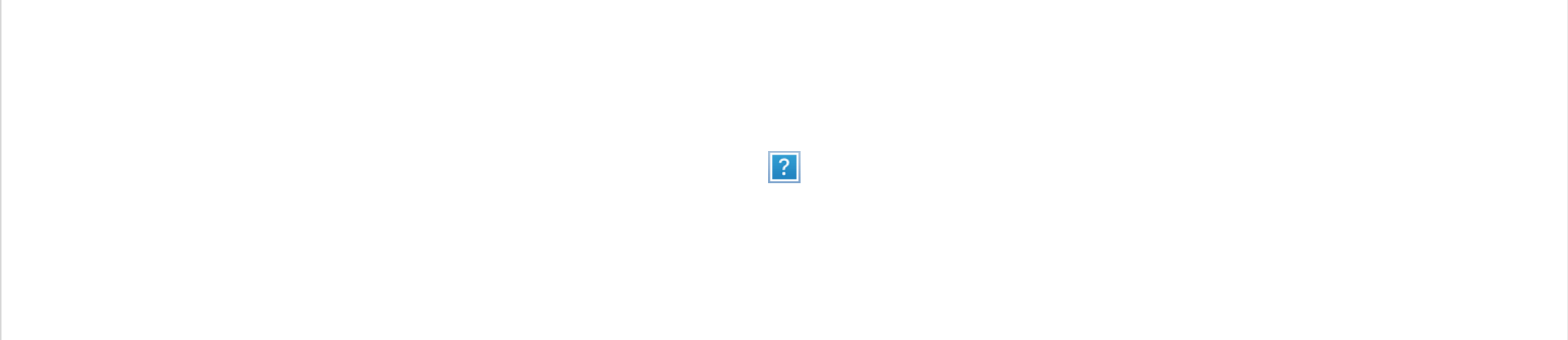




**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science**

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**Davitt College,
Castlebar, Co. Mayo
Roll number: 76060U**

Date of inspection: 18 November 2008

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING OF IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Dháibhéid, Castlebar, Co. Mayo. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of the teaching and learning of 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 the teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with the students and with the teachers, inspected the 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, to the deputy principal and to the subject teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE-SCHOOL SUPPORT

Good provision is made for the teaching and learning of Irish in so far as daily contact with the target language is ensured for senior students and four class-periods per week for juniors. Provision for junior students is not always at this level, however, and it is recommended that every effort be made to provide a daily input in the teaching of Irish, for third years in particular, as is done for the other core subjects.

First-year students are allocated to mixed-ability classes. Students are streamed at the end of first year, on the basis of a common test. Other year-groups in the school are organised according to the levels being taken in the State examinations. Irish classes are timetabled to be taught concurrently from second-year through to Leaving Certificate. There are two Transition Year (TY) groups in the school this year, allocated, more or less, according to higher and ordinary level groupings. It would be advisable to review this provision and to organise the students in mixed-ability groups, in keeping with the TY philosophy.

The management makes every effort to ensure continuity by assigning the same teacher to students for the duration of the cycle. The students are allowed to change level on furnishing a signed letter from their parents or guardians to the school. It is praiseworthy that the majority of the teachers teach classes in both cycles and at the various examination-levels, an approach which means that the majority of the department's teachers have appropriate experience of teaching the subject from first year through to the Leaving-Certificate class.

A total of 22% of the school's enrolment of students has been approved an exemption from the study of Irish, according to the provisions of Circular M10/94. The inspector was given to understand that 45% of those exempted are students who were not educated within the State and that the other 55% are students with identified learning difficulties.

