

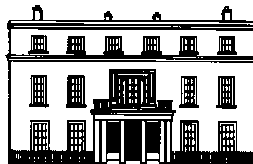
An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT**

**Mount Seskin Community College
Tallaght, Dublin 24
Roll number: 70141N**

Date of inspection: 23 September 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Mount Seskin Community College, 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

There is very good support from school management for the delivery of the planned teaching programme in Geography. A dedicated geography room and teacher-based classrooms have been provided. A wide range of resources is available and the provision of information and communication technology (ICT) supports the work of teachers. Resources are stored in the geography room and are available to all members of the subject department. The geography teaching team is planning to make these resources available to teachers and students via the school's intranet. This is a very worthwhile development. A section in the school library with geography resources is a welcome development. Teachers have registered with the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) in relation to the use of *Scoilnet Maps*.

Geography is a core subject in the school's junior-cycle curriculum. Learning statements for Geography have been prepared for students taking the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and teachers are encouraged to involve students in the completion of these learning targets as a priority. In the senior cycle, Geography is offered to students on the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) as one of their option subjects. The uptake of Geography has been increasing and is in a healthy state. This reflects the positive experiences by students in the junior cycle. The school has moved from streamed classes to a mixed-ability class organisation with the current first-year class groups, along with a small stand alone resource class, and this is very appropriate for Geography. Time allocation for the subject is in line with syllabus guidelines and lessons for all class groups are appropriately spread throughout the week.

The planned teaching programme for Geography is delivered by a team of four very competent and experienced subject specialists. Teachers have availed of continuing professional development (CPD) both in relation to Geography and whole-school issues.

Teachers are aware of students with additional educational needs in their classes and use a variety of strategies to effectively support these students. These strategies include team teaching,

sensitive presentation of lesson content, provision of well-designed and appropriate worksheets and, in some instances, one to one tuition. Special needs assistants, when present in the classrooms visited, provided appropriate supports to students. The model of team teaching used is one of lead and support, with one teacher managing the lesson content and the other teacher providing support. The sharing of resources by both teachers is good as is the practice of having both teachers as subject specialists.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Teachers had thoroughly prepared for all of the lessons observed and had available a range of resources to support students' learning. Individual lesson plans were provided by teachers. These plans outlined aims, objectives, lesson content, resources and, in some instances, a timeframe for the delivery of elements of the lesson. All lessons had clear learning objectives and were part of a larger unit of study. A notable feature of most lessons was the use of ICT which made an important contribution to stimulating students' interest. The provision of well-designed worksheets facilitated students' engagement with the subject matter of the lesson. The use of Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, satellite images and photographs was important in developing key geographical skills. Teachers had readily available rulers and colouring pencils to support students' written work during the lessons observed.

Planning documentation provided indicated that teachers are aware of students with additional educational needs in their classes and they take students' needs into account in planning the topics chosen for study, in arranging the sequencing of lessons and in including time for revision and examination preparation in their plans. Teachers' planning also makes reference to assessment and to a planned review at the end of the school year. It will prove beneficial if the planned review of the teaching programme is undertaken by the collaborative efforts of all members of the geography teaching team. This approach to planning is very good practice and reflects teachers' commitment to providing appropriate learning experiences for their students.

A culture of collaborative planning was evident and teachers have been engaged in developing a long-term and medium-term plan for Geography. Minutes of department meetings were provided and these indicated that teachers have been working collaboratively. A subject co-ordinator is in place and this role is rotated amongst the members of the geography department. Formal planning time is provided by school management once per term and ongoing informal meetings take place amongst the geography teachers. It is suggested that during formal subject department meetings some time be set aside for teachers to share ideas in relation to teaching and learning strategies.

A subject department plan is in place. This plan sets out the organisational arrangements for the subject and includes aims for the geography department and an ICT policy for the subject. The identification of four development aims is a notable feature of the plan. It is planned to have data projectors in all geography teachers' rooms; to implement a policy of assessment for learning (AfL) with first-year students; to keep a high profile for the subject amongst third-year students and for teachers to follow the agreed schemes of work. Consideration should be given to extending the planned implementation of an AfL policy to beyond first year to include all year groups.

Long-term schemes of work set out topics to be taught in each year group while medium-term plans set out topics to be covered on a weekly basis. The focus of these plans is on subject content. In reviewing these plans it is recommended that teachers focus on learning outcomes,

linked to syllabus content, timeframes, resources, teaching methods and assessment. This approach to subject department planning will put the student at the centre of the planning process.

The planned teaching programme for first-year students commendably includes the development of key geographical skills in relation to OS maps, satellite images and photographs. However, there is a considerable focus on topics from physical geography. This poses significant challenges, particularly for students taking the JCSP, in terms of understanding complex geomorphic processes and of using technical vocabulary. It is recommended that the planned teaching programme for first-year students should be reviewed and amended so as to provide greater variety in the topics studied and to ensure an appropriate level of challenge is provided for students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Very high quality teaching was evident in all of the lessons observed. An innovative and creative approach to presenting topics helped to ensure student engagement with the topics being studied. For example, a discussion around breakfast and the provision of an egg shell lead to a discussion on plate tectonics, much to the amusement of students. The provision of a jigsaw helped students to identify the major plates in the earth's crust as they worked in pairs to assemble the pieces. In another lesson the urban problems of Calcutta were identified by students as they worked in groups to describe images in high-quality photographs. The presentation of their findings in a whole-class setting provided students with an opportunity to develop their presentation and oral skills. In all of the classrooms visited there was a very good balance between teacher exposition, teacher-student interaction and student activity. Teachers were very clear in their presentations and their enthusiasm for the subject was evident. The greater use of local and regional examples of geographic phenomena is recommended.

