An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Gairmscoil Mhuire,
Athenry, County Galway
Roll number: 71270G

Date of inspection: 16 September 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Gairmscoil Mhuire. 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 and examined students’ work. 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. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Gairmscoil Mhuire is a co-educational school under the auspices of County Galway Vocational Education Committee. Geography is in a strong position in the school and is well supported by school management. Geography forms part of the core curriculum at junior cycle and time allocations to the subject are appropriate. The majority of classes are well distributed across the week which ensures that students have a well balanced exposure to the subject. In this context the timetabling of lessons on three successive days at the start or the end of the week should be avoided. All class groups are banded at junior cycle and students are facilitated to move between bands. This system of class organisation is under review and consideration is being given to the introduction of mixed-ability class groups. This development is encouraged. Geography is also included in the school’s optional Transition Year programme. At senior cycle Geography is an optional subject offered within an open choice structure. There is a high uptake of the subject at this level. Class period provision is in line with syllabus recommendations. However, double class periods should be timetabled for all senior-cycle class groups where possible to facilitate practical work. There are very good supports in place to advise students in regard to subject choices.

The facilities available are appropriate to the teaching and learning of Geography. Four of the geography teachers are provided with base classrooms each of which is equipped with a computer and data projector. The planned further development of the school’s ICT infrastructure through the provision of laptops to all teachers in the current academic year reflects management’s support for the use of electronic resources to enhance teaching and learning. There is a good range of subject resources available within the school and that any requests to date for additional resources have been provided by management. It is recommended that the geography department develops a detailed inventory of these resources and this should be included in the subject plan to assist teachers in selecting suitable materials for course topics. The provision of large maps of Ireland, Europe and the world in all classrooms where Geography is taught should be a central priority in planning for the further acquisition of resources. These maps are essential to facilitate the integration of locational geography which is relevant to all areas of the syllabuses.
Five teachers deliver the geography programme in the school all of whom are subject specialists. It is good practice that staff deployment provides the opportunity for teachers to rotate across both cycles. The continuing professional development of teachers is facilitated and the geography teaching team have availed of recent subject in-service. The teachers are encouraged to attend the support sessions on Scoilnet maps to be provided by the NCTE in local Education Centres. These sessions will support teachers in developing their competencies in the use of this digital resource which provides online access to map and aerial photograph applications and other valuable geography teaching resources.

**Planning and preparation**

Subject department planning is at an early stage of development in the school. School management has put in place a number of structures to support and enhance the planning process. Formal planning meeting for the geography teaching team are facilitated each term. It is good practice that minutes of these meetings are recorded. One of the geography teachers acts as department co-ordinator. Whilst this role is vital in leading the work of the department it is essential that all members of the teaching team contribute to the further development of planning for Geography.

A subject plan was made available during the course of the evaluation. The plan needs to be updated and further developed so that it indicates clearly and in adequate detail the planned programmes in place for each year group, the organisational details of the department, teaching strategies to support students with additional educational needs and procedures for assessment of students’ learning. It is strongly encouraged that the plan is recorded in electronic format so that amendments to the plan can be easily made following each annual review.

There were some elements of teamwork evident within the department. However, it is recommended that the geography teachers engage in a more collaborative and cohesive approach to subject planning. Common programmes of work and common assessment should be put in place for each year group. This will ensure standardisation of provision across the department and will more readily facilitate any changes that may occur in the teachers assigned to class groups. In developing a common first-year programme of work map and photograph skills should be introduced at an early stage as these key skills can then be strategically integrated and developed in association with the planned programme. The study of meteorology and climatology should also be deferred to a later stage in the junior cycle and replaced by less technical areas of the syllabus.

It is very positive that teachers are encouraged to make a presentation on a topic of their choice at planning meetings. It is recommended that the geography teachers should also use this forum to discuss and share a number of teaching and learning methodologies to ensure that the planning process has a meaningful impact on classroom methodology and learning. This collaboration should also provide for the development of common programmes of work for each year group which link topics to the learning outcomes to be achieved and to appropriate resources and active learning methodologies including differentiation strategies to achieve these outcomes. The geography teachers have begun to develop a shared network of resources on the school’s server. This initiative is commended as it will enable a rich bank of resources to be built up and will be a support to teachers in planning for the integration of ICT and web-based materials into teaching and learning. To support this development each teacher is encouraged to contribute resource materials in line with their interest and expertise.
The Transition Year (TY) programme includes a full-year module of Geography and is assigned two class periods per week. The TY geography plan consists of a list of topics for study. This plan needs to be developed into a more comprehensive document to reflect the aims and objectives of the module, teaching and learning strategies, resources, and assessment and evaluation procedures. The document ‘Writing the Transition Year Programme’ will provide support and guidelines in developing this plan. The planned TY geography programme should be reviewed as some areas of study, for example, two contrasting Irish regions and a study of rocks are similar in content to Leaving Certificate course material. Other topics, for example, environmental geography, need to be expanded to build on the knowledge and skills acquired at junior cycle. It is good practice during TY that students are provided with the opportunity to undertake a geographical investigation and write a report on it. It is encouraged that students use a template similar to that for the geographical investigation in the Leaving Certificate when writing this report.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Overall, a good standard of teaching and learning was observed in lessons. Effective short-term planning resulted in well structured lessons with content delivered in a sequential and developmental manner. Learning objectives were clear and were communicated to students. Particularly good practice was evident where the planned learning outcomes were written on the board. The wider use of this practice is encouraged in all lessons as it provides students with a clear framework for learning and for measuring their progress.

