

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT**

**Ratoath College
Ratoath, County Meath
Roll number: 76088T**

Date of inspection: 16 December 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 Ratoath 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 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 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

Ratoath College is a co-educational school under the trusteeship of County Meath Vocational Education Committee (VEC). Current enrolment stands at seven hundred and sixty seven students, of whom somewhat over half are boys.

School management has provided two dedicated geography rooms and a wide range of resources to support teaching and learning in Geography. These resources are appropriately stored and are available to all members of the department. It is good to note that a system is in place to track the use of these resources. The provision of ICT resources is a particular strength of this school and teachers have registered with the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) in relation to the use of *Scoilnet Maps*. It is noteworthy that both teachers and students are actively involved in using ICT to prepare and to share resources.

Geography is a core subject in the school's curriculum at junior cycle. The members of the geography teaching team are preparing a module in Geography to be included in the optional Transition Year (TY) and this is a worthwhile development. Geography is an optional subject for the established Leaving Certificate and in line with best practice students are provided with an open choice of subjects before option bands are generated. The geography teachers are aware that there is scope to increase the uptake of the subject for the Leaving Certificate and are planning to address this. The inclusion of Geography within the TY should help to sustain students' interest in continuing to study the subject. The time allocation for Geography is in line with syllabus recommendations and lessons are appropriately distributed across students' timetables. All students are taught in a mixed-ability class setting.

Five teachers form the geography teaching team in Ratoath College. All are subject specialists and a very collaborative and supportive culture was evident amongst the group. They share

resources, plan for the department and benefit from sharing their considerable professional expertise. They have benefited from continuing professional development (CPD), which is supported by school management, both in relation to Geography and whole-school issues.

Members of the geography teaching team are made aware of students with special education needs and it is noteworthy that one member of the team liaises with the learning support department. Geography teachers have developed resources to support these students and a folder of these resources was made available during the evaluation.

Ratoath College has a special class, Aonad Arkle, for students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and it is noteworthy that these students study Geography either in their own classroom or by attending class in the mainstream school. This class group maintains a notice board with a geographical theme on a school corridor and this helps to maintain a presence for the subject within the school. Students in this class are being prepared to take certificate examinations and the quality of work in their copybooks was very good. Further supports are provided for students by special-needs assistants (SNAs) and by the use of team teaching. As a means of further supporting all students it is recommended that the members of the geography teaching team develop a policy on literacy and numeracy to support students' development in these areas.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There was clear evidence of collaborative planning and the sharing of professional expertise by the geography teachers. A subject co-ordinator is in place and it was evident that all members of the department contribute to subject department organisation and planning. Agendas are prepared and minutes of meetings are recorded. It was evident from minutes that there is ongoing monitoring and review of the planned teaching programmes. It is noteworthy that the senior management team suggests areas for discussion by subject teachers and provides time for formal department meetings once per term. It is suggested that some time be set aside at such meetings for teachers to discuss teaching and learning and to share successful teaching strategies.

A comprehensive subject department plan has been developed and this includes an incremental approach to the delivery of the long-term curriculum plan for Geography. All of the organisational arrangements for the subject are included in the plan as are records of communications using the school's email system. The long-term curriculum plan for the subject includes schemes of work for each year group. These schemes are presented using the headings: topic, syllabus reference, time, resources, methods and assessment. This approach is very good and the addition of planned learning outcomes for each topic would be very appropriate. Consideration should be given to the introduction of large-scale maps and photographs of the local area to the planned teaching programme for first-year students. This would cater for the interests of first-year students and would develop key geographical skills at an early stage. These key skills could then be integrated throughout the rest of the planned teaching programme.

All of the lessons observed were very well planned. Topics under discussion formed part of a larger unit of work and were in line with the agreed long-term curriculum plan for the subject. Teachers had prepared a range of resources which made a significant contribution to supporting students' learning. These resources included digital presentations, worksheets, flash cards, and maps and photographs. A notable feature of the worksheets used was their clear layout which effectively supported the wide range of student abilities present in classrooms.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

During the evaluation seven lessons were observed and very high quality teaching was evident in all of the classrooms visited. Teachers taught with competence, enthusiasm and showed awareness for the different learning styles of students. An exploratory and investigative approach was adopted to the delivery of lessons as students were encouraged to offer explanations for geographic phenomena and to ask questions. In all lessons there was a very good balance between teacher input, teacher-student interaction and student activity. Where group work was used clear tasks were assigned and feedback was taken in a whole-class setting thus maximising the learning potential of such strategy. Lessons were appropriately paced, teacher exposition was clear and there were smooth transitions between different elements of lessons.

Particular attention was paid to teaching the language of Geography. The references to local examples and to students' personal experiences were further good practices that facilitated students' understanding of complex geographic concepts. ITC was used very effectively in all lessons and provided students with rich learning experiences. All lessons had clear learning outcomes which were shared with students at the start. In some instances there was scope to make the learning intentions more specific and detailed.

