

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

**Subject Inspection of Geography**  
**REPORT**

**Elphin Community College**  
**Elphin, County Roscommon**  
**Roll number: 722800**

**Date of inspection: 8 March 2010**



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS  
AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA** | **DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION  
AND SCIENCE**

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

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Elphin Community College. 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 examined students' work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the acting principal. 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**

Elphin Community College is a co-educational school under the auspices of County Roscommon Vocational Education Committee (VEC). There is good whole-school support for Geography. At junior cycle Geography is a core subject and is allocated three class periods each week. Geography is included within the compulsory transition year (TY) programme and is assigned one class period per week for the year. At Leaving Certificate Geography is a popular optional subject and uptake is above the national norm. Teachers are commended for their work in maintaining a prominent profile for the subject in the school. It is commended that student access to the subject at senior cycle is supported by an open-choice system of subject selection. Time allocation to the subject at this level is in line with syllabus recommendations.

Examination of the timetable shows a good spread of lessons across the week. Class organisation in both cycles is in mixed-ability groupings. Teacher deployment is appropriate and all the geography teachers are qualified in the subject. School management is very supportive of teachers' continuing professional development and the geography teachers have attended recent in-service in the subject.

Teachers expressed satisfaction with the range of subject resources available within the department. These resources are stored in a cabinet which is accessible to all the geography team. The resource inventory in the subject plan should include further detail, such as a list of Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, aerial photographs, videos and DVDs. This would prove useful when selecting resources for teaching topics and could form the basis for future resource planning. In this context it is recommended that large maps of Ireland, Europe and the world should be displayed in all rooms where Geography is taught. These are an essential resource to facilitate the integration of locational Geography which is relevant to all areas of the syllabuses.

The geography teachers are using information and communication technology (ICT) and are interested in its further integration to support teaching and learning in the subject. Some of the teachers have purchased their own laptops to facilitate this. There is one computer room in the school which can be accessed by teachers via a booking schedule. The school has one laptop and portable data projector which is shared among all departments. This limited provision of portable

ICT facilities is having a restrictive impact on the use of ICT in the classroom. School management should plan, as a matter of priority, for the increased provision of ICT to support teachers in the delivery of the syllabuses. Furthermore rooms are student-based which means ICT equipment has to be carried by teachers to classrooms. Management should give consideration to the introduction of a number of specialist rooms equipped with a ceiling-mounted data projector. These rooms could then be shared by teachers on a rotational basis.

### **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

There was evidence of good team work among the geography teaching team which is commended. Formal subject department meetings take place each term and minutes of these meetings are recorded. The teachers also meet informally throughout the year to plan for the teaching and learning of Geography. It is planned that the role of co-ordinator is to be rotated among members of the team. This good practice will ensure that capacity will be developed as teachers will have the opportunity to lead and co-ordinate developments in Geography.

A subject plan has been developed as part of the collaborative planning process. This provides information on the department's organisation and procedures and contains a planned curricular programme for each year group. The geography teachers are reflective in their practices and have revised the first-year teaching programme to provide a programme of work more suited to the abilities and needs of these students. These amendments include a range of topics of varying levels of difficulty and the teaching of more technical topics such as meteorology has been postponed until a later stage. This reflective approach is good practice. It is recommended that map and photograph skills are also included in the first-year teaching plan. These fundamental skills could then be integrated and further developed throughout the planned teaching programme. Going forward the second and third year curricular plans should be reviewed and updated in line with the above changes. The subject planning process should also facilitate the further development of all curricular plans to include the expected learning outcomes and the methodologies including differentiated strategies to achieve these outcomes. Working together to develop these plans the geography teachers will benefit from sharing their experience and expertise.

A written plan for Geography within the TY programme is in place. The planned teaching programme consists of a study of the European Union, Ireland, locational geography and environmental issues. There is also a commendable focus on the development of geographical skills. While students undertake some field activities these are limited to the use of a viewfinder and clinometer. It is recommended that a geographical investigation be included in the programme to enable students to further develop geographical skills. The students should then write a report on the investigation, the format of which should be broadly based on the Leaving Certificate report template. This provision would serve as an effective bridge between the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate geography syllabuses.

### **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was clear evidence of good preparation for the lessons observed. A range of good quality resource materials supported lesson delivery and included PowerPoint presentations, worksheets, handouts, a map, video clip and other authentic visual stimuli. Teachers are highly commended for this preparation which impacted positively on both teaching and learning

Overall effective practice was observed in most aspects of short-term planning. Lesson objectives were clearly outlined and shared with students at the beginning of the lesson and in some instances these were written on the board. In one case the teacher conducted a plenary session at the end of the lesson which allowed for a review and consolidation of the main learning points. This practice is commended and should be incorporated into all lessons. All lessons were well structured and followed a logical sequence. Whilst the pace of lessons was generally appropriate there was scope in certain instances to proceed through the lesson content in a more expeditious way. In this regard it is recommended as part of short-term planning that more attention be given to the pacing of lessons in the context of the breadth of the syllabus.

