An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Saint Aidan’s Community School
Tallaght, Dublin 24
Roll number: 91338D

Date of inspection: 3 December 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING OF IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Saint Aidan’s Community School. 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 to the principal on the outcomes of the evaluation. 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

Saint Aidan’s Community School is a participant in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme. The last subject inspection of Irish in the school was carried out in 2004.

As reported in 2004, the management provides very good support for Irish and makes very good provision for the language. Five teachers are involved in the teaching of Irish. Their competence in oral Irish, for the purposes of teaching, is satisfactory and they undertake their work with enthusiasm.

The classes are organised in bands in each year group. These bands are streamed according to ability, but it is possible that students would be studying Irish at different levels within the classes in each of the bands. In junior cycle, for example, there are two class groups in the first band and two in the second. Students in the higher band study Irish at either higher or ordinary level, while those in the second band study the subject at either ordinary or foundation level. There is just one class group of students with learning support needs in the third band and they participate in the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). Apart from those who have an exemption, all JCSP students study Irish Cultural Studies. They have three class periods per week for this, a satisfactory provision. Depending on the availability of human resources, an extra teacher, with learning support qualifications, is timetabled to coincide with the Irish class periods provided for this group in order that most of the teaching can take place in the mainstream class as opposed to withdrawing students from class. The management is highly commended for this approach. These students take the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) in senior cycle. Regarding the JCSP itself, it is recommended that the management reconsider the current arrangement, which results in only students in the weakest class in every year of the cycle having the opportunity of availing of the programme and that, in the process, the management take cognisance of the aim of the department of Irish to raise students’ expectations.
The time allocation for Irish in senior cycle is satisfactory. In junior cycle, four class periods per week are provided for Irish on the timetable for every class, apart from the JCSP classes. It is recommended that this allocation be augmented by one class period, for at least one year of the cycle. Classes for third, fifth and sixth years, and for the bands where there is more than one class group in the other year groups are timetabled simultaneously. This arrangement facilitates student access to the subject at different levels within the bands, which is commendable. As recommended, students have one class period only per day for Irish, which helps facilitate them in receiving regular inputs of the language throughout the week. The timetable indicates that the fifth-year class is shared between two teachers, one taking four class periods, with the students attending Irish class with a different teacher and joining another group of students for the fifth period. This is not good practice. It was reported that this situation arose as a result of one teacher’s job-sharing status. The management is reminded that priority must be given to students’ educational needs when applications for job-sharing are being considered.

At the time of the evaluation, seventeen per cent of the total enrolment of students was exempt from the study of Irish. This slightly exceeds the national average. The majority of the exempted students were those who had learning needs as regards English as an additional language. The management makes every effort to provide the necessary supports for those students with exemptions while Irish classes are in progress. It is worth mentioning that opportunities are also provided to accommodate any exempted students who show an interest in studying Irish.

Significant developments have been made in the provision of resources and facilities for the teachers and students, for the teaching and learning of Irish, as well as other curricular subjects. The school has utilised the educational initiative Connect, through which, in partnership with South Dublin County Council, the Department of Education and Science, the National Centre for Technology in Education and Tallaght Institute of Technology, a laptop computer has been provided for every teacher and a data projector has been permanently installed in every classroom. Besides, a laptop computer is now available to every student from first year to fifth year. All of these resources and facilities are used to develop an authentic learning environment and to extend its use among the school community. With that aim in mind, for example, third-year and fifth-year students are allowed to bring laptops home with them, to help with their study and homework. The Irish department recognises the important potential of the use of technology as a medium to develop students’ experience of using Irish outside of formal classes. The department has used technology to develop resources for classes, by compiling notes on literature for example, as well as PowerPoint slides, and worksheets which they share. The work being done in this area is highly commended.

The management supports teachers’ participation in professional development opportunities. In recent years all the teaching staff have received training in the use of technology and all the teachers of Irish attended various workshops organised by the Second Level Support Service for Irish.

Among the other noteworthy developments carried out in the school is the initiation of ‘Le Chéile’. The teachers founded this group to afford the students opportunities to develop and display their musical talents. While it fosters students’ interest in Irish music, it also has an intercultural focus. The school participated in the Comenius programme some years ago, with schools from Wales, Sweden, Denmark and Austria. This opportunity was utilised to promote Irish and as part of the project students produced a short film on Irish in the school. In addition, the school regularly uses DEIS and Accessing College Education (ACE, Tallaght Institute of Technology) to provide financial assistance for students who wish to attend summer colleges in the Gaeltacht. It is evident that the management takes the students’ needs in the area of Irish into
account in the initiatives and projects in which the school participates and the work being done is most impressive. An account of the various events, projects or initiatives in which the school participates, and which are relevant to Irish language and culture, should be made available in the subject plan.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A member of the Irish teaching team acts as co-ordinator. This responsibility has been shouldered by the same teacher for some years now. As decided by the management, and as part of their professional development, the other teachers in the department of Irish should assume the responsibility in turn. The management has identified a precise role for the co-ordinator and those responsibilities are effectively carried out. It is recommended, however, that a written account of these responsibilities be available in the subject plan. It would be desirable that all members of the department would assume the role in turn, for a two-year period each. The teachers hold both formal and informal meetings, and a copy which was provided of the minutes of one meeting, indicates that a start has been made on the good practice of keeping minutes. Copies of the agendas and minutes of meetings should be included with the subject plan. An account of the department’s aims for Irish, such as raising students’ expectations, should also be taken into account in the plans. To facilitate this and to further emphasise how learning is done in class, it is recommended that methodologies and strategies for teaching and learning be included in the agendas for the meetings and that teachers focus on differentiation in particular. When discussing strategies, teachers should consider how the use of ICT as an aid in the learning of Irish might be further developed and extended.