Teachers are aware of the needs of individual students and team-teaching was used in an exemplary way to support students' learning needs. Team teaching was practised in three of the classrooms visited. From observation of these lessons and from further discussions it was evident that teachers had worked collaboratively to both plan and to deliver the lessons. This is very good practice. Both teachers presented part of the lesson and then as students were engaged in a planned learning activity they moved around the room offering support and advice to students. Discussions between both teachers and students provided further interest and stimulation for students. The practice by senior management of assigning new members of staff to work with a more established colleague in a team teaching context is commended as it provides an effective means of supporting students and of enabling teachers to share their professional expertise. Differentiation was also evident in the use of questioning and in the one to one support provided to students.

Students are making very good progress in their study of Geography. It was evident from questioning at the conclusion of lessons that the planned learning objectives had largely been achieved. Students could recall previous learning and could apply this in new settings. Students had also completed homework assignments correctly and in some cases had successfully answered past examination questions. Students in those lessons where maps and photographs were used demonstrated their competence in a variety of geographical skills.

Classroom management was very effective in all of the lessons observed and an atmosphere of mutual respect was evident. Students willingly participated in and enjoyed the planned learning activities. In line with the school's mission statement 'Mol an Óige agus tiocfaidh sí' teachers acknowledged students' effort and were affirming in their comments. The establishment of clear classroom routines particularly at the beginning and conclusion of lessons helped to create an atmosphere which was conducive to teaching and learning.

Classrooms visited were rich learning environments as maps, charts and posters were displayed. Students' project work was also displayed and this in an appropriate way to acknowledge students' efforts.

ASSESSMENT

A homework policy is in place and in viewing students' journals it was evident that homework is regularly set. It was good to note that homework is based on lessons and that a variety of homework tasks is set, for example word searches and cloze type exercises. Students are also required to write continuous prose and this is good practice. It was evident in students' journals that teachers enter positive comments and this is an important means of encouraging students.

Students use two copybooks one for maintaining a record of their work and the other for homework. This is good practice and enables students to track their progress and will prove a valuable revision aid. During lessons teachers gave clear instructions in relation to the layout and maintenance of copybooks. This supportive approach has resulted in students producing high quality written work which was evident in a sample of copybooks reviewed during the evaluation.

Assessment practices are very good as teachers use a range of assessment methods. These include ongoing questioning during class, common tests are set and these are based on models used in the certificate examinations. Arrangements are also in place for the formal assessment of students' progress. Teachers maintain records of attendance, homework and behaviour and these are used to inform reports to parents at formal parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group.

Past examination papers are used at an appropriate stage and students have attempted answering these. It was noted that some teachers are using 'comment only' marking in providing constructive feedback to students and this is good practice. Significant numbers of students take certificate examinations at higher level and student attainment in these examinations is very good.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School management has provided a wide range of resources to support teaching and learning in Geography. The provision of ICT resources is a particular strength of this school.
- There was clear evidence of collaborative planning and the sharing of professional expertise by the geography teachers.
- A comprehensive subject department plan has been developed and the planned introduction of a module in Geography into the TY is a welcome development.
- All of the lessons observed were very well planned and teachers had prepared a range of resources which made a significant contribution to supporting students' learning.
- Very high quality teaching was evident in all of the classrooms visited. Teachers taught with competence, enthusiasm and showed an awareness of the different learning styles of students. Team-teaching was used in an exemplary way to support students' learning needs.
- Students are making very good progress in their study of Geography. They showed a very good knowledge of their courses and demonstrated well developed geographical skills.
- Classroom management was very effective and an atmosphere of mutual respect was evident. Students willingly participated in and enjoyed the planned learning activities.

- Assessment practices are very good as teachers use a range of assessment methods, common tests are used and these are based on models used in the certificate 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 members of the geography teaching team develop a policy on literacy and numeracy to support students' development in these areas.
- The introduction of large-scale maps and photographs of the local area should be considered as part of the planned teaching programme for first-year students.

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.

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of Ratoath College wishes to congratulate the Geography Team on an excellent report, which outlines the high standard of teaching and learning in the school.

The Board would like to thank all members of the Geography Team who have worked extremely hard over the last six years to build the Geography Department.

The report itself commends teachers on the "clear evidence of collaborative planning" and on the "very high quality of teaching in all classrooms".

Team Teaching, the report states "was used in an exemplary way to support students' learning needs" and teachers were commended for the "range of assessment methods and tests which are based on models used in the certificate exams"

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

The Geography Team have planned to develop a policy on literacy and numeracy in the year 2011 – 2012 to support students' development

They have also amended the first year Curriculum Plan to include the introduction of large scale maps and photographs