An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

St Colman’s Community College
Midleton, County Cork
Roll number: 71050P

Date of inspection: 1 February 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Colman’s Community College. 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

There are particular challenges in relation to provision for Geography in St Colman’s Community College. Provision of class time in junior cycle is low at two class periods per week in each year of the three-year cycle. This presents challenges for teachers who are expected to deliver the Junior Certificate syllabus within this time allocation. The school offers an optional Transition Year (TY) programme but a geography module does not feature on the TY curriculum. It is recommended that school management explore the possibility of increasing the class-period allocation for Geography to three class periods per week in junior cycle. School management, in consultation with the geography teachers, should also consider the inclusion of a module of geography in the TY programme. Both of these recommendations are made with due cognisance of the limitations of available resources.

The school participates in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan and, as such, provides Geography to some students within the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). The range of subjects for JCSP students has been expanded recently to include Geography following the implementation of a recommendation of a whole-school evaluation completed in the school in 2007. This positive development has ensured that all students in junior cycle now have the opportunity to study Geography.

Class groups are streamed in junior cycle and are of mixed ability in senior cycle. Uptake of Geography in senior cycle fluctuates above and below national uptake figures. Uptake of higher-level geography is generally low in the school while the outcomes for students in certificate examinations in Geography are good. It is clear that geography teachers and school management have high expectations for their students. An increased timetable provision for the subject in junior cycle and the provision of a TY module in Geography could assist in increasing uptake for Leaving Certificate and uptake of higher level at both junior and senior cycle.

Support for students of Geography with additional educational needs is appropriate. A culture of mentoring and support for teachers is also evident, both informally within Geography, but also more formally at whole-school level. These systems are very positive and useful in
relation to sharing subject-specific skills and in supporting the professional development of teachers.

A very good quality and well-equipped geography room is a focus for the visibility of the subject in the school. While this facility acts as a base-room for one of the teachers, both the room and its resources are shared by all members of the geography teaching team. The integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into teaching and learning in Geography is advancing. Engagement with *Scoilnet Maps*, a web-based application provided to schools by the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) to support the teaching of geographical skills, should provide a further entry point to this work.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The geography teaching team, consisting of newly appointed and long-established teachers, works collaboratively and is committed to the sustainable development of the subject in the school. One teacher acts as subject co-ordinator. Collaborative planning is very well advanced and records of meetings give a clear insight into the meaningful engagement with subject development planning and the commitment of the geography teachers over time. The subject plan outlines clear procedures, a common teaching programme for both cycles and material relating to JCSP geography. The geography teachers have identified a focus on good practice in teaching and learning as an immediate collaborative planning priority. Assessment for Learning (AFL) could be used as framework within which to develop this planning priority.

A team approach to planning, that is complemented by valuable and significant informal contacts, and sharing and support between individual teachers, is evident. This collaborative approach has a very positive impact on the students’ experience in the geography classroom.

Individual planning and preparation for lessons was also of a very high standard. This was evidenced in the extensive files of resources that had been prepared to support individual classroom practice. It was noteworthy that resource materials included very topical items based on current events and materials sourced over many years. These had been shared by the teachers and the use of these resources in the classroom was observed to be very effective.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Engaging and participative teaching methodologies ensured that students were actively engaged in their own learning. It was clear from the lessons observed that the students’ experience in the geography classrooms was very good and that teaching and learning was of a very high quality. The range of teaching methodologies included teacher exposition of key points, teacher questioning, classroom discussion, and the use of visual-stimulus materials, process diagrams and the interpretation of photographs. Students were engaged by the variety of these teaching strategies and by the effective pacing of the teaching. Tasks ensured that students worked individually and in groups and that they were appropriately challenged in their learning.

Junior cycle lessons focused on river processes and combined an appropriate focus on literacy, geographical terminology relating to processes, student tasks and visual materials including digital photographs. Very effective process diagrams, produced on acetate sheets and projected using an overhead projector, clearly outlined these geographical processes. Students were engaged in short note-taking exercises, in a quiz and in word-search tasks. These activities, in combination with appropriate direction from the teachers, provided very stimulating learning experiences for the students.
A senior cycle class group was engaged in an introduction to a sub-continental region. The methods used very effectively combined the establishment of the syllabus key idea and its development using a combination of locational geography, relevant terminology and a basic synthesis of the key factors that create a regional identity at that scale. The lesson was successful due to the identification and reinforcement of the key learning points. These were then developed into significant relevant points (SRPs), a term used extensively in advice and guidance materials for Geography provided by the State Examinations Commission. This strategy assisted students in structuring their understanding of the concept of a region and in developing their ability to represent this understanding in written examination questions.

The classroom atmosphere in each lesson was very positive and the level of planning and preparation ensured that classroom management was very effective. Students were courteous, assertive and respectful of their peers and teachers as they participated in lessons.

ASSESSMENT

Good quality assessment procedures and practices were integrated into all lessons observed. Homework was included in all lessons, either as a means of assessing previous learning or as a platform to develop new learning. Questioning was central to the normal and on-going assessment of learning in the classroom. The quality of work in students’ notebooks and copybooks was of a high standard. The good quality, neatness and labelling of diagrams was of particular note in lessons.

Formal assessment procedures in Geography are in line with normal practice in post-primary schools as they include a combination of class tests, end-of-term and end-of-year examinations, mock examinations and certificate examinations, as appropriate. The outcomes of these assessments are reported to parents through the student journal, school reports and at parent-teacher meetings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Very good quality teaching and learning was observed in lessons.
- Geography teachers and school management have high expectations for their students.
- Collaborative subject planning and individual planning are of a high standard.
- The teamwork and support among geography teachers has a very positive impact on the students’ experience of Geography.

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

- School management should explore the possibility of increasing the class-period allocation for Geography in junior cycle.
- A geography module should be included in the TY programme.

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

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