The recent focus of whole-school planning has concerned the development of a DEIS plan. Taking this work into account, as well as the developments in the use of ICT as a teaching and learning tool, the development of resources and the outline scheme of work for the subject, good progress has been made in developing the subject since 2004. The scheme of work includes outline schemes for the subject in every programme provided in the school. The schemes provide the basic content, which can be developed at the next stage of the work that must be done, to compile a comprehensive, thorough plan for Irish as part of the school curriculum. Included here are references to the learning outcomes set out, for third year for example, and to the use of ICT.

It is recommended that use be made of the information on the website www.sdpi.ie when the subject plan is being developed in order to compile a list of content. When setting out plans for the subject specific content, it is recommended that a template be used which would give more information on the material to be covered, term by term, and on how the plans would be implemented. It is recommended that work commence with the setting out of a framework of the expected learning outcomes at the various stages and levels in the different programmes. These should be based on the language functions set out in the syllabuses and on the different language skills. The teaching and learning methodologies and skills to be used to achieve the learning outcomes should also be indicated, among them being assessment modes. Any scheduled review of the plan should be noted in the document. Individual teachers should use this plan when preparing their own lessons making appropriate amendments. As already mentioned, a class was being shared by two teachers on the occasion of this visit. No specific written plan had been prepared for this arrangement. Such cases require a considerable level of collaborative planning between teachers and detailed planning of content.

It was recommended in the 2004 report that resources be developed. The department of Irish deserves great credit for the resources developed precisely for presentation of the content to suit
the needs of the students in this school in particular and of the LCA programme, for example. The various members of the team develop, store and share resource material electronically. It is evident from the work being consistently done in this area that great use is being made of ICT to develop opportunities for students to access support material from outside the school.

Although individual class plans were not available in every case, there was evidence that teachers keep records of the material they cover in their classes. The plans that were made available were praiseworthy. Appropriate preparation had been made for every class and this was of a very good standard in most cases. Particularly praiseworthy were those cases where resource material prepared by the teachers themselves was being used to adapt the content to the students’ needs. In a small number of cases, it is recommended that more attention be paid to the time available for implementing the plan. In most cases, the language in the written material presented to the students was accurate: teachers should always ensure that the language used is accurate.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The teaching and learning of Irish in Saint Aidan’s Community School was of a good quality. In almost all classes observed, the creation of opportunities for the students to use the language was an integral part of the teaching. This is highly commended because it is through practice that the students will acquire the language and develop confidence in using it. The roll was not called in every class. Considering that students are coming to Irish classes from situations where other languages are the medium of communication, the roll should be called and answered in Irish. It would be worth spending a few minutes also, when possible, on conversation in Irish about a topical subject.

The aims of the classes were clear and, in a small number of cases, these were recorded on the whiteboard. This is good practice and should be more widely used. In line with the recommendations made regarding planning for the subject, vocabulary should be used in presenting them which would give the students a better understanding of what they would have learnt and what they should be able to do by the end of the lesson.

In most classes, a variety of tasks was assigned to the students. There should, however, be a greater range of tasks, so that the required development of all the language skills would be addressed in every class, rather than focusing on listening comprehension only, for example, on a certain day during the week. Many examples of pair work, as previously recommended, were observed. The examples observed were praiseworthy, especially where the task assigned created opportunities for students to ask questions as well as to answer them. A time limit should be set for the tasks, however, and this limit adhered to. Besides, in those cases where mixed ability is involved and students are taking the subject at different levels, the learning should be differentiated and this should be taken into account when designing tasks.

Although the use of ICT as a medium of instruction was observed in only a minority of classes, its use was of a very good standard, as was the content presented to the students. It is evident that there are skills and experience among the department staff which would be well worth sharing and greater use should be made of the high quality aids available in the school. It has been mentioned earlier in this report that every student from first year to fifth year has a laptop computer. In none of the classes observed, however, were the students seen using the laptops. An example of a project undertaken by first years on the laptop, using PowerPoint, was viewed outside of class and it was very impressive. These resources should be used also to help students gain access to authentic texts such as job advertisements, or sites offering information on summer
colleges, when they are undertaking related tasks such as form filling, or writing letters, postcards or e-mails.

In half of the classes observed, teachers attended to the development of students’ language awareness, as recommended. In some cases, accurate pronunciation was the focus of attention and, in other cases the teachers focused the students’ concentration on grammar, for example on verbs and tenses being used. The students showed a good understanding of tenses, of the structures of sentences and of interrogative language. When such work is being done, long lists should be avoided and plenty of opportunities created instead, to practise the new structures being learnt through the various language skills.

