

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Irish  
REPORT**

**Newpark Comprehensive School,  
Blackrock, County Dublin  
Roll number: 81001I**

**Date of inspection: 22 October 2009**



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F  
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N  
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | 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 in Newpark Comprehensive School, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. 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 the students and examined student work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and the deputy principal. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

First-year classes are of mixed ability in Newpark Comprehensive School. The students are divided in second year into higher and ordinary-level classes according to their results in the first year summer examinations. Usually, two higher-level classes and three ordinary-level classes are formed in every year group in the school. In the current year, there are two ordinary-level and two higher-level classes in Transition Year (TY). The number of students taking higher-level in certificate examinations is a little lower than expected. There was a significant increase in the number of students who took the higher-level paper in the Leaving Certificate last year and this change is commended. It is recommended that senior management and the teachers of Irish discuss strategies to increase the number of students studying Irish at higher level for the Junior Certificate as a first step and that they plan also for a similar increase for the Leaving Certificate examination.

There is very good timetabled provision for Irish as regards the number of lessons provided for each year group. There are four periods for Irish per week available for first and second year, and five periods for third year. There are four periods per week for Irish allocated for the students in Transition Year (TY) and five periods are allocated to Irish in fifth and sixth year. This is more than satisfactory.

Six teachers are involved in teaching Irish in the school and all these teachers are suitably qualified to teach the subject. The Irish teachers rotate the classes and the levels between them each year under the direction of school management and every effort is made to maintain continuity in junior and senior cycles within that system.

One hundred and seventy-five students have an exemption from the study of Irish in the school. Students who received their primary education abroad until they were eleven years of age account

for eight exemptions, students from abroad account for thirty-nine exemptions and students with learning difficulties account for one hundred and twenty-seven exemptions. There is no reason given as to why one student is listed as being exempted from the study of Irish. It is recommended that school management ensure that circular M10/96 is being strictly applied. It was reported that every effort is made to encourage the students with exemptions to learn Irish and in one case observed, a significant number of students with exemptions were participating fully in the Irish lesson. Senior management are highly commended for this approach.

Commendable efforts are made in the school to broaden and develop students' experience of Irish as a living language outside Irish class. A series of activities and occasions is organised during Seachtain na Gaeilge and the principal reported that the celebration has been a great success in recent years and that the teachers work hard at organising the various events. *Céilís*, concerts with special guests, a table quiz, competitions, a coffee morning and a treasure hunt are organised during the week and it would appear that these events are very visible throughout the school. In addition, students are brought to dramatic productions in Irish when they are staged in Dublin and the students participate in the *Gael Linn* debating competitions.

An Irish Club is organised regularly in the school also, although the Club had not yet been established for that school year at the time of the inspection. It is recommended that the teachers discuss the possibilities of broadening the access to the Club, to see if it could be organised for various age groups at different times. It would be worth considering registering the Club with the youth organisation *Feachtas* in order to give focus to the activities. The efforts of the teachers in organising all these events are commendable. Efforts such as these aid the teachers in the classrooms and are important as they give the students an opportunity to experience Irish as a living language.

It was reported that there is no established tradition in the school of students attending one of the Irish language summer courses in the Gaeltacht or in Dublin. Although it is understood that the teachers publicise the courses available, it is recommended that senior management play a more central role when it comes to informing parents about the advantages of these courses. It is recommended that information be made available to parents about Gaeltacht courses and daytime courses in the Irish language available locally and in the city centre. If the number of students attending these courses could be increased, it would help raise the profile of the language in the school as well as achievement in Irish generally.

Most of the Irish teachers have their own classrooms and generally a satisfactory effort has gone into the decoration of these rooms with materials relating to the teaching and learning of the language and the work of the students on display. There is a television and DVD player available in the majority of classrooms and school management is to be commended for providing those resources following a request from the Irish teachers a number of years ago.

An annual budget is allocated to the Irish department and it was reported that the teachers were free to acquire extra resources, as necessary. There is a resource room available for the Irish teachers and it was reported that there was a certain amount of resources and books available there. It was not clear during the inspection visit whether or not the materials and resources had been recorded or listed anywhere. If no list has been compiled until now, it is recommended that one be compiled and that it form part of the plan for teaching and learning Irish in the school. Irish books are available in the school library as well.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A co-ordinator is nominated among the Irish teachers. This is a new practice in the Irish department and it is hoped that the teacher nominated as co-ordinator will be in the position for two years. This is good practice, as it affords all teachers the opportunity of taking a leading role in relation to planning for the teaching and learning of Irish and the promotion of the language in the school in general.

The teachers meet together as a group once a term and it was reported that senior management in the school gives teachers every opportunity to meet together more often, if necessary. Minutes of these meetings were made available in Irish. Choice of textbooks, allocation of classes, subject planning, in-service courses and other relevant topics are discussed at these meetings.

