

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Belvedere College SJ
6 Great Denmark Street, Dublin 1
Roll number: 60520P

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AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Belvedere College SJ. 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 deputy 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

Belvedere College SJ is an all-boys voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of the Society of Jesus. It has a current enrolment of 997 students.

Teaching and learning in Geography are very well supported by school management. The geography department is provided with an annual budget which has been used to build up a wide range of resources to support teaching and learning. While teachers are generally classroom based a workroom with storage facilities has also been provided for teachers. Further whole-school support for Geography was evident in display cabinets in corridors and through a programme of school visits both within Ireland and abroad and by hosting visiting groups from abroad.

Significant progress has been made in improving the information and communications technology (ICT) available in the school. Geography teachers share their resources with each other through a shared folder on the school's intranet. They also use Moodle, an on-line learning resource, to share resources and to communicate with each other and with the student body. Some teachers have registered with the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) in relation to the use of *Scoilnet Maps*. Other teachers expressed a willingness to register and to use this valuable teaching resource. These are good practices.

Geography is a core subject in the school's junior cycle and classes are allocated three single periods per week. In the senior cycle Geography is included as a module within the compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme which is delivered over a term. For the established Leaving Certificate Geography is an optional subject. Students are provided with an open choice of subject before option bands are generated. The uptake of the subject is in a healthy state with three class

groups formed in each of the Leaving Certificate years. In the Leaving Certificate Geography is allocated three single class periods and one double class period both in year one and year two. Time allocation is in line with syllabus recommendations. Teachers usually continue with their class for the duration of a programme. All classes are of mixed ability and this is good practice. Five teachers currently make up the geography teaching team most of whom are subject specialists. Teachers have availed of continuing professional development (CPD) both in relation to Geography and to general pedagogical issues. Some members of the geography teaching team have joined the school's committee focusing on the development of key skills as a means of enriching the learning experiences of students. Teachers are encouraged to become members of their professional organisation, the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland (AGTI), as a means of providing for their ongoing professional development.

A register of students with special educational needs is available to teachers. Support is generally provided on an individual or small group basis with some team teaching. The wider use of team teaching should be considered. A member of the geography department is also a member of the special educational needs department and provides input at geography department meetings and reviews common examination papers to ensure their suitability. Teachers are using a key word approach in lessons to support the development of students' literacy and this practice is commended.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A culture of collaborative planning and the sharing of professional expertise is well established amongst the geography teachers. There has been a clear focus on reflective practice and a subject improvement plan over a period of time has resulted in ongoing monitoring and review of the delivery of the planned teaching programme for Geography. This approach has been supported by senior management by providing a template to facilitate identification of areas for improvement. Areas identified for improvement in the current school year include: monitoring student activity, engagement with the key skills committee and the continued use of Moodle. Minutes are maintained of all formal subject department meetings. Teachers are supportive of new members of the geography teaching team. Formal planning time is provided by school management once per term and informal planning discussions take place on an ongoing basis. The subject department is well co-ordinated and the role of the co-ordinator is clearly set out in documentation provided during the evaluation. This role is rotated amongst the members of the department in line with good practice.

A subject department plan is in place. This plan sets out all the organisational arrangements for the subject and includes a long-term curriculum plan for each year group. This consists of a list of topics to be delivered within an agreed time frame. It is recommended that the scope of the subject department plan for Geography be expanded to include reference to learning outcomes for each year group. These should be linked to curriculum content, teaching strategies including differentiation, resources and assessment to be delivered within agreed time frames. The identification of learning outcomes would reflect the good practices evident during classroom visits and would ensure that the student remains at the centre of the planning process. Resources provided during the evaluation will support this more comprehensive approach to developing a long-term curriculum plan for Geography.

It was noted that the planned first-year teaching programme includes the introduction of key Ordnance Survey (OS) map and aerial photograph skills. This is good practice as these key skills

can be further developed when integrated into the rest of the planned teaching programme as appropriate. Consideration should be given to using large-scale maps and photographs of the local area as a means of catering for the range of abilities present in classes and of stimulating interest amongst students in the immediate environs of the school. The rest of the first-year programme deals exclusively with topics from Geomorphology. This places considerable demands on students at this early stage in terms of understanding complex processes and using technical vocabulary. It is recommended that this focus on physical geography be reviewed and that consideration be given to introducing some topics for human geography such as those topics outlined in Section C of the Junior Certificate Syllabus for Geography.

