

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

**Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT**

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Date of inspection: 2 April 2008



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

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St John's 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 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

School management supports the work of the geography teachers and is committed to the continuing development of the geography department. A wide range of resources have been made available for the subject. While there is no specific annual budget allocation to the department, requests to management for the enhancement of existing resources are generally met. The resources which include maps, charts, globes, overhead projectors and audio-visual equipment are catalogued and a copy of this is in the subject department plan. This is good practice. It is recommended that this catalogue be updated regularly to assist with the identification of future resource needs. A copy of the resource catalogue should be made available to all geography teachers. This would ensure that teachers can readily identify the resources available for use in their teaching. There is no dedicated geography room. However teachers are assigned base classrooms. This has facilitated the creation of print-rich learning environments as was observed in the majority of classes visited during the evaluation. This is laudable.

Provision of information and communication technology (ICT) facilities to support teaching and learning is very good. The majority of classrooms visited were furnished with a desktop computer and a data projector is also available. The integration of ICT is to be commended and its use is encouraged in the teaching of Geography.

Geography is a compulsory subject for students at junior cycle including students following the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). At senior cycle Geography is an optional subject within an open choice structure for the Leaving Certificate (LC). This is effective practice. Students and parents receive appropriate support prior to making programme and subject choices. Support is provided to students by the subject teachers and guidance counsellor and by holding an open night for parents. A booklet is also made available containing information and guidance on the different subjects. The school is commended for this comprehensive support for students and parents as it will facilitate more informed education and career planning. Uptake of Geography at

senior cycle is very healthy and this is a positive reflection of the commitment of the geography teaching team.

At junior cycle, time allocation to the subject is generous with four teaching periods per week. At senior cycle there is an allocation of five teaching periods per week in line with syllabus recommendations. The inclusion of one double period lesson at senior cycle is good practice as it facilitates teachers and students undertaking practical work. However the allocation of two double periods in the week reduces teacher and student contact time and therefore it is recommended that wherever possible only one double period is allocated. Generally classes are well distributed throughout the school week. This is good practice as it facilitates regular contact between the students and their teachers. However, in first year one class group has three geography lessons on Monday. This is not effective practice and has a negative impact on continuity and the regular assignment of homework. It is recommended that future timetabling should provide a balanced provision of classes to all year groups as far as possible. This would further support continuity in the learning process.

School management encourages the professional development of its teachers and has facilitated teachers' attendance at the recent national in-service training for the Revised Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus. Teachers have also attended JCSP in-service training. New teachers are supported by an induction programme and the co-ordinator of the geography department plays an important role in the support of new geography teachers to the school. The commitment on the part of management and staff to continuous professional development is commendable.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The geography teachers form a clear subject department where teachers provide mutual support and share their professional expertise and teaching resources. One teacher acts as a subject co-ordinator. The position of co-ordinator should be rotated so that all members of the geography teaching team gain the experience and leadership skills associated with the role as well as sharing the workload. Regular informal contact takes place among the teachers to discuss subject issues. Collaborative planning is commendably facilitated by a formal meeting once a term. The main areas discussed and key decisions taken at these formal meetings are recorded. This is very good practice and supports continuity in the planning process.

Good progress has been made to date in the development of a subject department plan. Information regarding class profiles, additional educational needs provision, cross-curricular links, homework and curricular plans for each year group are included in the plan. To build on this it is recommended that the curricular plans for each year group indicate a breakdown of the topics to be covered, timeframes, the corresponding resource materials required to support their teaching and learning, statements of the desired learning outcomes and the modes of assessment used to test students' knowledge and progress. Consideration should also be given to the inclusion of a variety of teaching methodologies and strategies including the use of ICT to support the delivery of the various units of the syllabus. Targets to achieve this should be set within realistic timeframes.

Teachers are engaged in a significant level of planning for teaching. Best practice was observed where clear objectives were established and learning was supported by the provision of appropriate resource materials. This level of individual planning is lauded and was seen to have

positive outcomes for student engagement and understanding. As a means of developing this all the geography teachers should share good practice especially with new teachers.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Good quality teaching was evident in the geography lessons observed. Established classroom routines helped to focus students at the beginning of each lesson. Learning intentions were set out clearly and shared with students. This is very good practice as it provides learners with a focus for their attention and gives them a sense of achievement on the successful completion of the lesson.

A variety of teaching and learning strategies were observed throughout the evaluation. The methodologies associated with the JCSP were clearly in evidence. These were effectively used in the JCSP lesson observed and some of these methodologies were also evident in other lessons observed. Teachers focused on students' literacy and regularly wrote key words on the board. Key word lists were displayed on the wall in one classroom and they were highlighted in support materials distributed in lessons. This is very good practice and its use is encouraged in all lessons.

Questioning was skilfully used to revise material covered and to introduce new topics. In some lessons global questioning tended to dominate. It is recommended that teachers increase their use of directed questions as a means of challenging individual students and keeping the entire class group alert and attentive. This strategy will also enable teachers to gauge more effectively the level of students' understanding and knowledge. The development of higher-order thinking skills was encouraged in a number of lessons. Students were encouraged to develop their answers and given sufficient time to do so. They were appropriately affirmed by their teachers. This is effective practice.