Lessons were managed in a positive, affirming and sensitive manner in all classrooms visited thereby ensuring students engaged in the planned learning activities. Teachers have established clear classroom routines for the start and end of lessons. These routines help to establish an appropriately secure environment where learning and teaching can take place. The provision of teacher-based classrooms also supports good classroom management. Clear instructions were provided for student activities and a mutually respectful attitude was evident in the lessons observed. Teachers frequently affirmed students for their contributions to discussions or when set tasks were completed. Teaching strategies used facilitated the inclusion of all students in the planned learning activities.

Teachers catered for the visual learners in their classes by using ICT, OS maps, and photographs. Board work by teachers was very clear and where PowerPoint presentations were used new terms were highlighted. Very good practice was evident as teachers paid particular attention to the development of students' literacy skills. New terms were introduced, clearly explained and their use by students was encouraged. In all of the lessons observed students were encouraged to develop higher-order thinking skills as teachers asked them to offer explanations or to describe geographic phenomena. In one lesson OS map skills were clearly demonstrated by the teacher prior to students being assigned a series of set tasks which they completed as the teacher moved around the room offering affirmation and support as appropriate.

Teachers were clearly aware of individual student's needs and provided for differentiated learning through group work, appropriately designed worksheets and in some instances by providing one to one tuition.

Students are making good progress in their courses, are developing a range of key social and geographical skills and the quality of their written work is of a high standard. During all of the lessons observed students readily engaged in the planned learning activities and completed the assigned tasks satisfactorily.

Classrooms displayed maps, charts, photographs and students' projects thereby creating a stimulating learning environment. The use of small-scale project work is very appropriate for Geography as it encourages independent learning and where groups are involved it develops students' social skills. Good practice was evident where class rules and a record of students' progress in completing homework were recorded and displayed in classrooms.

ASSESSMENT

Students' progress is regularly assessed and the members of the geography department have begun to implement AfL strategies, in keeping with the developmental aim of the subject department plan. An examination of students' answers to past certificate examination questions indicated that they are receiving constructive feedback from their teachers. This is an important step in helping students to prepare for these examinations. Students' journals indicated that homework is regularly set and lessons generally began with homework being monitored and corrected. There was ongoing assessment during the lessons observed and class tests are held on the completion of sections of the planned teaching programme. Arrangements are in place for the formal assessment of students' progress. The good practice of setting common tests for first-year students is in place and there are plans to extend this to other year groups. Students' progress is reported on to parents by issuing reports after formal assessments and at parent-teacher meetings held annually for all year groups. Teachers should include students' end of topic tests, written work, project work and class participation in their summative assessments. Teachers maintain records of attendance, homework and class tests.

Student achievement in certificate examinations is analysed by the members of the geography teaching team and is used to identify the learning needs of students and when helping students to decide on an appropriate level at which to take further certificate examinations. The use of this data to establish baseline data on which to monitor and review the planned teaching programme for Geography is very good practice.

At present, students use a variety of methods to maintain a record of their written work. This includes, in some instances, the good practice of having separate copybooks for homework and class work. Some students have folders in which they store their copybooks and supplementary materials provided by their teachers. A method by which students maintain a record of their written work should be agreed by all members of the geography teaching team and used across all class groups. The quality of students' written work was good with neatly kept copybooks and clearly presented maps and diagrams. This reflects the supporting advice and the high expectations of teachers.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good support from school management for the delivery of the planned teaching programme for Geography.
- Teachers are aware of students with additional educational needs in their classes and use a variety of strategies to effectively support these students.
- A culture of collaborative planning was evident and teachers have been engaged in developing a long-term and medium-term plan for Geography.
- Teachers had prepared thoroughly for all of the lessons observed and had available a range of resources to support students' learning.
- Lessons were managed in a positive, affirming and sensitive manner in all classrooms visited thereby ensuring students engaged in the planned learning activities.
- Very high-quality teaching was evident in all of the lessons observed.
- Students are making good progress in their courses, are developing a range of key social and geographical skills and the quality of their written work is of a high standard.
- Students' progress is regularly assessed and the members of the geography department have begun to implement Assessment for Learning strategies.

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

- In reviewing the planned teaching programme for Geography a focus should be placed on identifying appropriate learning outcomes and linking these to syllabus topics, timeframes, resources, teaching methodologies and assessment.
- The planned teaching programme for first-year students should be reviewed and amended so as to provide greater variety in the topics studied and to ensure an appropriate level of challenge is provided for students.
- The greater use of local and regional examples of geographic phenomena is recommended.
- A method by which students maintain a record of their written work should be agreed by all members of the geography teaching team.
- Teachers should include students' end of topic tests, written work, project work and class participation in their summative assessments.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Geography and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.