An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Gort Community School
Gort, County Galway
Roll number: 91498C

Date of inspection: 13 & 14 May 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Gort Community School. 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 and deputy principal. 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

There is very good provision and whole-school support for Geography. At junior cycle Geography is a compulsory subject and it is an optional subject at senior cycle offered within an open-choice structure for the selection of subjects. Uptake of the subject at this level is strong which reflects its popularity and the commitment of teachers to the subject. Class-period allocation for the subject in both cycles is appropriate. The majority of classes are well spread across the week. For some class groups geography lessons are timetabled on three consecutive days at the start or the end of the week. This should be avoided where possible so as to provide students with more regular exposure to the subject.

School management is supportive of teachers continuous professional development and has facilitated their attendance at recent in-service provided for the revised Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus. The current geography teaching team consists of eight teachers, all of whom are subject specialists. A good level of subject expertise has been developed within the department as a number of teachers have been facilitated to teach in both cycles.

The school has very good information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. The majority of classrooms are equipped with a fixed data projector and computer and this provision is to be extended to all classrooms by the start of the next academic year. Given this and to ensure its effective impact on teaching and learning in Geography, it is recommended that the teachers access and use Scoilnet Maps. This online mapping and geographical information system (GIS) will support and complement the use and application of geographical skills that are central to the syllabus both at junior and senior cycle.

The majority of subject teachers have their own base classroom. One room had a very good range of maps to support the teaching of locational Geography which is relevant to all areas of the syllabuses. It is recommended that all classrooms where Geography is taught have large maps of Ireland, Europe and the world. In a small number of cases some efforts were made to create geographical learning environments. The geography teachers should develop the potential of their classrooms in this regard and use the wall space for the display of maps, photographs and geographical posters. Students could also be involved in creating GeoNews notice boards and in
contributing articles and photographs from a range of media sources. In one class the students had undertaken a farm study and had completed very good projects on their investigation. The use of project work is commended and further encouraged it promotes independent and activity-based learning. A range of resources are available in the school to support the teaching of Geography. These should be listed in detail in the subject plan, for example, lists of ordnance survey (OS) maps and videos. This will guide teachers in selecting suitable resources for topics and will also assist in the identification of resource needs within the department.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject-department planning is supported by the provision of formal planning time once per year by school management as well as additional meetings of the geography teaching team. Minutes of meetings should be kept to enhance collaborative planning and to provide a record of the progress achieved. The role of subject co-ordinator is rotated so that all members of the department have the opportunity to lead developments in the subject.

A subject-department plan was made available during the evaluation. It was not possible to establish the relevance of this plan as most of it referred to the academic year 2006-2007. The plan contained programmes of work for each year group. However the delivery schedule and dates attaching to these programmes were not consistent with the 2010 school calendar and did not reflect the programme of work observed in some classes. It is strongly recommended as a matter of priority that the subject plan is reviewed and henceforth updated on an annual basis. The plan should describe in appropriate detail the current practices and procedures within the department in relation to class organisation and grouping of students, students with additional educational needs, homework, assessment and reporting procedures. A key element to be addressed as part of the review is the development of comprehensive schemes of work that outline the actual teaching programme collaboratively planned for each year group. These schemes should include topics linked to timeframes, the key learning outcomes, teaching methodologies, resources and assessment. The collaborative planning process should have a focus on active learning methodologies including differentiation strategies and student assessment with particular reference to assessment for learning strategies. The agreed teaching programme to be developed for first-year students should include the development of map and photograph skills at an early stage and should include a variety of topics of varying levels of difficulty. This teaching programme should be adhered to by all teachers. The study of meteorology and climatology should be deferred until a later stage in the junior cycle.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Individual planning and preparation was good for the lessons observed. A range of resources were used to support teaching and learning and these included worksheets, PowerPoint presentations, maps, aerial photographs and supplementary textual material. In some lessons the use of ICT made a significant contribution to student learning. The quality of PowerPoint presentations seen in these lessons reflected thorough preparation and included graphical images, diagrams and photographs. It was not possible to establish if teachers have registered with the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) in relation to the use of Scoilnet Maps or to what extent ICT is used in the classroom. It is recommended that the use of ICT as a teaching and learning resource be further developed by all members of the geography teaching team. All lessons had clear aims which were shared with students in a general manner. To provide a clearer focus for students on what exactly they should expect to have learned by the end of the lesson the learning
Objectives should be stated in more specific terms. In all cases some time at the end of the lesson should be reserved for the purpose of summary and review. Lessons were well structured and were generally purposefully paced.

