

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT**

**St Mary's Secondary School
Glasnevin, Dublin 11
Roll number: 60770P**

Date of inspection: 9 February 2011



**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 Mary's Secondary 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 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 principal and subject teachers. 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

St Mary's Secondary School is an all girls' school under the trusteeship of Le Chéile, a Catholic schools trust. It has a current enrolment of 717 students.

School management supports teaching and learning in Geography very effectively. An annual budget is provided and this has been used to develop a wide range of resources. These resources are stored and displayed in a dedicated geography room which is a very stimulating learning environment. Timetabled access to this room is arranged for classes by the subject co-ordinator. An inventory of these resources is contained in the subject department plan. Considerable progress has been made in upgrading the school's provision of information and communications technology (ICT). Some teachers have registered with the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) in relation to the use of *Scoilnet Maps*. All teachers are encouraged to register and to use this valuable teaching resource.

The aims of the geography syllabuses, particularly in relation to developing positive attitudes towards environmental protection, are supported by a number of school activities. The school has engaged with the Green-School environmental education programme, there are facilities for recycling and the school environment has been upgraded. The inclusion of a report from the geography department is included in the school's newsletters and a geography film club has been formed. This latter development is an initiative by the geography department to ensure that the subject has a prominent presence in the school and to integrate the study of film with Geography. These are very good practices.

Geography is a core subject in the school's junior cycle. In first year three single periods are provided, this increases to four single classes in second and third year. The introduction of mixed-ability teaching is a welcome development. In the senior cycle Geography is included in the optional Transition Year (TY) and is allocated two single periods per week. For the established

Leaving Certificate Geography is an optional subject and the uptake of the subject is in a very healthy state with four class groups being formed in each of the leaving certificate years. This reflects the very positive experiences of students in the junior cycle. Time allocation is in line with syllabus recommendations and classes are appropriately spread across students' timetables.

The geography teaching team consists of eight teachers, all of whom are subject specialists. Teachers have availed of continuing professional development (CPD) and some are members of their professional organisation the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland (AGTI). The members of the geography department provide very good support for students undertaking the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) as was evident in documentation provided during the evaluation.

Teachers are made aware of students with special education needs by the learning support department. The support of these students has been identified by the geography teaching team as an area for development. The introduction of weekly revision tests for third year and sixth-year students is seen by the geography teachers as a means of supporting all students in preparing for the certificate examinations.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A culture of collaborative planning is very well established amongst the members of the geography teaching team. This is valued by all the teachers concerned. Documentation provided indicated an early engagement with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The work of the geography department is very well co-ordinated. Teachers share resources and their professional expertise. Minutes of department meetings are maintained and indicate that teachers engage in self-evaluation through the use of the diagnostic window technique. This has resulted in changes being made to the planned teaching programme and in the identification of areas for further development. These good practices could be further enhanced by the setting of agreed timeframes for improvement. It is suggested that teachers use some of the time at planning meetings to discuss teaching strategies and to share lesson plans. This would ensure a focus on teaching and learning and will facilitate the sharing of best practice.

A very comprehensive subject department plan is in place which has been monitored and reviewed and this has resulted in a number of changes being made to the long-term curriculum plan. Folders with extensive teaching and assessment resources for each year group were provided during the evaluation. The mission statement for the geography department is linked with the school's mission statement. All the organisational arrangements for the subject are in place as is a long-term curriculum plan to be taught in each year group. This plan sets out curriculum content to be delivered per term and refers to resources, forms and times for assessment. It is recommended that the subject plan for Geography be further developed to include learning outcomes linked to curriculum content, resources, teaching methodologies and assessment. This will ensure that students' learning is placed at the centre of the planning process. Resources provided during the evaluation will support this development.

The study of Ordnance Survey (OS) maps and aerial photographs in the first-year teaching plan is good practice. However, there is a significant emphasis on the study of topics from physical geography in this first-year plan. This poses considerable challenges for students in terms of using technical vocabulary and understanding complex geomorphic processes. It is recommended that

this first-year teaching plan be reviewed and consideration given to the inclusion of topics from section C of the Junior Certificate Syllabus: Economic Activities.

A plan for the geography module within the TY was provided. This sets out a list of topics for study and presents them using the headings aims, objectives, content, teaching and learning, resources and assessment. This comprehensive approach is commended. The topics listed provide students with an opportunity to experience Geography in a unique way, for example the geography of crime. Minutes of meetings indicate that this module has been amended and that further changes are planned thus keeping a fresh approach. It is also noteworthy that the use of ICT by students for research and presentation is encouraged. A variety of assessment modes is used to assess students' progress. These include project work, digital presentations, poster design and formal tests. The inclusion of a geographical investigation should be considered as a means of further developing students' collaborative learning and key geographical skills.