A variety of methodologies was observed during the inspection including teacher-led instruction, questioning, note-taking and some individual learning tasks. Teaching and learning were most effective where there was a good balance between teacher input and student activity. In these lessons students were kept on task through effective and inclusive questioning strategies and instruction was combined with individual learning tasks. In all lessons presentation of key points by the teacher was interspersed by questioning. However, in some lessons general questions put to the whole class dominated which resulted in limited opportunities for many students to contribute to the lesson. Whilst teachers’ explanations were thorough it is recommended that a greater range of methodologies be employed to actively engage students in their learning. In this regard individual learning tasks, pair or group work activities should be incorporated into the lesson and greater use should be made of directed questioning which require responses from named individuals. These strategies will further ensure the participation of all students and will allow for a more accurate assessment of individual learning and progress.

There was effective use of ICT in some lessons to provide images of geographical landforms and to facilitate whole-class teaching of aerial photograph skills. This visual approach is commended as it impacted positively on students’ learning and engagement and added variety to lesson delivery. A number of teachers have registered with the National Centre for Technology in Education for the use of Scoilnet Maps. The greater use of Scoilnet Map resources and other digital resources is recommended to meet more effectively the objectives of the syllabuses.

In some cases lesson content was written on the board or presented on Powerpoint and the students recorded this in their copybooks. It is recommended that these notes be short and restricted to bullet points. The use of mind maps or flow charts is strongly encouraged for this purpose. Such graphic organisers effectively scaffold students’ learning, they can be quickly constructed and they can serve as an invaluable revision aid. Students could then be challenged to write up on the topic based on the graphic organiser and in this manner be supported to become ‘note-makers’.
There was a suitable focus on examination preparation for those sitting State examinations in June. Homework was assigned from past examination papers and students were given appropriate instruction and advice to assist them in completing these questions. In one lesson the marking criteria for the question was explained to students and their use was also evident in the correction of students’ written work. This is good practice and these marking schemes should be used as early as is practicable in the junior and senior cycle.

Teachers are made aware of students with additional educational needs in their classrooms. There was some evidence of differentiation achieved through the use of lower-order and higher-order questions and geographical terminology was well explained and reinforced. As a means of supporting the full range of abilities within the mainstream setting the geography teachers should collaboratively plan for the further implementation of differentiated methodologies. To enhance geographical literacy key terms encountered in the lesson should be displayed on the board and the students should maintain a glossary of these in their copybooks. The learning support department could advise on appropriate teaching strategies and provide resource materials to assist teachers in differentiating the curriculum. Teachers are also encouraged to consult the website of the Special Education Support Service.

Classroom management was very good in all the classrooms visited. Teachers have established clear routines which provided for an ordered learning environment. Many lessons opened with the correction of homework followed by a recap and consolidation of previous learning before introducing new material and concepts. A positive relationship characterised by mutual respect was observed between teachers and students. The students were extremely well behaved and co-operated willingly throughout lessons.

The level of learning was difficult to assess in some lessons due to the limited input of students. However, in other lessons it was clear from students’ answers to questions that good quality learning was taking place. Good practices have been developed among students to record their work. Copybooks were well organised and maintained and diagrams were drawn to a high standard.

**ASSESSMENT**

Assessment of students’ learning is ongoing in lessons through questioning, class exercises, the correction of homework and class tests. Teachers should also consider using small-scale project work as an additional mode of assessment. This work could be displayed in classrooms and could be used to enhance the learning environment. It is evident that homework is regularly assigned and monitored. In some cases the correction of work consisted of a tick mark and in other cases written work was provided with constructive feedback to guide students in the further development of answers. This latter practice is commended and such assessment for learning (AfL) strategies should be further implemented across the department. As part of the collaborative planning process the geography teachers should develop a policy on the type of feedback given to students following the correction of copies and substantial assignments. More information on AfL can be found at [http://www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) to support teachers with the extended implementation of this practice.

An analysis of results is conducted in the school. A good proportion of students in both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate take higher level in State examinations. The geography teachers should now develop strategies and set targets to further raise student achievement in both cycles. Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas and summer in addition to ‘mock’
examinations in the spring. The outcomes of these assessments are communicated to parents by written reports and at parent-teacher meetings. Parents can also access information on their children’s attendance and progress through the school’s e-portal system. This level of communication with parents is commended.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Geography is in a strong position in the school. It is a core subject at junior cycle and there is a high uptake of the subject in senior cycle.
- Geography is well supported by school management through the provision of base classrooms, information and communication technology (ICT) and other resources.
- School management has put in place structures to support and enhance subject-department planning.
- There was effective short-term planning for lessons.
- Overall, a good standard of teaching and learning was observed.
- Classroom management and established routines created an environment conducive to learning.
- Good quality learning was observed in classroom interactions.

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

- Planning should be more collaborative in approach. The subject plan should be further developed and common programmes of work and common assessment should be put in place for each year group.
- The first-year and TY geography programmes should be reviewed.
- Planning for lessons should provide a focus on methodologies and differentiation strategies to ensure the active participation of all students.
- Assessment for learning (AfL) practices should be further developed and implemented by teachers.

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

*Published, April 2011*
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management is very pleased with the report and the strengths identified. The Board wishes to acknowledge the excellent work of the subject department in achieving exceptional results in the leaving Cert this year and aim to maintain this target as outlined in the report.

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

The Geography department will continue to review and develop its practice with a view to maintaining a high standard of teaching and learning.