

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**Presentation Secondary School
Listowel, County Kerry
Roll number: 61380H**

Date of inspection: 25 January 2010



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

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in the Presentation Secondary School, Listowel. 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 on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal, the deputy principal and to the subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The Presentation Secondary School is located in an area with a strong literary tradition. The school has a very valuable resource in the local heritage movement which works to promote the cultural and literary richness of the area. The interest and commitment that the school population has in Irish stems from this local cultural awareness. The fact that members of school management are fluent in Irish is most helpful to the teachers of Irish and it was a great source of satisfaction that all aspects of this inspection visit were carried out entirely in Irish.

The majority of students have either five or six class periods of Irish per week. Such class contact arrangement is to be commended. The timetabling arrangement is concurrent in so far as Irish classes are timetabled at the same time for the different year groups. This provision is quite satisfactory, primarily for the possibilities it creates for team teaching projects which could be initiated in the future.

School management has a good understanding of the importance attaching to the balanced distribution of Irish classes among all teachers of Irish in order to ensure that every teacher has experience of teaching all the different programmes and levels. A consultative approach is taken in so far as teachers discuss the issue among themselves at the beginning of the school year and management then consults with them on an individual basis to agree arrangements. Other means by which management supports teachers include: the provision of time for formal meetings; encouraging students to undertake study of the subject at the highest level appropriate to their ability; supporting a range of cross-curricular and extra-curricular activities in Irish; facilitating teachers who wish to enhance their professional skills.

Classes in first, second and Transition Year (TY) are of mixed ability. A banding system operates in the other year groups. Regular review is carried out of the systems in operation to ensure that the best possible response is being provided for the various needs of students and, if deemed necessary, improvement measures are introduced. This approach is commended.

Forty students have an exemption from studying Irish. This figure equates to eleven per cent of the total school enrolment. Twenty of these students have learning difficulties and the twenty other students received their early education abroad. Teachers indicated that some students who have an exemption undertake formal study of Irish. Particular commendation is due to these students and to the teachers who encourage and support them.

Teachers are aware of the importance of continuing professional development (CPD) as a means of advancing their teaching skills and they welcome opportunities to attend various CPD seminars. Among the topics discussed formally at a whole school level are: use of information and communications technology (ICT); assessment for learning; legal implications of the education provision; support of students with special educational needs (SEN); teaching and learning methodologies. Teachers of Irish have attended workshops organised by the Second Level Support Services (SLSS) for Irish. It is the open attitude of teachers of Irish towards such educational developments which allows them to engage effectively with the needs of students in their care.

There is an Irish Room in the school and efforts are made to ensure that one Irish lesson per week takes place in this room for every class group in the school. This room is shared with the English department. While it is good practice to have a dedicated room, this particular arrangement limits the availability of the room for both departments. The walls are decorated with charts displaying samples of student work in Irish and there are DVD players, storage cupboards and shelves with reading materials. It was stated that there are plans to install a computer in the room as soon as an internet service is accessible there. It is recommended that the school considers this as a matter of urgency and one would expect that funding made available under the *Smart Schools Initiative* would be used to ensure that a laptop computer and a data projector are included in the equipment in the room. Since the majority of Irish lessons are conducted in student-based classrooms it would be worthwhile to display more charts on the walls of these rooms, especially charts where language points and common oral expressions are demonstrated. Reference must also be made to the partitions between certain rooms where an absence of soundproofing is evident and consequently the number and type of interactive tasks which can be organised during lessons is limited.

It is very affirming that so much Irish is visible throughout the school because it tells both the school population and visitors to the school that Irish is a living language in the school. As a means of further developing this approach, it is recommended that it would be common practice in the school to have a certain amount of Irish included in any correspondence or publication from the school.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject development planning is an integral part of the school's planning work and the effort invested by teachers of Irish in this regard is acknowledged. A coordinator has been selected for the Irish department. Included among the coordinator's principal responsibilities are: the arranging of meetings; the well-ordered maintenance of the department folder; informing other members of the department on the various developments in relation to Irish.