The teachers responsible for the teaching and learning of Irish all have Irish in their degrees. The management offers every encouragement and support to the staff to attend courses in continuing professional development (CPD). Three full schooldays were made available in January of this year (2008) for training in the use of PowerPoint in the classroom. All the teachers of Irish are members of *Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge* and the management pays their membership fees. Representatives of the staff took part in in-service courses run by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish this year and it is intended that other staff-members will attend the courses during the coming year. It is recommended that, as part of the school development planning process (SDP), information acquired at these courses be included in the subject-plan; that the recommendations made be thoroughly discussed, and that the teachers' own feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the techniques suggested, based on their experience in the classroom, be also recorded. This discussion of methodologies will add to the sharing of resources for teaching and learning already in progress in the department. The discussion will help every teacher, including newly-appointed staff-members. The teachers are congratulated also on developing their skills in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) at night-courses organised by the Mayo Vocational Education Committee (VEC), or those available in the Education Centre in the town. A mentoring scheme for newly-appointed teachers is operating in the department of Irish. It is recommended that methods be devised to ensure that trainee teachers as well as newly-appointed staff-members get every opportunity of experiencing the very good teaching-practices already being employed in the Irish department.

All of the teachers have their own classrooms and they have beneficially used this advantage. There is a budget available for the language and a remarkable range of learning- and teaching-resources and aids has been compiled by the department. The teachers have also developed ICT resources and these are shared among members of staff. The school management is compiling an archive of film-excerpts and every department in the school will have free and ready access to these. It was reported that the library is used as a support to the learning of Irish and some classrooms also have their own sets of books. The teachers of Irish are highly commended for this professional co-operation and for their initiative in providing resources and aids for their students.

An impressive number of co-curricular and extra-curricular events are organised to promote the language among the students. *Seachtain na Gaeilge* is celebrated in the school every year and the whole-school celebration is enhanced by providing different events from year to year. In the context of the announced change in the allocation of marks for oral Irish in the Leaving Certificate exam 2012, as per Circular Letter 0042/2007, the department of Irish has devised schemes to increase the students' contact with the Gaeltacht. Mid-week courses are run for the year-groups who are not sitting the certificate exams and Transition-Year students go on a week-long Gael Linn film course based in the Each Léim Gaeltacht in Belmullet. It was also observed in the school documentation that a letter had been sent to the parents/guardians, informing them of the upcoming change in the oral examination. The school is commended for keeping homes up-to-date on changes which impact on their children's education. Scholarships are awarded also, in co-operation with Mayo VEC, for attendance at Irish Colleges which operate in the Gaeltacht throughout the summer. These initiatives, undertaken by the teachers and the school management, are praiseworthy indeed. Other events are also run throughout the year, among them, Irish music and dancingand visits to a theatre as well as encouraging students to take part in literary competitions and debates. All the language-teachers in the school join in celebrating 'International Language Day' every year. The school is highly commended for providing a positive experience of the Irish language for the whole school community.

It was evident from an analysis of the timetable for Irish that the length of the school-week must be reviewed in the context of *Time at School*, Circular M29/95. This recommendation was already made in a subject inspection report on German in May 2008.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

It was clear from the planning documentation that the department of Irish has made very good progress in the planning process for the subject. The co-ordinator appointed for the department holds a post of responsibility in the school and a defined role has been developed for this post. Although a whole-school review of the responsibilities attached to all posts is conducted every other year, it is recommended that the role of co-ordinator be assumed by all the Irish-teaching staff on a rotational basis. Over time, all staff-members of the department of Irish will gradually acquire the leadership skills involved in the role of co-ordinator.

The department has developed short-term, medium-term and long-term plans for the delivery of the curriculum. The teachers are commended on their professional work in this area. The medium-term plans were the most impressive because they involved teaching the four main language-skills in a thematic way, incorporating the various aspects of the courses. Comprehensive details were specified for language syntax, teaching and learning activities and resources as well as assessment methods. This approach to planning is commended. It is recommended that the strategies developed for the medium-term plans be also used in the short-term documents.

It is praiseworthy that the long-term plan for Transition Year Irish accords with the basic aims for TY as set out by the Department of Education and Science in *the Transition-Year Programme, Guidelines for Schools* or on the website www.slss.ie regarding the promotion of speaking and listening skills, drama skills, as well as raising students' awareness of local culture. It is recommended that some of the assessment and review instruments described on the Transition Year website be translated into Irish. This development would enhance the level of assessment in the language and the students would have an opportunity of having an input into the study-plan for TY Irish. The short-term plan presented to the inspector does not accord with this long-term plan. An example is the planning for the second and third terms, where two of three weekly lessons are focused on reading-comprehension texts and on a Leaving Certificate textbook. It is recommended that the short-term plan be reviewed, to ensure that the elements suggested above are included in the study-programme for students.

