Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

St. David’s Holy Faith Secondary School
Greystones, County Wicklow
Roll number: 61830M

Date of inspection: 22 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 St. David’s School, Greystones. 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 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 deputy principal. The board of management was given the opportunity to respond to the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE-SCHOOL SUPPORT

In St David’s School, first and second-year students are placed in mixed-ability classes. They are assigned to higher-level and ordinary-level classes after second year. Normally there are two ordinary-level classes and one higher-level class in third year. Transition Year (TY) is optional in the school and there is currently one mixed-ability class for Irish in this year group. There are two ordinary-level classes and one higher-level class in fifth and in sixth year. Four class-periods per week are available for Irish in all the junior cycle classes, three class-periods per week for Transition Year and five class-periods per week for fifth-year and sixth-year students. It was reported that there are problems with providing a fifth class-period per week for any of the junior-cycle classes and with providing a fourth class-period per week for Transition Year, due to lack of Irish-teaching staff.

There are three teachers of Irish in the school at present. They all are fully qualified to teach Irish and have years of experience in teaching the subject. Classes are rotated between all the teachers so that every teacher gets the opportunity of teaching the various levels and age-groups. This is good practice.

Sixty one of the total school-enrolment of four hundred and fifteen students has an exemption from the study of Irish. The school is commended for implementing circular M10/94. It was reported by school management that a fairly significant number of students arrive at the school saying that they had been allowed to give up learning Irish at some point in their primary-school career, but have not been officially exempted from the study of Irish. This issue has been raised with particular primary schools and it was reported that there is a certain improvement in the situation over the past few years. It is recommended that school management continue to discuss this situation with the primary schools with a view to ending the problem completely.

Certain efforts are made in the school to celebrate ‘Seachtain na Gaeilge’ by placing extra emphasis on using the language during the week, for example at morning assembly. Poster competitions are also organised. This work is commended because of the importance of providing a co-curricular and cross-curricular programme for Irish throughout the whole school year, to
ensure that students experience Irish as a living language. Irish medium occasions and events reinforce the teachers’ efforts in the classrooms and they are a very valuable support to the teaching of the language. It is recommended that the school management and the teachers consider what programme of events might be organised in future to support the learning of Irish. It would be well worth enlisting the help of TY students in drawing up a range of ideas and in helping to organise and manage events.

It was reported that some students from the school go to the Gaeltacht every year and some attend a locally-organised Irish college as day students. Complete and accurate figures for the number of students who attend some kind of Irish course were not available during the evaluation. The school management and the teachers of Irish are commended for providing the students and their parents with details about Irish courses available, locally, in the Gaeltacht or in other areas.

It was reported that DVD players, and CD players are available to the teachers of Irish, as well as television sets to show excerpts from television programmes and films. There is an annual budget, the size of which varies from year to year, available for the purchase of resources for the teaching of Irish. It was reported that the teachers keep resources for the teaching of Irish in their own classrooms. It is recommended that a complete list be compiled of all the resources available for Irish in the school and that that list be available as part of the overall plan for the teaching and learning of the language. It is recommended, also, if possible, that the resources be kept in a central location where all the teachers of Irish would have access to them. The teachers should consult the websites of An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, www.cogg.ie and of the Second Level Support Service for Irish, www.muinteoirgaeilge.ie to get information on the most up-to-date resources on the market.

The teachers of Irish are classroom based, an arrangement which affords them a great opportunity of creating a stimulating Irish-themed environment in those rooms. There was some material on display in the classrooms observed, including various posters and examples of students’ work. It is recommended, however, that the amount of material on display be increased and that teachers ensure that material be included which would help students in their efforts to compose sentences and carry on a conversation. Charts showing the verbs most commonly used could be displayed and students’ attention directed regularly to them, to help them compose complete and accurate sentences in the target language.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A co-ordinator for planning for the teaching and learning of Irish is nominated every year from among the teachers of Irish. This is an informal arrangement and the responsibilities of the role include such areas as arranging booklists and setting common exams for classes at the same level.

The teachers of Irish meet three times a year to plan for booklists, provision of the curriculum and the organisation of exams, but it was reported that they meet more frequently, as necessary. No minutes of these meetings are kept. It is recommended as good practice, however, that minutes of meetings be kept from now on, as records of the discussion that took place and of decisions made.

A plan was provided during the evaluation for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. The plan comprises an account in English of administrative work, exams and the organisation of the teachers of Irish, as well as a list of topics to be covered with the various year-groups and levels. Reference is also made to the literature courses and to other subject-matter that might be undertaken in certain classes. The plan as it exists at present is clear and readable and the work done on getting it to its present form is commended. It is necessary, however, to develop the plan
An outline plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in Transition Year was provided during the evaluation. It appeared from the plan that there is an emphasis on teaching Irish in a traditional way, focusing in particular on the use of textbooks, aural comprehension and other work that was not wholly suited to TY. Transition Year affords teachers a wonderful opportunity of teaching subjects in novel, creative, interesting ways. Teachers are advised to seize the opportunity of devising an interesting, contemporary, stimulating programme for the students, that will give them an awareness of Irish as a living, modern language.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The use of Irish as the language of management, communication and teaching was very good in the classes observed. Effective efforts were made to avoid translation from Irish to English and that is commended as good practice. The teachers of Irish are commended for their commitment to the use of the target language during the Irish classes.