A plan for the TY module in Geography was also made available during the evaluation. This draws heavily on both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate syllabuses for Geography. While the focus on the study of urban geography makes use of the local area with its rich Georgian heritage it is necessary to maintain a clear distinction between the planned teaching programme for TY and the content and methodologies employed in the syllabuses for the subject. It is recommended that the geography module within the TY be reviewed. This review should ensure that a clear distinction is maintained between the content and methodology for the geography syllabuses and the planned teaching programme for TY. A good TY programme should also provide students with an opportunity to sample geographical topics not included on the current syllabuses. Resources provided during the evaluation will support this review.

Planning and preparation by individual teachers for the lessons observed was exemplary and included the preparation of teacher-generated support materials. In a number of instances teachers provided a written lesson plan for the lesson to be observed. It is noteworthy that one lesson plan outlined strategies to be used to support differentiated learning based on the needs of individual students in the class. For example students with attention difficulties were seated at the top of the class while a student with dyspraxia was provided with a photocopy of the lesson digital presentation. The range of resources included digital presentations, work sheets, supplementary textual materials and sample answers. All resources were clearly presented and made a significant contribution to facilitating students' learning. A range of resources developed over time by teachers was also made available. The creation of such resources is very good practice and reflects teachers' commitment to providing rich and appropriate learning experiences for their students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all of the lessons observed very high quality teaching was evident with a clear focus on the active engagement of students in the learning process. Lessons were clearly student-centred and encouraged an exploratory and investigative approach to the study of Geography. Planned learning outcomes were shared with students at the start of lessons, frequently written on the classroom board and revisited at the conclusion of lessons. This very good practice ensured students had a clear focus for their attention and experienced a sense of achievement when these outcomes were successfully achieved. It was evident that all of the lessons observed formed part of a larger unit of work.

Teachers' exposition was clear and lessons were delivered at an appropriate pace which ensured that students remained focused for the duration of lessons. It was evident that teachers were enthusiastic and appreciated the educational value of their subject. A notable feature of all lessons was the use of pair or small group work. This was very well managed by teachers and students

responded positively, co-operating fully in completing the assigned task. Think-pair-share was also used to encourage the participation of all students in the planned learning activities. As students were engaged in tasks teachers moved around the classroom offering support and affirmation as appropriate. In some instances teachers provided one-to-one support to students thus catering very effectively for the needs of all students. Differentiation was also evident in the language register used in teacher questioning.

In line with the aims of the school's key skills committee there was a very evident focus on developing students' skills both geographical and cognitive. Students' literacy development was supported by the display of key geographical terms in teacher-based classrooms and by their introduction into lessons at appropriate times. These were clearly explained by teachers, their importance stressed and students were then encouraged to use these in answering questions.

The integration of statistical diagrams, such as future world population projections, into one lesson observed was appropriately used to develop students' numeracy skills. The management of the course content was supported by the use of graphic organisers in some lessons. Students were encouraged to critically evaluate subject matter and to engage in peer reviews and co-operative learning. In one lesson, for example, students were provided with a marking scheme which was used to evaluate each other's work. Feedback was provided to the student and this was followed by a whole-class discussion. As students provided feedback their oral and listening skills were being developed. In discussions with the inspector it was clear that students appreciated the benefits of this approach to assessing their work. The skilful use of questioning by teachers helped to ensure the active engagement by all students and encouraged the development of higher-order thinking as students were encouraged to offer explanations or to develop their answers further.

Another notable feature of all of the lessons observed was the integration and appropriate use of ICT. Digital presentations, maps, photographs and the use of a visualiser all enriched the learning experiences of students. These catered very effectively for the visual learners in the classrooms visited.

Students are making very good progress in their acquisition of geographical knowledge, developing appropriate skills and positive attitudes towards environmental protection. During lessons students could use previously acquired knowledge to contribute to the lesson topic under discussion. Set tasks were successfully completed during lessons and the correction of homework demonstrated that students were capable of applying their knowledge in a new setting. Students willingly engaged in discussions with the inspector, used geographical terms appropriately and expressed enlightened opinions on a range of topics.