It is customary for every subject-department in this school to prepare an annual report for the management on the progress made by the department. This is commendable practice and it is recommended that the strengths and weaknesses of the department of Irish be identified based on this report. A plan of action could be framed which would enhance strategic planning and comprehensive review for the future, as happened for the past two years in the case of the development of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

It is commendable that representatives of all the language-departments in the school meet to undertake co-operative planning for the development of languages. 'International Language Day' is organised as a result of the activities of this group. This is a laudable project. This forum also affords language-teachers an opportunity to discuss and exchange effective teaching and learning methodologies. The forum could be used as a medium for promoting a whole-school learning experience for all languages, a development that would benefit both teachers and learners. It is recommended that this group outline its priorities for language teaching and learning and that a plan of action be formulated outlining the steps for achieving those identified priorities. This will ensure ongoing research and progress on ways of improving teaching and learning methodologies, based on the identified needs of the school. For example, this group has recognised for some time the need to develop strategies to assist students in learning vocabulary. It is suggested that teachers be appointed in turn, at the discretion of the group itself, to manage the co-operative work of the group. It was evident from the planning documentation and from the aids being used in teaching and learning, that worthwhile links were being forged between Irish and other languages in the areas of design of language-games using ICT. The departments of English and of Irish co-operate on co-ordinating topics for essays. The language-teaching staff of the school is highly congratulated for this cross-curricular approach. Commended also is the good planning done by the department of Irish in promoting links with various subjects other than languages.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The short-term planning for the majority of the classes was of a high standard, which greatly enhanced the order and sequential delivery of lessons. A good range of teacher-generated learning- and teaching-aids resources was used, including PowerPoint presentations, worksheets and jigsaw-puzzle material to compose a letter. Effective use was made of visual stimulation in the PowerPoint presentations. The teachers are congratulated on these good practices. It is suggested that, when material from the internet is being used for a lesson, the order of material be adapted to the ability-range of the particular group of students involved. This would improve the structure of the lesson as well as allowing for a reporting session before the end of the lesson.

The department of Irish made beneficial use of an effective range of teaching methodologies which enabled them to achieve a balance between their own input and the student activities. The good blend of whole-class work, individual work and pair-work greatly enhanced the variety of the lessons. When students were engaged in lesson tasks, the teachers moved around giving guidance to the students where necessary. Opportunities were created for the students to cope with the subject-matter of the lesson in a meaningful way, for example in the lesson where a jigsaw puzzle base using individual sentences of a letter was used as an approach for language-learning. Communicative situations were created in classes where students were practising their oral skills for both generation and reception of language. Impressive group-work was used in the majority of the classes observed during this evaluation; however, in order to maximise the value of this methodology as an aid to learning, four recommendations are made. First, the greatest benefit is always derived from group-work when a sample-demonstration is provided beforehand. A time-limit should be agreed for the task. Each member of the group should be assigned a definite role. Finally, an opportunity should be provided for each group to inform the class what they had learnt in fulfilling their task. This approach will improve co-operation within the group, as well as enhancing the pace and result of the work. In other classes, questioning was effectively used as a way of encouraging students to participate in the use of the target language. It is recommended as an optional technique for a teacher asking questions, that the students be organised in pairs to facilitate interaction through questioning between the students themselves also. These are commendable teaching and learning techniques and it would be advisable to make wider use of them in teaching all syllabuses and programmes.

The integration of ICT was a distinctive feature of all the lessons. It is commendable also that the teachers of Irish normally exchange ICT resources with one another. The resources enhanced students participation in the lessons and the ICT resources had a positive effect on both the teaching and the learning. In some lessons very good links were made between the students' own life experience and the subject-matter of the lesson, a strategy which deepened the students' learning by affording them the opportunity to internalise the material. In one poetry class, the students were challenged through questioning to analyse the subject-matter of the poem and to interpret the words for themselves. The students arrived at the theme of the poem in their own words, which is preferable to getting a simplified version prepared for them by the teacher. The teachers are congratulated on these practices which foster deep learning.