A subject plan was provided for Irish during the evaluation. The subject plan contains information regarding the structure of the department, allocation of students to classes and levels, cross-curricular planning, modes of assessment and teaching methodologies. The aims and objectives of the syllabus are also provided. Certain information is also given regarding the topics to be covered with the various year groups and levels. Although the work completed to date on the plan for Irish is to be commended, it needs to be further expanded and developed. It is recommended that the plan contain a description of the departmental approach towards the use of the target language and more comprehensive information about the cross-curricular and co-curricular activities which support Irish. It is recommended that a more detailed description be provided for the following: teaching methodologies; methods of assessment in general; the various resources available for use in the different classes and for different levels; and strategies to encourage students to speak Irish. Planning for the use of information and communications technology (ICT) should be a central feature of the plan.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in Transition Year (TY) was contained in the overall school plan for Irish. Some aspects of the plan are highly commendable. For example, the study of certain modules of the TEG (The European Certificate in Irish) and Irish in the media. It was unclear from the plan the extent to which the language was being taught in an innovative and creative way. It is recommended that a separate plan be compiled for TY which would clearly demonstrate what is covered during classes and how Irish is presented as a living language in different ways, in line with the aims and the spirit of TY. Students should follow a broad and diverse programme during that year in order to gain a deeper understanding of Irish as a contemporary community language. It would be worth investigating the possibility of encouraging some students to participate in the week-long communication course run by *Gael Linn* for TY students.

Careful planning was undertaken for all lessons observed. Worksheets and notes were prepared for distribution to the students. It was clear that print resources and materials were being shared and exchanged among teachers. This is good practice.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Very good use was made of Irish as the language of classroom management, communication and instruction in all the classes observed. The teachers are highly commended for their dedication in using the target language. Many teachers made every effort to avoid translating from Irish to English by using pictures, drama, mime and other strategies. In some classes observed, however,

too much use was made of translation to ensure that students understood the lesson content, where it was not necessary. It is recommended that the teachers discuss the issue of translation among themselves and that they come up with some strategies for avoiding direct translation from Irish to English as much as possible.

Although many students made good attempts to ask the teachers questions in Irish as well as answering questions in Irish, it was felt that quite a lot of English was accepted from students in some lessons. It is recommended that all students in first year class groups be informed that Irish is the language of communication for Irish lessons, and that students have to make an effort to use the target language with the teacher. In this way, the practice would be established from the outset and students would appreciate, as they progressed from year to year, that they should make an effort.

Good efforts were made in all classes observed to create opportunities for students to communicate in the target language through the use of group and pair work. This approach is highly commended. However, it is recommended that teachers ensure that real and effective opportunities are provided for the students to use the language by giving them oral tasks in which they must speak Irish to each other. Groups of three are sufficient when group work is being carried out. If groups are larger than this, not every student gets sufficient opportunity to speak. It is necessary to carry out regular reviews of activities and class games which involve pair or group work, so as to ensure that those activities are effective and beneficial to the students in their learning.

It is necessary to ensure accuracy and correct pronunciation in Irish. The students' pronunciation should be corrected on a regular basis, without interfering with the rhythm of the conversation or student self-confidence. Effective use can be made of repetition from time to time to ensure that students are able to pronounce new words and sentences correctly. Examination of students' copybooks in certain classes showed that there is a need to concentrate on accurate written work in Irish from the outset. It was clear from the copybooks examined that the students have a broad vocabulary in Irish but that they are unable to use it in simple accurate sentences. It is recommended that the teachers of first-year classes focus on this issue as a matter of urgency. A significant amount of time should be spent helping students to write simple sentences correctly. If the foundation stone is laid in the junior classes, matters should improve throughout the school over time.

The teachers were energetic and diligent when teaching the Irish classes. A friendly and comfortable atmosphere was observed in the classes in general and students were at ease during the lessons. The teachers circulated around the classrooms helping and correcting students and ascertaining that assigned work was being completed.

Effective use was made of the white board in many classes observed to clarify answers to questions as well as to display questions and new vocabulary. In one lesson observed, an overhead projector was employed during a lesson and some teachers used pictures and photographs during lessons. Apart from the examples mentioned above, few materials or other resources were observed in use in the classes except for the textbooks. Although it is stated in the plan for Irish that extracts from films and television programmes are used during the classes, examples of such materials were not observed in any lessons during the inspection.

The teachers made significant attempts to contextualise the different poems to be covered in the lessons for the students and this approach is highly commended. In one case, a link was made between a drama covered on the English course and the theme of a poem on the Irish course and

again this approach is commended. It is recommended, however, that teachers make a greater effort to contextualise lesson content, especially the prose and poetry courses, for the students. To this end, reference should be made to films, television programmes, stories, contemporary pictures, photographs, and articles from magazines and newspapers. It is important to make lesson content as interesting as possible for the students and to make links between the lessons and their own contemporary lives.

It was very clear that the Irish teachers were implementing the recommendations from the Second Level Support Service for Irish in classes, especially in relation to teaching poetry. The teachers are highly praised for their work in that regard. It was clear that the strategies and the various activities used were successful in developing and fostering student interest in the relevant poems. It is recommended however that a broader range of strategies from the Support Service be used in the classes to foster diversity and to develop the range of methodologies used.