Good quality teaching was observed over the course of the evaluation. A variety of methodologies was employed in the lessons evaluated. Several opportunities were created throughout the lessons for students to actively engage with the lesson content through the use of individual learning activities and pair and group work. There was good variety in both individual and pair activities which included the completion of a worksheet while viewing a video clip, a map and aerial photograph exercise, a matching task and brainstorming activity. The alternate use of whole-class teaching and student activity is very good practice. In a proportion of lessons group work was the central methodology. In line with best practice the task was clearly outlined and a time was assigned for task completion. However for this methodology to be effective the time limit should be adhered to. It is essential if the real benefits of group work are to be realised that there should be sufficient time for students to display and discuss their different learning experiences at class level.

A good range of visual stimuli was used in the teaching of Geography and ICT was integrated well. Visual stimuli were used effectively in lessons to elicit the various land use in urban centres and to illustrate visuals of different stages of peat harvesting and the locations of bog types. This is good practice. In order to further support the different learning needs in the mixed-ability setting it is recommended that a key word list be written on the board at the outset of the lesson and a thematic glossary be compiled by students based on this list. Simplified and visual lesson summaries should also be structured on the board or in handout form as part of lesson recapitulation.

There was good discussion of topics and in line with good practice there were several instances where the content was linked to the student's experience and in some cases to the local environment. In all cases where possible the topic should be linked to the local environment as a means of providing for a more meaningful learning context. Questioning was a feature of all lessons and used to stimulate discussion and to engage students. However there was a tendency for global questioning to dominate. It is recommended that greater use be made of targeted questioning techniques to ensure that all students are challenged and engaged.

A very good rapport which contributed to a constructive learning environment was evident in all lessons observed. The teachers supported students in all aspects of learning and positively affirmed them for their contributions. The students appeared secure in asking questions or seeking clarification and were interested and participated well in all activities. There was evidence that most students had a good understanding of the work being carried out in lessons. An examination of a sample of students' copybooks indicated that work has been completed on a range of topics in line with the planned teaching programme. The quality of students' work was generally of a good standard.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Formal assessments are held for non-examination students at Christmas and at the end of the school year. Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students sit class tests at Christmas. It is recommended that a longer examination period be timetabled for these class groups in preparation for mock and state examinations. It is good practice that common assessments are in place where there is more than one class group in a particular year. Parents are kept very well informed and updated on student progress in the subject. The student journal is signed each night by parents of junior-cycle students and each week by parents of senior-cycle students. School reports are sent to parents following formal assessments. A progress report may also be issued to a parent at the discretion of a teacher if this is considered necessary. Feedback to parents is provided through annual parent-teacher meetings for each year group. This level of communication is commended.

The results obtained by students are analysed and filed in the subject plan. Uptake of higher-level Junior Certificate Geography has increased significantly and is above the national norm. This is praiseworthy. The geography teachers should now plan and develop strategies to increase the uptake of higher-level Geography at Leaving Certificate level and to further raise student achievement in both cycles.

There is ongoing informal assessment of students' progress using a variety of methods including end-of-topic tests, questioning, discussion and in-class activities. It is recommended that small-scale project work be included in the repertoire of assessment instruments for all year groups. This provision will promote independent activity-based learning and cater for the range of learning styles in the mixed-ability classroom setting. This project work should be displayed in classrooms as a means of acknowledging student achievement and further developing geographical learning environments. Homework is regularly assigned and monitored. Students' work was annotated with evaluative and developmental comments and good quality constructive feedback was provided where students had answered a number of past examination questions. This is good practice and the further use of assessment for learning (AfL) practices is encouraged.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The geography teachers have a positive attitude to information and communication technology (ICT) and are using it to support teaching and learning.
- Subject department planning is characterised by a strong spirit of collaboration and supported by the provision of formal time for meetings and the appointment of a co-ordinator.
- Good quality teaching was observed over the course of the evaluation.
- A constructive learning environment underpinned by positive and supportive teacher-student relationships was evident in all lessons.
- Parents are kept very well informed on student progress.

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

- Large maps of Ireland, Europe and the world should be displayed in all rooms where Geography is taught.

- School management should plan, as resources become available, for the increased provision of ICT to support teachers in the delivery of the syllabuses.
- Curricular planning should provide a further focus on expected learning outcomes and the teaching and learning strategies to achieve these outcomes.
- Greater use should be made of targeted questioning techniques to ensure that all students are challenged and engaged.
- The geography teachers should plan and develop strategies to increase the uptake of higher-level Geography at Leaving Certificate and to further raise student achievement in both cycles.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with 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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