An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography

REPORT

Mount Mercy College
Cork City
Roll number: 62661U

Date of inspection: 7 February 2013
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

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| **Inspection activities undertaken** | **Observation of teaching and learning during four class periods**
| Review of relevant documents | Examination of students’ work |
| Discussion with principal and teachers | Feedback to principal and teachers |
| Interaction with students | |

MAIN FINDINGS

- The quality of teaching and learning was very good in all geography lessons observed.
- Geography students experienced a visual and skills-based pedagogy in lessons.
- Achievement in Geography in certificate examinations is strong.
- Integration of information and communication technology (ICT) significantly enhances the students’ experience of Geography.
- Planning, and particularly internal subject evaluation and review, are well advanced within the subject department.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- To build on current very good practice, teachers should focus on further developing questioning strategies in lessons as they advance planning and review teaching and learning in Geography.
- The current Transition Year (TY) modules for Geography and Environmental and Social Studies should be reviewed in the context of effecting further growth in uptake of the subject for Leaving Certificate.
INTRODUCTION

Mount Mercy College is a voluntary secondary school for girls with a current enrolment of 741 students. Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Transition Year (TY) programme are offered to students. Geography is a core subject at junior cycle, is provided in the optional TY programme as a module in Geography and as Environmental and Social Studies, and is offered as an optional subject for Leaving Certificate.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Very good quality teaching and learning was observed in all geography lessons visited in the course of the evaluation. From the outset, lessons followed clear and established routines with preparedness for work and progression of learning obvious at all levels from sixth-year to first-year. Students were actively engaged in their learning and in the activities and tasks provided by the teachers to scaffold that learning. The learning intention was clear in all lessons, and progressed from previous learning in line with the appropriate geography syllabus for junior or senior cycle. To build on current practice, teachers should now focus on further developing their questioning strategies in relation to spread, targeting, wait-time and differentiation.

- All lessons were significantly student-centred, with the exception of examination class groups that were in the final stages of revision for their pre-examinations. These lessons were, of necessity, more teacher-directed in the context of revision. However, teachers skilfully engaged students in higher-order thinking and analysis, leading to understanding of key concepts and interrelationships appropriate to the demands of higher-level geography examinations at both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate.

- In other classrooms, students were engaged by very interesting, enjoyable and stimulating activities linked to a clear yet general learning intention. A junior cycle class group was engaged by both the practice and application of geographical skills through their use of a local Ordnance Survey (OS) sheet. This very effective resource was used to apply the physical processes of river erosion and deposition to local settings familiar to the students. Fifth-year students were appropriately challenged to think as geographers and to link their understanding of endogenic processes with the general theory of plate tectonics. These senior students were challenged to recall, analyse and evaluate evidence relating to the topic. Both geographical learning activities, appropriately positioned within junior cycle and senior cycle, reflected very effective and engaging geography teaching.

- Integration of ICT into both teaching and learning significantly enhanced the student’s experience in all lessons. ICT resources provided a further scaffold to students learning and understanding through the inclusion of visual imagery, key words, summary points and digital photographs of features and landforms. The use of hand-held computer tablet devices is a further experimental advancement of this work that is being trialled in lessons by the geography department.

- Effective literacy support strategies in geography lessons, reflecting a developing school-wide strategy, are currently focusing on key terminology relating to subject knowledge and assessment. These emphases were evident in the lessons observed.

- Co-operative learning, in well organised groups and pairs, further supported students’ engagement in learning in the lessons observed. These strategies discouraged passivity among the students and facilitated the teacher to support individual students in the mixed-ability classroom settings.
SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Timetabling and resource provision for Geography are very good in the school and are in line with normal practice. A well-equipped geography room provides a very good quality visual learning environment for students and a space within which to display maps, posters, samples of students’ project work and photographs of fieldwork activities among other geographical teaching resources.

- Geography is provided as two modules within the optional TY programme. Students are provided with a half-yearly module of Environmental and Social Studies, and a more conventional geography module. The capacity to engage students in project work or field investigations is somewhat limited by the allocation of two single class periods per week to each of these modules. In this context, consideration should be given to merging these into one geography module with a time allocation of one single and one double class-period per week. A comprehensive review of TY geography is therefore recommended to provide a particular focus on skills and competencies to support a stronger connection to, and increased uptake of, Leaving Certificate geography.

- The opportunity afforded to the geography department to engage and experiment with hand-held ICT devices within geography classroom activities reflects a tradition of innovation and development within the department and the confidence of school management in the capacity of the department to experiment and report on this intervention for the benefit of all subjects and students. The geography teaching team is enthusiastic in its engagement with this project.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Collaborative planning structures for Geography are in place and in operation. It is noteworthy and praiseworthy that the geography department has an established student evaluation process in place that informs practice and planning for student activities. Such an engagement with student voice, in the context of individual class groups and at subject department level, is clearly developmental and is focused on the continuing improvement of students’ experience of Geography.

- Individual planning and preparation by geography teachers was of a very high standard as was evidenced by the range of very effective experiences provided for students in geography lessons.

- Achievement in Geography in certificate examinations is strong. Planning strategies to further support uptake and achievement at Leaving Certificate level are in place and are being actively implemented by the geography department.

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

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.

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