Continuous use was made of questioning in the classes observed, to test students’ knowledge, to ensure they understood the material being taught and to encourage them to speak Irish. Although it is necessary to question students regularly, questioning alone is not adequate as a means of providing them with opportunities for communicating in Irish. It is vital that regular opportunities for communication be created for students to enhance their ability to speak the language and to build up their self-confidence. Pair-work was used in a few cases observed, but the work on hand was not conducive to use of the target language. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish discuss communication strategies for use in class and that role-play, pair-work, group-work and games be regularly used in every class. The range and type of activities can be adapted to the ability of the particular class and of individual students. It must also be ensured that whatever activities are employed in class are focused on encouraging students to speak to one another in Irish. It was reported that two teachers from the school attended an in-service course provided by the Second Level Support Service for Irish. It is suggested that the teachers discuss some of the communication strategies recommended by this Service for use in Irish classes. A school visit can be requested from the Support Service and the school management might discuss that possibility with the Irish-teaching staff.

ICT was very effectively used in a few of the classes observed, where slides had been prepared to teach about time, directions and well-known place-names in the locality. Those lessons went well and certainly the use of ICT added greatly to the students’ interest in the subject of the lesson. In one class, an article from an Irish-language paper was used to complement students’ learning about a piece of literature. Effective use was made of the whiteboard to illustrate key words, new phrases and answers to questions. The use of the resources mentioned is highly commended. Apart from those examples, however, scarcely any other resource was used in the Irish classes, except the textbook. It is strongly recommended that the teachers of Irish use a wide range of aids in their classes – ICT, music, DVDs, pictures, photographs, excerpts from television programmes and films, and posters, for example. The use of such materials supports the students’ learning.
Their use also helps to contextualise the subject-matter of the lesson in contemporary life for the students, a very important requirement if the teacher wishes to stimulate students’ interest and awaken their enthusiasm for learning the language.

A good range of activities was used in certain classes observed; this approach is commended but it is necessary to ensure that not all of those activities are focused on listening and on writing. All the language skills must be attended to during every Irish class. Repetition was used in one case observed to ensure that students were able to pronounce new words and phrases correctly. This approach is commended because it greatly enhances students’ self-confidence if they can use the correct pronunciation. In certain cases observed, one-word answers were accepted from students rather than insisting that they compose full sentences. Teachers are advised to demand full sentences as answers to questions, to give the students more experience of the syntax and structure of Irish.

The teachers were energetic and enthusiastic in their Irish classes. They circulated around the classrooms helping students, correcting their work and answering questions. They succeeded in getting the students to work reasonably diligently in class and it was evident that there was a good relationship between the students and teachers. The teachers were patient and sympathetic towards students who had difficulties in learning the language and those who were making a genuine effort in class were continuously praised. Discipline was excellent in the classes observed.

ASSESSMENT

House exams are organised in the school at Christmas and at the end of the school year. Mid-term tests are also organised in the classes and it was reported that there is ongoing assessment of the students’ homework. School reports are sent home to parents twice a year, following the main house exams. Parents are also informed of their children’s progress through parent-teacher meetings and through the use of the school diary.

It was reported that ‘mock’ oral exams are organised for TY students, fifth and sixth-year students at Christmas and at the end of the school year. This is good practice and is commended. In addition structured oral exams are organised for third-year students and this practice is also commended. It is recommended, however, that oral exams be held for all students in the school, starting with first years, and that the results of that assessment be indicated as a separate item in the school reports. It is really necessary that the students and their parents understand the importance of oral Irish as part of the language-learning process and that they be made aware of the extra emphasis now being placed on the oral test as part of the state examinations.

There was an impressive amount of work in the copybooks inspected. It was evident that homework is regularly set. Various kinds of homework were assigned in the classes observed, including written work, research work, learning assignments, computer work and TV programmes to be watched; this variety of homework is commended. Where other homework besides a writing task is set, it is important to require students to keep some record of that work, to ensure that the assignment was carried out. Some of the copybook correction was somewhat deficient and it was frequently difficult to distinguish the teacher’s corrections from those done by the students themselves. It is recommended that the teachers agree a common correction system that would ensure that a grade or mark be awarded for the work, as well as references to the standard of the work and to the student’s progress. It is also necessary to agree a system that would ensure that the students learn from their mistakes.
The number of students taking higher-level papers in Irish in the state exams, the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate, has dropped in recent years. The overall achievement is not as might be expected, either. It is recommended that the school management and the teachers of Irish discuss this situation as a matter of urgency. Some of the recommendations made in this report – the development of a co-curricular and extra-curricular programme, an emphasis on Summer courses in Irish, extra emphasis on oral Irish and on active learning, for example – should help to encourage the students to continue studying Irish at higher level and to aim for high achievement in general.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The work completed on compiling a plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school is commended.
- The use of Irish as the language of management, communication and teaching in the classes observed was very good.
- The effective use of ICT in teaching certain lessons is highly commended.
- There was a good relationship between the teachers and the students and there was a good atmosphere in the classes.
- The teachers were very patient with students who had difficulty in learning the language and they gave support and praise continuously as required.

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

- It is recommended that an extra-curricular and co-curricular programme be prepared for Irish, to be used throughout the whole school year, to support the teaching and learning of the language.
- It is recommended that a wider range of resources be used in the Irish classes, to contextualise the learning of the language and make it more interesting for the students.
- It is recommended that regular, effective opportunities for communication be created for the students during Irish classes, by using a range of strategies such as role-play, pair-work, group-work and games.
- It is recommended that every student in the school should take a formal oral Irish exam on an annual basis.
- It is recommended that strategies be considered to increase the number of students taking higher-level papers in Irish in the state exams over a number of years.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Irish, the principal and deputy principal, meetings at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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