

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

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**Coláiste Cholmáin
Claremorris, County Mayo
Roll number: 64610N**

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Cholmáin, Claremorris, Co. Mayo, 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 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, deputy principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Irish is well provided for in Coláiste Cholmáin. There are five Irish classes per week for each year, apart from Transition Year students who have three classes well distributed throughout the week. The schools practice had been to stream the first year classes based on entrance results. This custom has changed and all students are taught three agreed topics from September to November. They have a common assessment in November and selection is applied based on the results of this examination as well as the participation of students in class. The department's philosophy is that students' achievement is better when they are divided on ability early in the

secondary school. It was indicated that the effectiveness of this method was being reviewed continuously, and this ongoing evaluation is advisable.

Concurrent classes are timetabled for each year group which facilitates easy transition within the levels. Students always have the freedom to move from one level to another provided the change is agreed by completion of a transfer form signed by parents or guardians, by the class teacher, by the principal and/or the deputy principal, and by the guidance counselor. Management and teaching staff are to be commended for the comprehensive management structures applied to transferring within levels.

Of the total number of students in the school 46 have been granted exemptions from Irish by the school in accordance with Circular M10/94. 18 of these students were not educated within the State, and a further 28 have been diagnosed with learning difficulties. In the junior cycle international students with exemptions from Irish receive additional classes in English. Children with diagnosed learning difficulties receive additional learning support in English and in Mathematics. At senior cycle most of these students focus on the Applied Leaving Certificate and they follow an 'ab initio' course in Irish.

A wide range of materials and resources are available for teaching and learning Irish. All of the Irish teachers have their own classroom. This provision is commendable as it allows teachers easy access to resources that enhance their teaching. The Irish teachers have accumulated resources over a number of years which include tapes, compact discs, journals, articles, videos, extracts from Radio na Gaeltachta, TG4 and newspapers. Teachers also have access on a reservation basis to a multimedia laboratory and two computer rooms. Every classroom in the school has a computer with broadband access. Three portable data projectors are available to the entire school staff. In addition one of the Irish classrooms has a data projector and a screen. The Irish department retains a file which contains support documents being developed by the entire staff for the teaching and learning of language in the school.

Students have access to a range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities such as Seachtain na Gaeilge, guest speakers and authors, creative workshops, quizzes and debates. Coláiste Cholmáin has a long tradition of participation in the annual Gael Linn debating competitions. Students are also encouraged to attend Irish Colleges during the summer. These events are now a well established part of the boys' language awareness in Coláiste Cholmáin. The Irish staff has established links with the local branch of Conradh na Gaeilge which also supports the promotion of Irish in the school. The Irish department is to be congratulated for their own aims in ensuring that the language has life in the school outside the classroom and indeed outside the school also.

Each of the four Irish teachers has a degree in Irish and has extensive teaching experience. They are all members of Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge, and school management covers the annual membership fees. Two of the Irish teachers have many years experience as examiners for both oral and written examinations. Another one of the teachers corrected the Leaving Certificate Higher Level Irish papers for the first time last year. One teacher has a Teastas i dTeagasc na Gaeilge qualification and a second teacher has registered this year for a Masters Programme in Language Teaching Methods in Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, Galway. School management is very supportive of the Irish teachers' participation in continuous professional development programmes. Teachers attend in-service courses for Irish that are provided on an ongoing basis through the Second Level Support Services. The Irish department is aware of the value attached to continuous professional development and ensures that opportunities as they arise are shared amongst staff. In addition to subject-based courses, management makes every effort to ensure that ongoing professional development is available to all members of staff. Training in information and communications technology (ICT), and training in the use of the multimedia laboratory, was provided for all staff members. The school also arranged a training day last year on staff personal development and on the interaction between staff and students. This year management hopes to provide an in-service day in association with the Special Education Support Services on differentiated teaching methods. School management and the Irish department are to be commended for their philosophical approach that ensures their professional skills are developed in accordance with the latest research.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Coláiste Cholmáin's school motto 'Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí' is in Irish. The main aim underpinning the school's policy on Irish, 'that all children would achieve their potential' is supported by their motto. One of the objectives listed in the policy is that students would achieve their potential in Irish in the school, in the local community, and in the national events pertaining to Irish. This policy is challenging, but commendable.

Two years ago the Irish teachers in the school initiated the process of developing a school plan which was an extension of informal planning work already being undertaken. The Irish teachers meet formally three times a year. Since September 2005 a record has been kept of these meetings. In addition to these formal meetings the teachers have regular informal meetings. Every Irish teacher uses the intranet which provides for ongoing communication amongst the team.

