Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Christian Brothers School, Tralee
County Kerry
Roll number: 61440W

Date of inspection: 28 April 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in CBS, Tralee. 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 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 and subject teachers. 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Geography is in a strong position in the school and is very well supported by school management. Geography is a core subject in junior cycle and as such is studied by all students. The school offers an optional Transition Year (TY) programme but uptake is low. However, all students opting for the TY programme take a full-year module in Geography. Students transfer to fifth year following an open subject-choice process and uptake of Geography is significantly strong. This is very positive and reflects the efforts and commitment of the geography-teaching team. In the current fifth year, almost all students have included Geography within their choice of subjects for Leaving Certificate. This has resulted in a large teaching team and a large number of class groups in senior cycle. In some cases, it has been possible to timetable these classes concurrently allowing for the creation of higher-level and ordinary-level class groups. This is good practice and further challenges students by offering them the facility to move between levels as they progress through senior cycle.

Geography is well resourced by school management. Teachers are allocated to base rooms in which they teach most of their geography lessons. Many of these rooms have been decorated appropriately with visual geographical materials and, in some cases, very good quality photographs of local landforms and a variety of maps. A store of teaching resources is maintained in two of these classrooms. These resources have been catalogued and are shared by the teachers of Geography. Digital-data projectors have been installed in two of the classrooms used for geography teaching. The level of integration of information and communication technology (ICT) within Geography is acknowledged and further appropriate development in this area is encouraged. The use of scoilnet maps, a web-based map and aerial photograph resource that can be freely accessed through the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE), would be a useful next step.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There is clear evidence of a developing subject department for Geography in the school. A subject co-ordinator works with the teaching team to plan collaboratively for the continuing development of the subject. Much progress has been made in the area of subject planning and the rotation of the position of subject co-ordinator has facilitated a range of contributions from different members of the teaching team. Meetings of the subject department are organised on a regular basis and records of actions planned and decisions taken give a clear insight into the development of the subject department and the subject-planning process. The evolving subject plan includes a common teaching programme and general discussion on a range of aspects of the subject in the school. Significantly, a recently developed draft of the subject plan includes some discussion on teaching strategies which is a very positive focus in collaborative planning.

To build on the achievements to date, the geography teaching team should identify a number of clear and achievable planning priorities with a clear focus on the experience of the learner within the geography classroom. These could include the integration of ICT, strategies to facilitate the inclusion of students with additional educational needs and formative assessment strategies. To this end, it is recommended that the teachers of Geography should focus on planning for the use of differentiated strategies and teaching methodologies in the context of the mixed-ability nature of class groups. The skills and expertise of the education-support team in the school should be used to facilitate this planning development.

Individual planning by teachers and preparation for work was seen to be very good in the lessons observed. The quality of most of the individual base rooms in terms of the resources used and the visual environment created for the students testifies to the very good quality of individual planning in evidence and to the commitment of these teachers to the subject. It is clear that the very good practice of individual teachers in this regard has had a direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning observed and on the outcomes for the students of Geography in these classrooms.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching was very good in almost all lessons observed. The atmosphere for learning and teaching was seen to be positive and purposeful. Almost all class groups observed were mixed ability in nature and the diversity of students’ needs within these lessons was evident. Students in these lessons were engaged by the planned activities and interacted positively with their teachers. In some lessons, a minority of students were passive and disengaged and unwilling to participate actively in the planned learning. It was clear, in almost all lessons, that the skills and competences of the geography teachers addressed these challenges. These lessons were characterised by high expectations and very good quality planning, preparation and attention to the active engagement of students in their learning. Classroom management was direct and yet sensitive to the learning needs of students. This ensured, in almost all cases, that purposeful learning and dialogue took place.