Individual lesson preparation incorporating a wide variety of stimulus materials engaged students effectively in the learning process. These included worksheets, overhead transparencies, handouts, posters and PowerPoint slides. As students completed worksheets and practical tasks teachers circulated to give individual attention to students. The inclusion of practical activities is commended as it provides opportunities for students to reinforce and apply their learning. It is recommended that the geography teachers consider the use of pair work during these practical activities as it provides an opportunity for co-operative learning.

The development of map and photograph skills was very effective in a number of lessons observed. Students displayed a very good knowledge of, and high level of competency in basic map reading skills. Students were given ample opportunity to practise and apply these skills. It is recommended that during such lessons the Ordnance Survey map be displayed on the overhead projector or data projector to further facilitate whole-class teaching of skills and concepts and for ease of reference. Best practice was observed in the integration of ICT in the teaching of skills relating to the analysis and interpretation of aerial photographs. A combination of vertical and oblique aerial photographs was displayed and the use of ICT facilitated the overlaying of grids and labels at appropriate times in the lessons. The use of ICT in such activities facilitated comprehensive questioning and review of material covered in the lessons thus consolidating the learning process in an effective manner. This practice is to be commended.

The geography teachers are aware of students with additional educational needs. A variety of strategies to support these students were evident including strategic seating arrangements, extra individual attention and differentiated worksheets. The geography teaching team liaise informally with the JCSP co-ordinator and the learning support department. It is recommended that a formal communication process be established between the geography teaching team and those providing

supports to students with additional educational needs. This communication should include discussions relating to differentiated teaching methodologies and strategies for the effective and ongoing inclusion of these students in geography lessons.

Classroom management was very effective. Teachers negotiated aspects of the lessons with their students. This contributed to the successful engagement of students in the learning process. The display of maps, charts, and posters helped to create stimulating and motivating learning environments and they were regularly referred to during lessons to support learning. Teachers are to be commended for the effort and time invested in developing and maintaining the appearance of their classrooms.

The classroom atmosphere in all lessons observed was warm and respectful. Teachers were encouraging and affirmed students for all their contributions to class discussions. Students willingly participated and their enjoyment of learning was very evident in the lessons observed. It was clear from students' successful completion of practical tasks in lessons and from the responses to questions from both the teachers and the inspector that significant learning was taking place in geography lessons.

ASSESSMENT

Continuous informal assessment of students' progress was carried out in lessons. This was achieved through questioning, the correction of homework and written tasks completed in class. Teachers encouraged students to seek clarification and they responded in a positive manner. The standard of students' written work was generally very good. This reflects the high expectations teachers have of their students and is commended.

The departments' commitment to homework is highlighted by the fact that procedures for homework are outlined in the department plan. A sample of copybooks was viewed in the course of the evaluation. It is evident that homework is assigned and monitored. This is good practice as homework is important in consolidating class work and plays a significant role in enhancing student learning. In some instances it was noted that detailed formative comment was provided to students following correction of written work. This is highly commended as it guides the further development of answers. As part of the ongoing collaborative planning process it is recommended that the geography teachers focus on the type of feedback given to students following the correction of students' written and oral work. The methods set out in Assessment for Learning (AfL) should be used to implement these strategies. Information on AfL is available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) www.ncca.ie.

An appropriate focus on examination preparation was evident in the lessons observed. Students were given clear and appropriate advice on answering techniques. They were regularly encouraged to develop their answers and support their discussion with appropriate evidence. This is good practice.

Formal assessments are given at Christmas and at the end of the summer term. Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate students sit pre-examinations in the spring. Attendance and assessment results are recorded in teachers' journals. This good practice is commended as it helps to build a profile of the students' engagement and achievement in the subject over time. Parent-teacher meetings for each year group are held annually and this affords parents the opportunity to meet with teachers and discuss students' progress. This is effective practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School management supports the work of the geography teachers and is committed to the continuing development of the geography department.
- Provision of information and communication technologies (ICT) facilities to support teaching and learning is very good.
- Students and parents receive appropriate support prior to making programme and subject choices.
- Uptake of Geography at senior cycle is very healthy.
- The commitment on the part of school management and staff to continuous professional development is commendable.
- The geography teachers form a clear subject department. Collaborative planning is commendably facilitated by a formal meeting once a term. Teachers are engaged in a significant level of planning for teaching.
- Good quality teaching was observed during the course of the evaluation. Classroom management was very effective.
- The display of maps, charts, and posters helped to create stimulating and motivating learning environments.
- The classroom atmosphere in all lessons observed was warm and respectful.
- Significant learning was taking place in the lessons observed during the evaluation.

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

- It is recommended that future timetabling should provide a balanced provision of classes throughout the school week to all year groups as far as possible.
- It is recommended that curricular plans for each year group be further developed to indicate a breakdown of the topics to be covered, timeframes, the corresponding resource materials, statements of the desired learning outcomes and the modes of assessment used to test students' knowledge and progress.
- Geography teachers should consider the use of pair work during practical activities as it provides an opportunity for co-operative learning.
- A formal communication process should be established between the geography teaching team and those providing supports to students with additional educational needs.
- It is recommended that the geography teachers focus on the type of feedback given to students following the correction of students' written and oral work. The methods set out in Assessment for Learning (AfL) should be used to implement these strategies.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers Geography and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

