An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaiochta
Department of Education and Science
Subject Inspection of Irish

REPORT
Margaret Aylward Community College
Whitehall, Dublin 9
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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 Margaret Aylward Community College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning of Irish and offers recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed the 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 subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The three teachers of Irish in the school have long experience of teaching the subject and each has his/her own classroom. Each class in the junior cycle is taking the Junior Certificate School Programme. The teachers and school management are commended for providing Irish as set out in Siollabas don Teastas Sóisearach: Gaeilge for students who are taking that Programme. This ensures that students can continue with Irish as part of their course of study in the senior cycle, whether they follow the established Leaving Certificate or the Leaving Certificate Applied programme.

There are two class groups in each year of the junior cycle and these classes are divided according to ability. One class group follows the Transition Year programme and this is a mixed-ability group. There is one class group for each year of the established Leaving Certificate and these are mixed-ability groups. One other class group for each year of senior cycle takes the Leaving Certificate Applied. The Irish classes are concurrently timetabled in order that students can move, if necessary, to the class that best suits their needs.

The vast majority of the students take Irish at foundation level and the remainder of the students take it at ordinary level. It was intimated that an increased number of students are due to enrol at first year at the beginning of the school-year 2007-08. It is recommended that the students’ progress be carefully monitored during first year and that they be encouraged to take Irish at the highest level commensurate with their ability.
It was stated that a significant number of students had exemptions from Irish in accordance with the provisions of Circular M10/94. Various arrangements have been made to serve the needs of these students during class periods for Irish: a special needs assistant works with them in the class, they are given extra lessons in English, and in other instances they are encouraged to study Irish. In senior cycle, other subjects such as physics or chemistry are scheduled for students who have an exemption, during class periods for Irish. Management and the teachers are commended for the alternative provision being made for these students and in particular for encouraging them to participate in Irish classes where appropriate.

Five Irish classes per week are timetabled for first and second years. Third years have four Irish classes. Transition Year students have three Irish classes per week while fifth and sixth years have five Irish classes per week. Students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied study Irish for two years and have three lessons per week throughout that period. This ensures continuity in the learning of Irish for these students from Junior Certificate onwards. The students in each year group are allocated single classes in Irish. Management and teachers are commended for the amount of time allocated to Irish and for the timetabling of classes because of the importance of giving the students a regular daily input in the language.

Although the school has a computer room, is not currently used for the teaching and learning of Irish. It was indicated that plans are in place to improve the provision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the school. In this context teachers of Irish are advised to begin including ICT aids and resources in their teaching and to adjust their plans accordingly. This would help to present Irish to the students as a living, contemporary language and would give the students opportunities to practise transferable skills such as using search engines effectively. A good supply of other teaching aids and resources is available to the teachers of Irish, as well as storage units in their classrooms.

The management makes good provision for Irish and lends valuable support to the teaching and learning of the language.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The teachers of Irish have three formal meetings per year. These meetings held since the beginning of this school year dealt mainly with planning for the subject in the context of School Development Planning. Students’ progress is discussed and planning for house exams is undertaken at these meetings also. It is recommended that formal meetings of teachers of Irish be continued to further develop the planning already begun, to monitor and review the plans and to discuss students’ progress and achievement in house and State exams. It is also recommended that one of the
teachers of Irish assume the responsibility for co-ordinating the work, that an agenda be drawn up for the meetings and that records of meetings be kept. Teachers could assume the role of co-ordinator in turn so that everyone would have the opportunity to develop their skills and apply their individual strengths to the role.

The following suggestions are offered to further develop the plans already in place for the subject: that planning for teaching and learning of Irish for the various year groups be rooted in the aims and objectives of the syllabuses for Irish; that the plans contain an account of the content and of the graded development of its teaching and learning; that they contain a listing of the expected learning outcomes, the methodologies and teaching and learning strategies as well as the assessment methods to be used; that they contain an account of the aids and resources that would be available for the implementation of the plans in the classrooms.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

It is the main objective of the teachers of Irish to foster in the students a positive attitude to Irish and to give each student the opportunity and encouragement to learn Irish. The teachers are highly commended for this approach and it was evident from the students in the classes observed that this objective is being achieved.

A good standard of preparation had been made for all the classes observed. Homework was corrected at the start of lessons and teachers ensured that every student made an input, a praiseworthy practice. In a few cases, students were made aware of the subject matter of the lesson and of any task to be undertaken by them in class. It is suggested that, as a general practice, at the start of each lesson, students be informed of what would be learnt, or what they would be able to do by the end of that lesson. This would facilitate the development of a better understanding by them of their own learning.

In the classes observed, the students were given a variety of short well-organised tasks to complete. These tasks concerned the development and consolidation of vocabulary, the development of oral ability in Irish as well as reading-comprehension and writing skills. The development of those language skills was impressively integrated and although students heard the language spoken by their teachers and their fellow students, they would benefit from the use of authentic material, for example from Irish-language media, related to the theme being discussed in class. The variety of tasks ensured that students’ attention was focused on their work during class and that they were afforded opportunities to practise and use what they were learning. This is highly commendable.

