An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Our Lady’s Bower Secondary School
Athlone, County Westmeath
Roll number: 63210P

Date of inspection: 24 February 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Our Lady’s Bower Secondary School, carried out as part of a whole school evaluation. 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 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In Our Lady’s Bower Secondary School Geography is a core subject at junior cycle. In first year the subject is assigned two teaching periods per week. It was noted from teachers’ timetables that four of the five first-year class groups are timetabled for Geography on two consecutive days of the week. So as to facilitate more regular contact between the students and their teachers and with the geographical material being studied it is recommended that classes are more widely distributed across the week. The time allocation for Geography increases to three class periods per week in both second and third year. Given the breadth of the junior-cycle syllabus management should explore ways of increasing timetabled provision for the subject in first year.

Students’ geographical knowledge is extended by undertaking two modules in Geography as part of the optional Transition Year programme. At Leaving Certificate, Geography is an optional subject and the time allocation to the subject is in line with syllabus requirements. The open choice approach to subject selection is commended. In this context and given the availability of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) uptake of Leaving Certificate Geography is fairly good. There are six geography teachers in the school all of whom have qualifications in the subject.

The geography department is provided with an annual budget and has access to a good range of resources. Some of the teachers have base classrooms in the main school campus and these are well equipped with information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. This provision is highly commended and has facilitated teachers to use electronic resources to support teaching and learning in the subject. It was reported that plans are underway to equip the older campus which houses first-year students with similar facilities. This development is strongly encouraged. One base classroom had a rich and stimulating learning environment created through the display of subject materials, charts, photographs, maps and students’ project work. This is commended. It is recommended that greater efforts are made to create motivational and geographical learning environments in other rooms to enhance students’ learning and interest in the subject. In planning for future resources the acquisition of large maps of Ireland, Europe and the world should be prioritised. These should be provided in the main classrooms where Geography is taught,
including those in the first-year campus. This will support teachers in integrating locational Geography which pertains to all areas of the syllabuses.

School management supports teachers’ continuing professional development and has facilitated their attendance at subject in-service. In order to remain up-to-date with subject developments and new resources the geography teachers are encouraged to develop a strategy for attendance at courses.

**Planning and Preparation**

The geography teachers work well together in a collegial manner. A formal subject department meeting takes place at the start of the year and planning is further supported by informal liaison among the teachers. School management should facilitate formal meetings to take place on a more regular basis to advance the planning process and to share good practice in the teaching and learning of Geography. Minutes of meetings should be maintained to provide a record of key decisions and action plans and to assist in evaluating progress. The senior geography teacher has acted as co-ordinator on a voluntary basis for many years. This commitment to the subject is commended. It is now recommended that this role be rotated so as to build leadership and distribute responsibility across the department.

A subject plan has been developed which outlines the organisational details of the department, long-term curricular plans for each year group with associated learning outcomes, and assessment and reporting procedures. The subject plan should be reviewed and updated on an annual basis and should reflect practice in the current academic year. To further enhance the work of the department it is recommended that subject planning should provide a forum for the collaborative sharing of practice, expertise and resources to support the delivery of the syllabuses and the achievement of their learning outcomes. As part of this process it may be beneficial for individual members of the department to develop and lead forward areas in which they have a particular interest and expertise. In this context the curricular plans in place should be extended in scope to detail the methodologies, including the differentiated strategies, and specific resources employed by teachers to achieve identified learning outcomes within term timeframes. To support this work a detailed inventory of all the resources available for Geography should be developed by the geography teaching team and included in the subject department plan. Some of the teachers with greater expertise in using ICT have begun to develop, compile and share electronic resources at senior cycle to support teaching and learning. This initiative is highly commended and further encouraged. It is suggested as part of the team approach to subject department planning that one individual takes responsibility for developing a bank of electronic resources, particularly visual stimuli for use at junior cycle. These resources could then be made available on the school’s intranet system to all the geography teachers.

The first-year programme consists exclusively of physical Geography. These topics are quite challenging and in this context the programme should be reviewed and should include some less technical areas of the syllabus. As map and photograph skills are fundamental to the study of Geography these should be introduced in first-year and subsequently developed in conjunction with the teaching of other topics.

The planned teaching programme in TY includes two modules of work involving census studies and third world development. The census study provides an interesting opportunity for students to study and track changes in the historical geography of Athlone using historical maps, photographs and census data. Both modules contribute to the development of geographical skills including statistical analysis and interpretation, project work and research. These provisions are
commended. As a means of further developing geographical skills it is recommended that a geographical investigation should be included within the planned teaching programme for TY.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was evidence of effective short-term planning for lessons. All lessons had clear aims and the learning objectives were shared with students. This is good practice that ensured a focused working atmosphere from the outset. The delivery of content was well structured to support the achievement of the planned learning outcomes. Lessons generally commenced with a recap of the previous lesson. This is commended as it served to consolidate key learning points and paved the way for the introduction of new material.

Overall good quality teaching and learning was seen during the course of the evaluation with some examples of very good practice. A range of teaching methodologies was observed across the lessons evaluated including teacher exposition, group work, pair work, note-taking and discussion. Best practice was evident where the strategies deployed facilitated the on-going active participation of students throughout the lesson. In this regard it is recommended that all lessons are planned to ensure that there is a good balance between teacher talk and student active interaction with the topic under study.

