

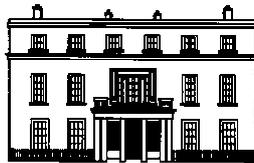
An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT**

**Newbridge College
Newbridge, County Kildare
Roll number: 61680T**

Date of inspection: 15 November 2010



**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

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report was written following a subject inspection in Newbridge College 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 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 planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the acting deputy principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Geography is in a strong position in the school and is well supported by school management. The subject forms part of the core curriculum in junior cycle. Geography is allocated two periods a week in first year, which is understandable where students sample a broad range of subjects. This allocation of only two periods per week is, however, continued in second and third year. This is insufficient to meet syllabus requirements. It is recommended that this level of provision in junior cycle be reviewed. There are five periods a week devoted to Geography in senior cycle, which is very good provision for the subject.

Class groups at all levels are mixed ability. Uptake of Geography at senior level is consistently high, as is uptake at higher level. There are usually two Geography classes in both fifth year and sixth year. Geography is also an integral part of the optional Transition Year (TY) programme. There is one Geography lesson each week in TY.

The school operates a system of teacher-based classrooms. There is also a dedicated geography room, where a large range of maps, photographs, and an impressive inventory of geography resources has been compiled. Class sets of Ordnance Survey maps used in certificate examinations have been put together over the years and they are used regularly in class. It is suggested that a comprehensive dictionary of geography be placed in both the school library and the geography room as an important work of reference for both staff and students.

The integration of information and communications technology (ICT) into learning and teaching processes was impressive in a number of Geography lessons observed. A number of rooms, including the geography room, are equipped with digital projectors.

There is a subject co-ordinator and seven other teachers of Geography in the school. Four of the eight do not have Geography as a degree subject. The co-ordinator gathers and stores a range of resources in the geography room, gives advice especially to new teachers, encourages and supports the teaching team and co-ordinates the development of the subject plan, as well as chairing subject meetings. This role is currently part of the posts of responsibility structure. Consideration should be given to rotating the role of co-ordinator, in the context of a whole-school review of posts of responsibility duties, as is also recommended in the WSE report.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The overall level of planning and preparation is good, but there is room for improvement. Collaborative planning is engaged in, but is at an early stage of development. A detailed subject plan has been developed with valid and well-thought-out aims and objectives. A similar plan has been developed for Geography in TY, but the content relies too much on Irish tourism. Content to be covered for each year of the programmes is agreed in both junior and senior cycle. It is recommended that the more complex and difficult aspects of physical geography, such as chemical weathering, should not be studied in first year.

Individual teachers' planning for the lessons observed was of a high standard. Aims, objectives, content and structure of the lessons were part of the planning templates used, but greater emphasis should be placed on teaching methodologies, assessment modes and desired learning outcomes. This recommendation also applies to term and yearly planning, which tends to be largely content-driven. Planning templates for all years should be standardised, agreed and adhered to by all geography teachers and reviewed annually.

Geography team meetings for planning and co-ordination are held approximately once a term. Agendas are set and minutes are recorded. While it is acknowledged that it may be difficult to find time for subject team meetings where eight teachers are concerned, it is important that all teachers, especially those who are new to the subject or new to the school, attend all of these meetings.

It is recommended that collaborative subject planning aims to develop a more local focus in the teaching and learning of Geography. The school environs, the river Liffey which flows through the school grounds, and the wider Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow areas, provide ample opportunities for relevant and innovative geographical studies and project work. These opportunities need to be explored, perhaps initially in TY, and also in non-examination years. Locally-based project work is valuable in developing geographical concepts and skills and in stimulating interest in the subject.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Good quality teaching and learning was evident in the lessons observed. Teaching was lively, engaging and competent. Classroom atmosphere was characterised by mutual respect, positive discipline and excellent rapport between students and teachers. Geography teaching, at all levels, takes place in a mixed-ability setting that works well. Lessons were characterised by clear routines based on focused instruction, relevant and probing questioning, purposeful learning and the giving of homework. Teacher explanations were clear and concise and the pace of lessons was appropriate. Questioning was focused and of good quality, and students' views and perspectives were sought and given.