There was excellent planning and preparation by individual teachers for the lessons observed. All of the lessons had very clear aims and formed part of a larger unit of work, which was in line with the long-term curriculum plan for the subject. Individual written lesson plans were provided to the inspector and these had a clear outline for the lesson. In line with best practice there was a significant emphasis on student activity. Teachers had also prepared a range of resources which were effectively used to support teaching and learning. These resources included demonstration materials, worksheets for class and homework, supplementary textual material, digital presentations, rock samples and weather instruments. The development and use of these resources contributed to students having rich learning experiences and reflects the commitment by teachers to their students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teachers have adopted an exploratory and investigative approach to teaching Geography and this resulted in very high quality teaching in the classrooms visited. Teachers used a variety of teaching strategies with a clear emphasis on student activity. The use of demonstrations in lessons on metamorphism and mass wasting enabled students to grasp the key concepts in these topics and resulted in their evident enjoyment of the lessons. For example, the placing of a chocolate bar in a microwave oven was used to demonstrate the effects of thermal metamorphism. Lengths of piping were used to demonstrate the effects of gradient, water and plant roots on the rate of mass movement. This involved students actively participating in the demonstrations and was accompanied by careful teacher questioning in order to maximise the learning potential. The use of a worksheet after the demonstration of mass wasting provided students with an opportunity to consolidate their knowledge. The use of rock samples and weather instruments also provided students with first hand experiences and is very good teaching.

Question and answer sessions formed part of many of the lessons as did small group or pair work. Where group work was used students quickly formed groups and were assigned a specific task to be completed within a given timeframe. The provision of a range of statistical data further encouraged an exploratory approach to learning and helped to develop students' interpretative skills. Requiring students to draw conclusions based on their analysis of data helped to develop higher-order thinking skills and is very good practice.

Lessons were appropriately paced and teacher exposition was clear. Key geographical terms were introduced, clearly explained and students were encouraged to use these terms in their responses

to teacher questioning. Teachers taught with competence and their enthusiasm for the subject was evident. References to current events, as well as teachers' and students' personal experiences helped to enrich the learning experiences of students. The use of ICT in a number of lessons catered very effectively for visual learners. Of particular note was the use of ICT to teach place geography. There is scope for the further teaching of place geography and this could be done by providing students with maps at appropriate times during their study of Geography. The focus on teaching the language of geography and the use of statistical data encouraged students to develop their literacy and numeracy skills and is very good practice.

Differentiated learning was a notable feature of the lessons observed. Teachers moved around the classroom offering affirmation and one-to-one support to students during group work. The clearly presented worksheets were a further support to students. Students were given clear guidance by teachers during lessons on how to maintain a clear and accurate record of their written work. This further supported students and reflected the high expectations of teachers.

Out-of-class learning is a feature of the geography teaching programme in St Mary's Secondary School. Students undertake a weather walk in the school grounds, visit an agricultural college following the study of primary economic activities and visit the Burren. Commendably students undertake their geographical investigation for the Leaving Certificate in the local area.

Teachers have clear classroom routines in place for the start and conclusion of lessons. The good practice of sharing the planned learning outcomes for lessons was evident. There was, in some instances, scope to make these learning outcomes more explicit, to write them on the classroom board, to revisit them during the lesson and to assess students' grasp of them towards the end of the lesson. A positive, affirming and relaxed atmosphere was evident in the relationship between students and their teachers. Students willingly engaged in the planned learning activities, contributed to class discussions and were enjoying their learning experiences.

Students are making very good progress in their study of Geography. This was evident in the correction of homework and in the successful completion of tasks set during lessons. Students could recall previous learning and could relate this to the topic under discussion in class. This was also evident in discussions between the students and the inspector.

ASSESSMENT

A variety of assessment methods is used by teachers in St Mary's Secondary School to monitor students' progress. These include both formative and summative assessments. During lessons teachers frequently assessed students' understanding and invited them to seek clarification if necessary. Homework is regularly set and corrected. This was evident from classroom practice and from viewing a sample of students' journals. It was notable that homework set required students to be reflective and to consolidate their new knowledge rather than simply transcribe sections of the textbook. For example, crosswords, word searches and the completion of worksheets formed part of homework. Teachers keep records of attendance, homework and class tests. These are used to inform reports to parents and for discussions at formal parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group. Assessment and homework policies are included in the subject department plan. These are very good practices.

A sample of students' copybooks was viewed in each of the classrooms visited and these showed that students were keeping an accurate record of their work. Students' written work was generally

being maintained to a very high standard. Students preparing for certificate examinations answer past examination questions and are receiving appropriate guidance in relation to examination requirements and constructive feedback from their teachers. The use of 'comment only' marking could be extended so as to focus students' attention on areas for improvement.

The subject department plan showed that the school carries out an analysis of students' attainments in the certificate examinations and compares these to national norms. This is very good practice. There has been an increase in the number of students taking the certificate examinations at the higher level and students are achieving well in these examinations.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School management supports teaching and learning in Geography very effectively.
- The work of the geography department is very well co-ordinated. Teachers work collaboratively, share resources and their professional expertise. Teachers are engaged in self-evaluation.
- A very comprehensive subject department plan is in place which has been monitored and reviewed.
- There was excellent planning and preparation by individual teachers for the lessons observed.
- Teachers have adopted an exploratory and investigative approach to teaching Geography and this resulted in very high quality teaching in the classrooms visited.
- Differentiated learning and a focus on developing geographical skills and positive attitudes were notable features of the lessons observed.
- A positive, affirming and relaxed atmosphere was evident in the relationship between students and their teachers. Students willingly engaged in the planned learning activities, contributed to class discussions and were enjoying their learning experiences.
- Students are making very good progress in their study of Geography.

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 subject department plan for Geography be further developed to include learning outcomes linked to curriculum content, resources, teaching strategies and assessment to be delivered within agreed timeframes.
- It is recommended that the first-year teaching plan be reviewed.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers 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.