Documents in the Irish folder were reviewed: - general aims of the teachers; the strategic plan for the department; minutes of meetings; schemes of work; internal forms; copies of correspondence with various parties such as parents or the Department of Education and Science; the department budget; a list of resources; references to SEN students; accounts of formal training undertaken by

individual teachers; information on the various cross-curricular and co-curricular activities in which students of Irish participate. This folder provides a good insight into all the work carried out to enable students to become more proficient in Irish. In order to supplement what is already included in the folder teachers are requested to agree a policy regarding the use of Irish and English during lessons. Teachers are also asked to ensure the accuracy of Irish in all documentation.

It would be worthwhile to broaden out what is included in the schemes of work through the drafting of an overall long term plan, based on the topics of the syllabuses, which would show the continuity in the learning achieved by students in the different year groups. One would also expect such a plan to detail the manner in which different aspects of the syllabus topics are built on, from year to year. In the case of each topic references should be made to; language structure and functions, points of accuracy, literary works, resources, learning activities, assessment methods, cross-curricular links, and the skills being developed. It is most likely that such a plan would encourage even more collaboration among members of the Irish department. In addition, it would inform every teacher of the level of experience which students have of the learning in that particular topic, before beginning discussion of the topic in class.

Both formal and informal meetings are organised frequently and minutes indicate what is discussed in these meetings: choice of textbooks; allocation of students to class groups; learning resources; student needs and abilities. Following each meeting a copy of the minutes is given to the principal. This practice is commended. As the development of the Irish plan continues into the future, it is recommended that teachers discuss ways in which literature can be taught in an innovative manner. Perhaps it could be worthwhile inviting members of the English department to participate in this discussion.

The TY plan is positively noted especially the way in which opportunities are exploited in order to discuss different contemporary content relating to the everyday life of students. Another good practice that operates in the TY is the development, in an integrated manner, of the cultural awareness of students.

Excellent preparation by teachers was evident in all the lessons observed. It was clear in all cases that thought had been given to the different stages in the lessons and to the resources necessary to achieve each stage. The vast majority of teachers planned for the scheduling of learning activities which would stimulate the participation of all students. In a small number of cases it was evident that the teacher had spent time, in advance, reflecting on the aspects of the language to be practised during these activities. This approach demonstrates an excellent understanding by teachers of the most effective means of facilitating language acquisition. When lessons are being planned in the future, it is recommended that all teachers of Irish design tasks that would reduce their own workload and which would require more deliberation and talk from students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Irish was the dominant language in all the lessons observed, especially in so far as the vast majority of teachers spoke only in Irish. All students showed a good understanding of what their teachers said which indicated that students are used to hearing Irish spoken on a regular basis. All students are to be commended on their efforts to speak Irish during the lessons observed.

Very many teachers provided students with numerous opportunities to speak Irish, either through answering oral questions or through communications among students as part of group work. It is recommended that conversation among students should be common practice in every Irish class and teachers are reminded that it is much better if short term communication is created among students all the way throughout the lesson, if possible.

Lesson content reflected the interest range and experiences of students. Among the topics discussed were the weather, the town and music. Literary works were being examined in half of the lessons observed and in one of these lessons the way in which the teacher was so successful in using the piece of literature as a teaching tool and as a language resource was noted. This particular teacher showed great understanding of the differentiated abilities of the students in her care and she set out a stimulating lesson which ensured the participation of every student.

Effective use was made by many teachers of a wide range of activities to provide students with practice in the use of newly acquired language. These activities included answering oral questions, listening tests, language games, role play, reading aloud, dictation and written tasks. Indeed, effective use was made of questioning in very many lessons to measure student introductory knowledge and to assess learning effectiveness. The most effective learning took place during the lessons where students were set a range of different tasks which affirmed and reinforced newly acquired knowledge. In one case the teacher spent time on intensive oral practice of newly taught forms of speech and the positive outcome was evident from the correct manipulation and accurate phonetics of these speech terms used by students. This is excellent practice and its extended use is recommended.