Irish was used as the normal medium of communication and instruction in almost every class and it was evident that this was the students’ usual experience. This practice should be extended, because the students depend to a major extent on the school and on their teachers to provide them with an input in the language. Most teachers used effective strategies to avoid over-use of translation.

There was a very pleasant co-operative atmosphere in all the classes. The students were appropriately praised for their efforts and assistance was provided for individual students as necessary. The students’ attention was focused on their work and hands were regularly raised to offer answers. It would be worth while for the teachers to use the students’ school diaries, as appropriate, to note genuine efforts and good behaviour, as an extra incentive to the students. Posters and other printed materials in Irish were on display on the walls and in a small number of cases this material was very well used to support the students in their participation. As recommended in the last report, samples of the students’ own work should be displayed on the walls and regularly updated. It was evident from the observation of classes and from the interaction with the students, that they were making satisfactory progress and that, in certain cases, they had achieved a very good standard in the language.

ASSESSMENT

An appropriate range of modes is used to assess students’ learning. The school has an assessment and homework policy which is implemented by the teachers of Irish. In the scheduled review of this policy, the requirements involved in developing different language skills should be specified. Listening, writing and reading skills are taken into account when assessing the learning of Irish in every class, as well as literature where appropriate, but spoken Irish is not always part of the assessment. It is recommended that there should be an oral language component in the assessment of every student and that their achievements in this area be specified in the school reports and diaries. This would ensure that the assessment practices would reflect more closely the aims and objectives of the syllabuses and classroom practice. Regarding homework, reference should be made to the different kinds of tasks that could be set, the criteria for success, and the responsibilities of all the partners. The guidelines for corrections and the types of correction should be further developed. It was noted in the case of one class observed that no homework was being set, an unacceptable practice which contravenes the school policy.

The students sit a test in Irish as part of the school transfer examination and the feeder primary schools are consulted when the test is being designed and to discuss the results. This is commendable. The various language skills to be developed in accordance with Curaclam na Bunscoile: Gaeilge should be kept in mind when these tests are being designed. The results of
these tests are used when assigning students to appropriate classes. An account of the results should be kept in the subject plan.

There is continuous class-based assessment of the progress of JCSP students and students’ profile cards are completed regularly. The work samples observed were of a very good standard and, as discussed with the co-ordinator, the possibilities of offering the students opportunities of attempting the subject at a more challenging level, according to their ability, should be considered.

The teachers deserve great praise for using common examinations as appropriate, which offers opportunities for collaborative planning, which in turn, helps to ensure standards and share good practices.

Samples of students’ written work were examined in copybooks and in folders. The material accorded with the requirements of the syllabuses. The LCA material examined in folders could be more thoroughly done. In the case of most classes, work is assigned and corrected regularly. Notes of commendation and grades were noted on the work. This is good practice. As well as acknowledging work well and correctly done by the students, guidance should also be given on ways in which the work might be improved. For example, criteria for success should be brought to their attention before they embark on the work, to give them a better understanding of the expected outcome that would be expected as a result of the work. It is recommended that the department of Irish consult the website www.action.ncca.ie/ga/afl for information on Assessment for Learning.

The teachers keep very good records of student achievements. Students’ results in the state examinations are analysed. This is commended. This practice should be extended to house examinations and an account of the results kept in the subject plan. They should also be used in monitoring the plans for the various year groups and in any review. As well as the formal reports sent home with the results of house and mock examinations, student diaries should also be used to share assessments of students’ progress with parents.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The management provides very good support for Irish, very good provision is made for the language, and the teachers undertake their work with enthusiasm.
- A satisfactory provision of time is made for Irish in the senior cycle and the distribution of classes for each year group ensures that students get a regular input in the language.
- Significant developments have been made in the provision of resources and aids for teachers and students, for the teaching and learning of Irish and other subjects on the curriculum, and especially in the provision of ICT.
- The teaching and learning of Irish was of good quality and, in almost all classes observed, the creation of opportunities for students to use the language was an integral part of the teaching.
- Irish was used as the normal medium of communication and instruction in almost every class and it was evident that this was the usual experience of the students.
- There was a very pleasant co-operative atmosphere in all the classes and the students were focused on their work.
• An appropriate range of modes is used to assess students’ learning, teachers keep very good records and student achievements in the certificate examinations are analysed.

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

• It is recommended that the board of management prioritise the needs of the curriculum and of the students when making decisions on job sharing.
• It is recommended that the provision of time for Irish in the junior cycle be increased by one class period per week and that the organisation of JCSP be reconsidered with regard to student access to Irish.
• It is recommended that the subject plan be developed as outlined in this report.
• It is recommended that there be more variety, based on the different language skills, in the tasks assigned to students in class, that the use of ICT as a language learning tool be developed and that the language presented to students be accurate, as it was in the most cases.
• It is recommended that the practice of including all the language skills in the assessment of each student be extended.

A post-evaluation meeting was held 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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