REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Muire. 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 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

Provision for Geography in Coláiste Muire is very good. On enrolment, students are organised into mixed-ability groups for first year. Following progress reports and the outcomes of class and end-of-term examinations, students are re-organised into one streamed and two mixed-ability class groups for second and third year. The mixed-ability groups are timetabled concurrently for a range of subjects, including Geography and, if necessary and appropriate, to facilitate movement between class groups and the creation of a higher-level and ordinary-level class group in different subjects. Both school management and teachers support this method of classroom organisation as they feel that it has a positive impact on outcomes for students in junior cycle.

The visibility of Geography as a subject in the school is heightened by the provision of a social studies room which is the base room for geography classes. This room is spacious and is in a central position in the school building. The learning environment of the room is significantly enhanced by visual displays of photographs, projects, students’ work and a wide range of maps and posters. The quality of the room as a teaching and learning space has also been further enhanced by the provision of very good quality information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. These include a wall-mounted flat-screen television with DVD player, a digital-data projector and a desktop computer with internet access. The quality of this room as a resource has a very positive impact on the student’s experience of the subject in the school.

The geography teachers are very well organised as a department and work together as a team to develop the subject. A subject co-ordinator has been appointed. The resources of the social studies room are shared, as is access to the room for lessons. Members of the teaching team have also engaged in a significant range of professional learning programmes provided through the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and through long-standing membership of the subject association. Current professional development is focused on the use of Scoilnet Maps; a web-based geographical skills application provided to schools through the National
Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE). The focus on professional learning in Geography has a positive impact on the students’ experience of the subject in the school.

Support for geography students with additional educational needs is well organised and appropriate. Geography teachers are also engaged in professional learning in this area. One of the geography team acts as the school’s education-support co-ordinator while another member is currently engaged in professional training in special education.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Individual planning and preparation for the lessons observed was of a very high standard. Lessons had a clear emphasis on learning and were prepared with a view to the class context and the overall teaching plan for Geography. Teachers had planned for the inclusion of a range of methodologies and learning strategies including visual stimuli, questioning, discussion, and group and individual tasks. Teachers also reflected on the effectiveness of some of these methodologies particularly with a view to the experience of students who choose Geography in senior cycle. Planning and preparation for a range of interesting and stimulating locally-based fieldwork projects in Transition Year (TY) geography were also of very good quality.

Collaborative planning for Geography is excellent. Teachers have developed an active and developmental plan for the subject. The plan outlines the teaching programme for each year group within junior cycle, TY and senior cycle. The inclusion of details on teaching methodologies, settings and resources to enhance teaching and learning add significantly to the quality of the plan. The geography teachers have catalogued the resources for geography teaching and for fieldwork. They have also compiled an extensive catalogue of geography books that are available to students and teachers in the school library. To build on the very good quality subject plan, the geography teaching team should develop intended learning outcomes for the various units of the Junior and Leaving Certificate plans and for the TY plan. These could then be used to develop the learning intention in individual lessons at appropriate times in the teaching of these units.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Teaching and learning was of very good quality in the lessons observed. The methodologies particularly focused on the engagement and participation of the students in their own learning. In all lessons in the social studies room, visual stimuli were used to engage students in the topic for study. These included a PowerPoint presentation on desert environments and a very well-managed visual presentation on the River Shannon. In both cases, these visual materials were interspersed with teachers’ questions, students’ responses, tasks, reference to the textbook and linkages to previous learning.

Leaving Certificate students were engaged in the study of syllabus topics focusing on development issues. Previous learning relating to ethnicity and cultural conflicts was reinforced through a focus on homework and an analysis of the *significant relevant points* (SRPs) that students included in their written answers. Such a particular focus on how students translate their understanding into written time-bound answers is very good practice for sixth-year students. The depth of geographical thinking by these students and the quality of their engagement with geographical concepts was excellent.
The TY class group was engaged in the analysis of data from a fieldwork project. While this lesson took place in a pre-fabricated classroom without audio-visual or ICT equipment, the engagement and participation of students was excellent. This level of engagement arose from their enthusiasm for a locally-based fieldwork project that involved a survey of litter levels on beaches in Cork harbour. The working groups of students analysed and reported on their findings. A simple chart, drawn on the whiteboard, was used to gather the data. As the groups reported their results, the overall patterns in the findings emerged. It was clear that the students were familiar with this routine of fieldwork and analysis of data leading to results and conclusions. Engaging students in these fieldwork projects is very good practice as the projects are based on local issues. They involve students working in their local environment and they reflect the geographical investigation skills that will be required in Leaving Certificate geography.

The rapport between students and their teachers was warm and mutually respectful in all lessons. It was clear that routines relating to students’ attention, to reviewing homework and to assessment of learning had been established. The well-planned lessons and the chosen methodologies fully engaged students and gave them the confidence to respond to the challenges provided by their teachers. It was clear that students were learning in the lessons observed. Achievement in certificate examinations in Geography is strong and grade profiles are carefully analysed by the geography teachers. The geography team is currently focused on the achievement of higher grades for some students and planning for improvement in the presentation of the geographical investigation coursework element at Leaving Certificate. This level of focus on outcomes for students reflects the commitment and professionalism of the geography teachers.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment strategies were evident in all lessons and were very effective. The range of strategies included very good quality questioning of students, review of homework and previous learning, and the completion of tasks in lessons.

Students’ notebooks also reflected the very good level of work and engagement with learning in Geography. These notebooks contained a mixture of worksheets, printed materials, brief notes taken during lessons, and completed homework tasks. Students’ notebooks were monitored by the teachers and, in most cases, contained formative comments that affirmed the quality of the written work and gave direction for improvement. Students sit monthly tests in all subjects. The outcomes of these assessments, combined with the outcomes of more formal end-of-term examinations, are reported to parents in a written report on students’ progress and at parent-teacher meetings. This focus on assessment reflects the high expectations of the school for its students and the quality of the work of the geography teachers.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision and whole-school support for Geography is very good.
- Individual planning for geography lessons is very good while collaborative planning for the development of the subject in the school is excellent.
- The TY programme engages students in very effective locally-based fieldwork projects.
- Very good quality teaching and learning was observed in lessons.
- Geography teachers set high expectations for their students.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendation is made:

- The geography teaching team should develop intended learning outcomes for the key ideas and topics for study in Geography and include these in the subject plan.

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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