An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Sexton Street, Limerick
Roll number: 64550J

Date of inspection: 21 September 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Presentation Secondary School, conducted 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 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision for Geography in the school is good and this is supported by an enthusiastic and committed team of geography teachers. Geography is offered as a core subject in junior cycle and as an optional subject in senior cycle. Timetable provision for Geography is in line with guidelines and practice nationally. The school participates in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative and, as such, has developed specific targets to support students within the school. Attainment, attendance, literacy and numeracy have been identified as priorities for the development of Geography in the school.

On completion of junior cycle, students are offered a choice of subjects and programmes. Uptake of Geography in senior cycle is low because of the strong uptake by students of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. A small cohort of students chooses the established Leaving Certificate, some of whom may opt to study Geography. For two years it had not been possible to offer Geography at senior cycle due to the small number of students who choose the subject. This created a challenge that is being addressed by the teaching team. It is very positive that a fifth-year and a sixth-year group are currently studying Geography. The efforts of school management and the geography teachers in this regard have been very successful. The sustainability of senior-cycle geography has been identified as key priority by the teaching team.

Two mixed-ability geography class groups have been created in each year of the Junior Certificate programme. Students taking the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) are offered a specific programme of subjects that does not include Geography as an examination subject. However, in the current year, second-year JCSP students are offered a one-hour lesson per week in Geography with the aim of broadening their educational experience and of developing specific skills and competencies. School management should now review this provision with a particular focus on the evaluation of the educational experience of these students. A co-ordinated approach to this review is recommended, combining the input of the geography teachers and the expertise of the education support teachers. The views of the special needs assistants who support some students in these class groups should also be sought.
The well-equipped geography room is a particular support for the provision and development of the subject. The room provides a visually-stimulating learning environment for geography students. The very recent provision of a high-quality, wall-mounted data projector and an interactive whiteboard has significantly enhanced the quality of the room as a teaching area for Geography. Teachers should change the current seating arrangement for students to maximise the visual impact of the digital displays provided by this technology.

Meeting the challenge of integrating information and communication technology (ICT) into lessons will significantly support the experience of students in Geography. This particular challenge is being addressed by members of the teaching team through up-skilling and the sharing of good practice. 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 useful entry point in addressing this challenge.

**Planning and Preparation**

Good quality individual preparation and planning was in evidence for most lessons observed during the evaluation. Teachers prepared lessons in line with the agreed programme contained in the subject plan. This preparation included planning for intended learning outcomes and linkage to the appropriate syllabus. Very good planning for the integration of visual-stimulus materials and, in one case, the preparation of very good quality quiz sheets and word puzzles relating to geographical terms was also in evidence. This represents very good practice as it aligns with the whole-school focus on literacy within DEIS. Other good practices included planning for the integration of ICT by individual teachers and the inclusion of geographical field work in junior cycle. Pending the outcome of the recommended review of the provision of Geography in the JCSP, a particular focus should be placed on planning for these lessons to ensure that JCSP students experience a valuable and significant geographical experience including a practical focus on geographical skills and on literacy and numeracy.

An identifiable geography department exists and a subject co-ordinator is in place. Subject-department meetings are held as appropriate and records of matters discussed and decisions taken are kept. Collaborative planning for Geography is at a developmental stage. A basic written plan is in place that represents the outcome of collaboration directed at the sustainable development of the subject in the school. This plan includes a common teaching programme and arrangements for common assessments. Planning for field work is also included in the plan. However, significant further collaboration, within the department, will be required to enable the team to meet the challenges that face the subject in the school.

To build on the work already completed, the geography teachers should now identify and focus on a number of planning priorities. These planning priorities for Geography should be considered in conjunction with DEIS planning targets and, as such, should have clear intended outcomes. Uptake of Geography and attainment in Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate should be foremost among these priorities. Integration of ICT, differentiation in mixed-ability lessons and communication between the geography teachers and the education support teachers to maximise support for students should also become planning priorities. Once they have been agreed, priorities should be translated into time-bound achievable targets and these should be recorded in the subject plan. The achievement of these targets and their impact on students’ learning should be reviewed as appropriate.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

Very good quality teaching and learning was observed in almost all lessons during the evaluation. Where very good practice was in evidence, the students were actively engaged and participated in the planned teaching and learning activities. These lessons included appropriate tasks and students were required to respond to a range of visual-stimulus materials and to use and apply geographical skills. The learning intention was clear in these lessons and the learning was monitored through effective and sensitive questioning strategies, the review of previous learning and the monitoring of homework. In some lessons, students were more passive and were not actively engaged by the planned methodology. Attention to the quality and targeting of questioning is recommended to engage these students. The identification of clear and achievable learning goals that are shared with students and that are appropriate to their needs and abilities should also be considered.

To meet the challenge of teaching mixed-ability class groups and to address the needs of JCSP students in geography lessons, it is also recommended that geography teachers reflect upon, discuss and share differentiated teaching and learning strategies that have been found to be effective in engaging students. This process should contribute to and support the review of JCSP geography. It would also support the achievement of increasing uptake and improving attainment in Geography.

The use of visual materials was evident in all lessons. Photographs, maps and diagrams were used to engage students and to develop the learning point. ICT was integrated very effectively into a number of lessons. A very detailed and visually stimulating presentation on plate tectonics significantly enhanced the learning in a senior-cycle lesson, while the very effective combination of a worksheet and a video clip relating to the impact of an earthquake was observed to be very powerful in engaging students in a junior-cycle lesson. In other lessons, photographs, diagrams and maps, found in the students’ textbooks, and key points placed on the whiteboard were used to good effect to illustrate and develop learning and understanding.

All the lessons observed were very well managed and were characterised by care and concern for individual students. Students responded very positively to their teachers and were observed to be courteous, confident and assertive in their interactions. The classroom atmosphere was positive and caring in all lessons.

ASSESSMENT

In all lessons, there was a clear concern for students’ learning. Previous learning was reviewed and student’s responses to homework tasks, in many cases, formed the basis to develop new learning points. Learning was monitored through questioning and through the review of tasks completed within some lessons. Achievable tasks were very well integrated into these lessons and they provided a very useful opportunity for the teacher to assess learning and to support some students in the mixed-ability classroom settings. This practice should be integrated into all lessons.

The quality of work in students’ copies was good and was appropriate to the syllabus and level. Copies contained diagrams, written work and some class tests. In some lessons, workbooks were also used to assess learning. Copies and workbooks are monitored by teachers and in some cases formative comments are used to direct students towards improvement. This practice is very
positive as it allows students to view and understand their progress in learning. It also provides affirmation and encourages further progress and effort. This good practice should be extended to all lessons.

Formal assessment procedures are organised at appropriate times throughout the school year. It is very positive that students aim towards higher-level geography at least until the pre-examination in advance of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. This represents very good practice as it challenges students to achieve to the best of their ability. It also illustrates the high expectations of teachers for their students.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

• A very good quality of teaching and learning was observed in almost all lessons.
• Provision for Geography is good and the subject is supported by an enthusiastic and committed team of geography teachers.
• Good quality individual preparation and planning resulted in engaging and participative classroom activities.
• Uptake of senior-cycle geography has increased.

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

• The geography department should set clear, achievable and time-bound planning priorities with a particular focus on uptake and attainment.
• Engagement with Scoilnet Maps should be used as an entry point to the integration of ICT into geography lessons.
• Good practices in planning and preparation, teaching and learning, and assessment should be reflected upon, discussed and shared among all members of the geography department.
• School management should review the provision of Geography within the JCSP with a particular focus on the evaluation of the educational experience of these students.

Published October 2011