In some lessons pair and group-work activities were used to establish students’ knowledge and to enable them to apply their learning. These created opportunities for co-operative learning and added variety to the lessons. This good practice is commended and the use of such active learning methodologies should be incorporated into all lessons. Following group-work tasks it is important however that sufficient time is spent on the feedback session to ensure that the learning point is well reinforced and acquired by students.

There were variations in the extent and type of questioning strategies utilised by teachers. In some cases there was a tendency to focus too much on global questioning which allowed more confident students to dominate. The more widespread use of questioning techniques that target and challenge individual students is recommended to ensure the participation of all. In some lessons questioning was used skilfully and intensively to develop lesson content, to probe and deepen students learning and to ensure the active engagement of students. This strategy is recommended in all lessons.

In all lessons teacher instruction was clear and comprehensive. There was some good use of the whiteboard to outline key points, to draw diagrams and explain concepts introduced in the lesson. As appropriate there was good reference to the local environment to explain geographical concepts. In two lessons the recent mudslide on the island of Madeira was very well integrated to develop and support students understanding of mass movement. The linking of topical events and examples drawn from the students’ familiar environment to enhance the study of Geography is highly commended as it creates a meaningful learning context.

It was noted from both students’ copybooks’ and some classroom practice that students taking notes on topics is a significant methodology adopted by teachers. In order that students benefit from optimal class contact time with teachers and to maximise the value of this learning strategy it is recommended that class time spent on notetaking should be brief, focussed on main points and should provide a structured and readily accessible summary of the material under the study. In one lesson there was very good use of a graphic organiser in the form of a spider diagram to present the lesson. This good practice should be extended to all lessons as such a provision will
effectively support and guide students when revising and will appropriately complement the textbook. It is also encouraged that students are taught the key principles of how to construct and develop effective and comprehensive graphic organisers to assist them in undertaking independent study.

A good variety of resources was appropriately integrated in lessons to support teaching and learning. Teachers are commended for the preparation of these resources which included worksheets, maps, and PowerPoint presentations. The use of ICT facilitated the inclusion of a range of visual stimuli which enhanced students’ interest in the lesson. The more widespread use of ICT is recommended as a means of providing for the variety of learning styles pertaining in the mixed-ability classroom.

In many lessons there were good efforts made to provide for the range of abilities of students through differentiation by language, questioning and homework. Overall there was a good emphasis on subject terminology and terms were well explained and reinforced. As a further support to students’ geographical literacy it is recommended that they maintain a glossary of key words.

In all cases classroom management was good. A good relationship was evident between teachers and students and the classroom atmosphere was conducive to learning. Teachers were affirming and supportive towards students. In most cases it was clear that students had acquired a good knowledge and understanding of the topics under study.

**ASSESSMENT**

Standard arrangements are in place for formal assessment of students at Christmas and the end of the school year. Students preparing for state examinations sit mock examination in the spring. Common assessments are in place at the end of the third term for first, second and fifth-year students. This is good practice. Parents are appropriately informed of students’ progress through school reports, annual parent-teacher meetings for each year group and the student journal.

Students’ knowledge and understanding were assessed informally in all lessons observed. In TY students undertake project work as part of their assessment. It is recommended that the use of small-scale project work be extended to other year groups, particularly at junior cycle level. This provision will facilitate a practical and independent approach to learning and the materials produced could then be used to enhance the learning environment in classrooms.

It was evident from students’ copybooks that homework is regularly assigned, monitored and corrected. Overall students’ copybooks were well maintained and the presentation and quality of their written work was of a good standard. A number of students’ assessments were examined and these were appropriately graded and annotated with developmental comments. The application of assessment for learning principles in the correction of students work is highly commended. The further use of this practice is encouraged.

It is clear that the expectations of the teachers for their students are high and student attainment in state examinations is very good. In line with good practice an analysis of the results obtained by students in the state examinations is performed each year. Decisions in relation to the level taken in the Junior Certificate examinations are postponed until after the mock examinations, following which one of the teachers meets with all third-year students on an individual basis. This level of support and guidance is highly commended.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Geography is included as part of the Transition Year (TY) programme.
- There is an open choice of subjects offered to students at senior cycle.
- Base classrooms of teachers are well equipped with information and communication technology (ICT) facilities.
- School management supports teachers’ continuing professional development.
- Subject department planning is supported by the appointment of a co-ordinator and characterised by a good sense of co-operation among the teachers.
- At senior cycle the collaborative development and sharing of electronic resources is commendable.
- Overall good quality teaching and learning was seen during the course of the evaluation with some examples of very good practice.
- A good relationship was evident between teachers and students and the classroom atmosphere was conducive to learning.
- In most cases it was clear that students had acquired a good knowledge and understanding of the topics under study.
- Overall students’ copybooks were well maintained and the presentation and quality of written work was of a good standard.

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

- In planning for future resources the acquisition of large maps of Ireland, Europe and the world should be prioritised.
- Subject planning should provide a forum for the collaborative sharing of practice, expertise and resources and curricular plans should be extended in scope to reflect this process.
- As part of the collaborative planning process a detailed inventory of all the resources available for Geography should be developed and included in the subject department plan.
- The first-year teaching programme should be reviewed and should include some less technical topics and the development of map and photograph skills.
- Methodologies should be planned in a manner that ensures that there is an appropriate balance between teacher talk and student activity.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal in the presence of the reporting inspector at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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