The atmosphere in all the classes was friendly and supportive of learning. The vast majority of the teachers had very good class-management skills. High learning expectations were a characteristic of most of the classes. The teachers derived every possible advantage from being based in their own classrooms or using a special room and they are highly commended for creating an environment which is conducive to learning. It was evident that the teachers had given due consideration to the content of the charts and posters. There were useful phrases on display, as well as posters based on poems, on prose stories, and the characters from the play *An Trial* by Máiréad Ní Ghráda. It is recommended that the valuable work on display in one of the classrooms, showing 'useful phrases' be used as a template to provide the vocabulary needed by the various year-groups for participation in the target-language. There were some notices in Irish on display in the school also. It is suggested that the diligence of the Irish-teaching staff and the good-will of the management be combined in order to make notices in Irish a more permanent element of students' language-experience.

Irish was the language used for all classroom transactions. The teachers adapted their use of Irish to the various year groups, as appropriate. At the start of the school year, teachers are provided with a list of the kinds of educational needs that particular students have. It is commended that this information was taken into account in the teachers' planning-work as well as in their classroom practice.

ASSESSMENT

The school is congratulated on the integrated policies it has developed for assessment and for homework. The department of Irish is developing a draft assessment policy; it would be advisable for the department to develop assessment and homework approaches for Irish based on these two whole-school documents. Particularly recommended are the references in the assessment policy to providing developmental feedback on students' work by using comment only marking. Further information on assessment for learning is available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie. It would be advantageous to the department also to consider the advice in the whole-school homework policy concerning giving equal weight to the different language-skills in the homework set by the teachers.

It was evident from a random sample of diaries inspected that homework was being regularly set. Tasks assigned to certain year-groups catered for all the different language-skills. The integrated approach to homework is strongly commended and it would be advisable for the whole staff to adopt this good practice. Occasionally, the homework was being recorded in Irish only, or bilingually. The teachers who encourage students to record their homework in Irish are congratulated on using this as a teaching and learning opportunity. A sample of copybooks inspected during the evaluation indicated that a lot of work had been done on a range of subject-matter that accorded with the requirements of the syllabuses. The continuity that was evident in the work in the copybooks indicated a good level of development. It was clear from this random sample that the majority of the subject-teachers were monitoring students' work regularly and doing developmental corrections. This regular developmental correction is conducive to student learning and it would be advisable for the whole department to adopt this method. The department of Irish should reflect on the value of corrections to the students' learning, to ensure that the correction process has a positive effect on the intrinsic level of motivation of the learner.

Class tests are conducted regularly and an account of the students' results recorded in the teacher's diary. End-of-term tests are set for all classes and the results of these are sent home. At Christmas and in the summer, aural comprehension skills are taken into account throughout the school and formal oral exams are conducted for Leaving Certificate students. An oral component has been included in the assessment of students who will be taking the new Leaving Certificate oral exam in 2012 since Christmas 2007. This approach is highly commended. It is recommended four main language-skills be integrated in the reports being sent home.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Very good provision is made for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school in the areas of timetabling, provision of aids and resources and general support of management for promotion of the language.
- Admirable work is being done in the school regarding the school-development planning process for Irish.
- Very good teaching and learning techniques were in use during the evaluation, which afforded the students the opportunity of playing an active part in building their own learning.
- Good assessment- and homework-practices are in operation and draft departmental policies for Irish are being framed at present.
- A comprehensive whole-school assessment and homework policy has been developed by the school.

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

- The management must ensure that the length of the school week complies with all the conditions prescribed in Circular M29/95, *Time in School*.
- It is recommended that Transition Year students be organised on a mixed-ability basis, in accordance with Transition Year philosophy.
- It is recommended that a plan of action be devised to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the department of Irish and that strategic planning be carried out to tackle the challenges in the school to the teaching and learning of Irish.
- It is advisable for the department of Irish to develop approaches to assessment and homework based on the two whole-school documents available and also include the recommendations made above under assessment.

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