

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT**

Saint Mary's Secondary School

Ballina, Co. Mayo

Roll number: 64520M

Date of inspection: 15 October 2014



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY**

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

Date of inspection	15 October 2014
Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of relevant documents• Discussion with principal and teachers• Interaction with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of teaching and learning during six class periods• Examination of students' work• Feedback to principal and teachers

MAIN FINDINGS

- In almost all lessons the quality of teaching and learning was good or very good. There was significant scope for improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in a very small minority of lessons.
- A range of high quality visual resources and referencing of actual examples complemented instruction and enhanced student learning.
- In the majority of lessons there was a good level of student engagement, however greater consideration of how to challenge and engage students across the ability continuum is required.
- Management is very supportive of Geography in terms of timetabling, teacher deployment and the provision of resources.
- Subject planning is collaborative, however curricular plans need to be further developed beyond their content focus.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- The increased use of differentiated approaches and methodologies that actively engage and challenge students across the range of abilities is recommended.
 - A geographical investigation should be included in the Transition Year (TY) geography programme.
 - As an effective guide to teaching and learning curricular plans should detail the learning outcomes, resources, methodologies and assessment strategies in relation to each topic.
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INTRODUCTION

St. Mary's Secondary school is a girls' voluntary secondary school with an enrolment of 567 students. The school is one of three providers of post-primary education in the town of Ballina. Geography is included in the school's optional TY programme.

- In almost all lessons the quality of teaching and learning was good or very good. There was significant scope for improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in a very small minority of lessons.
- Best practices were observed where lessons had clear learning outcomes, where instruction was combined with a good level of questioning and where students were well engaged and challenged by the methodologies employed.
- There was some very good use of active learning methodologies including individual exercises and collaborative learning tasks. Pair and group work were generally well managed with clear tasks assigned. Very good practice was noted where the plenary session facilitated structured feedback from students.
- In a minority of cases there was an over emphasis on instructional teaching. The students were passive in their learning and were not engaged or challenged by differentiated questions to test their knowledge and understanding. It is strongly recommended that all lessons incorporate a range of strategies to adequately support and engage all students in the learning process.
- The atmosphere in lessons was positive and affirming of students. Some classrooms had colourful and stimulating geographical learning environments which included the display of students' work. The geography room was exemplary in this regard.
- There was some very good use of information and communication technology (ICT) to illustrate concepts and to stimulate and engage students' interest. The potential of ICT as a dynamic learning aid should be further explored in some lessons. The resources available on Scoilnet Maps should be utilised as much as possible to support the teaching of ordnance survey (OS) map and aerial photograph skills.
- There was some good use of differentiation through questioning, individual support for students and in the use of visual resources. However, in some cases there need to be greater differentiation in the tasks assigned so that students are appropriately challenged particularly at the upper end of the ability continuum. This approach would support greater independent learning, critical analysis and the development of a range of skills.
- There was good support for literacy as evident in the explanation and use of key words both by teachers and students.
- In some cases there was very good teaching for understanding. This was facilitated where the material under study was linked to local, regional and national examples and the students' familiar experience.
- Students demonstrated good levels of learning as evidenced by their answers to questions, their contributions to the lesson and their ability to complete tasks.
- The use of short, visual key point summaries including the use of graphic organisers is recommended where note-taking is used as a methodology in lessons.
- Homework is regularly assigned and monitored. In some cases students' written work is provided with a good level of feedback. This practice should be extended to all lessons.

Students should follow up on the feedback provided as a means of improving the quality of their written work and developing their self-assessment skills.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Geography is a core subject at junior cycle and is an optional subject at senior cycle where there is good uptake of the subject. Timetabling in both cycle is in line with syllabus recommendations. Students benefit from the generous allocation of four class periods per week in third year.
- Geography is very well supported by school management with the provision of teacher-based classrooms and a wide range of subject resources.
- The six teachers of Geography are deployed in line with their qualifications. A number of teachers teach at both junior cycle and senior cycle thus ensuring a good level of subject capacity and experience among the teaching team
- In TY a module in Geography is provided on a rotating basis over a seven week period. The revision of map and photograph skills is a central focus of the programme. The inclusion of a local fieldwork study is recommended so that students can develop their geographical skills in an experiential and investigative manner. This provision would also help to bridge the study between Geography at junior cycle and senior cycle.
- School management is very supportive of teachers' professional development. The geography teachers are affiliated to the local branch of their professional subject association.
- There is regular formal assessment of students' progress, including common end-of-term assessments. Standard procedures for reporting to parents are in place.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Formal planning meetings are held each term and the minutes of meetings are recorded. The geography department is co-ordinated on a rotating basis in line with best practice.
 - Common curricular plans are in place for each year group, however these are primarily content driven and should focus more on strategies to guide teaching and learning. These plans should identify the key learning outcomes in terms of students' knowledge and skills in relation to the various units of the syllabus and link topics to resources, methodologies and assessment strategies. In the further development of curricular plans it is recommended that map and aerial photograph skills are introduced into the first-year teaching programme.
 - A good level of reflection underpins the work of the department. Results in certificate examinations are analysed and discussions in relation to these are documented which is very good practice. It is evident that high expectations are set for learning and students achieve well in certificate examinations. In addition to the operational aspects of the department time should be facilitated at planning meetings for the discussion of teaching and learning as a means of further developing and sharing good practice.
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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.