Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Coláiste Mhuiire
Mullingar, County Westmeath
Roll number: 63270K

Date of inspection: 25 March 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Mhuire, Mullingar. 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 examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In Coláiste Mhuire, Geography has a prominent profile. It is a compulsory subject at junior cycle and becomes an optional subject offered within an open choice structure for the established Leaving Certificate. The high uptake of geography at senior cycle reflects its popularity and is also indicative of the commitment of the teachers to the subject. Geography is also present on the school’s Transition Year (TY) programme under the title Histography. This provision includes elements of History and Geography and is allocated three teaching periods per week. In the future it is recommended that a stand-alone module in Geography be developed to build on the geographical skills acquired by students at junior cycle.

There is very good whole-school support for the organisation, teaching and learning of Geography. General resource provision for the subject is very good. Whilst there is no specific budget allocation to the geography department school management provides resources as the needs arise. The geography teachers have base classrooms and these had audio-visual equipment and good storage facilities. These rooms were also very well decorated with geographical posters, photographs, maps and students’ project work. The teachers are commended for the creation of stimulating and geographical learning environments. The school has an extensive information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and base classrooms were equipped with a PC and data projector if the teachers requested such facilities. These provisions are highly commended as they have enabled the teachers to integrate electronic resources into the teaching and learning of Geography.

The time allocations to the subject at both junior cycle and senior cycle are in line with the relevant syllabus guidelines. In the majority of cases the class periods assigned to the subject for the various year groups are well distributed across the school week. This is good practice as it facilitates regular contact between the students and their teachers and the geographical materials being studied. This provision should be extended where possible to all class groups so as to avoid the timetabling of geography lessons on three consecutive days.

The teaching of Geography is supported by co-curricular activities organised by teachers including field outings to the Burren and areas of geographical interest in the local environment. The teachers are commended for the organisation of these learning activities as they expand and enrich students’ experience of the subject.
School management encourages and supports teachers professional development and all of the teachers have attended recent in-service for the revised Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus. Deployment of teachers to the subject is appropriate and in line with their qualifications. A broad skills base has been developed across that department and four of the teachers have been facilitated to teach in both cycles. This is good practice.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

School management has facilitated the planning process through the scheduling of three formal meeting times for the subject department in the school year. It was reported that minutes of these meetings are recorded. Co-ordination of the geography department is rotated on an annual basis. This is good practice as it shares collective responsibility for the operation of the department and helps to develop leadership skills.

A copy of the subject plan was made available during the evaluation. The plan identifies aims and objectives for the subject and information relevant to the operation of the department such as timetabling arrangements, class organisation and assessment procedures. A catalogue of resources available to the subject is also compiled as part of the plan. Long-term outline curricular plans are in place for each year group. These essentially provide a list of agreed textbook chapter titles to be covered each term. In the future the planning process should focus on teachers sharing and discussing classroom practices, methodologies and resources appropriate to the various areas of the syllabuses. In line with this extended collaborative approach to planning more comprehensive curricular plans should be developed for all year groups. These should link curriculum content to the learning outcomes to be achieved, the teaching methodologies and resources employed to attain these outcomes and the assessment modes used by teachers to monitor students’ progress. This work will ensure that the planning process has a meaningful impact on classroom methodology and learning and will help to disseminate good quality teaching practice across the department.

The curricular plan for TY Geography should be updated to reflect the changes that have been made to the programme. The programme covers elements of physical Geography and global issues of justice and development with a focus on India. It is good to note that research and project work provide opportunities for students to develop as independent learners. It is recommended that the programme be extended to include a geographical investigation. The students should write up on their fieldwork activity using a template similar to that used for the Leaving Certificate. This provision will facilitate students in developing key geographical skills and effectively bridge the gap between junior cycle and senior cycle Geography.

In first year the planned teaching programme consists of physical Geography, soils and biogeography. This places considerable demands on students in terms of technical vocabulary and complex geomorphic processes to be understood at an early stage. It is recommended that this provision be reviewed and that some less technical areas of the syllabus be interspersed with these topics. In some cases first-year students are introduced to ordnance survey (OS) maps and aerial photographs and taught fundamental geographical skills. In most cases these skills are not developed until third year. It is recommended, in all cases, that map and photograph skills are introduced at an early stage in first year and these key skills can then be subsequently integrated, reinforced and developed throughout the planned teaching programme for second year and third year.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

In the majority of cases good quality teaching and learning was observed with some very good practice in evidence. In these cases lessons were characterised by clear learning objectives and a purposeful pace and were sequentially structured. It is recommended that all lessons should have clearly defined learning objectives that detail more than the thematic area of the content to be covered. Such explicit detailing of the learning objective will give focus, direction and structure to both teaching and learning. This will also provide a clear framework to identify if the learning objectives were achieved within the lesson. There is a good level of teaching expertise within the geography department. The geography teachers should explore ways in which this expertise could be shared across the team. Pedagogical discussions at planning meetings, peer observation and peer mentoring are some of the possibilities that could be considered.