The Irish department has completed a subject plan which provides for long-term planning for each year group. Included is a description of the sequence in which topics are covered, the organisation of copybooks and homework, various aspects of coursework, recommendations and guidelines for students' work, and an assessment schedule. In the plans outlined for the senior cycle some aspects of coursework and of the four main language skills are integrated thematically. It is recommended that this good practice, which underpins the communicative approach to language teaching, be applied by all staff. As a means of improving the subject planning it is recommended that all language skills are included in both formative and summative assessments of Irish. The general section of the plan provides an outline of the objectives of the Irish department, co-curricular planning, linkages with learning support, the structuring of options, timetabling issues and the use of ICT resources. In order to derive maximum benefit from the school's ICT facilities, it is recommended that practical steps be put in place to ensure additional opportunities are provided for students to experience modern technologies available for language learning.

The subject plans for all year groups indicate the need for differentiated teaching strategies. There is limited development of this area evident in the plans. It is recommended that this aspect of the plan be extended to include an outline of differentiated methodologies, indicating the resources that will be used as well as the differentiated tasks available to assess learning outcomes across a range of student abilities.

A subject coordinator for Irish has been appointed by the Irish teachers. This responsibility is rotated annually and such practice is to be commended.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Some of the areas examined during the inspection included poetry, tape work, a personal letter, discussion of shopping activities, music and an accident. Teaching and learning resources were used to good effect and this added considerably to the standard of presentation. The planned and prepared activities included an extract from Wikipedia, a tape, worksheets (both hard copy and digital), as well as thematic sequence pictures and a writing frame.

The standard of teaching was effective in almost all classes observed during the inspection. The lesson content for all classes was in keeping with the requirements of the syllabuses and topics were presented in a manner appropriate to students' range of interests. Many of the classes began with a review of homework and in some classes the teachers moved around the room looking at copybooks while work was being corrected. In almost all classes specified learning outcomes and preplanned teaching materials were evident. These teachers indicated what the proposed learning outcomes were at the beginning of the lesson, and again during the lesson when learning activities were varied. The objectives as stated were achieved. The lessons included integrated aspects of coursework and /or of the four language skills within the allocated class time. The short term planning was not as good in a small number of the classes. In these instances the learning objectives were not specified and the lesson progressed from activity to activity without any thematic integration of the various aspects of either the coursework or the language skills. It is recommended that the Irish department as a whole continue to connect the language skills by using interesting themes and integrating various aspects of the curriculum as outlined in the syllabuses. A further recommendation

is that clear learning objectives would be identified for each lesson and that these objectives would be communicated to the students.

In the junior classes two of the lessons focused on the theme of shopping. These lessons were appropriately paced and a clear structure was evident in the lessons. The four main language skills were integrated. In one lesson the teacher skillfully used questioning, pictures and samples based on the students' own lives to encourage the students to participate in the lesson. Whole class work was followed by individual work on matching where students had an opportunity to engage with the content. In another class where the same theme was selected, a poem was used to initiate a discussion on shopping activities. A further preparation for tape work on the same theme included a pre-listening period where the teacher connected the content of the tape to the students' own experiences. This was followed by an effective post-listening session where consolidation work on new vocabulary from the tape was included in a worksheet. Homework given in these classes had a natural follow-through from the content of the lesson. Such methods are to be recommended. In one poetry lesson, the teacher managed to guide the students to connect the underlying message of the poem to their own experience. The class began with an extract from Wikipedia on the poet's background and this was presented by slide on the data projector. Students were then required to write down any three pieces of information from the life of the poet. This activity was followed by a brainstorming session where students working in pairs contrasted the advantages of country life with the disadvantages of life in the city. The teacher recorded the views of the students. Students then completed a written worksheet where they described their feelings of the area in which they themselves were living. These teaching techniques helped to give students some valuable insights into how the poet was feeling when he was writing. Students then reflected on the tone following several quality recitations of the poem. They were given an essay for homework which helped to recap on the primary objectives of the lesson. This innovative approach worked very well, and its effectiveness was evident in the quality dialogue amongst the students and the enjoyment they derived from the poem and from their own efforts. This was a good example of students engaging in active learning connected with their own experiences which involved the integrated use of all language skills as well as poetry and essay work.

In a few classes the teacher did not achieve the same balance between the active engagement of students and of the teacher. Although there was variety in the teaching within whole-class, pair and individual work, students did not have enough time to engage with the content. Pair work and group work are most effective when everyone has a defined role, when a realistic time frame appropriate to the task is agreed in advance, and when there is an opportunity to provide feedback to the discussion groups.

Whiteboards, overhead projectors and data projectors were used effectively in the classes. Using the whiteboards to record key words in the lessons, pre-written answers to homework, feedback from groups and writing frames was very beneficial to the overall clarity of the lessons. In certain classes pictures were used effectively on the overhead projector to reinforce new vocabulary or as an opportunity to further explore the lesson. These are all further examples of good practice as they accommodate the range of learning styles that apply to every class. The staff as a whole is to be commended for this insightful approach.

