

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT**

**St Catherine's Vocational School
Killybegs, County Donegal
Roll number: 71241W**

Date of inspection: 5 October 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Catherine's Vocational School. 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 the teacher's written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and the teacher of Geography. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Catherine's Vocational School is a co-educational school under the trusteeship of County Donegal Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The school offers the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), and a number of Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. Current enrolment is 304 students, 153 boys and 151 girls.

There is very good whole school support for Geography with the provision of a dedicated geography room and a wide range of resources. The planned provision for information and communications technology (ICT) in the geography room in the near future will be a worthwhile development. The use of ICT will be facilitated as the school has registered with the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) and there are plans to attend continuing professional development (CPD) provided in relation to the use of *Scoilnet Maps*.

Geography is currently not part of the junior-cycle core curriculum offered in St Catherine's. Students are required to make subject choices prior to entry to the school. A range of supports to enable students and parents to make informed subject choices was outlined by school management during the evaluation. During the last three years an average of forty per cent of junior-cycle students opted to study Geography. Consideration should be given by school management to including Geography within the core curriculum offered to junior-cycle students.

For the senior cycle Geography is offered as part of the optional TY under the title 'Geographical and Social Studies'. Geography is an optional subject for the established Leaving Certificate. Students are provided with an open choice of subjects before option bands are generated. This is good practice. Given the non-core position of Geography in the junior cycle the uptake of the subject for the established Leaving Certificate is in a healthy state. Time allocation for the subject

is in line with syllabus recommendations and lessons are appropriately distributed across students' timetables. Students are taught in mixed-ability classes for Geography.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A subject department plan is in place based on the approved syllabuses for Geography. However, subject department planning is an early stage of development. The plan presented deals with the organisational arrangements for the subject and provides a list of topics to be taught to each year group. It also refers to goals for each year, such as encouraging third-year students to take the higher level paper in the junior certificate examination. The subject department plan for Geography should be developed further and should set out learning objectives for each year group linked to curriculum topics, resources, teaching strategies and assessment, to be delivered within agreed timeframes. Resources provided during the evaluation will support this development.

The planned teaching programme for first-year students, in line with best practice, includes the development of key geographical skills. However, most of first year is spent dealing with Section A Unit 1 Human Habitat – Process and Change of the Junior Certificate Syllabus. This leads to lack of variety in the topics studied and poses significant challenges for students in terms of technical vocabulary. The planned teaching programme for first-year students should be reviewed so as to include the development of map and photograph skills at an early stage and to reduce the strong focus on topics from physical geography. The use of local Ordnance Survey (OS) large-scale maps and photographs of the local area is encouraged.

In all the lessons observed learning was very well structured and purposeful and there was evidence of good short-term planning. Records of topics taught to each year group on a weekly basis are being maintained and there was clear evidence of very good medium-term planning. Appropriate resources were available to support teaching and learning in the lessons observed, such as the overhead projector, blank maps, summary notes and wall maps.

A written plan for the TY module was made available during the evaluation. This plan sets out aims, objectives, teaching and learning strategies and lists resources. Commendably it includes reference to developing students' geographical skills and some out of class activity. However, some of the topics to be studied are similar to those specified in the syllabus for the established Leaving Certificate. The TY plan for Geography should be reviewed so as to ensure a clear distinction is maintained between the content and teaching methodologies used in TY and those of the established Leaving Certificate.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

High quality teaching was evident in the lessons observed. In all cases clear lesson aims were evident and these were developed from previously taught subject matter. It is recommended that the learning intentions be shared with students at the start of lessons, written on the board, referred to during the course of the lesson and used to assess students' learning at the conclusion. This will provide a focus for students' attention and will serve to provide them with a sense of achievement when the lesson is successfully completed. The subject matter of lessons was clearly explained and the pace was appropriate to the students' ability.

