

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Irish  
REPORT**

**Coolmine Community School  
Clonsilla, Dublin 15  
Roll number: 913150**

**Date of inspection: 23 March 2010**



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT  
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION  
AGUS SCILEANNA | A N D S K I L L S**

**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 as part of a whole-school evaluation in Coolmine 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 individual teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Since its foundation Coolmine Community School has been favourably disposed to using Irish in its organisation and administration. To begin with, this support is illustrated by the fact that both the Irish and English versions of the school name are given equal recognition and only the Irish version of the name is displayed on the school building. Furthermore, only the Irish form of all terms relating to pastoral care and management of students is used. These terms include *ceann tí*, *caomhnóir* and *meitheal*, which correspond to the terms 'year head', 'tutor' and 'mentors', commonly used in English. Another example is the bilingual versions of almost all the headings used on the school website. This is an indication that, in Coolmine Community School, Irish is more than just a subject on the timetable. An Irish course is organised in the school during the summer to provide parents with an alternative to courses in the Gaeltacht. An Irish debating team represents the school in interschool debates and Irish is promoted by activities arranged during Irish Language Week (*Seachtain na Gaeilge*). Many identifying features are present to show that Irish is very well established in the school.

An all-Irish primary school is located nearby and Coolmine Community School had strong links with this school as one of its feeder schools for a long time. In the interest of renewing and fostering this link school management supports the consideration currently ongoing regarding the establishment of an all-Irish stream in Coolmine Community School.

There is very good timetabled provision for Irish in both junior and senior cycles with the number of lessons offered and their even distribution. Eighty per cent of all classes have a daily Irish lesson timetabled, an arrangement which is to be commended. A review of the Transition Year (TY) timetable, in particular, is recommended in order to achieve a more even distribution of Irish classes. The current arrangement offers two classes on a Monday and one on a Tuesday. This means that there are no classes timetabled for three consecutive days, followed by the weekend. It would be a better arrangement to have the three classes timetabled, one per day.

Concurrent timetabling arrangements throughout senior cycle ensure student access to the appropriate levels in the subject. These arrangements guarantee that students always have an opportunity to change level if they so choose. In junior cycle the choice is a little more restricted. This is a consequence of the whole-school arrangement of establishing two ability bands throughout the whole of junior cycle.

From the point of view of Irish, it is worth noting that this arrangement greatly encourages a high number of students to take higher level. All of the classes in the highest ability band, that is band A, are directed towards higher level from the beginning of first year. In addition, another higher level class is formed in band B. This arrangement facilitates high expectations in Irish for the highest number of students. Despite the goodwill which exists to encourage all students in band A to undertake higher level, records of the Irish department planning meetings show that the range of abilities in the higher level classes in band A is too broad, especially by the time students reach third year. It is recommended that third year Irish classes in band A be timetabled concurrently. This arrangement would have the advantage of offering the subject at higher level to students in the highest ability band, however; should an ordinary level class be necessary in third year, concurrent timetabling would allow students to have that choice. It was noted that this flexibility is already available in Irish classes in band B and students have the opportunity to change level. Furthermore, no foundation level class is established until the mock examinations for Junior Certificate have taken place. In this way the maximum number of students is encouraged to take the subject at the highest level appropriate for their ability.

School management is very supportive of teachers of Irish with regard to the provision of resources and facilitating teachers to attend in-service offered by the second level support services (SLSS) for Irish. Most of the teachers of Irish have their own designated classrooms. A supportive learning atmosphere has been established in the majority of these classrooms and teachers have easy access to resources. Information and communications technology (ICT) resources are very good: there is a personal computer with internet access in every classroom in the school and other audio-visual resources are freely available.

A work room is available to teachers of Irish and French. This room is equipped with a computer with internet access and contains a comprehensive store of reference resources including books in Irish, dictionaries, CDs and DVDs. The magazines, *Céim*, *Staighre* and *Dréimire* are used in class to provide new reading and listening material. It would be worthwhile to consider the introduction of a reading initiative for students, especially in junior cycle, in order to make available attractive reading material in Irish, independent of the textbooks. It would be worthwhile also to link this initiative with a proposal such as inviting an Irish language author to the school.

Almost sixteen per cent of the total student population have an exemption from studying Irish. This figure is slightly higher than the figure of thirteen per cent recorded in the inspection report on Irish carried out in 2005. The majority of students with an exemption are from outside the state. Arrangements are made in the case of students with an exemption to provide resource-based teaching to those who hold such entitlement and to provide supervised study for other students, where that is possible, when Irish is on the timetable. It was stated that students with exemptions are rarely present in Irish classes and no interruption is caused. These arrangements are satisfactory.