A number of teachers created many opportunities for communication among students through the effective use of pair and group work. Student eagerness to participate in interactive tasks was noted. These tasks stimulated student opinion and imagination as well as requiring them to use their own analytical and interpersonal skills. This is excellent practice and it is recommended that every teacher should promote independent learning through creating the greatest possible number of opportunities for forming and expressing opinions. Indeed, very many of the Assessment for Learning strategies enable student to assess and direct their own learning, and therefore it is recommended that every member of the department further develop the questioning, marking, feedback, collaborative learning and assessment strategies which they employ.

In two lessons teachers focused student attention on points of language as they occurred during the lessons. This is a good approach as students will have a much better understanding of a grammar rule if they see the rule being used.

Many teachers of Irish are to be commended for their use of resources which greatly enhanced the learning experience; resources such as DVDs, podcasts, photographs, flash cards and CDs. In addition, many teachers designed posters and work sheets. It would be very useful for students to have the most commonly used range of vocabulary and language structures displayed on classroom walls. Not alone would this create a pleasant learning environment, the charts would function also as a reference aid when students are speaking during the lesson.

ASSESSMENT

A variety of methods is used to assess student progress. These methods include oral tests in class, correction of written homework, monitoring of class work, class tests, house examinations, pre examinations and oral proficiency tests. Common examinations ensure that the same language

programme is being followed, more or less, by each year group. Teachers are also reminded that a significant increase in the marks allocated for candidates' oral proficiency in the State Certificate Examinations is being introduced and therefore it is recommended that the school ensures that the assessment system used by the Irish department affords appropriate recognition to the four language skills. Many possibilities exist to test student oral proficiency in Irish in an innovative, enjoyable manner and it would be most beneficial for teachers to discuss, both among themselves and with management, the implementation on a formal basis of some of these strategies.

The Irish department has a homework policy based primarily on the school's homework policy. The additional content for the Irish department includes references to other assessment methods which are distinctly relevant to the subject – for example, oral examinations. The inspector discussed some ideas with teachers concerning ways in which student written work could be checked and feedback provided on the standard of work by having students correct the mistakes. This is another means of giving additional responsibility to students for their own learning since it is they who will be seeking the correct versions. Many possibilities for self and peer assessment would evolve from such activity.

Management carries out a formal analysis of student achievement in the State Certificate Examinations. The results are shared with teachers and feedback from them is welcomed. This is good practice.

School management gives priority to fostering effective means of communication with parents. Reports are sent home twice during school year. Individual teachers maintain personal records of student progress and this information is shared with parents at annual meetings. Particular note was taken of the practice one teacher has of maintaining comprehensive notes on the holistic development of the students, apart from the record of examination marks. This practice is highly commended.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Irish enjoys high status in the school.
- Timetabling provides full support to learning and teaching Irish.
- Classes are divided equally among teachers.
- Students are encouraged to study Irish at the highest level appropriate to their ability.
- Cross-curricular and extra-curricular activities are organised to promote Irish.
- Teachers are aware of the importance attaching to continuing professional development and they are well supported by management in this regard.
- Subject development planning is an integral part of the work of the teachers of Irish.
- In planning lessons, many teachers incorporated awareness of the ability range and experiences of their students.
- Irish was the dominant language in all the lessons observed.
- Students were set a range of tasks which offered them opportunity to practise the four language skills.
- A wide range of aids and resources were used.
- Appropriate emphasis was placed on the cultural awareness of students.
- Very many teachers used questioning methodologies effectively.

- Student progress is monitored on a regular basis and a formal assessment system operates in the school.
- Good efforts are made to inform all participants as regards student progress.

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

- It is recommended that additional use is made of learning, teaching and assessment methods which promote independent learning.
- It is recommended that assessment strategies in use be further developed in order to acknowledge the oral proficiency of students.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Irish, with the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.