

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta  
Department of Education and Science**

**Subject Inspection of Geography  
REPORT**

**Coláiste Cholmáin  
Claremorris, County Mayo  
Roll number: 64610N**

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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 Coláiste Cholmáin, conducted 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 the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day 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.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

In Coláiste Cholmáin, Geography is a compulsory subject at junior cycle. There are two class groups in first and second years and three in third year. Geography classes have a mixed ability structure and are allocated three class periods per week. The vast majority of students take higher level Geography in the Junior Certificate. The junior cycle Geography syllabus is designed as a common syllabus with a small number of extra settings for higher level students only. Of those students doing ordinary level it is encouraged that they follow the higher level syllabus for as long as possible before deciding on level of uptake for the Junior Certificate.

For the Established Leaving Certificate the uptake of Geography is in line with the national norm. At this stage Geography becomes an optional subject offered within an open choice structure. Students

and their parents are well informed prior to the selection of programmes and subjects. Parents are invited to attend an information evening at which they have the opportunity to discuss the various options with the programme co-ordinators. The guidance counsellor and class teachers also inform and advise students on the selection of subjects and what they entail at senior cycle. There are two mixed-ability class groups in each of the senior cycle years. The time allocation of five periods per week is in line with syllabus requirements.

The Transition Year (TY) programme contains a module in Geography that is delivered to two groups of students over a ten week period. This course entitled 'Tourism awareness in Ireland' is based on the Fáilte Ireland resource pack. Students receive certification from Fáilte Ireland if they achieve a high standard in their portfolio of coursework.

The Geography department has access to a wide range of resources to facilitate teaching and learning in the subject. These include Ordnance Survey (OS) map extracts, aerial photographs, wall maps and charts, rock samples, videos, CDs, a digital camera and overhead projector. The school has excellent information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. There are three computer rooms including a state-of-the-art multimedia room, which teachers can access via a booking system. All classrooms are networked with internet access, broadband enabled and equipped with a laptop. There are a number of data projectors strategically sited throughout the school in addition to three mobile units. School management has facilitated the acquisition of ICT skills among teachers through the organisation of a course on the use of the multi-media room. This level of support and resource provision is highly commended as they make an important contribution to teaching and learning.

Teachers are provided with base classrooms. It is recommended that the Geography department maximise the potential of teacher-based classrooms as spaces to display student project work. The Geography syllabuses provide vast opportunity for students to undertake both group and individual projects. This work enables students to engage in independent and exploratory study and simultaneously enhances the development of ICT skills both in research and presentation methods. The completed work should then be displayed as a means of increasing the visible presence of the subject within the school and enhancing its profile.

All of the Geography teachers were facilitated to attend the recent in-service for the implementation of the Revised Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus. A number of whole staff in-career development courses have been organised by school management to support teachers in their daily work. This level of facilitation and encouragement for the professional development of staff is commended. Supportive arrangements are in place for the induction of new and substitute teachers. Each new teacher is assigned a mentor in a similar subject area, who informs and advises the inductee on department policy and practice. They are also provided with a 'Welcoming Pack' which contains valuable information on the school ethos, rules and other important school systems and procedures. This accommodation for new teachers is acknowledged.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

St. Colman's College is at an advanced stage in the school development planning process. The Geography teachers form a clearly identifiable subject department. Currently the most senior teacher acts as co-ordinator for the subject. It is recommended that this role is rotated so that new members of the Geography teaching team can acquire the experience and expertise attached to the position. Formal subject meetings are held on three occasions during the year and there is ongoing informal discussion to discuss subject-related issues.

A Geography plan was made available during the evaluation. The subject plan contained details of the long-term aims and objectives of the department and made reference to textbooks and course materials, cross-curricular planning, homework and assessment procedures, communication with parents and listed some of the resources available for the teaching of Geography. Curricular programmes to be followed by each year group were also outlined. It is recommended, that this section of the plan be further developed to include the specific methodologies and resources to be used in the delivery of the various topics and the assessment instruments to evaluate the learning outcomes. While project work forms an important element of assessment in transition year it is recommended that it be more widely used to facilitate student learning and as an assessment

tool. Students generally embark on this activity-based approach to learning with much enthusiasm and take great pride in having their work displayed and acknowledged.