Overall the quality of teaching and learning was good. Teaching and learning were most effective where there was a good balance between teacher exposition and student activity combined with the integration of visual stimuli to support the development of lesson material. A variety of methodologies was employed which facilitated the active engagement of students with the topics under study. In the majority of lessons a good mix of lower-order and higher-order questions was used to progress lesson delivery and to revise topics. However in some instances the greater use of directed questioning strategies is recommended to ensure the engagement of all students and to facilitate assessment of their learning. Where individual learning tasks and worksheet activities were deployed they added variety to instruction and challenged students to apply their learning. In a minority of lessons teaching was less effective where there were was a reliance on more traditional methods with high levels of teacher input. These lessons were dominated by teacher-led presentations and while learning did take place the students were mainly passive participants in this process. In some cases while good quality visual stimulus materials were used these were largely described and explained by the teacher. It is recommended that a greater range of teaching methodologies be employed, for example greater questioning of students and individual learning tasks so as to more actively engage students in the learning process.

The development and revision of Ordnance Survey (OS) map and aerial photograph skills were central to some lessons. Students were well supported in their learning and were competent in completing the assigned tasks. In one lesson students were challenged to interpret a range of visual materials including graphical images, photographs and diagrams. The development of such skills is a major objective of the geography syllabuses and is good practice. Teacher instruction was clear in all lessons. The key learning points should be summarised on the board to complement instruction particularly in the case of broad topics. The use of mind maps or graphical organisers should be considered for this purpose. Very good practice was noted where geographical concepts were explained and developed in the context of local and familiar examples.

Differentiated teaching strategies were in evidence when teachers moved about the classroom to help individual students as they carried out tasks. Geographical vocabulary was well developed and terms were well explained and used throughout lessons. In one case the use of a word-search exercise provided a clear focus on the key terms encountered in the lesson. These good practices in relation to differentiation should be further developed and included in the subject-department plan. The use of key word glossaries and liaison with the learning-support department to obtain advice on differentiated methodologies are recommended in this regard.

In some lessons there was a focus on examination preparation. Students were given clear and appropriate advice on answering questions and in one lesson they were provided with a sample answer which illustrated the level of detail and standard required. In most of these lessons homework was assigned from past-examination papers. This is good practice and should be used with all certificate classes.

Classroom management was effective in all the classrooms visited. A positive and affirming atmosphere was observed and the students co-operated well with their teachers. The students displayed a good level of knowledge. This was evident from their responses to questions, their ability to use geographical terms and they were competent in completing tasks.
**ASSESSMENT**

The school operates a system of continual assessment for all year groups. The Christmas grade attained by students is based on a number of class tests taken during the term. It is recommended that an examination period longer than a class period is put in place for certificate class groups in preparation for the mock and state examinations and to facilitate the development of time-management skills. Non-certificate examination classes take formal assessments at the end of the year. The good practice of setting common assessments is in place for second-year students. This provision should be extended to all class groups. Reports on students’ progress are provided to parents following formal assessments and at parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group.

It was reported that the geography teachers analyse the school’s results in certificate examinations and compare them with national norms. This is a beneficial activity as it helps to identify trends and plan for future improvement. The analysis of students’ outcomes should be provided to senior management on an annual basis. Uptake of higher level geography in both Junior and Leaving Certificate is above the national norm. This is praiseworthy. The geography teachers should now develop strategies and set targets that would further raise student attainment at higher level.

Student progress is monitored in a variety of informal ways in lessons including questioning and correction of homework assignments and class exercises. A review of a sample of students’ copybooks indicated that homework is regularly set and work has been completed on a range of topics in all lessons. The quality of students work and the standard of presentation were very good in a number of classes. While teachers monitor students’ work, in some cases this consisted of a tick and/or an overall evaluative comment. In other instances students were provided with constructive feedback on how to improve the quality of their work. This good practice reflects assessment for learning (AfL) principles and should be developed across the department as means of assisting students to improve the standard of their work.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good provision and whole-school support for Geography.
- Uptake of Geography at senior cycle is high.
- The geography teachers have very good access to information and communication technology (ICT) facilities.
- Formal time is provided for subject-department planning and the role of subject co-ordinator is rotated.
- Individual planning and preparation was good for the lessons observed.
- Overall the quality of teaching was good and students displayed a good level of learning.
- Classroom management was effective and the students co-operated well with their teachers.
- Uptake of higher level geography in both Junior and Leaving Certificate is above the national norm.

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

- Geography classrooms should be provided with large maps of Ireland, Europe and the world and should be further developed as geographical-learning environments.
• The subject plan should be reviewed as a matter of priority and henceforth updated on an annual basis. Comprehensive schemes of work should be collaboratively developed by teachers for each year group.
• The use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a teaching and learning resource, including Scoilnet Maps should be further developed by all members of the geography teaching team.
• Subject planning by teachers should include a greater range of active learning methodologies in their lessons and the further development of common assessment and assessment for learning (AfL) strategies.

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

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