All teachers displayed effectiveness in classroom management. Good rules and behaviour were constantly promoted in classes. There was a caring respectful relationship between teachers and students. Teachers expected the highest possible attainment from all students. Teachers praised as well as providing positive feedback on students' efforts. Students generally participated in classes and it was evident that they had a good understanding of the subject being taught. Irish was the language of communication in all classes. In some classes vocabulary was skillfully simplified in a manner that avoided the use of English.

In Coláiste Cholmáin the Irish classrooms provide a stimulating physical learning environment for students. Teachers have availed of the opportunity of having base classrooms by providing a rich print environment. This good practice not only enhances the learning environment, but also provides a visual reinforcement for learning. In some classrooms the students' work was displayed on the walls and this approach is to be commended as it improves students' self-confidence in the subject when they see their work displayed. In one classroom the prizes awarded in a debating competition were displayed. Such displays are important because this celebration of students' achievement in

language improves the status of the language in the minds of the students as well as giving confidence to those entering the same competition the following year.

ASSESSMENT

Formative assessment takes place both formally and informally. The informal methods used during the inspection included oral assessment by questioning, pair and individual worksheets and tape work. Coláiste Cholmáin has a whole school policy for homework which is fair and student centred. This policy describes the value, rationale, objectives, criteria and content of the homework as well as outlining the roles of the main partners in promoting the policy. This policy will be reviewed annually or at least every two years. Management and staff are to be congratulated for this comprehensive policy and for regularly reviewing it. A homework diary is used which includes a list of rules outlined by management regarding the appropriate use of the diaries. Class teachers regularly monitor homework diaries and a teacher with a relevant special duties post conducts a weekly inspection of the diaries. It was evident from observation of sample diaries that homework was allocated regularly and that the tasks given varied. A sample of diaries and essay/note books examined during the inspection indicated that comprehensive work had been undertaken on a range of content related to the syllabus. In almost all copybooks continuity and progression were evident. Students' work was corrected regularly and in some cases clear explanations of errors were detailed, as well as commending good work, which is in keeping with the department's policy as outlined in the subject plans, 'continuous references in workbooks including praise and direction'. In other copybooks, however, feedback was by means of a tic or a grade with no clear learning guidelines. It is recommended that the good practice as evidenced in some classes be extended to include the entire staff and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) website www.ncca.ie, might be helpful in this regard. Students have class examinations during the year and results are systematically recorded; the diary system is a means by which these results can be communicated to home.

Formal summative assessments differ for the various year groups. All students have house examinations in Irish in November and in December. Certificate classes have their mock-examinations in January. Fifth year students have additional house examinations at Easter, and all students not sitting formal State examinations also have exams at the end of the year. Results, based on the outcomes of the examinations, are communicated to parents or guardians through written reports issued to homes, and at parent teacher meetings. It is recommended that all four language skills be examined and that they are included in the reports sent home. Each year third year students have an opportunity to attend a study skills' and examinations' seminar. Such practice is to be recommended.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Irish receives favourable allocation in Coláiste Cholmáin
- The school has a comprehensive variety of resources and ICT resources for the teaching and learning of Irish.
- Those staff members who organise a good range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities are to be commended.
- Ongoing professional development for teachers, including courses organised within the school and externally facilitated courses, is encouraged and supported,.
- The school has an Irish policy and long-term planning for Irish for all year groups.
- In the senior cycle, subject plans for aspects of the courses, as well as the four main language skills, are integrated thematically in accordance with the underlying principles of the syllabuses.
- The standard of short-term planning and the standard of teaching were effective in the majority of classes observed.

Aspects of the courses as well as the four main language skills were, for the most part, integrated.

In the classes inspected a cooperative atmosphere was evident, students were praised, as was their work, and the mutual respect staff and students had for each other was evident.

- Irish is the accepted language of communication in all classes.
- A systematic whole-school homework policy has been agreed and this is monitored regularly and is currently under review.
- A seminar on study skills and examinations is organised each year for third year students.

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

- It is recommended that the use of ICT, in addition to aspects of the courses and of the four main language skills, be integrated on a thematic basis into the planning for all aspects of the subject.
- It is recommended that planning for the subject is extended by developing strategies for differentiation, and that all language skills are included when planning for assessment.
- It is recommended that an objective for each lesson would be to achieve a balance between student activity and teacher activity to ensure that students have an opportunity to engage with the subject
- It would be beneficial to students' progress if the good practice regarding corrections that already applies within the department is extended to include all staff

Post-evaluation meetings were 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.