All teachers are given the opportunity to teach all levels in the subject. This approach enhances competence within the Irish department and promotes co-operation and collaboration. Guidance is provided for newly appointed teachers and for trainee teachers who come to the subject

department for their teaching practice. This good practice was evident during the evaluation visit and these arrangements are to be commended.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

School management supports and promotes subject planning. Time is made available for collaborative planning once a term and records of meetings are maintained. Minutes of meetings make available show that teachers meet more frequently, for example, once a month on average during the school year 2009/10. Minutes provide an important record of what was discussed and agreed for members of the Irish department and for school management. These minutes contain information which gives good insight into some of the challenges associated with teaching the subject in the school. The minutes should be arranged in a more orderly manner. To this end a common template should be used where the meeting agenda and decisions made could be clearly recorded. All minutes should be collated and put in year order.

The position of subject co-ordinator for Irish has been a post of responsibility in the school for a number of years. In the interests of providing all members of the Irish department with the opportunity to gain experience of managing department events and obtaining an overview of the status of the subject in the school, it would be worthwhile to consider rotating the role among the members of the department.

The Irish department planning folder was made available. In addition to the 'plan for Irish' this folder contained an amount of valuable reference material for the certificate examinations. This plan should be reviewed and developed significantly. The content to be taught in the different years is identified, however, there is very little insight or direction in the plan regarding teaching or learning, or about the timeframes for achieving this work. It was recommended previously, in the 2005 report, that an account of the teaching and learning methods and strategies to be used should be included in the planning documentation. Incremental progress should be evident in the teaching plan and for the development of student proficiency in the language. The most effective way to achieve this is to identify clearly the learning outcomes in the four language skills for the different levels in the subject, year on year. Guidance in this regard is to be found in the publication the *European Languages Portfolio* developed by the Council of Europe. Further information is available on the website at ([www.tcd.ie/slss/clcs](http://www.tcd.ie/slss/clcs))

Teachers should discuss their own experiences of teaching methods and should detail these in the subject plan along with the expected learning outcomes. As a further step, it would be helpful to exploit opportunities for collaborative teaching or to invite each other into classes during the year. School management stated that such collaboration exists among certain members of the Irish department in senior cycle. This is commended; however, there is no reference to this development in the subject plan. The guidance given in the planning documentation regarding collaborative subject planning activities was noted. In 2004 it was recommended that discussions among subject coordinators in the school include teaching methods and self-evaluation of their teaching. It is not evident from the subject plan or from minutes of meetings that such discussion has been initiated in the Irish department as yet. It is recommended that teachers refer back to this previous direction.

The TY Irish programme presented for the school year 2009/2010 should be reviewed in detail. It is not clear from this document how the objectives and ambitious aims recorded in the programme are to be achieved using the course content presented. The TY programme should

seek to promote fresh ways of providing learning experiences in Irish. Appropriate attention should be given to the time constraints that apply to the delivery of the TY programme. The programme for the year should be realistic, interesting and achievable and should have a timeframe.

It would be useful to include in the plan a shared description of the status of Irish as the teachers perceive it to be in the school, and identify an action plan to initiate improvements within an agreed period of time. The outcome of these efforts should be recorded in review. The inspection report from 2005 should also be included in these deliberations.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In the course of the evaluation visit seven classes were observed. These included all levels of the subject and a good mixture of both junior and senior cycle classes. All teachers were confident in their presentations and good efforts were made to maintain Irish as the primary language of communication in the classes. In the vast majority of classes the lesson objective was clear and was achieved within the lesson period. Activities in most classes demonstrated good preparation and in some lessons handouts had been prepared in advance to support students. In certain cases written preparation was made available and fully reflected the work achieved during the class. Teaching was well structured in many instances. Students were reminded of the aim of the lesson during and at the end of classes.

The range of teaching methodologies in evidence was quite limited. For the most part, learning activities were teacher-directed throughout the lesson periods and included questioning, encouraging students to recall previously practised vocabulary and regularly providing explanations of the material being presented. Students were asked to: answer questions posed by teachers on the content of the lesson; repeat explanations provided by teachers and make written note of the finished work. On the whole, material practised and resources in use in all classes were similar, more or less. In six of the seven classes observed this involved a written task, primarily a short letter or postcard and, in another class, a short written account. This type of work is appropriate for students who must complete such tasks as part of the written papers in the certificate examinations. However, this type of work is limited when the focus in lessons is solely on written work. The principal resources used in classes consisted chiefly of the whiteboard and the work of the individual teacher. With the exception of one class in senior cycle, the use of ICT resources was peripheral. The same statement is made in the 2005 subject inspection report on Irish.

