Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Douglas Community School
Douglas, Cork
Roll Number: 91396R

Date of inspection: 5 October 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Douglas 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 on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and the teachers of Irish. The board of management of the school 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

The management recognises the importance of continuing professional development and training workshops on various subjects are organised for the school staff. Drawing the attention of teachers to approaches which have more recently come to prominence is a worthwhile practice. The teachers are to be complimented on the open attitude they display towards innovative strategies and on the effort many of them make to integrate these with well-established practices.

All the teachers have attended the workshops of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish and they indicated that they have benefited from the content of these workshops.

Fifth and sixth year students have five class periods per week. First, third, and Transition Year (TY) students have four classes per week. Second-year students have three class periods per week, an allocation which is unsatisfactory. It is recommended that the timetable provision for Irish at junior-cycle level be reviewed and that it be ensured that Irish is placed on an equal footing with the other core subjects.

Students are encouraged to study Irish at the highest level which best matches their range of abilities. In support of this, the great majority of junior-cycle students are placed in mixed ability classes while there is special provision for students with particular educational needs. A system of streaming system is in place at senior cycle. It is recommended that the method whereby these students are assigned to Irish classes be reviewed and that consideration be given to the advantage accruing from establishing mixed-ability classes within higher level and ordinary level bands.

Almost all teachers have their own designated classrooms, an arrangement which enables them to create a stimulating learning environment. The teachers are commended for displaying charts showing vocabulary lists and points of grammar. It is anticipated that, as the year progresses, samples of the students’ work would also be displayed. All the rooms have storage presses which facilitate the collection and safekeeping of resources. There is a CD player, a data projector and a
laptop computer connected to the Internet in each room. This provision enables teachers to make regular use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) during Irish lessons.

One hundred and twelve students are exempt from the study of Irish. This figure equates to twenty percent of the entire student cohort. Management carefully monitors the level of exemptions. It is ensured that each student has the required documentation before he is exempted from the formal study of Irish. While a praiseworthy effort is made to provide students who have learning difficulties with learning support while the Irish classes are in session, there remains in many Irish classes a significant cohort of students who do not participate in formal class activities. While the challenges arising in confronting this particular issue are acknowledged, it should be set as a target that, in the future, a greater percentage of the overall student cohort would undertake the study of Irish. It would be worthwhile identifying the primary schools from which a significant number of students with exemptions come each year, and establishing channels of communication with staff members in these schools. Such engagement would allow for discussion of this particular issue as well as other matters relating to the teaching and learning of Irish.

The programme of extra-curricular activities supports the promotion of Irish outside of the classroom. It was reported that Seachtain na Gaeilge is a major event on the school calendar, during which a range of activities is organised such as an essay competition, a speaking contest and a quiz. In addition, céilíthe are organised with another local school, senior students are encouraged to enter the Éigse Uí Ríordáin essay competition and an effort is made to integrate Irish into the drama productions of the school. Particular praise is due to those teachers who encourage the participation of students in these events.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The teachers of Irish have participated in the subject development planning process for some years. One outcome of this work is the planning file which gives an overview of the work done by the department to develop students’ competency in Irish. It sets out agreed practices as regards homework, teaching methods, record keeping, the use of resources and so forth. It would be advisable that this file would also contain an account of the various modes of assessment, both formal and informal, applied in different year groups; copies of the minutes of departmental meetings; as well as details regarding students who are exempt from the study of Irish. The priority accorded in the documentation to the fostering of the students’ communication skills and to active learning was noted. The emphasis placed on the use of ICT was also noted. These particular priorities indicate that the teachers make every effort to bring students to an understanding of the possibilities attaching to the role of Irish in their own lives. This is a commendable practice. It is good that teachers discuss together teaching and learning strategies.

A long-term outline of work has been set out for the junior-cycle, TY and Leaving Certificate programmes. These various documents are useful reference aids, as they provide a guide to the development of the students’ language skills. They contain specific references to the elements of language associated with the various topics, an approach which is in keeping with good practice from a planning point of view. As the planning process is developed further, it might be expected that on-going review would constitute an integral part of the discussion, and that a record be kept of any amendments and recommendations arising from the discussion.

It was clear that the large majority of teachers had drawn up lesson plans, in that specific activities has been planned and appropriate resources prepared as a support for learning. Good
practice was observed in cases where it was decided to set students to working on various activities which consolidated the acquisition of the newly-taught language. The approach was even better where the teacher assigned tasks which ensured that the students would practise a balanced combination of the four language skills.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Five teachers are responsible for the teaching of Irish in this school. The differences between individual teachers, in respect of the methods they employ to develop their students competency in Irish, were noted. It is good that such differences exist, as it gives the students experience of learning Irish in a variety of ways. In addition, it creates opportunities for teachers to inform themselves of methods other than those which they habitually use themselves.

