

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT**

**Coláiste Dhúlaigh Post Primary School
Coolock, Dublin 17.
Roll number: 70330Q**

Date of inspection: 15 November 2010



REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Dhúlaigh Post-Primary School carried out as part of a whole-school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Geography and makes 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 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 teacher's written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teacher.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

School management effectively supports the planned teaching programme for Geography. A dedicated geography room is in place and it has been provided with information and communications technology (ICT) and a wide range of resources.

Geography is currently not part of the junior-cycle core curriculum in Coláiste Dhúlaigh and is provided only to those students not following the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). Students following the JCSP study the subject Environmental and Social Studies (ESS). Two class groups in first year and in third year and one class group in second year are studying Geography. Students are taught in streamed class groups. The school is reviewing this method of class organisation and is considering including all junior-cycle students in the JCSP. This will necessitate a review of the position of Geography within the junior-cycle curriculum offered in the school.

For the senior cycle, Geography is included within the compulsory Transition Year (TY) where it is offered as a module studied by students for half of the school year. Geography is an optional subject for the established Leaving Certificate. Students are provided with an open choice of subjects before option bands are generated. This is evident as the subject option bands vary from year to year. This is good practice. The uptake of the subject is in a healthy state. Timetable allocation is in line with syllabus recommendations and lessons are appropriately distributed across the timetable.

Continuing professional development (CPD) has been availed of in relation to the revised Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus and whole-school issues. Membership of the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland (AGTI) is encouraged as a means of ensuring CPD into the future.

Teachers are made aware of students with educational and behavioural needs and in-class support is provided by special needs assistants.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A subject department plan is in place based on the approved syllabuses for Geography. A notable feature of the plan is the goal of increasing the number of students taking higher-level papers in the certificate examinations and of raising student levels of attainment. This can be achieved by establishing base-line data for the school and setting realistic targets for improvement, to be achieved within set timeframes.

Subject department planning in Geography is at an early stage of development. Schemes of work for each year, including the compulsory TY, were made available during the evaluation. These schemes provide a list of topics to be taught within given timeframes. The subject department plan for Geography should be developed further and should set out learning objectives for each year group linked to curriculum topics, resources, teaching strategies and assessment. Resources provided during the evaluation will support this development. A policy on developing students' literacy and numeracy skills in Geography should be developed and included in the subject department plan. This will complement whole-school planning in line with Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) planning requirements.

The planned teaching programme for first-year students focuses on topics from physical geography. This places significant demands on students, at this early stage, in terms of technical vocabulary and understanding of complex geomorphic processes. The first-year programme should be reviewed and consideration should be given to developing the key geographic skills of map reading and photograph interpretation. The use of large-scale Ordnance Survey (OS) maps and photographs of the local area would be an appropriate way to teach these skills and to engage students' interest. Consideration should also be given to including topics from section C of the Junior Certificate Syllabus: Economic Activities as a means of introducing greater variety into the planned teaching programme.

A written plan for the geography module within TY was made available during the evaluation. This plan sets out aims and objectives, teaching strategies and resources to be used. The first seven weeks of the module are devoted to map reading and photograph interpretation and the remainder of the module is based on a resource pack on global citizenship entitled '*How the World Works*'. It is commendable that this part of the module includes cross-curricular links with other subjects such as Religious Education. Commencing the TY module with map reading and photograph interpretation revises skills that all students of Geography should have acquired during the junior cycle. It is acknowledged that it will be necessary to further develop these skills for students who studied ESS. The plan for Geography in TY should be revised to ensure that it provides sufficient academic challenge for students as well as providing students with a broader educational experience. The undertaking of a geographical investigation could be used to develop students' geographical skills while encouraging an exploratory and investigative approach to the study of the subject.

All the lessons observed had a clear focus and were part of a larger unit of work. Lessons had been carefully prepared and available resources were effectively used to support teaching and learning. Folders of teacher-generated resources were made available. These resources included PowerPoint presentations, revision aids and test papers. The preparation of such resources reflects

the commitment of teachers to providing rich learning experiences for students and it deserves to be acknowledged.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Clear routines were evident in the classrooms visited. Lessons began with instructions to students to have textbooks, copybooks and diaries on their desks. Roll call was followed by the monitoring and correction of homework. A statement of the learning intention for the lesson was made before new subject matter was introduced. Such routines create a positive atmosphere which facilitates learning and teaching. This is in line with agreed school policy and is commended. It would prove useful to make the learning intention more explicit by having a number of specific planned learning outcomes which could be written on the whiteboard and ticked off when achieved. These could also be referred to during a review of the lesson. This approach will provide students with a sense of achievement and will help to develop their self-confidence in the subject. The establishment of agreed routines for the conclusion of lessons would also prove useful and would ensure that all students remain engaged for the full duration of class time.

