

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Davitt College
Castlebar, County Mayo
Roll number: 76060U

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AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Davitt College, Castlebar. 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 examined students' work. 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 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

Geography is a core subject on the junior-cycle curriculum and is allocated two class periods per week in both first year and second year. In third year three class periods are assigned to Geography every second year in rotation with History. It is recommended that the class period provision to the subject is increased as it places undue demands on both the teachers and students in view of the breadth of the syllabus. The number of students taking higher-level Geography at Junior Certificate is below the national average. An increased time allocation to the subject should have a positive impact on uptake of higher-level Junior Certificate Geography and on the number of students opting to take the subject at senior cycle. A number of classes are timetabled for Geography on two consecutive days at the start or the end of the week. This should be avoided and timetabling should provide for a greater spread of lessons so that students have a more balanced exposure to the subject over the week. All classes are of mixed ability.

Six teachers are involved in the delivery of Geography and all are appropriately deployed in line with their qualifications. Some teachers are provided with base classrooms and these rooms have stimulating learning environments with geographical charts, maps and student work on display. Due to increased enrolment and space restrictions other teachers have to move from room to room. This has limited the development of geographical learning environments. School management is giving consideration to the creation of subject specialist rooms. This is encouraged as it will enable teachers to access resources such as large wall maps more readily and increase the opportunity for students to contribute to the learning environment.

School management is commended for the development of the school's information and communication technology (ICT) facilities which facilitate the use of ICT in all classrooms. Each classroom is equipped with a digital projector and all teachers have been provided with a laptop. The geography teachers are actively integrating ICT to support teaching and learning and have prepared Powerpoint presentations, including visual and audio stimuli, animations, and links to relevant web sites on the various areas of the junior cycle and senior cycle syllabuses. The geography team have immediate access to these resources which are stored in a common folder

on the school server. This resource folder is updated on an ongoing basis by all teachers. This work is highly commended.

School management actively promotes and supports continuous professional development and all teachers are encouraged to undertake one in-career development seminar in the course of an academic year. This practice is commended as it keeps teachers informed on educational themes and of developments in their subject. The geography teachers have engaged in recent in-service for the subject. Teachers are encouraged to attend the upcoming support sessions on Scoilnet maps to be provided in local Education Centres by the NCTE.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject department planning is well established and supported by the scheduling of a formal team meeting each term in addition to regular contact between teachers to discuss subject matters. It is good practice that the minutes of meetings are recorded and an official report on the department including meetings held, participation at in-service, leaving certificate results analysis and co-curricular activities is submitted to the principal. The department has a co-ordinator. Over time, as teachers new to the department become more established, it is encouraged that this role is shared on a rotational basis to build capacity and leadership skills amongst all the teachers.

The subject plan contains the department's aims and objectives and organisational details. A common curriculum plan is in place for each year group and these are set within appropriate timeframes. These timeframes should be followed by all teachers to facilitate the setting of common examination papers for all formal in-house assessments and to ensure consistency across the department. It is good practice that the first-year teaching plan includes the development of map skills and a range of topics of varying levels of difficulty. However, physical geography is taught in a linear manner throughout the first term. This places significant demands on students in terms of technical vocabulary and understanding complex geomorphic process. It is recommended that Ordnance Survey (OS) map and aerial photograph skills are introduced at an early stage in first year and these can be then be integrated and developed across all areas of the syllabus. It was evident from classroom observation that second-year students were finding the study of meteorology very difficult and this topic should be deferred until a later stage in the junior cycle. The teachers are encouraged to experiment with a thematic approach to the delivery of the syllabus so that related topics of different levels of difficulty can be taught in an integrated manner.

The geography teachers work well as a team and are engaged in the collaborative development and sharing of resources. This collaboration should be extended to professional dialogue on learning outcomes and methodologies including differentiation strategies to enhance and facilitate the active participation of all students in their own learning. The outcomes of this process should inform the further development of the curricular plans to include learning outcomes, the methodologies adopted to attain these outcomes and the assessment modes employed to monitor students' progress.

This year, for the first time, Geography forms part of the Transition Year (TY) programme. The topics for study include Irish emigration, climate change and nuclear power with a focus on its advantages and disadvantages. In line with the ethos of TY activity-based and independent learning are central features of the programme. Students undertake research and complete projects on topics. In some cases the projects were of good quality, however in other cases the projects consisted of downloaded articles from the internet and had little student input. It is recommended, in order to maximise the learning outcomes for students that they be provided with clear

guidelines for carrying out and structuring their projects and that specific criteria be developed and shared with students for the assessment of their work.

The TY geography plan needs to be developed into a more comprehensive document to reflect the aims and objectives of the module, teaching and learning strategies, resources, and assessment and evaluation procedures. The document 'Writing the Transition Year Programme' will provide support and guidelines in developing this plan. Consideration should also be given to the inclusion of a geographical investigation based in the local area so that students have the opportunity to develop practical field skills in a local context.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was evidence of good preparation and planning for the lessons observed. Students were provided with worksheets, handouts, Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, and rock samples. ICT was used very effectively to enhance lesson delivery and students learning. All lessons had a clear structure and in most cases were appropriately paced. The learning objectives were communicated to students at the outset of each lesson. In building on this practice there should be a further focus on the learning objectives at the conclusion of the lesson as a means of consolidating students' learning.

Good quality teaching was observed in lessons with some very good practice in evidence. Teaching and learning were most effective when supported by the use of appropriate resources and active learning methodologies that stimulated students and enabled them to engage with the content of the lessons. These included the use of inclusive questioning strategies, individual learning tasks, and the integration ICT to illustrate concepts and processes and to present a wide and rich range of visual stimuli on the topic under study. Questioning, including higher and lower-order questions, was employed in all lessons to aid the introduction and subsequent broadening of the topic under study and to review and reinforce students' learning. However, in some lessons there was a marked concentration on general questions of the whole class and there were few opportunities given for students' input. In these cases it is recommended that questions to named individuals are distributed across the range of ability levels and that students are given time to develop their answers. The use of such directed questioning strategies will help to ensure the more active participation of all students.

There was evidence of some differentiated strategies to support student learning. In all cases students were questioned on geographical terms and these were explained and integrated throughout the lesson. Very good practice was noted where students maintain a word bank of key terms in their copybooks and where simple definitions of technical terms were written on the board. These practices enhance students' access to the subject and should be extended to all lessons. Teachers are highly commended for the advanced integration of digital images including interactive animations of geographic processes and video clips to engage and stimulate students. The further development of a differentiated approach to teaching to cater for the range of students' abilities in classes should be a central element of subject department planning. In this context consideration should be given to differentiation of the syllabuses, questioning strategies, homework assignments, project work, and assessment and feedback provided to students. The school's learning-support department could provide advice on differentiated teaching and learning strategies. Teachers should also consult www.sess.ie the website of the Special Education Support Service.

In all lessons instruction was clear and accurate and some very good links were made with relevant topical issues, the local environment and students direct experience. Where student note-

taking is deemed necessary this should be confined to key points in bullet point format or graphic organisers could be used to summarise lesson material and provide a simple overview of the topic. Students could then write up on the topic based on the graphic organiser and this strategy would facilitate students' ongoing engagement in the learning process.

Students copybooks are well maintained. Notes were organised and neat and diagrams were drawn to a high standard. In some lessons the students showed a good level of learning from their responses to questions and had a clear understanding of the topic under study. In other lessons students found the topics challenging and had difficulty in understanding concepts and the operation of geographical processes. The rescheduling of some topics on the junior cycle teaching programme to a later stage and an increase in the provision of timetabled classes to the subject should alleviate these difficulties.

Classroom management was very effective in each lesson and the classroom atmosphere was warm, secure and very well ordered. Students were being affirmed and there was a positive student-teacher relationship that was underpinned by mutual respect.

ASSESSMENT

Formal assessments are held at Christmas and the end of the summer term for first-year, second-year and fifth-year class groups. Third-year and sixth-year students have class tests at Christmas and take 'mock' examinations in the spring. A longer examination period should be timetabled for these class groups in preparation for the 'mock' and state examinations. Student learning is also assessed through tests for each class group at appropriate times during the teaching programme. A good level of contact is maintained between the school and parents. Feedback from all formal assessments is provided to parents through school reports and parent-teacher meetings.

It is good practice that an analysis of students' performance in state examinations is carried out each year. Student achievement in the Leaving Certificate has increased in the past few years. The geography teachers should now set targets to increase the uptake of higher-level Geography at Junior Certificate level and to raise student attainment in the higher grades.

Students progress in lessons is monitored in a variety of ways including questioning, correction of homework and in-class exercises. Homework was set by all teachers based on the lesson content. A sample of students' copybooks was reviewed and best practice was noted where the teachers had provided advisory comments on how to improve the work. In other cases the completion of work by students had been monitored by a tick mark but showed no evidence of any further correction. In further developing their work in the area of assessment the geography teachers should develop a policy on the frequency and type of feedback provided on students work. This policy should focus on the correction of homework in lessons and on more substantial assignments taken up by the teacher for correction. Common procedures should be agreed and outlined in the policy in relation to commenting on students' work, marking that work and ensuring that students amend work in accordance with teacher feedback.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Teachers are appropriately deployed to the subject.
- The school has excellent information and communication technology (ICT) facilities and these are used to good effect by the geography teachers.

- School management actively promotes and supports teachers' professional development.
- The teachers have collaboratively developed and are using an extensive range of ICT resources to support teaching and learning in Geography.
- There was effective planning and preparation for lessons.
- Good quality teaching was observed in lessons with some very good practice in evidence.
- Classroom management was very effective and interactions between teachers and students were underpinned by mutual respect.

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

- The time allocation to Geography should be increased at junior cycle level and timetabling should provide for a more even spread of lessons.
- In the future, collaborative planning for the subject should focus on learning outcomes, methodologies including differentiation strategies to enhance the active participation of all students in their own learning, student attainment and assessment for learning practices.
- The Transition Year (TY) geography plan should be further developed and specific criteria developed for the assessment of students work.
- Targets should be set to raise student attainment and uptake of higher-level Geography in the Junior Certificate.

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.