

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta  
Department of Education and Science  
Subject Inspection of Geography  
REPORT  
Ashbourne Community School  
Ashbourne, County Meath  
Roll number: 91495T  
Date of inspection: 28 April 2009**

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**REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY  
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ashbourne 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 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. 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**

Ashbourne Community School is a co-educational school with a current enrolment of 998 students. The organisation, teaching and learning of Geography is well supported by school management with the provision of a wide range of resources, an area for the storage of these resources and for project work. Teachers have been provided with base classrooms. The provision of a geography noticeboard on a corridor, which is updated regularly, helps to maintain a prominent profile for the subject in the school.

In the junior cycle Geography is a compulsory subject and is allocated three class periods per week in each of the three years. In almost all instances, Geography is appropriately timetabled; however, in one instance a junior cycle class has the subject twice on the same day. This means that students only have class contact with the subject twice during the week. It is desirable that all class groups should have geography classes more evenly spread throughout the week. Classes are of mixed ability and this good practice enables students of differing abilities to share their learning experiences. At senior cycle students continue their experience of Geography by studying a half-year module within the optional Transition Year (TY) programme. For the established Leaving Certificate (ELC) Geography is an optional subject and is allocated five class periods per week, consisting of one single and two double class periods. This time allocation is in line with syllabus recommendations. Classes are of mixed ability and this facilitates students' choice of subject as Geography appears on a number of option lines. The school makes every effort to cater for the subject requests of students by providing an open choice of subjects for the Leaving Certificate. The school has in place a range of

effective measures to support students and parents in making informed educational choices in relation to subject choice. The uptake of the subject in the senior cycle is in a healthy state.

Currently ten teachers deliver the geography programme in Ashbourne Community School, most of whom are graduates in the subject. They work collaboratively and form a clearly identifiable subject department within the school. The work of the department is effectively supported by the subject co-ordinator who holds a post of responsibility for this role. Teachers have also been involved in peer observation and this will further support the development of teaching and class management skills. Teachers have availed of continuing professional development (CPD) provided by the geography support service, by attending meetings of the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland (AGTI) and in-service days provided by the school, notably in relation to assessment for learning and on raising academic standards.

Teachers have access to information and communications technology (ICT) including access to the school's computer rooms, in-class personal computers, a workroom adjacent to the staff room provided with computers and, in some classrooms, data projectors.

During the evaluation it was evident that the geography teachers support a number of co-curricular activities. These include: a school garden, involvement in an intercultural week and the Green-School programme. This is very good practice as these activities give a practical expression to some of the aims of the geography syllabuses.

There are a large number of newcomer students enrolled and the school has made significant efforts to cater for these students and to include them in the life of the school. Documents provided during the evaluation showed a range of supports provided in Geography, including supportive worksheets and the translation of key geographical terms and phrases into Lithuanian. Teachers are made aware of students with special educational needs (SEN) in their classes and the school supports these students in a number of ways notably by the effective model of team teaching.

#### **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject department planning is well established in Ashbourne Community School and is supported by school management through the provision of planning time on a regular basis. Informal planning also takes place frequently. In documentation supplied and in discussions held during the evaluation the key role of the subject co-ordinator in supporting department planning was evident. Minutes of department meetings were provided during the evaluation.

A comprehensive subject department plan has been developed and a written plan for the geography module within the TY was provided. The subject department plan contains a planned teaching programme for each year group. The planned programme is set out using the headings: targets, topics, duration, class structure and outcomes. There was evidence that the plan was reviewed in 2007 and the geography teaching team has carried out a SCOT analysis. This is very good practice. In reviewing the subject department plan teachers should focus on learning outcomes linked to curricular content, timeframes, resources, teaching methodologies and assessment.

The planned teaching programme for the junior cycle shows that there is a significant emphasis on the teaching of topics from physical geography in first year and that some topics involving lower-level concepts are taught in third year. It is recommended that the planned teaching programme for the junior cycle should be reviewed and that map and photograph skills be introduced at an early stage to students. The use of large-scale maps and photographs of the local area would be a very appropriate means of engaging students. Consideration should also be given to teaching topics from Section C of the Junior Certificate Syllabus, Primary Economic Activities, in first year as this would introduce greater variety into the planned teaching programme. The plan also makes reference to aims and objectives, to homework policy and to assessment and recording procedures. Following a review of the plan it was decided to introduce a revision folder as a means of supporting students in revising their work; this positive outcome following a review is good practice. The plan refers to the holding of a geography week, a policy on educational visits, and strategies for raising academic standards. The plan makes reference to supports for newcomer students and for SEN students. Further details on specific measures to support SEN students could be provided in the planning documentation in line with the good practices evident in relation to newcomer student supports.