An atmosphere of courtesy and of collaboration was evident during all the lessons observed. It was obvious that good relationships existed between teachers and their students, a factor which stimulated the participation of students. It was gratifying that examples of good practice were to be observed in the great majority of classes observed.

Irish was frequently in use during lessons in that it was in Irish that the teachers addressed the students. Many students showed that they understood what the teacher was saying and those students who endeavoured to reply comprehensively to the questions posed are deserving of commendation. Even better practice was observed when students were set to speaking Irish to one another and it is strongly recommended that every teacher should create as many opportunities as possible for participation in interactive tasks during lessons.

Some teachers ensured that there was significant variety in the tasks to be completed by students. They also ensured that there was a thematic link between tasks, so that the students consolidated the newly-learned language progressively through the lesson. It was when these tasks ensured balance between the four language skills that the most effective practice was seen. It is with a view to encouraging the continuing participation of students that the recommendation is made that they should be assigned a variety of tasks during lessons.

Particular note was taken of two lessons in which all the students were sufficiently confident and able to play an active part in all the class activities. In these cases, it was apparent that the teachers used well-established methods and that the students were well acquainted with these approaches. It was clear that these teachers place an emphasis on independent learning and, as the lessons progressed, they equipped the students with the necessary language tools in order that they might communicate appropriately. In one instance the tools in question were the language structures needed to review a work of literature, and in the other case students were first given the necessary vocabulary, verbs and speech idioms which would enable them to speak freely on their pastimes. In both instances, the students were required to keep their own records of the class work in their notebooks, which is a commendable practice and should be extended further. Informal assessments done by the teachers at the end of lessons showed that this work resulted in positive learning outcomes. It was clear that these particular students were developing their communication skills on an ongoing basis, as a result of student-centred learning and teaching strategies. When the implementation of these practices is being extended further, it is recommended as a general guide that each teacher place an emphasis on requiring full-sentence answers rather than single-word answers.
ASSESSMENT

A system of assessment is implemented in the school which ensures that there is ongoing monitoring of the students’ progress. It is further ensured that all interested parties are kept informed as to the standards being achieved by students. Continuous assessment is emphasised and an average mark is awarded for the students’ ongoing work three times a year. A report is sent home informing the parents of these marks. In-house examinations are organised at Christmas and in summer, as well as mock examinations for students undertaking certificate examinations. Reports are sent home following these major examinations.

The homework policy of the school embodies a very clear guide to desirable practices. It is expected that homework will be set for students at the end of each lesson, and teachers are asked to record this on the white board and in their own personal diaries, as well as ensuring that it is also noted in the students’ journals. The attention of teachers is also drawn to the fact that they are responsible for regularly monitoring the written work of students. It is commendable that these good practices were being implemented in the great majority of classes observed. The plan for Irish makes specific reference to the types of tasks assigned as homework and the emphasis placed on material to be learned was noted.

Apart from the examinations and the correction of homework, the Irish teachers assess the progress of students in other ways, such as by monitoring their participation in class and by questioning students. Formal oral examinations are administered to sixth-year students at Easter time, while it was reported that the speaking skills of all other students are assessed during class time and that marks awarded are incorporated into the system of continuous assessment.

The importance of cultivating effective methods of communication with parents is recognised, and formal meetings are convened for this purpose once a year. Parents are also given to understand that they are welcome to meet with the class teacher or the subject teacher, if they so wish.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The importance of continuing professional development is recognised.
- An extensive range of equipment and resources is readily available.
- There is a programme of extra-curricular events which encourages the use of Irish outside of the classroom.
- Subject-development planning forms a core element of the teachers’ work.
- The comprehensiveness of the planning documents, and the emphasis which they place on active learning, were noted.
- A courteous atmosphere existed in the classes observed.
- Irish was the language predominantly in use during the majority of classes.
- Students were assigned a range of tasks.
- In the case of some teachers, a balance was struck in the practice given to students in the four language skills.
- A system of assessment is implemented which keeps all relevant parties informed as to the progress of students.
As a means of building on these skills and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that the time allocated to Irish in the case of second-year students be increased.
- It is recommended that a review be carried out of the way in which students who undertake Leaving Certificate Irish are allocated to classes.
- It is recommended that greater use be made of learning and teaching strategies which promote independent learning.
- It is recommended that the oral ability of all students be included in the assessment process.

At the conclusion of the evaluation, a post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Irish and the principal at which 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

The Board of Management wishes to thank the inspectorate for the courteous and professional manner in which the inspection was conducted. The Board of Management is delighted with the positive findings and is pleased that the high quality of planning, teaching and learning was recognised in the report.

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

The school has already put in place a structure to allow for an increased allocation of time to Irish in Junior Cycle. The Board of Management would also like to confirm that the oral ability of all students is included in the assessment process as recognised on page 5 of the inspection report.