It is recommended that language acquisition be promoted through the integration of all the language skills. Even though there was a certain variation in the learning activities provided, for the most part emphasis was restricted to the one skill of writing. In this regard, the main recommendation is that opportunities be provided for students to talk about everyday events as normal practice, even if only for a limited period during class. This recommendation was made previously in the 2005 report. Another helpful suggestion is to adapt the lesson content for students and have students discuss the content, instead of focusing entirely on practising vocabulary for letters or a story. By and large however, classes closely reflected the content being presented. In some instances efforts were made at lateral development of the content to bring students more into the conversation; however English was also used here.

This approach was useful in the case of students who were very weak. One such lesson in junior cycle where students showed low levels of proficiency was well managed. Variety was introduced into lesson activities for the students by the use of pair work. The task involved reassembling a letter which had been cut into sentences. Students worked well together to complete this task. Even though many of the students were not sufficiently proficient to speak in Irish within their groups, the teacher encouraged, motivated and helped them through her conversation with them as she moved from group to group. The teacher used a little English with certain students to ensure they understood instructions. In one senior cycle class too much translation to English was employed when asking questions on vocabulary and excessive use was made of English in general conversation with students. It was evident that the oral proficiency of these students in Irish was quite limited however, later in class they were able to understand questions posed in Irish. It is recommended that the amount of translation be significantly curtailed. If translation is used regularly students will not gain experience of engaging in the target language by any means other than translating it.

A more challenging approach to letter writing was used in another junior cycle class. This challenge was adapted for a class where the standard of the students' oral Irish was higher but still quite limited. The exercise involved writing a letter home from a school trip. The task was well developed at the beginning through discussion of a school trip which students had taken. The teacher succeeded in encouraging good efforts from the students by praising them and through the use of humour. In addition to oral communication, student attention was directed also to richness of vocabulary and accuracy of speech in Irish without adversely affecting the self-confidence of these students. Students made mistakes in their speech nevertheless; they were successfully encouraged to speak without the use of translation to English. Student awareness was focused on the most important elements of the mistakes without drawing attention to the individual who had made the mistake or without interrupting the students as they spoke. This is the type of effective approach and good practice that teachers would observe in visits to each other's classes.

The provision of differentiated work for students must be considered in order to accommodate their range of abilities. This is particularly important in a mixed-ability class. In the case of one junior cycle mixed-ability class observed, it was noted that the needs of students with poorer ability were well provided for in the task of letter writing however, sufficient challenge was not set for the higher-level students. Opportunity to speak in Irish was not provided and students were very engaged in one task. A similar situation was evident in another junior cycle class where the task set was to put together an account of an appointment with the dentist. A printed account on this subject was read and focus placed on vocabulary. For homework students were asked to write a story on the same topic. Students should also be encouraged to speak about the topic from their own experiences. A short video excerpt from the television comedy series *Mr Bean* would be very useful in encouraging students to talk about a visit to the dentist, especially since there is no dialogue in that video.

In a senior cycle class students were appropriately prepared for the Leaving Certificate oral examination. This involved practice in the correct use of verb tenses in answers to the examiner's questions. There was also a good deal of written practice on those verbs with the help of a useful handout which had been prepared in advance. The best practice in developing oral competence is to speak the language on a regular basis. These students had good oral proficiency and many of them had completed a course in the Gaeltacht. Practice of oral skills would be more appropriate for these students.

Active learning methods were used in another senior cycle class to promote oral work. This consisted of groups of students discussing in front of the class their recently completed work

experience period. These interviews were being filmed by video camera. Students had prepared scripts however, the standard of Irish was very poor and it was clear that the text had not been corrected prior to filming. It was a great pity that this had not been done as the idea for the lesson was worthwhile. All of the students involved, actors and audience, derived great enjoyment from the activities but there were no obvious benefit to student learning in Irish gained from the class. Neither was it clear what learning objectives had been set in advance. Appropriate preparation must be made for such a class.

Good collaboration was evident between students and teachers. Class management was effective in the lessons observed and a positive atmosphere obtained. On the whole, the amount of learning achieved by students in the lessons observed was quite limited. The aims of the lessons were also quite restricted. To support student learning it is strongly recommended that, in planning for individual lessons, careful focus be placed on setting out definite, achievable learning objectives and that teaching in classes be consistent with these targets.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The school operates an assessment policy. Student progress is regularly assessed using term and mid-term tests. Common tests are set in the house examinations for all the same level Irish classes. This is good practice and facilitates valid comparisons of student progress from class to class. Parents are informed through the issuing of school reports and by parent-teacher meetings. The guidance given regarding the assessment system for Irish in TY should be clarified as the Irish and English versions presented do not match.