A wide range of engaging and well-planned teaching and learning methodologies was observed in lessons. In most cases, the planned learning intention was clear from the outset. Methodologies used allowed for a review of previous learning and actively engaged students in new learning. Effective and frequent questioning of students ensured focus and stimulated thought and understanding. Good quality differentiated questions, directed at individual students, ensured that all students in these lessons were attentive, challenged and actively engaged with the topic for
study. Work sheets, summary sheets, ordnance survey (OS) maps and other visual-stimulus materials were observed to be very effective in engaging students. These stimulus materials were combined appropriately with whole-class discussion, individual student tasks and responses to teachers’ questions. ICT was integrated very effectively into teaching and learning in a small number of lessons. The use of ICT in integrating both physical geography and map work, and the use of animations to illustrate physical processes, was particularly effective. The use of completed work sheets, maps and photographs following a junior cycle fieldwork activity was also very effective in consolidating the learning in these lessons. The engagement in geographical fieldwork at junior cycle is very good practice.

In a small minority of lessons, the teaching methods utilised did not engage students and these lessons were dominated by teacher inputs while the students were largely passive and inactive in their learning. It is of importance that the planned methodologies are appropriate to the syllabus and are delivered at a pace that challenges the range students in some class groups. Lessons should include questioning of students, individual and group tasks, the use of visual-stimulus materials and a variety of engaging methodologies. Appropriate homework tasks should also be used to consolidate the planned learning.

The quality of learning in geography was very good in almost all lessons. Students were very responsive to the questions posed by their geography teachers in the course of lessons and to those posed by the inspector. The level of learning observed reflected the mixed-ability nature of the class groups as students addressed topics and utilised skills appropriate to their level of progress in the subject. The learning and application of geographical skills in lessons was also very good and these skills were, in most cases, appropriately integrated into lessons and were effective in enhancing students’ learning of key geographical concepts.

Revision strategies in class groups preparing for state examinations at both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate levels were observed to be intensive and very effective. The learning intention relating to each syllabus topic was outlined to students. Key concepts and significant learning points were revisited through detailed questioning and the provision of short and focused summary sheets. These practices, observed in a number of lessons, are effective and appropriate in reinforcing learning as students revise in the final weeks and days before examinations. The outcomes for students in certificate examinations are strong and reflect the effort, commitment and high expectations of teachers for their students.

**Assessment**

Good assessment practices were evident in most lessons through the use of oral questioning, discussion following the completion of individual tasks, and the completion of written task sheets in lessons. Assessment of learning was also clear in the dialogue and responses of students engaged in intensive examination preparation. Class tests and homework tasks are also used by teachers to assess students’ learning. However, evidence of the provision and the completion of homework showed significant variation between class groups. Some very good quality homework, completed by students on a regular basis, was evident in students’ notebooks and copybooks in the lessons observed. It was also clear that homework was assigned regularly and was recorded by students in their homework journal. In other lessons, the provision of homework tasks varied significantly. In a number of lessons, the provision of homework was intermittent and in one senior cycle lesson there was evidence of little or no provision of homework. The students’ homework journals examined made almost no reference to homework in Geography and completed homework tasks in the student copybooks examined were very limited and of poor
quality. It is essential that appropriate homework be assigned to students in all lessons, and teachers should ensure that all students record these tasks in their homework journal.

The provision of formative feedback to students in the form of written comments in their notebooks and copybooks also showed significant variation. In some class groups, teachers’ comments contained some detail and both affirmed students and directed them towards improvement. In other cases, there was little or no evidence of monitoring of students’ written work in their copybooks and notebooks and no formative written comment. It is important that students receive formative comment on written work at reasonable but regular intervals as they progress. To this end, it is recommended that the geography teachers should discuss and then implement a strategy to provide regular formative feedback to students on their homework and on their progress in Geography. This should reflect a whole-school policy on assessment and homework.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

• The quality of teaching and learning was very good in almost all lessons observed.
• Provision for Geography in the school is very good.
• Uptake of the subject is significantly strong.
• Collaborative planning for Geography is in progress and is at a developmental stage.
• The engagement with fieldwork at junior cycle represents very good practice.
• The outcomes for students of Geography in certificate examinations are strong.

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

• Collaborative planning for Geography should focus on the use of differentiated strategies and methodologies in the context of the mixed-ability nature of class groups.
• It is essential that appropriate homework be assigned to students in all lessons, and teachers should ensure that all students record these tasks in their homework journal.
• The teachers of Geography should discuss and then implement a strategy to provide regular formative feedback to students on their homework and on their progress in Geography.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Geography and 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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