In general teachers had generated a very good range of resource materials that was appropriately used to support students’ learning. Among those observed were some very good use of ICT to revise the rock cycle, acetates to present lesson content, handouts providing a summary of the lesson, a matching exercise and a newspaper article pertaining to a proposed local windfarm development. All of these teacher-generated resources served to enhance and reinforce student learning and their use is highly commended. During one lesson a video clip was used to introduce a new theme. To maximise the learning value of such a resource it is necessary that the basic geographical concepts presented in the video are first explained to the students to effect learning in a more targeted way. Where visual stimuli were integrated these impacted positively on learning and enhanced students’ interest in and understanding of the topics being studied. This visual approach is highly commended and its wider use is encouraged to support students whose preferred learning style is predominantly visual. In this context planning for the further integration of ICT across the department is recommended. In some cases teachers are currently integrating ICT into their programme delivery and have compiled a comprehensive bank of electronic resources across a range of syllabus topics. This work is highly commended and encouraged across the department.

Whole-class teaching was an integral part of lessons observed. In the majority of cases this input was comprehensive in terms of the content covered, was pitched at an appropriate level and engaged the students. This approach was complemented by teacher-student questioning and there was some good use of higher-order questions. However in many lessons there was a tendency to over rely on global questioning strategies which in some cases elicited chorus answers or created a situation whereby any student could choose to answer. The greater use of directed questioning is recommended to challenge all students and ensure their participation. During some lessons whole-class teaching was balanced by the creation of opportunities for student activity in group work. The students eagerly engaged with the tasks and it was clear that learning was taking place based on task completion and feedback from the groups. This discursive and problem-solving approach to teaching and learning is commended and is encouraged in all lessons. In other cases work sheet activities and homework assigned towards the end of the lesson period also provided good opportunity for further learning and consolidation of the topic.

Locational geography was integrated into some lessons. This is good practice and its extended use is recommended where relevant. In order to increase student awareness of locations of geographical phenomena it is suggested that students identify these locations on classroom maps. Where map reading skills are taught it is recommended that the specific skill is modelled centrally
on the whiteboard or overhead projector. This will provide an accurate exemplar of the sketch map and will enable all students to progress at their own pace. It will afford the teacher more time to provide any necessary scaffold to students experiencing difficulties with the skill.

It was evident from a review of students’ copybooks and folders that significant note-taking forms part of many lessons. These notes were of good quality and indicated a good level of research. It is recommended that where it is necessary to support teaching and learning with such notes that they be provided on handouts to students. This will avoid the tedium associated with dictation and note-taking and this class time should then be used for students to engage with the lesson material in a more active manner. Progression through the syllabus will also proceed in a more expedient and meaningful way.

All geography classes are mixed-ability in composition. Generally there was a good focus on geographical terms encountered in the lessons and other differentiated approaches were in evidence as commended above. It is recommended that these strategies for differentiation be further developed by all members of the geography team.

Classroom management was good in the lessons observed. There was a positive atmosphere in all classes and students were affirmed for their contributions. Discipline was seamlessly maintained and student behaviour was of a high standard. In most lessons students displayed a good knowledge and understanding of the topics being studied.

**Assessment**

There is ongoing formative assessment of students in lessons. Homework is regularly assigned to consolidate learning. It is important in all year groups that there is variety in the homework tasks assigned to build competencies in a balanced way across the syllabuses. Where summary work is set for homework it is important that students are provided with a framework to assist them in developing the skill of summarising textbook content. Project work is employed as a mode of assessment with some year groups. This is good practice as it fosters independent learning and caters for a variety of learning styles. However, it is recommended that the project be related to the programme of study for the particular year group and that students own work be a key criterion for assessment of all projects.

In some lessons there was a good focus on examination techniques which provided clear guidelines for structured student answering. This was also in evidence in notes in copies. This is good practice. In building on these good principles and as a further focus for students it is suggested that they be required to number their significant relevant points (SRPs) when practising examination questions. It is recommended that similar strategies for correction be developed with junior cycle students.

Formal summative assessments are conducted three times a year for all year groups. A significant proportion of students in both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate take higher level in state examinations. This is praiseworthy. In the future the geography teachers should explore ways and set targets to further raise student achievement at Leaving Certificate higher level. Common assessments are in place for first and second year students. This is good practice as it ensures consistency and standardisation of provision for the planned curricular programmes. It is recommended that this approach to assessment be extended to third year and for compulsory elements of the course in fifth year and sixth year. Reports are issued to homes for pertinent year groups following examinations. Students’ progress is also communicated to parents at annual parent-teacher meetings.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Geography has a prominent profile in the school.
- Resource provision for Geography is very good and includes teacher-based classrooms and access to information and communication technology (ICT) facilities.
- Base classrooms had motivational and print-rich geographical learning environments.
- The teaching of Geography is supported by co-curricular activities.
- Time allocations and deployment of teachers to the subject are appropriate.
- In the majority of cases there was effective short-term planning for lessons.
- Teachers had generated a very good range of resource materials to support students’ learning.
- In the majority of cases good quality teaching and learning were observed with some very good practice in evidence.
- The integration of visual stimuli impacted positively on learning.
- There was a positive atmosphere in lessons, discipline was seamlessly maintained and student behaviour was of a high standard.
- Students generally displayed a good knowledge and understanding of the topics being studied.

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

- A stand-alone module in Geography should be provided within the Transition Year programme.
- Subject planning should focus on teachers sharing methodologies and resources and in line with this process curricular plans for each year group should be further developed.
- The first-year teaching programme should be reviewed.
- All lessons should have clear learning objectives to give focus, direction and structure to teaching and learning.
- Note-taking should be restricted as a methodology during class time and strategies should be developed to engage students with the lesson material in a more active manner.

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.

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