A strong spirit of collaboration and collegiality was evident in the preparation of resources for teaching the subject. The Geography teachers have compiled an impressive and extensive shared folder of course materials on the computer network including audio-visual resources and powerpoint presentations on a vast range of topics. These resources were effectively integrated into lessons and provided a visually rich and interesting presentation on class topics. This work is highly commended.

The learning support co-ordinator circulates information on relevant websites to assist teachers in catering for the variety of learning needs within the mixed ability classroom setting. One of the Geography teachers also provides learning support in the subject to a small group of students. To further enhance the effectiveness of this work it is recommended that the Geography teaching team and the learning support department should plan and develop differentiated teaching and learning strategies to further support all students in the mainstream setting. To facilitate student accessibility to the subject, key word lists pertinent to the topic being taught should be displayed in classrooms. The Special Education Support Service will provide useful guidelines and direction with this work.

An examination of the first-year curricular programme indicated a marked concentration on the teaching of physical Geography including geomorphology, meteorology and climate. These aspects of the syllabus present challenging academic demands to students in terms of the vast range of new technical terminology, complex geomorphic processes and feature formations. It is recommended that consideration be given to the introduction and development of map and photographic skills at an earlier stage in first year. Use of large-scale OS maps (1:1000) and aerial photographs of Claremorris would constitute a familiar starting point for students and provide for a more activity based and practical introduction to Geography. The resource material provided by the inspector will provide some ideas on developing a programme for junior-cycle Geography.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was clear evidence of individual planning and preparation for the lessons observed. All classes were conducted in an organised and coherent manner and delivered at an appropriate pace. A range of methodologies and resources, including ICT, was effectively used to create a stimulating and interesting teaching and learning environment.

High quality teaching was evidenced in the lessons evaluated. Clearly established routines were a feature of all classes. Lessons commenced with roll call followed by correction of homework. Students read aloud their answers and the teacher expanded on responses and clarified points when deemed necessary. This good practice is commended. Homework is an essential activity in reinforcing learning and is a valuable tool in monitoring students' progress. The opportunity to further practice and develop the skills and knowledge acquired during the lesson was also afforded to students in the setting of appropriate homework at end of all classes. At the outset of lessons the sharing of the learning objective provided a good focus for students and communicated a clear expectation of what they would be required to know at the end of the class.

There was excellent use made of ICT in the presentation and delivery of the syllabuses. Lesson content was clearly structured and outlined on colourful powerpoint presentations. It is recommended that students are instructed to record main terms, definitions and points in their copies. These will serve as a useful revision aid to students and enable them in organising and managing their own learning. The provision of quiet time to do so will also facilitate reflection on the material and help students to internalise the knowledge. This approach was supplemented by thorough and comprehensive teacher explanations of all aspects of the lesson. The students' direct experience was drawn on repeatedly to clarify points and to facilitate their understanding and engagement with the learning material. There was excellent reference to local examples whenever possible and national and international examples were continuously integrated and used. This practice of linking Geography to the real world and students' familiar experience is highly commended. Students were enabled to actively participate in class discussion and it was apparent from their question and answers that meaningful learning was taking place.

Students were assisted adequately in the preparation for examinations. Meticulous attention was paid to the appropriate layout of questions and the development of answers. In one certificate examination class students were provided with sample answers to typical examination type questions and a prescribed format to follow in structuring their answers. The marks allocated to each element of the structure were clearly highlighted and students were repeatedly reminded of the appropriate time to be allocated to each aspect. The different periods of historical settlement were taught within this framework and OS map extracts were utilised to illustrate the various features. A somewhat similar approach was adopted in another class. A clever mnemonic was exploited as a memory aid for describing features. Students were well advised on the presentation of diagrams. The relevant information was then read from the textbook. Students were instructed to underline key terms and sentences and as difficult points were encountered they were explained. A model answer based on the mnemonic was outlined on the board. Rather than transcribing information from the book sentences were phrased in simplified language. This practice is highly commended in facilitating access to learning and creating a memorable learning experience.

