An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Tarbert Comprehensive School
County Kerry
Roll number: 81006S

Date of inspection: 10 May 2011
REPORT 
ON 
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY 

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of inspection</th>
<th>10 May 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inspection activities undertaken</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Review of relevant documents 
• Discussion with principal, deputy principal and teachers 
• Interaction with students |
| Observation of teaching and learning during four class periods |
| Examination of students’ work |
| Feedback to principal, deputy principal and teachers |

MAIN FINDINGS

• Very good quality teaching and learning, including some examples of excellent practice, was observed in lessons.

• Uptake of higher-level Geography and outcomes for students in certificate examinations are consistently good.

• Geography is well-supported and resourced in the school.

• A number of the teachers currently teaching Geography in the school do not have specialist qualifications in the subject.

• Individual and collaborative planning for Geography is of a high standard.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

• The content of Transition Year (TY) geography module should be refocused to include an emphasis on geographical skills and their application through fieldwork in the local environment.

• The board of management should over time, and subject to available resources, move to deploy teachers with specialist qualifications in Geography to teach the subject in the school.

• The teaching team should reflect on, gather and share effective classroom practice and record this in the subject plan.
INTRODUCTION

Tarbert Comprehensive School has an enrolment of 603 students. It serves a wide hinterland in North Kerry and West Limerick. A comprehensive curriculum, including TY, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), is offered to students. Geography is offered in mixed-ability classroom settings in junior and senior cycle. A module that includes Geography is offered in the TY programme. The board of management of the school 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.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Students were active, engaged and participative in almost all the geography lessons observed during the evaluation. The quality of teaching was very good, including some examples of excellent practice. The topics for study were underpinned by key geographical concepts and a focus on appropriate terminology. Students, particularly in those classes preparing for certificate examinations, displayed significant spatial understanding of appropriate interrelationships and processes based on local, national and international settings.

- The very effective lessons observed were characterised by the use of well-planned teaching strategies and a range of methodologies. While revision for examinations was a central focus, students were challenged by good quality questioning, individual and group tasks and the use of printed and projected visual-stimulus materials that included maps, photographs and diagrams.

- Almost all of the Geography lessons were characterised by energy and enthusiasm for the topic under study and for learning. Where students were passive in their learning and largely silent in class, the pacing of the lesson and more detailed reference to students’ prior knowledge should have been considered.

- The use of a glossary of geographical terminology and attention to sentence structure in students’ written answers provided an effective focus on literacy in some geography lessons. The focus on significant relevant points (SRPs) and the structure of examination answers was also a very timely and worthwhile intervention and support for students’ examination preparation.

- Information and communication technology (ICT) was integrated appropriately into many of the lessons observed. Geographical skills were also practised and applied in these lessons through the interpretation of data, maps and diagrams. The use of local examples and settings provided an important and relevant context for many lessons. The use of Scoilnet Maps, a web-based mapping and spatial information tool supplied to schools by the NCTE would further enhance both teaching and learning in Geography.

- The learning intention was clear in all lessons. Assessment of the planned learning was achieved through questioning, and through discussion of students’ written homework. Very good quality questioning observed in some lessons included careful attention to clarity, targeting and depth. Students in these lessons were affirmed and encouraged to develop their responses, as appropriate.
• The quality of students’ work in copybooks was very good and was enhanced by some formative comment and annotation by teachers. Formative assessment should be further developed at classroom level to complement established summative assessment procedures in the school. Outcomes for students in certificate examinations are very good and reflect the high expectations of the geography teachers for their students.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

• Provision and resourcing of Geography is appropriate. The time allocated to the subject is in line with normal provision. Teachers’ base classrooms are well equipped and provide a good quality learning environment for Geography.

• The TY programme is offered as an option for students and experiences a limited uptake. It is very positive that Geography is offered as part of a cross-curricular module entitled Historical, Environmental and Local Studies. Students are offered an open choice of subjects on transfer into fifth year. Uptake of Geography is very good and uptake of higher-level is significantly strong. The level of uptake of the subject is a product of the commitment and enthusiasm of the teaching team.

• A number of the geography teachers do not have a specialist qualification in the subject although they have been deployed by school management to teach Geography over a prolonged period. These teachers display a very positive commitment to Geography and have developed significant subject expertise.

• Geography and History share a combined time slot on the junior cycle timetable for each class group and are taught by the same teacher. The combining of the time allocation for Geography and History is an internal timetabling decision and presents no difficulties currently. The planning and organisation of either subject within the allocated time is the responsibility of the teacher.

• It is very clear that teaching and learning is of a high quality and that the outcomes for students are very good. It is recommended however, that, subject to available resources, the board of management should, over time, move to deploy teachers with specialist qualifications in Geography to teach the subject in the school.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

• A high standard of both individual and collaborative planning informs teaching and learning in geography classrooms. This is the outcome of an inclusive planning process and the development of a good quality subject plan. Normal procedures and routines for subject-department planning are in place including the recording of meetings and the designation of the role of subject co-ordinator.

• To continue to develop the subject in the school, the geography teachers should reflect on their own good practice in the classroom. A teaching and learning framework such as instructional leadership, assessment for learning or teaching for understanding could be used as a lens to evaluate current practice. Elements of good practice should then be shared by all members of the team and should be included in the subject plan.
• Collaborative planning should also examine the current position of Geography in TY. Geographical skills should be repositioned within the current module and the application of these skills, through fieldwork in the local environment, should be considered.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation.

Published, December 2011
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

Response by the Board of Management to the Report on the Inspection of Geography in Tarbert Comprehensive School on 10-5-2011

The Board is very pleased with this report on the teaching and learning of Geography. The report affirms the high standards that are evident in classrooms, confirms that examination results are consistently good, notes that the subject is well supported and resourced and also praises “excellent practice”.

The Board notes the finding that “a number of teachers currently teaching Geography in the school do not have specialist qualifications in the subject.”

This is true and it is very heartening to the Board that these teachers, who have had to upskill themselves in their own time and at their own expense, have done so with such obvious success. However, the Board notes the concern of the Inspectorate and is glad of the opportunity to outline the background.

The reason for this situation is both historical and educational. In the past students here studied a total of 10 core subjects and 3 Options for the Junior Cert. To find time for all of these subjects, and maintain as wide a range as possible, History and Geography were treated as one for timetabling purposes and taught by the same teacher. Therefore one could find a teacher with specialist qualifications in either subject teaching both.

Despite the fact that it placed an extra burden on them teachers were happy with this situation as it meant that from an allocation of only 5 periods a week both subjects could get equal time. When we had to reduce the number of subjects for Junior Cert to 12 it was possible to allocate an extra period to History and Geography. However it was decided to continue having them taught by the same teacher as this was serving the students well.

The Board of Management feels that this subject report confirms the wisdom of that decision but is also aware of the regulations that underpin the current concern.

The Board would like to point out that this is a situation that pertains only to this subject area and is a result of the circumstances already explained.

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

To address this concern the Board of Management will in future endeavour to ensure that teachers are deployed in subject areas in which they have a specialist qualification. However the Board does not want to squander the expertise of those teachers who are currently doing such good work and therefore the process of co-operation with this regulation will take time.

The other recommendations in the report, re Transition Year and the sharing of effective classroom practice, are being developed, documented and implemented.

The Board is more than satisfied, and this is confirmed by the current report, that the teaching of Geography by all teachers, both specialist and non-specialist, is of a very high standard.

The Board is also satisfied that the school management makes optimum use of its staffing resources and that every decision in relation to the deployment of teachers is made wisely and in the best interests of the educational attainment of our students.