A plan of the half-year geography module in the TY was made available. This has been written using the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) transition unit template. The plan contains a clear statement of the planned learning outcomes. The content of the module is outlined and resources to be used are identified. The module prescribes group work where students will learn to work together and to share their knowledge. Students' output will involve three elements which will be used for assessment purposes. These will include: a written report, a PowerPoint group presentation and a third element which could involve a range of outputs, and which has included a

role play with a geographical theme or the making of a geographical model. Such innovative methods are very much in keeping the spirit of the TY programme.

Planning for all of the lessons observed was of a high standard. All lessons were clearly part of a larger unit of work, had clear aims, and the good practice of sharing the planned learning objectives with students was evident in all lessons. Teachers provided details of weekly, daily teaching plans and in some cases individual lesson plans for the lessons observed. During discussions some teachers indicated that they had adapted the department plan to suit the needs of their individual classes and this is in line with best practice.

Planning for the lessons observed included the preparation of appropriate resources to support teaching and learning. The use of these resources made a significant contribution to the engagement of students and to the sense of enjoyment in the subject in some of the classrooms visited. Resources used included: PowerPoint presentations, worksheets, the overhead projector, blank maps and supplementary textual material. In a number of instances teachers provided folders of resources they had developed over a period of time. This reflects their commitment to providing stimulating lessons for students.

### **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In the lessons observed classroom management was of a very high standard. Teachers had established clear routines. Lessons generally began with a roll call, homework was monitored and corrected, previous learning was recalled before new subject matter was introduced and the lessons concluded with appropriate homework being assigned. This homework was recorded by students in their journals. Students and teachers exchanged greetings as students entered and left the classroom. This created a positive, relaxed, affirming and mutually respectful atmosphere which facilitated teaching and learning.

Classrooms provided rich learning environments as teachers had created displays of maps, charts, photographs of students engaged in fieldwork and students' project work. The good practice of displaying of key words and flash cards that helped to support students' learning was evident. Maps on display were used in some lessons to develop students' knowledge of place geography.

The quality of teaching varied between the lessons observed. Teaching was most effective where students were actively involved in the learning process and where ICT was effectively used to enhance the learning experience of students. The variety of teaching methods used included: teacher exposition, question-and-answer sessions between teacher and students, a short quiz, brainstorming and the completion of short students tasks. Where teacher exposition was used it was effective and clear in presenting the subject matter to students. This was particularly effective in one lesson observed where the teacher used a PowerPoint presentation to revise the topic Global Interdependence with students and to include discussion of examination questions and the required answering techniques. In another lesson observed students were required to suggest the advantages and disadvantages of tourism in Majorca. This was done in small groups, with one student acting as recorder using a worksheet provided by the teacher. The teacher moved around the classroom offering support and encouragement to students during this group activity. Later in the lesson students gave feedback in a whole-class setting and the teacher recorded the outcomes of their discussions on a PowerPoint presentation. The issues raised by students showed they had a good grasp of the topic and were competent in expressing their views. Teacher input in both of these instances was measured and effective.

In some lessons, however, there was an over-reliance on teacher input where students were passive recipients of the subject matter. In planning lessons some teachers need to consider increasing the amount of student activity where the teacher facilitates student engagement with the subject matter. For example, in discussing the Mediterranean climate, rather than the teacher outlining the characteristics of the climate a set of climatic data could be provided to small groups of students with an appropriate set of questions which would enable students to identify for themselves the characteristics of the climate. They could then be required to write a number of sentences describing the climate. This could be followed by feedback in a whole-class setting before the teacher proceeds to discuss the causes of this climatic type. It is recommended that, in some instances, teachers extend the repertoire of teaching methodologies used and place a greater emphasis on those methods which more actively engage students in the learning process.

In a number of the lessons observed teachers adopted a visual approach to the presentation of the lesson. This included drawing diagrams on the whiteboard, use of the overhead projector, PowerPoint presentations and the use of satellite images and maps. The use of a weather forecast map for Western Europe was very effectively used to revise the topic 'weather' with one class group. Students were required to place weather symbols in the appropriate place on the map. As students left their seats and the rest of the class looked on there was an obvious sense of enjoyment as students,

sometimes with prompting for their peers or teacher, completed the task. In another lesson observed students were allowed choose groups to research a topic using the internet and they were required to report back to the class at a later date on the outcomes of their research. The potential of ICT, as a means of enriching teaching and learning, should be more fully explored and a policy in relation to this should be developed by the geography teaching team. This policy should then be included in the subject department plan.

Senior cycle students had completed the geographical investigation for the Leaving Certificate 2009. There are plans in place for other class groups to engage in out-of-class learning, including a visit to the Burren, a trip to Iceland or Rome and a traffic survey in Ashbourne. This will further stimulate interest in the subject and provide students with an opportunity to develop key geographical skills in line with syllabus recommendations.