In a number of classes observed, teachers made very good use of data projectors, *PowerPoint* presentations and white boards. In one class, the combined use of Scoilnet maps and Google Earth maps to study transport and communications in a local and regional context was an example of best practice. In some other classes, especially in sixth year, methodologies were more traditional and teacher-directed.

There was an appropriate emphasis on examination content and strategies in examination classes. Work on past examinations papers and associated marking schemes in examination classes was,

understandably, a major focus. It is important, however, to ensure that the focus on examinations and examination questions does not detract from more innovative work, especially in non-examination classes. There was some evidence of this in a small number of classes during the evaluation.

In TY, interesting and relevant projects were undertaken on geography-related careers and on environmental disasters. Students were given considerable freedom to choose specific themes and topics for study. More locally-based project work, as outlined above, should be planned for in TY. An excellent presentation was given by a student in TY on one of the environmental projects undertaken. Experimentation with pair work and the effective piloting of peer assessment strategies were observed in the TY and a limited number of other classes visited.

Students generally showed interest in the subject and demonstrated a good knowledge of key themes and concepts. Learners got ample opportunities in class to display their knowledge and to ask questions where necessary. Mapping skills and analysis of photographs were being well developed and practised in a number of classes, but more local maps and exemplars should be used to augment those provided each year at national level by the State Examinations Commission. Draft reports for the field study in Leaving Certificate were in progress in one of the senior cycle classes visited. A river study which involved one day's fieldwork has been chosen for a number of years. This was well planned and has achieved good learning outcomes and grades, but perhaps it is time to vary the fieldwork topic chosen.

Teachers have high expectation for their students, including those who are less able and they liaise closely with the learning support team to identify and meet learning needs. The school intends to place a particular focus on the gifted students.

ASSESSMENT

Geography participation and achievement is very good in the school. Significant numbers opt to take Geography as a subject in senior cycle. The vast majority of students take higher level examination papers and achieve consistently well in examinations at both junior and senior levels. Examination results are collated and analysed by the Geography co-ordinator and discussed with the teaching team and school management. Internal assessment procedures include frequent class tests, end of term assessments and pre-examination tests for students preparing for state examinations.

The relevant and incisive oral questioning of students was a regular feature of the lessons observed. Experimental work on peer assessment was observed in a small number of classes, where students assessed each other's work effectively under the guidance of the teacher. This was particularly effective in the TY class observed.

Homework is given regularly and monitored in all classes in line with the school's homework policy. However, more detailed positive feedback needs to be given to students. Students should also be given grades and credit for copywork, workbook and homework undertaken, in line with the principles of Assessment for Learning. These grades should be used, where possible, to affirm good work and to moderate test results. Regular grading of and formative feedback on homework and copywork will help motivate students and identify strengths and areas for further work and revision. The quality of teachers' record keeping varied, but some examples of good practice in the recording of attendance, homework and test results were observed.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Geography is in strong position in the school, has a consistently strong uptake in senior cycle and is well supported by school management.
- Teaching and learning was of good quality and took place in an atmosphere of mutual respect and positive discipline.
- The integration of ICT, including the use of data projectors, *PowerPoint* presentations and Scoilnet maps, was impressive in some classes.
- A detailed Geography plan and a less comprehensive Transition Year plan for Geography has been developed.

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

- The curricular provision for Geography of two periods per week throughout the junior cycle should be reviewed, especially in second and third year.
- Greater use should be made of the local area and the wider catchment area of the school in order to develop the skills and interests of both staff and students especially in non-examination classes, including Transition Year.
- Yearly and term planning templates should be standardised and followed by all teachers, and should include a greater focus on teaching methodologies, modes of assessment and desired learning outcomes.
- More regular, formative assessment of students' homework and copy work, in line with the principles of Assessment for Learning, should be undertaken, especially in junior cycle. The grades and comments generated could be used to motivate and affirm students and to moderate their test results.
- Consideration should be given to rotating the post of co-ordinator within the context of the general review of the post of responsibility duties recommended in the WSE report.

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