Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Calasanctius College
Oranmore, County Galway
Roll number: 631001

Date of inspection: 11 February 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Calasanctius College, Oranmore. 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 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 and acting deputy 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

In Calasanctius College there is very good whole-school support for Geography. Timetabled provision for the subject in both cycles is in line with syllabus requirements. In practically all cases classes are well spread across the week providing students with good exposure to the subject. This is good practice. Deployment is appropriate and all the geography teachers have a degree qualification in the subject.

Geography is an optional subject at senior cycle offered as an open choice on a wide subject menu. This student-centred approach to subject selection is commended. Notwithstanding the availability of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) uptake of the subject at this level is good. Geography is available within the Transition Year (TY) programme and is allocated two class periods per week over the year. In addition to map and photograph work students undertake the Tourism Awareness Programme (TAP) for which they receive certification. It is recommended that other areas of study are introduced to provide a greater flavour of what Geography entails at Leaving Certificate level. The inclusion of a geographical investigation based in the local environment is one suggestion. This would provide opportunities for experiential learning in the subject and extend students knowledge and skills in a manner that effectively bridges the gap between junior and senior cycle.

The geography department has access to a broad range of resources and the teachers expressed satisfaction with this provision. The school has a very well developed information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. The geography teachers have base classrooms that are fitted with ICT facilities and audio-visual equipment. These rooms have been developed into stimulating environments that support student learning and enhance the visibility of the subject.

School management promotes and facilitates teachers’ continuing professional development. One member of the department is affiliated to the Galway Geography Teachers Network. This is commended as membership of professional networks is very beneficial in the dissemination of good practice and increasing awareness of subject issues.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The geography teachers work in a collegial manner and are engaged in ongoing planning to enhance teaching and learning in Geography. Formal planning meetings of the teaching team are facilitated by management. There is also regular informal contact among teachers. It is good practice that minutes of formal meetings are recorded and that the role of subject co-ordinator is rotated between members of the department.

The teachers are commended for the very good progress made in planning for Geography. Common programmes of work have been developed for each year group which provide for standardisation of the subject across the department. Fieldwork is integrated into the junior cycle teaching programme. This is highly commended as the teaching and learning activities which fieldwork facilitates are fundamental to the study and experience of the subject. The geography teachers have recently introduced a systematic approach to planning for the development, organisation and sharing of resources using the school’s ICT network system. This initiative is work in progress and is to be further developed over time. This level of collaboration is in line with best practice.

The subject plan outlines policy and practice in relation to the subject and contains curricular plans for each year group. Very good practice was noted in the development of junior cycle schemes of work. These provided a focus on learning outcomes, methodologies and specific resources and assessment linked to syllabus topics delivered within specified timeframes. It is recommended that senior cycle schemes are further developed in scope to provide a similar focus.

The first year teaching programme contains a mix of topics which include varying levels of difficulty. This is good practice. As a further means of enhancing this provision it is recommended that map and photograph skills are introduced at an early stage in first year. These key skills could then be developed in line with the teaching of physical geography. Teachers are also encouraged to experiment with the implementation of a thematic approach to the teaching of Geography.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Very good teaching underpinned by effective individual preparation for lessons was observed during the evaluation. In all lessons the learning objectives were clear and the planned learning outcomes were communicated to students. At the end of most lessons time was afforded to summarise and recap on the lesson content. This good practice served to consolidate students’ learning and is encouraged in all lessons. All lessons were well structured, generally appropriately paced and the content matched the planned learning programme.

There were variations in the range of teaching strategies employed by teachers. In general the methodologies were deployed in a manner which facilitated the active engagement of students throughout the lessons and enabled the ongoing assessment of their learning. However, there is scope for this practice to be further developed in some lessons so that an appropriate balance is achieved between teacher talk and student activity. The use of learning tasks based on worksheets and the more vigorous use of questioning strategies are recommended in this regard.
There was good variety in the resources used by teachers and these were effectively integrated to enhance students’ learning. In some lessons there was excellent use of ICT which incorporated a wide range of visual stimuli relevant to the topic under study and enabled the development of map and photograph skills. All of the geography teachers are commended for their engagement with ICT in creating rich and stimulating learning experiences for their students. In other lessons the whiteboard was used very well to record information and to illustrate diagrammatically the incremental formation of coastal landforms. It is clear that a visual approach is integral to the teaching of Geography in the school.