Effective use was made of the whiteboard in some cases, to re-enforce students’ learning. In these cases students were involved, in turn, in writing sentences or words in Irish on the whiteboard.
Students took this in their stride and showed their understanding of the subject-matter by identifying and correcting their own or others’ mistakes. The teachers’ work in fostering students’ confidence and their interest in learning is praiseworthy. In a few instances students were collaborating with others in their learning. This practice is worth extending by centring the tasks to a greater extent on authentic communicative situations in which students would work in pairs for example. In this context also, it is recommended that students be enabled to ask questions as well as answering them, and to avoid translation into English to show that they understand Irish. This might be taken into account in planning for the development of students’ ability in oral Irish.

A very good example was observed of the use of authentic current text from the printed media as a stimulus for the topic of a lesson, a stimulus which the students could identify with. This encouraged them, with guidance from questioning by the teacher, to discuss the topic and it ensured that they concentrated their attention on preparation for the written task to be undertaken by them. Since students are required to be familiar with more than one grammatical tense, changes in verbs for different tenses should be explained to the students. Comparisons could be made with English and charts used to illustrate the changes, as was done in a few cases, to facilitate students’ understanding of the grammar.

Irish was used as the general language of communication in class in some cases and it was evident that this was the students’ everyday experience. It is recommended that the practice of using Irish as the normal language of teaching and communication in class because of the importance of students’ getting as much input as possible in Irish.

All the teachers demonstrated good classroom-management skills. A co-operative atmosphere, supportive of learning, permeated all classes observed and the respect of teachers and students for each other was evident. Teachers gave clear guidance to the students concerning their work and helped students individually in all classes observed. The allocation of time for completion of tasks was very well managed. In all classes observed, homework linked to the subject-matter of the lesson was assigned. Students were generously praised for their work, but this was not always done through the medium of Irish. It is recommended that opportunities like this be utilised to further the use of Irish in the classes.

Posters and charts showing, for example, phrases which would be useful for the class, were displayed on the walls of the vast majority of classrooms visited. It is recommended that this practice be extended and developed and that more examples of the students’ own work be displayed and regularly updated.
ASSESSMENT

Students’ ability in Irish is assessed before they enrol in the school. It is understood that the most recent assessment of this kind was based on a primary school Irish textbook. Teachers are commended for their efforts to adjust the exam to the abilities of the students but it is recommended that the exam be reviewed and that the document *Curaclam na Bunscoile: Gaeilge* (1999), which is available at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), and that part of it which deals with assessment, be consulted when designing exams for primary-school pupils. Assessment is carried out on students’ progress by questioning in class, assignment and correction of homework, class exams, completion of statements in the case of students taking the Junior Certificate School Programme, and house exams and ‘mock’ State examinations. Reports on students’ achievements are sent home twice a year. Parents get an opportunity to discuss the students’ progress with the teachers at parent-teacher meetings convened once a year or more frequently if necessary.

The assessment of students’ work is based mainly on reading comprehension and writing skills. It was intimated that in some cases students’ aural and oral skills are assessed. It is recommended that all the language skills be included when assessing students’ work and that their achievements in these areas be included in their results in house exams. This would help the students to get a better idea of their progress in all the language skills and this practice would be in accordance with the aims of the syllabuses.

The students’ written work reviewed showed that the work is corrected regularly and praised where appropriate. A variety of correction conventions was used, grade, mark, note, or stickers being awarded in recognition of standards. Any approach which gives recognition to students for work well done is praiseworthy. In cases where grades or marks are used, it is suggested that notes be written also so that students understand which parts of the work are correctly or well done and how they could improve their work and make better progress. In this context, teachers of Irish are advised to take account of Assessment for Learning (AfL) when planning for assessment of the subject. Information about this approach is available in different editions of *info@ncca*.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Good provision is made for Irish and it is well supported.
- Development planning for Irish as part of the school curriculum has commenced.
- A good standard of preparation had been made for the classes which included a variety of short well-organised tasks, based on a particular theme, to be undertaken by the students. These stimulated the interest and active participation of the students.
A very good example was observed of an authentic text from the print media being used as preparation and as a stimulus for a written task.

In some cases, the students showed that they had experience of Irish being used as the normal language of communication in the class.

The students were given very good guidance in their work and much praise for their efforts.

In every class observed, homework was corrected and the homework assigned was relevant to the subject-matter of the lesson.

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

The development planning for Irish as part of the school curriculum, which is already in hand, should continue, with the plans rooted in the requirements of the syllabuses and of the school students and this work should be co-ordinated.

The practice, observed in some cases, of using Irish as the normal language of communication and instruction should be further extended.

The learning outcomes should be shared with the students at the beginning of each lesson.

Corrections made on students’ work should offer guidance for improvement and all the language skills should be taken into account in assessment.

Each student should be encouraged to undertake Irish at the highest level commensurate with her ability.

Information and Communication Technology should be integrated into the teaching and learning of Irish.

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