There was a significant variety of tasks to be completed in all classes observed and, in general, worthwhile efforts were made to ensure that students had the appropriate opportunities to practice the four language skills. The lessons were well paced, as they were divided into different activities and this approach is commendable.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Students' progress is assessed through a broad range of assessment methods including house examinations at Christmas and in the summer and class tests in various subjects for the mid-term break and for Easter. The teachers of Irish work together to organise common house examinations for the various year groups and levels. This good practice is commended.

It was reported that the students' Irish oral skills are formally assessed in fifth and sixth year and this approach is commendable. The students undergo two oral examinations in Transition Year, before Christmas and Easter. Again, this is a worthwhile approach. It would be worth examining the possibilities of presenting *fáinní* to Transition Year students as part of the awards night. Students' oral skills in all junior-cycle classes should also be assessed. It is recommended that the Irish teachers discuss and agree ways in which this could be done for next year. It is vital that the students appreciate the importance of the spoken language from first year onwards.

Great variation in was noted in the correction of copybooks. Examples of good practice were observed where teachers gathered the common mistakes from written work and drew the students' attention to them as part of their Irish lesson. There were other examples where the students' homework was corrected carefully with concise instructions regarding improvement of their work provided by their teachers. The efforts of the teachers in this regard are highly commended. Many copybooks were also examined, however, in which it was difficult to read the corrections. There were other cases where no corrections had been made or where there were just ticks and the signature of the teacher. It is clear that a considerable number of students have difficulties in writing simple Irish sentences. Therefore teachers need to look at the system of correction as an important part of the solution to this problem. It is recommended that an agreed approach be devised in relation to corrections which would provide the students with information on progress being made and advice about improving their work. The system of correction should ensure that students learn from their mistakes and follow-up on corrections of their teachers.

## SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main findings identified in the inspection:

- The efforts made by teachers in organising a range of cross-curricular and co-curricular activities to give the students experience of Irish as a living language are commendable.
- The new practice of nominating a planning co-ordinator for the teaching and learning of Irish from among the Irish teachers is commendable.
- The work carried out to date on compiling the plan for the teaching and learning of Irish is to be commended.
- Good and comprehensive planning was undertaken for all lessons observed.
- Very good use was made of Irish as the language of classroom management, communication and instruction in all the lessons observed.
- Good efforts were made to give students opportunities to communicate in the target language through the use of pair and group work.
- Significant efforts were made in some cases observed to put the subject and themes of the poems on the Irish course in context for the students.
- It was clear that recommendations from the Second Level Support Service for Irish were being applied in some lessons observed, especially in relation to teaching poetry.

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

- It is recommended the Irish Club be renewed and that different days be organised for junior and senior cycles.
- It is strongly recommended that senior management in the school speak with parents about the advantages of students attending summer Irish courses in the Gaeltacht and in Dublin. It would greatly help the status of Irish in the school if a tradition of attending Irish courses were fostered.
- It is necessary to make significant additions to the plan for Irish in the following areas: methodologies, modes of assessment, resources to be used in the classes and the use of ICT in teaching the language.
- The plan for teaching and learning Irish in Transition Year needs to be broadened and developed significantly, so as to implement a diverse and creative programme in which the language is taught in innovative ways.
- It is recommended that attention be paid to accurate writing in Irish with the first year classes from the outset and that an effective common system of correction be agreed for use in all class groups.
- It is recommended that a broader range of resources be used in Irish lessons in order to put the learning of the language into a contemporary context which interests the students.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and with the deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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# **Appendix**

## **School response to the report**

### **Submitted by the Board of Management**

#### **Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report**

1. The Board of Management wishes to acknowledge the professionalism and courtesy of the Inspectorate in the manner in which the evaluation was carried out.
2. It notes the joint union directive in operation at the time of the evaluation directing staff not to attend pre or post evaluation meetings or scheduled meetings during the time of the evaluation.
3. The Board acknowledges the range of positive commendations in the report of the work of the Irish Department

#### **Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection**

1. Cross curricular activities have been activated with the Art Department around the theme of 'Seanfhocail'. Plans are also in train to work with the Home Economics Department during the Seachtain na Gaeilge.
2. The Irish Club is in operation on every second Thursday and a variety of activities are organised on each day.
3. A brochure has been organised for parents/guardians, outlining the importance of Summer courses in the Gaeltacht and in Dublin. The Irish department are looking into the possibility of an out of school trip to the Gaeltacht for Transition Year.
4. The Department are investing in new modern resources for use in the classroom.
5. In relation to the issue of use of the target language an 'Irish in the classroom' card has been developed for all students. The aim would be to include this card in the school journal when it is redesigned.



6. The Department intends to adopt a common correction policy. Guidelines for the amount of homework and range of tasks is outlined in the homework policy.
7. An extra period has been allocated to 6th year.
8. An extra teacher has been added to 6th year and to 2nd Year.