeatedly practise a certain number of questions considered likely to arise in this test. It would be far better to encourage the students from the very first day to speak the language as naturally as possible.

It would be worthwhile for the Irish department to contact the feeder schools for two reasons concerning Irish. Firstly, in order to raise awareness of the increased emphasis on spoken Irish as the learner's experience in the post-primary school and, secondly, in order to get more information on the work done in the primary school. Revision work is commendable but the work in the post-primary school should be at a more challenging level than that in the primary school.

An account is kept of the students' achievements in the certificate examinations and of the numbers of students attempting the various levels in the subject. It was not apparent, however, that this work was a reference point in order to plan improvements in teaching and learning in the subject. It is recommended that these details be recorded in the subject plan and used for that purpose.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The amount of time provided for Irish in the school is satisfactory in general but the current arrangement whereby each lesson on the timetable lasts one hour means that students do not have regular contact with the subject, especially in first year, where the subject is provided only two days per week.
- One of the teachers is strongly promoting e-learning and computer-assisted learning and the *Moodle* system is being used for that with attractive resources in Irish which are to be commended.
- For the most part the emphasis in the work schemes was on the content to be covered in the lesson more than on the lesson's objective for the learner and on how that objective would be achieved.
- Teaching was diligent in all lessons but there was a clear difference noted in the quality of teaching and learning in those lessons.
- In the most successful lessons the learning objectives were presented clearly, active learning was to the fore and the management of lessons was in accordance with the Junior Certificate School Programme practices regarding keywords.
- The six lessons observed showed that students had very different experiences indeed of learning Irish regarding the use of ICT resources in the classroom. In the two lessons where ICT resources were to the fore excellent use was made of those resources.
- There was a particular challenge in managing the hour-long lesson to avoid fatigue. There was an inclination to translate too soon into English questions and directions given.
- Evidence of the students' ability to make free conversation was limited and in certain cases non-existent.
- The practice regarding assessment of the students' work in the copybooks varied.

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

- It is recommended that a review be made on a whole-school basis of the current arrangement whereby classes last one hour, taking into account the second language learner's experience as well as attainments in the subject.
- The Irish department should devise a new approach to manage and measure teaching and learning in the classroom for an hour-long period in order to avoid fatigue and reluctance in learning.
- Regarding ICT resources for Irish in the classroom, the ongoing pioneering work being done in the department on an individual basis should be developed in order to advance e-learning and computer-assisted learning in teaching and learning the subject.
- Management is urged to look again at the imbalance and deficit observed in the staffing of the Irish department during the subject inspection with a view to a remedy.
- Planning for the Transition Year programme for Irish must be reviewed and adapted more to the aims of that programme.
- It is recommended that teachers provide opportunities to observe their colleagues' practice in the classroom. This measure could start with team teaching.
- It is recommended that the assessment of the quality of the students' spoken language on a continuous basis be significantly developed, including consideration of the optional oral examination in the Junior Certificate examination as part of this assessment.

A post-evaluation meeting was 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.