A variety of teaching strategies was observed, including brainstorming, student-teacher discussions, small group work and the completion of short student tasks. Visual learners were effectively catered for as notes and diagrams were clearly drawn on the white board. There is scope to further develop teaching strategies which will more actively engage students in the learning process, such as 'think-pair-share' and the wider use of small group work. The planned provision of ICT will also extend the range of teaching strategies. It would be important to use ICT so as to maximise the learning potential of resources by ensuring that students are actively engaged in a variety of activities such as completing short tasks and that they do not become passive spectators. These strategies would reduce the degree of teacher input into lessons.

In the lessons observed students were encouraged to develop their thinking skills by being asked to develop further their answers and to think and to offer explanations for geographic phenomena. This is good practice. There was a focus on developing students' literacy as new terms were appropriately introduced, clearly explained and reinforced by frequent use. The display of key terms in the classroom would further support students' knowledge of the language of Geography.

Teaching and learning took place in a positive and supportive environment, characterised by appropriate affirmation for the students' efforts, a sense of enjoyment and good rapport between students and teacher. The use of clearly established classroom routines helped to create an atmosphere which encouraged students to participate in the planned learning activities. The display of maps, photographs, rock samples and weather instruments helped to create a 'geographical atmosphere' in the classroom.

Students are making good progress in their study of Geography. They could recall previously studied subject matter and at the end of lessons showed a good grasp of the main learning objectives. A selection of copybooks and test results viewed during the evaluation confirmed that students are achieving well in their studies. During discussions with the inspector they were able to apply their knowledge in a new setting.

ASSESSMENT

Students maintain good records of their written work. This is presented in a logical sequence, maps and diagrams are accurately drawn and headings are underlined. This work has been monitored and where students answered past examination questions constructive feedback was provided. Where students attempt past examination questions the use of 'comment only' marking should be used, in the initial stages, as a means of supporting students in taking responsibility for their own learning. It would prove useful to give students relevant marking schemes provided by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) as they answer past examination questions. Students are encouraged to pursue their study of Geography at the higher level and final decisions in relation to the level to be taken in the certificate examinations are made following the pre-examinations. The uptake of the higher level in the Junior Certificate examination is very good. There is scope to increase the uptake of the higher level in Leaving Certificate and an analysis of results in the certificate examinations should be used to initiate an action plan for improving student outcomes.

Arrangements are in place for the formal assessment of students' knowledge and reports issue to parents following these assessments. Students' progress is also reported on at formal parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group. Records are maintained of attendance, homework and class tests. Copies of class and end-of-term tests were provided during the

evaluation. These indicated that there is scope for the greater use of data response and stimulus questions in setting these tests. This will reflect the structure of examinations set by SEC and will facilitate the testing of students' skills as well as their knowledge of the subject.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good whole school support for Geography with the provision of a dedicated geography room and a wide range of resources.
- A subject department plan is in place based on the approved syllabuses for Geography.
- In all the lessons observed learning was very well structured and purposeful and there was evidence of good short-term planning.
- Teaching and learning took place in a positive and supportive environment, characterised by appropriate affirmation for students' efforts, a sense of enjoyment and good rapport between students and the teacher.
- High quality teaching was evident in the lessons observed.
- Students are making good progress in their study of Geography.
- Students maintain good records of their written work.

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

- Consideration should be given by school management to including Geography within the core curriculum offered to junior-cycle students.
- The subject department plan for Geography should be developed further and should set out learning objectives for each year group linked to curriculum topics, resources, teaching strategies and assessment, to be delivered within agreed timeframes.
- The planned teaching programme for first-year students should be reviewed so as to include the development of map and photograph skills at an early stage and to reduce the strong focus on topics from physical geography.
- The TY plan for Geography should be reviewed so as to ensure a clear distinction is maintained between the content and teaching methodologies used in TY and those of the established Leaving Certificate.
- There is scope to further develop teaching strategies which will more actively engage students in the learning process.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teacher 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.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

Board members discussed the content of the Inspection Report in detail, spending much time debating the introduction of Geography as a core subject. Members felt that this is not possible at the moment without allocation of additional teacher resource. Without this allocation Board members felt this change would negatively impact on another subject and restrict open choice system for parents and student currently in place.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection