Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire gan Smál
Blarney, County Cork
Roll number: 62090D

Date of inspection: 30 September 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Mhuire gan Smál. 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 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

Geography is in a significantly strong position in Scoil Mhuire gan Smál. It has a long tradition as a very popular subject among the student cohort and uptake is strong currently. This position of prominence is attributed to school management’s support for the subject and the commitment of the current geography teaching team. The geography department in the school has been characterised by the use of innovative teaching methodologies, the mentoring of newly-qualified teachers (NQTs) and an emphasis on developing good quality fieldwork. These traditions and practices were nurtured by a former geography teacher, who later became principal of the school, and who has now retired. This legacy of a vibrant department has been further developed, and significantly enhanced, by the current geography teaching team.

Provision for Geography is very good in the school. While timetable provision is in line with good practice, it is the provision of a spacious and very well-equipped geography room that provides significant visibility for the subject. The room, which has large windows to the front of the school building, contains a wide range of equipment, posters, maps, photographs of fieldwork activities and examples of students work. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) equipment, including a desktop computer and a digital-data projector, has been provided. Blinds on the windows maximise the visual impact of this audio-visual equipment in lessons. The room is very well organised and provides an ordered and appropriate learning environment for geography students.

The school is currently in the process of organising classes on a mixed-ability basis at junior cycle. The current first-year and second-year cohort have been organised into mixed-ability groups while the current third years are the last year group to be streamed. It is clear from planning documentation, classroom practice and discussion with the geography teachers that there is much reflection on the challenges and opportunities that result from these changes. Geography teachers are clearly addressing these challenges in their classroom practice and are involved in the very positive whole-school engagement in professional learning relating to differentiation and
mixed-ability teaching methodologies. The geography teachers should, over time, reflect upon and review the teaching and learning strategies that have been most effective in mixed-ability settings. Strategies found to be effective should then be included in the subject plan.

Strong collaboration between the education-support teachers and the geography teachers is also very effective in supporting the needs of students in these mixed-ability settings. Appropriate and detailed profiles of the learning needs of specific students are presented to the geography teachers by the education-support team. The needs and progress of these students are reviewed regularly. This is very good practice.

Mentoring of NQTs is a noteworthy aspect of practice in the school, and is particularly strong in the geography department. Students completing their teaching practice as part of their Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) are assigned to a geography teacher in the school within a structured mentoring process. These NQTs are included in department activities and particularly in fieldwork outings. This very good work has the dual benefit of ensuring a quality learning experience for the NQT and good quality teaching and learning for the geography students in classes taught by these teachers.

Geography teachers also engage in professional learning programmes provided by the Profession Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the subject association. These have included training in the use of Scoilnet Maps, a web-based application provided to schools by the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE). These experiences have enhanced and supported the skills of all the teachers of Geography.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Individual and collaborative planning for Geography is excellent. Individual planning for the lessons observed was very effective. The learning outcome of the lessons had been planned. This learning was clearly linked to previous learning. The planned methodologies and resources used in lessons were very successful in engaging students in the planned learning. In all cases, the planning for individual lessons was linked to the syllabus and the subject-department plan.

The collaborative planning process and the resultant subject plan represent very good practice. It is clear that the geography teachers are an effective, reflective team and that the plan is an active and living document. Collaborative planning for Geography has developed over time and is characterised by both formal and informal communication, significant collegiality and teamwork. The subject plan includes agreed teaching programmes but, significantly, makes reference to teaching methodologies, differentiated strategies and appropriate links to the resources of the education-support team. A very good quality programme for Transition Year (TY) geography is also included in the subject plan. Planning for co-curricular activities is also evident, as is the emphasis on fieldwork at all levels. The planning in evidence for the integration of geographical skills through fieldwork, in both junior and senior cycle, is also very good practice.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching in the lessons observed was very good. Students were engaged and fully participated in these lessons. The methodologies used by the teachers focused clearly on planned learning. From the outset of the lessons the students were engaged in well-paced lessons. This engagement in learning began with reference to previous learning in the form of homework.
review or questioning based on homework tasks. The quality of questioning was of a very high standard. An appropriate combination of lower-order and higher-order questions was used. In all cases, questions were targeted at named students and all responses were affirmed. Students were also challenged through these questioning strategies and were encouraged to develop their answers and to display their understanding of the topic or concept. Students also had the confidence to both answer and pose questions in these lessons.

Learning was advanced in lessons through the use of visual-stimulus materials and the integration of tasks. A range of photographs was used effectively to illustrate the impact of high population density in one junior cycle lesson, while rainfall types were very well presented in both diagrammatic form and by digital photographs projected in another lesson. The impact of earthquakes was presented to students in a senior cycle lesson using a combination of very good animations and a video clip of a recent major earthquake event. The effectiveness of these visual materials was enhanced by the availability and integration of ICT in lessons. Tasks in lessons included the recording of key points from the presentations, note-making from the textbook and workbook and a review of a diary entry for a young person in an earthquake zone. The combination of these planned methodologies ensured very good quality learning by students in all lessons observed.

Classroom climate was positive, purposeful and challenging. Students were on task and were focused throughout. The level of good quality planning and preparation, and the skills of the teachers, resulted in very interesting and stimulating lessons. The range of tasks also created time for individual attention, and differentiated approaches were used to meet the needs of some students. Classroom management was very effective. The classroom environment was calm and inclusive, but it was also clear that well-established routines and procedures resulted in the creation of a challenging and stimulating learning environment in geography lessons.

**ASSESSMENT**

It was clear that assessment strategies were used effectively in all lessons. The review of previous learning, the attention to homework and the quality of questioning ensured that teachers were aware of students’ understanding within the mixed-ability classroom contexts. Students’ notebooks and copybooks were very well organised and reflected their progress in lessons and in their own learning. Students’ work was monitored in all lessons observed and copies had been corrected at appropriate intervals. The good practice of providing formative comments on students’ work was also noted.

The geography teachers also pay due attention to certificate examinations. Students’ homework questions reflected the question structure used in Junior Certificate examination questions while an emphasis on significant relevant points (SRPs) was in evidence in discussions regarding homework at senior cycle. Such a focus is important in developing good examination technique arising from the student’s understanding of the topic. The geography teachers also review the students’ results in certificate examinations with a view to informing their own classroom practice and to improving outcomes for students.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision for Geography is very good and uptake by students is strong.
• The well-organised geography room provides an ordered and appropriate learning environment for geography students.
• Strong linkage and communication with the education-support teachers is very effective in supporting the needs of geography students in the mixed-ability classroom settings.
• Individual and collaborative planning is excellent.
• The quality of teaching and learning is very good.
• Assessment strategies used are very effective in geography lessons.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendation is made:
• The geography teachers should reflect upon and review the teaching and learning strategies that have been most effective in mixed-ability settings with a view to their inclusion in the subject plan

Post-evaluation meetings were 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.

Published, February 2011