

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT**

**St Mary's Secondary School
Mallow, County Cork
Roll number: 62350D**

Date of inspection: 5 November 2014



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY**

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

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| Date of inspection | 5 November 2014 |
| Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of relevant documents• Discussion with principal and teachers• Interaction with students | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of teaching and learning during four class periods• Examination of students' work• Feedback to principal, deputy principal and teachers |

MAIN FINDINGS

- Teaching and learning of very good quality was observed in the lessons.
- Uptake of higher level geography and achievement at all levels in the subject are significantly strong.
- The emphasis placed by teachers on student reflection and evaluation of their experiences of a range of aspects of Geography represents very good practice.
- Fieldwork experiences are provided to geography students at all levels in the school.
- The geography teaching team demonstrate creativity, enthusiasm, and commitment in their development of the subject in the school

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- The provision of Environmental and Social Studies (ESS) to a small group of targeted students should be reviewed in the context of the limited progression options that this subject provides to senior cycle Geography or History for these students.
 - The curricular plan for Transition Year (TY) geography should be reviewed to focus increasingly on local settings and the application of key geographical skills.
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INTRODUCTION

St Mary's Secondary School is a post-primary school for girls under the trusteeship of Catholic Education: an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST). The 555 girls currently enrolled are offered Junior Certificate, and an optional TY programme, the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. A small group of students are also offered ESS as an alternative to Geography and History on completion of first year.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed in the course of the subject inspection was very good. In all classes, students were actively engaged by well-planned and focused strategies arising from clear and shared learning intentions and planned learning outcomes. Students and their teachers overtly and effectively co-constructed learning that was scaffolded within a very clear lesson structure.
- The coherence of the planned learning in each lesson supported the students' actual learning. This coherence arose from syllabus-based lesson topics that were set at a level that engaged students, and were progressed at an appropriate pace. The facility to openly discuss issues, pose and respond to questions, and to work in pairs or groups during the lessons, allowed teachers to assess and review learning in these mixed-ability classroom settings.
- All lessons observed had a very effective balance between teacher inputs and the level of responsibility placed on students to engage with the stimulus materials provided to support their learning in lessons. In one particular case, a student group presentation on the social and economic geography of a region provided an entry point for the teacher to question students, based on their previous learning, on an apparent anomaly in relation to their understanding of the principles of plate tectonics. This challenged all the students to think and engage, and provided an effective extension to the students' own research of the region for their presentation.
- A range of other student-centred tasks facilitated this effective balance between teacher inputs and student engagement. One class group very successfully learned and then demonstrated their learning of the use of easting and northing grid lines through the phased and increasingly challenging build-up of tasks from stylised diagrams to Ordnance Survey (OS) map. Another group used a tourist map of Mallow and photographs of buildings in the town to apply their learning of urban land use zones and to locate specific local examples. Very effective detailed examination of historical and modern photographs of the streets of Mallow allowed students to conceptualise and understand the process, consequences, and attempts to address, the problem of local flooding.
- A culture of student-focused evaluation has been developed by the geography teaching team that is evident in classroom practice. Students evaluated their learning based on the learning intention in a number of lessons and within a more formalised structure in TY when students were observed to peer-evaluate student presentations based on identified strengths and areas for improvement. The ongoing provision of formative written feedback to students from teachers at regular intervals would help to maximise the impact on students' learning of this very progressive practice.

- Whole-school literacy initiatives have been mediated by the geography teachers into agreed classroom practices. Strategies currently focus on recording and highlighting key words in each of the lesson topics and on students' spelling and punctuation. Teachers have also agreed to use mind-maps and other similar key-idea frameworks to gather and highlight words to stimulate students' understanding. This practice was observed to be effective and very progressive. In the context of the developing school self-evaluation (SSE) process, the geography teaching team should evaluate the impact of their literacy strategies within SSE action planning.
- Uptake of higher-level geography and levels of achievement at all levels in the subject in certificate examinations are significantly strong. Teachers should continue current good practice in maintaining high expectations for all students and ensuring that decisions relating to examination levels are taken and reviewed following the pre-examination in the third year of junior cycle.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Provision for Geography is very good in the school. This level of provision is evident in the context of timetabling, the quality of teacher-based classrooms, information and communication technology (ICT) in classrooms, shared folders on the school's hard drive, and the provision of an annual budget to the department.
- Fieldwork provision for all year groups represents very good practice and demonstrates teachers' commitment to their students in facilitating their experience of Geography in environments outside of the classroom. The support of school management in facilitating these activities is acknowledged. The variety, quality and level of enjoyment experienced by students on these fieldtrips is illustrated by the photographs on the geography noticeboard.
- ESS is provided, on completion of first year, to a small targeted group of students who are identified as experiencing difficulty in accessing the full Junior Certificate curriculum. ESS replaces History and Geography for this group of students. Within the six period per week time allocation to History and Geography, ESS and learning support in the areas of literacy and numeracy are provided to these students. Outcomes at higher and ordinary levels for these students in ESS in the Junior Certificate examination are strong. It is however recommended that this provision be reviewed in the context of the limited progression options to senior cycle Geography or History that ESS provides for these students.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- A curricular plan for Geography and an assessment framework are in place. It is very positive that the skills required by students to understand and interpret OS maps and aerial photographs are taught early in first year. This allows teachers and students to use these maps and aerial photographs to apply appropriate topics, concepts and issues as their study of the Junior Certificate syllabus advances.
- A review of the content of the current TY geography plan is recommended. While the current emphasis on applying the key-skills framework at continental and sub-continental regional settings is very positive, the content should now focus increasingly on local settings and the application of key geographical skills.

- Clear, effective and long-established collaborative planning structures are in place. These have facilitated the embedding of current literacy strategies in classrooms, the development of the aforementioned student evaluation processes, the sharing of teaching resources, and the ongoing engagement with meaningful fieldwork activities. These, and a range of other activities demonstrate the creativity, enthusiasm, and commitment of the geography teaching team to the development of the subject in the school.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation. 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.