Teachers provided support for students by carefully introducing key geographical terms at appropriate times during the lessons observed. These were carefully explained in a suitable context and were either written on the whiteboard or displayed on a wall chart. This is good practice particularly for students with special educational needs and those students for whom English is an additional language. Lists of these key geographical terms should also be provided to the learning support department to further support students' learning. Teachers' use of differentiation was evident in the questioning techniques used and in discussing past examination questions. There is scope for greater use of differentiation in the preparation and design of worksheets and in the setting of student tasks. Lessons were generally appropriately paced, thereby ensuring students' attention. However, care should be taken not to spend too much time in correcting homework or in recalling previously learned subject matter thereby reducing the amount of time available for teaching. It was also observed that teachers are paying attention to the development of higher-order thinking skills as students were frequently asked to imagine situations or to offer explanations for geographic phenomena. This is in line with best practice and is in keeping with the aim of raising academic standards in the school.

There was an appropriate focus on revision in examination classes, students had completed work on past examination questions and were given clear instructions in relation to examination answering techniques. Students were knowledgeable about their courses and could recall previously learned subject matter.

### **ASSESSMENT**

The staff of Ashbourne Community School, as part of its CPD programme, has considered ways of raising academic standards in the school. This is a very appropriate target. In line with this aim students are provided with a 'results tracker' record sheet where they record their progress in various assessments. Teachers stated that this has encouraged students to strive for higher standards. Teachers have used assessment for learning (AfL) practices where they have provided constructive feedback to students in their copybooks or where they have answered past examination questions.

It was noted that students maintain two copybooks, one for homework and one for notes. This is good practice. During some of the lessons observed teachers provided students with time to copy notes from the whiteboard or from the overhead projector. While this supports revision it is recommended that students be encouraged to become 'note-makers' and not just 'note-takers'. Examples of 'mind-maps' provided during the evaluation will support students in developing this skill. The quality of students' written work in many copybooks was of a very high standard. Notes were kept in a logical order, were neatly presented, maps and diagrams were accurately drawn, correctly labelled and appropriately coloured. In some cases notes were incomplete and the quality of presentation needs to be improved. It is recommended that teachers should provide greater supports for students in relation to scaffolding their written work by the use of blank maps and writing frames.

Teachers use a range of methods to assess students' progress. Some of these were evident during the evaluation and included questions directed to named students, the setting, correction and monitoring of homework, and the holding of class tests on the completion of sections of the planned teaching programme. Formal assessments are held at Christmas and summer. In examination years students sit pre-examinations in the second term. Students' progress is reported to parents by means of school reports after formal examinations and at parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group. The good practice of setting common examination papers for formal examinations is in place. It was noted that a very high percentage of students in both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations take the higher-level papers reflecting high teacher and student expectations.

### **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The organisation, teaching and learning of Geography is well supported by school management through the provision of a wide range of resources, an area for the storage of these resources and for project work. Teachers have been provided with base classrooms.

- A comprehensive subject department plan has been developed and a written plan for the geography module within the TY was provided. There was clear evidence that teachers work collaboratively and they are supported in this by the work of the subject co-ordinator.
- Planning for all of the lessons observed was of a high standard and teachers had prepared appropriate resource materials to support teaching and learning. In some cases teachers provided an extensive range of resources that had been developed over a period of time.
- A positive, relaxed, affirming and mutually respectful atmosphere prevailed in all of the classrooms visited.
- The quality of teaching varied between the lessons observed. Teaching was most effective where students were actively involved in the learning process and where ICT was effectively used to enhance the learning experiences of students.
- Students were knowledgeable about their courses and could recall previously learned subject matter. Students willingly engaged in the planned learning activities.
- There was an appropriate focus on revision in examination classes, students had completed work on past examination questions and were given clear instructions in relation to examination answering techniques.
- The display of maps, charts, photographs of students engaged in fieldwork and students' work created a stimulating and attractive environment in the classrooms visited.
- The introduction of assessment for learning practices was evident from an examination of students' written work and the introduction of a 'results tracker' record sheet for students is a valuable innovation.

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

- It is recommended that the planned teaching programme for the junior cycle should be reviewed and that map and photograph skills be introduced at an early stage to students.
- In reviewing the subject department plan teachers should focus on learning outcomes linked to curricular content, timeframes, resources, teaching methodologies and assessment.
- It is recommended that, in some instances, teachers should extend the repertoire of teaching methodologies used and place a greater emphasis on those methods which more actively engage students in the learning process.
- The potential of ICT, as a means of enriching teaching and learning, should be more fully explored and a policy in relation to this should be developed by the geography team. This policy should then be included in the subject department plan.
- Teachers should provided greater support for students in relation to scaffolding their written work by the use of blank maps and writing frames.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Geography and 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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