The school has a very good homework policy. Proof of homework having been assigned was evident in the classes observed and copybooks inspected. The best set of copybooks presented were in junior cycle, had hardback covers and contained comprehensive work. Teacher recognition of composition work was evident. In another class in junior cycle comprehensive work was obvious from the beginning of the year but teacher recognition of this work was limited. Copybooks from a senior cycle class showed evidence of comprehensive work, constructive guidance and teacher recognition. It is recommended that all teachers provide recognition of student work in copybooks, as common practice, and that guidance be given regarding improvement in composition work, in particular. A similar recommendation is made in the 2005 report on Irish. Concern was noted regarding the amount of translation to English which was evident in certain copybooks. An example of this is an English version of a short letter written in the copybook, followed immediately by the Irish translation. Another example is poetry reviews written completely in English in the copybooks. The use of translation should be significantly curtailed. The Irish syllabuses clearly recommend the avoidance of translation in class. Guidance on this issue should be recorded in the subject plan and a conscious effort made to avoid the use of translation as far as possible.

Emphasis on communication is identified as one of the aims and objectives in the 'plan for Irish'. It was stated on an information form that oral Irish is included in the assessment of student competence in the language. This is good practice. However no particular guidance about the methods involved or the proportion of marks awarded to oral Irish in the house examinations is provided in the subject plan. Clear guidance should be provided in the plan. This aspect of the assessment procedure should be explained to students from the beginning to encourage them to make greater efforts to speak Irish as the norm in classes. It would be worthwhile to consider recording student oral proficiency as a separate element in the total marks awarded in the subject

in the house examinations. In line with this recommendation it is suggested that the school consider entering students for the optional oral test in the Junior Certificate.

A new Leaving Certificate course will come into operation in the school year 2010/11 whereby forty per cent of marks will be awarded for oral proficiency in Irish. The subject plan for Irish should be reviewed in light of this fact and the school should ensure that students have sufficient experience in speaking the language from the beginning of fifth year. ICT resources would be very useful in this regard. Samples of student oral tests could be recorded and, with the permission of the students, these recordings could be used as exemplars in classes. It would be very valuable for teachers to work together to develop and update a very effective series of these recordings.

It would be worthwhile to analyse participation and achievement rates in the subject at the different levels in the certificate examinations and this information should be clearly stated in the subject plan. These details provide both valuable information on the status of the subject and direction for planning in teaching and learning. This information can also be used as reference points for the Irish department to develop and review an action plan for improvement.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There are many indications in Coolmine Community School which show that Irish is more than just a subject on the timetable.
- In the interest of strengthening and renewing the link with the nearby all-Irish primary school consideration is ongoing to establish an all-Irish stream in the school.
- Timetabled provision for Irish is very good for both junior and senior cycle classes in relation to the number of classes offered per week and, with the exception of TY, these classes are evenly distributed throughout the week.
- From the beginning of junior cycle high expectations in Irish are set for students and efforts are made to have the maximum number of students study the subject at higher level.
- School management is very supportive of teachers with regard to the provision of resources and attendance at in-service events.
- The school's information and communications technology (ICT) resources are very good.
- Teacher presentations were confident in all cases and good efforts were made to maintain the target language as the primary language in classes. In most of the classes observed the lesson objective was clear and was achieved within the class period.
- Students and teachers worked co-operatively during classes. Class management was good and a positive atmosphere prevailed.
- Common examinations are set in the house examinations for all the same level Irish classes. This is good practice and facilitates valid comparisons of student progress from class to class.

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



- In the interests of providing all members of the Irish department with the opportunity to gain experience of managing department events and obtaining an overview of the status of the subject in the school, it would be worthwhile to consider rotating the role of subject co-ordinator among all members.
- The 'plan for Irish' should be developed extensively in relation to guidance for teaching and learning.
- The current TY plan for Irish should be reviewed in detail and the programme should promote new ways of providing students with learning experiences in Irish.
- It is recommended that opportunities be provided in classes for students to speak in Irish about everyday events as common practice; alternatively, class content could be adapted to suit students themselves and students should be set the task of discussing it in Irish.
- In future it would be useful to consider recording student oral proficiency in Irish as a separate element in the total mark awarded to the subject in house examinations.
- An analysis of participation and achievement rates in the subject at the different levels in the certificate examinations would be valuable and this information should be clearly stated in the subject plan as guidance for planning for improvement and review.
- To support student learning it is strongly recommended that, in planning for individual classes, careful focus be placed on setting out definite, achievable learning objectives and that teaching in classes be consistent with these targets.

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.