REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste an Spioraid Naoimh. 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, 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

Provision for Geography is very good in Coláiste an Spioraid Naoimh. Uptake of the subject by students is high and their results in certificate examinations are significantly strong. All geography students are placed in mixed-ability class groups in junior and senior cycle. Geography has a sustained history as a strong subject in the school. An enthusiastic team of teachers has worked, over a prolonged period, to enhance and develop the subject and the geographical experience of students. The geography department places a particular emphasis on skills development by focusing on local studies and fieldwork. All students are given the experience of working in the local environment and, as a result, are in a position to look critically at environmental issues and at the sustainable development of the greater Cork area. The contribution of the teachers of Geography who have worked in the department, some of whom have now retired, to this vision for the subject and to these initiatives, is acknowledged in this report.

The geography laboratory is an excellent facility and provides a particular focus for the subject. This room, on the second floor of the school building, has windows facing north and south providing commanding views of the city suburbs and the ridge-and-valley landscape on which they have developed. Internally, the room provides a visually stimulating learning environment by displaying a range of maps, posters, students’ project work and photographs taken on fieldwork activities. The room has been equipped with very good quality information and communication technology (ICT) equipment that further enhances the study of Geography. The room also contains an extensive and very useful video library. Appropriate extracts from television programmes and other audio-visual sources, that are deemed suitable to support teaching and learning in Geography, have been gathered and catalogued by the geography teachers. These videotapes are currently being transferred to DVD format and are also being uploaded on to the hard-drive of the desktop computer in the room. This work, which is being
completed by one of the geography teachers, will ensure the sustained use of these very valuable teaching resources.

A very interesting and appropriate Transition Year (TY) programme for Geography is also provided for students. The programme offers students the experience of studying local and global issues including a particular focus on the local urban and physical environment. The TY programme is compulsory, while Geography is offered as an option within the programme. Unusually, students are required to make their choice of Leaving Certificate subjects on entry into the TY programme. This choice process, which is based on students’ individual preferences, determines the optional subjects that they study within the TY programme and that are intended for study to Leaving Certificate level. This procedure does not represent best practice as it limits the subject-sampling aspect that a TY programme can offer to students. Normally, a TY programme allows students to experience a range of subjects in advance of a subject-choice process that would take place on completion of TY, and in advance of transfer to fifth year. It was made clear by school management that students are facilitated to change subjects throughout TY and in the early stages of fifth year.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The quality of individual planning and preparation for the lessons observed was excellent. Teachers’ individual work demonstrated long-established and very effective planning strategies and routines. Teachers based their lessons on work prepared and stored in planning folders that contained details of their sequencing of lessons and included worksheets, prepared notes, acetate sheets illustrating the topic, and materials prepared for distribution to students. Teachers had also included current events, with a geographical emphasis, in their planning and preparation, and in a number of lessons, the focus on geographical skills and fieldwork was most appropriate. Planning for the lessons observed also reflected the subject plan and agreed programmes of work.

Collaborative planning is well advanced in the Geography department in the school. One teacher has volunteered to act as subject co-ordinator and an active and on-going subject-planning process is in place. A tangible outcome of this process is a subject plan that is comprehensive and contains an agreed teaching programme and a very good quality plan for TY geography. The plan addresses the linkage of topics for study and geographical skills from Junior Certificate to TY and on to Leaving Certificate Geography. It is clear that teachers have considered, in their planning, the students’ experience of the subject as they progress through all levels in the school. The plan also contains details in relation to health and safety issues that may arise on fieldwork activities.

The geography teachers have not, to date, engaged collaboratively in an overall analysis of students’ results in certificate examinations in Geography. While individual teachers monitor the results for their own individual examination classes, it is recommended that the department engage in an annual overall analysis and discussion of this data to inform planning for the further development of the subject in the school. The outcomes of this analysis should be included in the subject plan, as it is updated, to illustrate patterns and trends.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching and learning in Geography was very good in the lessons observed. It was clear that teaching strategies had been well planned, that they were successful in engaging students in learning, and that students displayed understanding of the topics for study.
The methods used were very appropriate to the mixed-abilities of the students and to the inclusive nature of the geography classrooms. All students were challenged by the topics, by the methodology, and were included in the lesson as a result of the teaching strategies in evidence. Methodologies included an appropriate combination of teacher presentation and explanation of the key learning points, a review of previous learning through good quality targeted questioning, and students’ responses to visual-stimulus materials. In a number of lessons, local settings accompanied by local maps and other visual materials were very successful in linking the topic for study to the students’ experience of the local environment. ICT was integrated to a significant extent into the lessons observed. In all lessons, students participated actively in their own learning.

While the learning intention was clear in all lessons, the student’s learning experience could be further enhanced if the learning intention for one, or a number of linked lessons, was displayed on the whiteboard or using the data projector, during these lessons. This strategy would assist students in the mixed-ability settings by keeping a constant focus on the intended learning and on the geographical skills that are used and applied in that learning. This strategy would also cement the link between individual planning, the agreed teaching programme and the subject syllabus.

Classroom management was very good and the atmosphere in classrooms was purposeful and engaging. Students were observed to be assertive and courteous in their interactions with their peers and with their teachers. A positive, challenging and mutually respectful learning environment was in evidence in the lessons observed.

**ASSESSMENT**

Assessment procedures in junior cycle, in fifth year, and sixth year follow practices that are normal in post-primary schools. Assessment of learning in lessons is achieved through questioning, discussion and review of previous learning, review of completed homework and discussion following the completion of in-class tasks. In all lessons observed, the teachers engaged in all, or some, of these assessment strategies to monitor and progress students’ learning. Class tests, end-of-term and end-of-year examinations are organised, as appropriate. The results of these assessments are reported to parents through the student’s journal, written school reports, and at parent-teacher meetings.

The work observed in students’ copybooks and notebooks was of a high standard. There was evidence of monitoring by teachers and the provision of some formative comments. Students also had subject folders or notebooks containing written notes, photocopied hand-out materials, completed assessments, and reports on fieldwork projects. These folders are a valuable and effective support to students to help them to consolidate their learning.

TY geography students sit formal written tests in line with whole-school procedures for other year groups. Twenty percent of the marks in these geography tests are allocated to fieldwork project reports. School management should review this whole-school approach to assessment in TY by considering a wider range of assessment methods in line with good-practice guidelines for TY.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision for Geography is very good.
- Uptake of higher level and students’ results in certificate examinations in Geography are significantly strong.
- Individual teachers’ planning for Geography is excellent.
- The TY programme for Geography has a strong focus on fieldwork in the local physical and urban environment.
- Very good quality teaching and learning was observed in all lessons.
- ICT is significantly integrated into teaching and learning in Geography.

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

- Geography teachers should display the learning intention of lessons to further enhance and direct students’ learning.
- The geography teachers should review and discuss the results achieved by those students who take Geography in the certificate examinations.

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

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