Classroom management was generally effective in the lessons observed. Students were encouraged to contribute to discussions and to seek clarifications when necessary and were affirmed for their efforts. In almost all of the lessons observed, students responded positively to the teacher's invitations. However, in one lesson, some students were uncooperative, used inappropriate language and, by their behaviour, limited the amount of time available for teaching and learning. The school is currently reviewing its code of behaviour and the method of class organisation for the junior cycle. These developments will help to address the issue of unacceptable behaviour by some students and will ensure a whole-school approach to the management of students.

A notable feature of the lessons observed was the use of ICT. Digital presentations were used to provide a visual approach to teaching and to summarise the main points of the lesson. The dominant method of instruction was teacher input, which was clear and appropriately paced. There was also some discussion between teacher and students. There is a need to extend the range of teaching methods used and to give students opportunities to learn through a range of teaching strategies and learning experiences. Learning by doing, multi-sensory teaching and practical assessments are particularly useful. This will help to ensure that students are engaged throughout the lesson. For example, where diagrams are shown, students could be asked to describe what they see prior to a question and answer session which could explore the causes of geographic phenomena. The use of 'think-pair-share' or small group work could also be used to actively engage students. Setting short individual student tasks, such as the completion of a cloze-type worksheet or a crossword should also be considered. Planning for lessons should provide for a range of activities to ensure that student activity is given a greater share of the lesson time.

Questioning was used effectively during lessons to encourage students to develop their answers and to facilitate students' contribution to the lesson. This was most effective when directed to named students. There is scope to extend the use of questioning in reviewing previous learning and at the review stage of a lesson. This would help to ensure a reduction of teacher input and a greater role for students.

During some lessons, students were provided with revision aids and this is appropriate for those students preparing for the certificate examinations in the current school year. However, care should be taken to ensure that students become 'note makers' and not just 'note takers'

The display of maps, charts and photographs created a geographical atmosphere in the geography room. As a means of supporting the development of students' literacy, it is recommended that lists of key words be developed. These lists should be displayed in classrooms and referred to during the course of lessons. It will also prove useful for the geography department to liaise with the learning support department in relation to the use of these lists and to share revision plans as a means of supporting students with additional educational needs.

ASSESSMENT

Students' progress is assessed in a number of ways in Coláiste Dhúlaigh. These include homework, in-class assessment, and class tests which are held when sections of the planned teaching programme have been completed. Formal assessments take place at Christmas and at the end of the school year. In TY, formal assessments take place at the end of the first module in January and at the end of the school year. 'Mock' examinations are held for third-year and sixth-year students in the second term. Samples of in-house examination papers are included in the subject department plan. These show that students are provided with questions requiring short answers and more extended pieces of writing. This is good practice. As a means of testing a wider range of key skills, it is recommended that a greater variety of data-response questions be included in these examinations. Examination papers set by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) should be consulted in this regard.

Records of attendance, homework and class tests are being maintained. Parents receive progress reports after the school's formal assessments and student progress is reported on at formal parent teacher meetings when the class tutor meets parents.

A review of a sample of students' copybooks indicated that there is room to improve the quality of their written work. Strategies need to be developed to ensure that students present better written work and that they maintain accurate and complete records of their work. The use of separate copybooks for homework and notes may prove a useful starting point.

The use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) was in evidence through the use of 'comment only' marking of students' written work. Peer assessment is also used when students correct each others' work. However, to gain greater benefit from peer assessment, it is suggested that students be given an opportunity to discuss common errors and strategies for improving the quality of their written answers.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School management effectively supports the planned teaching programme for Geography with the provision of a dedicated geography room which has been provided with ICT facilities and a wide range of resources.

- Timetable allocation is in line with syllabus recommendations and lessons are appropriately distributed across the timetable.
- Students are provided with an open choice of subjects for the established Leaving Certificate and the uptake of Geography is in a healthy state.
- Schemes of work for each year, including the compulsory TY, were made available during the evaluation.
- All the lessons observed had a clear focus, were part of a larger unit of work, and were effectively supported with teacher-generated resources.
- Clear classroom routines were evident in the lessons observed and classroom management was generally effective.
- The use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) was in evidence through the use of 'comment only' marking of students' written work

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

- The subject department plan for Geography should be developed further and should set out learning objectives for each year group which are linked to curriculum topics, resources, teaching strategies and assessment, to be delivered within agreed timeframes.
- The planned teaching programme for first-year students and the TY should be reviewed.
- A policy on developing students' literacy and numeracy skills in Geography should be developed to complement whole-school planning, in line with DEIS planning requirements.
- There is a need to extend the range of teaching methods used and to give students opportunities to learn through a range of teaching strategies and learning experiences.
- Strategies need to be developed to ensure that students improve the quality of their written work and that they maintain accurate and complete records of this work.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teacher of Geography and the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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