REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ballincollig Community 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 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 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

Provision and support for Geography in Ballincollig Community School are very good. As a core subject in junior cycle, Geography gets appropriate provision on the school timetable. Geography is also offered as an option for study in the compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme and is an optional subject for Leaving Certificate. Uptake of the subject for Leaving Certificate is strong and uptake of higher-level geography in both junior and senior cycle is significantly strong. This clearly reflects high expectations for students by the geography teachers and the commitment of the geography teaching team to the continued development of the subject in the school.

The geography teachers work together as a subject department and good quality structures are in place to support their work. A subject co-ordinator has been appointed. Their is a strong sense of collegiality and a system of mentoring and support for new teachers. Subject meetings take place regularly and good quality records are maintained. These records give a significant insight into the level of meaningful engagement with issues of concern to the subject over a prolonged period.

While most geography teachers are allocated to base classrooms, the maintenance of a very high quality geography room adds significant visibility to the subject in the school. This room is used to store geography resources and equipment and, while it is allocated as a base room, other groups also have access to the facilities of the room. The room provides a visually stimulating learning environment for geography students with displays of maps, posters, models, students’ project work, photographs and geography reference books. As with other base rooms, the geography room also contains very good quality information and communication technology (ICT) equipment that is used to enhance teaching and learning in Geography.

The organisation of TY geography is an area requiring some attention from school management. All students choose their subjects for Leaving Certificate on entry to the compulsory TY programme. Therefore students, who opt for Geography, study the subject in TY and then transfer directly to Leaving Certificate geography. Geography textbooks for Leaving Certificate are
purchased during TY. While accepting that there is some flexibility and possibilities for students to change subjects on entry into fifth year, this structure does not represent good practice and is not in line with TY philosophy and guidelines. Subject choice for Leaving Certificate should be organised towards the end of the TY programme and the programme should provide Geography students with a significant element of subject sampling. It is therefore recommended that school management should review and re-organise the programme on this basis.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

An excellent level of individual planning and preparation for lessons was evident among the geography teaching team. This level of planning included the preparation of visual stimulus materials, worksheets, student tasks and presentations using ICT. These materials had a significant positive impact on the students’ experience of the subject in the lessons observed.

Collaborative subject planning is also of a very high standard and the departmental structure that is in place has resulted in the development of a very good and effective subject plan for Geography. The plan includes detailed reference to programme planning, assessment, support for students with additional educational needs and the important issues of health and safety on fieldwork activities. The geography subject plan links with the overall school plan and clearly reflects the development of the subject in the school.

A revision of the TY geography plan and programme is necessary. While the plan for TY geography contains valuable experiences for students in relation to fieldwork skills and environmental issues, the plan also contains one Leaving Certificate unit for study using the language and content description of the Leaving Certificate geography syllabus. The content of any TY module or unit should link with, but differ significantly from, the students’ experience of Geography in Leaving Certificate. This issue should be addressed in the context of subject planning for Geography.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A very high standard of teaching and learning was evident in all the geography lessons observed. This arose from the quality of planning and preparation for lessons, and from the very good interactions between students and their teachers. The classroom atmosphere and rapport between students and their teachers was very positive in all lessons.

Learning was to the fore in geography lessons. The topic for study was clear from the outset in all lessons and the intended learning outcomes emerged as the lessons progressed and concluded. In all cases, the learning in lessons developed from previous learning. A review of homework tasks also characterised the beginning of a number of lessons. Lesson content was challenging and the level of challenge was appropriate to the needs and abilities of the students. The geographical experience of students in these classrooms was positive, engaging and participative.

The methodologies used in lessons included good quality questioning, discussion, engagement with visual-stimulus materials and student tasks. These strategies were woven into the well-planned lessons and resulted in a significant level of engagement and participation by students. In all lessons, students were active in their own learning. Senior cycle lessons included students engaging with figures, diagrams and maps relating to population distribution and density. These lessons involved students engaging with visual materials using ICT, numerical data and diagrams.
Key geographical skills and geographical terminology were integrated into the planned methodology. These strategies represent very good practice.

Lesson content focused on the geographical concepts of location, region, pattern and density. Junior cycle lessons also focused on appropriate syllabus topics including mass movement and settlement. Students revised the key learning points of mass movement through a very effective combination of worksheets, group work and digital photographs. Another group engaged with historic settlement though the use of maps, aerial photographs and discussion.

It was very positive that geographical skills were integrated appropriately into lessons as was Scoilnet Maps; a web based mapping application supplied to schools by the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE). Students’ projects, presentations and fieldwork reports, displayed in individual classrooms, also illustrate the range of activities and experiences afforded to geography students in the school. It is also very positive that the development of students’ numeracy and literacy formed an important element of the geography lessons observed.

ASSESSMENT

Arising from the learning-focused geography lessons, there was a strong emphasis on assessment in all lessons observed. In-class assessment strategies normally include class tests at appropriate intervals, the review of homework tasks, and questioning. The reviewing of previous learning points and the recapitulation of intended learning outcomes were observed to be very effective strategies to reinforce learning. The quality of student’s work in their copybooks and notebooks, including the quality and neatness of diagrams, was observed to be very good. Homework tasks were regularly monitored and formative comments were included in many cases. This practice is encouraged as it directs and challenges students towards improvement.

Whole-school assessment procedures follow normal practice and the outcomes of these assessments are reported to home through school reports, the student journal and at parent-teacher meetings. The organisation of formal examinations for TY geography should be reviewed in line with earlier recommendations relating to the programme. Portfolio assessment, student presentations and project work should be considered as more appropriate assessment strategies for TY geography students. These strategies and a range of other strategies are recommended by TY guideline documents.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision and support for Geography are very good.
- Individual planning for teaching and learning in Geography is excellent.
- Collaborative planning is of a very high standard.
- Uptake of Geography for Leaving Certificate is strong and uptake of higher-level is significantly strong.
- Teaching and learning in Geography is of a very high standard.
- A strong focus on assessment was observed in geography lessons.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendation is made:

- The organisation, planning and assessment of Transition Year geography should be reviewed and revised.

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

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