In all lessons teacher instruction was comprehensive and thorough and pitched at a level appropriate to the needs and abilities of students. Good use was made of students’ previous knowledge to introduce topics and to develop the lesson content. There were many instances of linking the material under study with examples from the local environment familiar to students.

All classrooms had print-rich and visually stimulating learning environments created through the display of maps, geographical posters, photographs, models and student work. This is commended and positively promotes the status of Geography in the school.

There is good liaison between the geography department and the learning-support department. Arrangements are in place for the learning-support teacher to provide additional support to students if they are experiencing difficulties with particular aspects of Geography. The geography teachers are aware of the learning needs of students with special educational needs. There was clear evidence of the use of differentiated teaching strategies in the lessons observed to cater for the variety of learning needs and styles within the mixed-ability classroom setting. In all lessons there was a focus on subject-specific terminology and classrooms had some key words on display. As a further measure of supporting students’ literacy development in Geography it is suggested that they maintain a glossary of key terms on each topic in their copybooks.

Classroom management was overall very good. However it is important that all students are obliged to follow the instructions given by the teacher and consideration should be given to re-arranging student placement when low-level indiscipline occurs. A respectful atmosphere conducive to learning pertained in all lessons. The students were very well behaved and were comfortable in contributing to class discussions. The teachers affirmed and positively supported students in their learning.

It was evident from students’ responses to questions, work on individual learning activities, an examination of a sample of copybooks and assessments that learning is taking place.

**ASSESSMENT**

There is on-going assessment of students’ progress through questioning, worksheet activities and the assignment of homework. In the majority of lessons questioning techniques were skilfully used on a continuous basis to develop the learning intention, monitor individual students’ understanding and progress and to ensure the participation of all students. Teachers should give careful consideration to their questioning strategies to ensure that this good practice is part of all lessons.

The school has a formal homework policy and there was evidence that homework is regularly assigned to consolidate and expand on the work carried out in class. There were some very good examples of providing students with constructive written feedback in relation to their progress. This is very good practice and its more widespread use is encouraged across the department. The
geography teachers should develop a policy to further integrate assessment for learning principles into their assessment practices. The very good practice of students amending their work following the correction of a test was noted in one case. This strategy should be employed by all teachers. In first year the students engage in model making and have constructed an impressive array of models illustrating geomorphic processes and associated landforms. This assessment of students’ learning is highly commended.

A sample of students’ copybooks was examined. In some cases the work was of a very good standard and presented in a neat and organised manner. In this regard there is need for the closer monitoring of students copybooks on a more regular basis. It is suggested that the quality of work in copybooks is included in the overall grade awarded to students in their in-school examinations.

Formal assessments are held at the end of the first and third term. Pre-examinations are organised for students in certificate classes. Appropriate procedures are in place to keep parents informed of students’ progress and engagement with work including parent-teacher meetings, the journal and school reports.

The geography teachers undertake a comprehensive analysis of students’ performance in state examinations. This practice is commended as it informs future subject planning and enables student achievement to be appropriately acknowledged.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School management is very supportive of the organisation, teaching and learning of Geography.
- Timetabling arrangements and the deployment of staff support the delivery of the syllabuses.
- The geography department is very well resourced in terms of provision of base classrooms and access to information and communication technology (ICT) facilities and audio-visual equipment.
- Planning for Geography is effective and well advanced.
- Fieldwork is integrated into the junior cycle teaching programme.
- Very good teaching and learning were observed during the course of the evaluation.
- A respectful atmosphere conducive to learning pertained in all lessons.
- Students showed a good understanding of the topics under study.

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

- The geography programme in Transition Year should be reviewed and extended in scope.
- The schemes of work for senior-cycle geography should be further developed.
- In all lessons the methodologies used should ensure an appropriate balance between teacher talk and student activity.
- The geography teachers should develop a policy to further integrate assessment for learning principles into their assessment practices.
Post-evaluation meetings were held with the acting principal and acting deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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