Classroom management was very effective and ensured the active engagement of students throughout the lessons observed. An atmosphere of mutual respect between teacher and students was evident and students willingly contributed to discussions and sought clarifications. It was evident that students were enjoying their lessons and were frequently affirmed by their teachers. Clear routines were in place for the start and ending of lessons and these ensured that class time was devoted to teaching and learning. It was noted that homework was usually assigned at the start of lessons. Teachers indicated the value of this approach in further providing students with a focus for their attention. The display of maps, charts, photographs, key word lists and students' projects in teacher-based classrooms created a visually stimulating environment.

ASSESSMENT

Many good practices were evident in the assessment of students' progress in Belvedere College. The geography department operates an assessment policy. Arrangements provide for the summative assessment of students' progress and the good practice of setting common papers for some year groups is in place. Arrangements for the holding of 'mock examinations' are under review. Copies of common test papers provided during the evaluation were of a good quality, providing students with an opportunity to have both their geographical knowledge and skills tested. Where a student is thought to be underachieving relevant supports are sought. Reports are issued to parents following these assessments and student progress is also reported on at formal parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group.

The identification of success criteria, co-operative learning and peer review are features of the assessment practices used by the geography teachers. There was ongoing assessment during the lessons observed through teacher questioning. Homework is regularly set, monitored and corrected. Class tests are held when sections of the planned teaching programme are completed. Teachers maintain records of attendance, homework and test results.

A sample of students' written work was viewed during the evaluation and this showed that students generally maintain a record of their written work to a high standard. They are supported in this by clear guidance provided by teachers during lessons. Students have been involved in co-operative learning and have devised marking criteria and comment boxes to be used in relation to records of their written work. It was also noted that students are encouraged to be 'note-makers' and not just 'note-takers', particularly when they work in pairs. The use of teacher and student reflection sheets in relation to teaching and learning strategies is particularly good practice. Samples of these provided during the evaluation showed a very positive response by students and teachers. The geography teaching team deserves acknowledgement for these very good practices.

These innovative practices reflect the commitment of teachers to develop important key skills amongst students. Teachers use assessment for learning by providing affirming and constructive feedback to students, particularly when they answer past examination questions. It is important that this feedback be very specific, for example if an answer lacks detail the level of detail required should be made clear. It was noted that in some classes students have the good practice of having two copybooks, one for homework and the other for notes. A uniform approach to maintaining records of students' work in all geography classes is encouraged.

Student effort is celebrated in a number of ways including the awarding of a specially commissioned school tie in recognition of academic progress and a prize for a research topic in Geography. A Medal for Excellence in Geography is presented to a sixth year student at the graduation ceremony. Very significant numbers of students in the both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations sit higher level papers and students are achieving very well in these examinations.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Teaching and learning in Geography are very well supported by school management.

- A culture of collaborative planning, reflective practice and the sharing of professional expertise is well established amongst the geography teachers. This approach has been supported by senior management.
- Planning and preparation by individual teachers for the lessons observed was exemplary and included the preparation of teacher-generated support materials.
- In all of the lessons observed very high quality teaching was evident with a clear focus on the active engagement of students in the learning process. Lessons were clearly student-centred.
- There was a very evident focus on developing students' skills both geographical and cognitive.
- Classroom management was very effective and ensured the active engagement of students throughout the lessons observed. It was evident that students were enjoying their lessons and were frequently affirmed by their teachers.
- Students are making very good progress in their study of Geography and co-operative learning and peer review are features of the assessment practices used by the geography teachers.
- Co-operative learning and peer review are features of the assessment practices used by the geography teachers.
- Very significant numbers of students in the both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations sit higher level papers and students are achieving very well in these examinations.

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

- It is recommended that the scope of the subject department plan for Geography be expanded to include reference to learning outcomes for each year group. These should be linked to curriculum content, teaching strategies including differentiation, resources and assessment to be delivered within agreed timeframes.
- The planned teaching programme for first-year students should be revised so as to provide a more varied and appropriate programme.
- It is recommended that the geography module within the TY be reviewed. This review should ensure that a clear distinction is maintained between the content and methodology for the junior certificate and leaving certificate syllabuses and the planned teaching programme for TY.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Geography and with the deputy-principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.