The delivery of lessons was well diversified through the implementation of a range of methodologies and the integration of various stimulus materials. A globe was used to illustrate the movement of the earth around the sun and the consequent unequal heating of the earth's atmosphere. This was further enhanced by a clear explanation and discussion of a textbook diagram. Students had the opportunity to watch an interesting and relevant slide show on global warming and the greenhouse effect. It is suggested that students be required to complete worksheets during such viewing to gain maximum advantage from its use. A series of waterfalls of varying magnitude were shown on a powerpoint presentation and some animated slides were most useful in illustrating how various features of the waterfall are formed and the operation of erosional processes. In one class the learning activity was punctuated with class exercises that were presented on digital slides and students were required to match related pieces of information. These short tasks were corrected in class and enabled students to immediately self-evaluate their knowledge.

It is apparent that a visual approach to the teaching of Geography features very prominently in Coláiste Cholmáin. Given the mixed ability structure of classes this approach is highly commended in catering for the variety of learning styles, creating a visually stimulating learning experience and maintaining student interest. Students had a good level of knowledge and understanding relative to their abilities. They participated in classroom activities with interest and were well able to discuss concepts. Very good rapport between students and teachers was evident in all classrooms. Students' contributions were at all times confirmed and they were comfortable in questioning their teachers. It was clear that learning was taking place in a positive and relaxed environment.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Formative and summative assessment is conducted on an ongoing basis. Informal assessment was observed in all classes through the correction of homework and the use of a variety of questioning strategies. A series of global and directed questions was effectively integrated at various points in the lessons to check student understanding and knowledge. Assessment of learning also focused on the development of student responses by discussion or challenge.

The school has formulated a comprehensive policy on homework which outlines appropriate time allocations for this task at junior and senior cycles. An integral part of the policy is the use of a journal system to record homework and to act as a channel of communication with parents/guardians. In the event of homework not being completed the journal must be signed by a parent/guardian and a minor sanction of extra homework is applied. After a number of offences the student is referred to the year head and a more serious sanction is imposed. Homework journals are monitored by individual teachers and a special duties post-holder checks them on a weekly basis. The school is commended for placing such high priority on homework as it plays a vital role in consolidating students' learning and thus maximising their performance potential.

An examination of students' copies indicated that homework is given regularly and corrected. Questions are graded based on the certificate examinations marking schemes and commented on. It was reported that generic errors are dealt with at a global level and specific mistakes are highlighted in individual copies. This good practice of indicating shortcomings in written work and outlining ways

to improve is essential for students to improve the quality of their work. It is recommended that its use be extended to all classes.

Formal assessments for non-examination students include regular class tests and Christmas and end-of-year examinations. State examination classes take a formal Christmas examination and pre-examinations in the second term. There are common assessments in place for senior cycle students and this is commended. Parents are very well informed and updated on student progress through a variety of mechanisms apart from the journal system. The results of all assessments are reported to parents through written school reports that are issued three times a year. Annual parent-teacher meetings are held for each year group. A parent can meet a teacher by appointment at any stage during the school year to discuss their child's progress. This level of home-school communication is commended and acknowledged as an additional factor in motivating students.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Geography is a well supported subject in terms of resource provision and ICT facilities.
- The professional development of teachers is actively encouraged and facilitated by school management.
- The Geography teaching team is engaged in effective collaborative planning for the subject.
- There was clear evidence of individual planning and preparation for the lessons observed.
- ICT is extensively used in the presentation and delivery of the Geography syllabuses.
- High quality teaching was observed in the lessons evaluated.
- A variety of methodologies and stimulus materials was used to facilitate teaching and learning. A visual approach to the teaching of Geography features prominently.
- Students had a good understanding and knowledge of the topics for study.
- There was very good rapport between students and teachers. A positive and inclusive atmosphere prevailed in all classes.
- A comprehensive whole school policy on homework places high priority on its completion and the involvement of parents in their children's educational progress.

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 curricular plan be further developed within a short-term framework to include specific methodologies, resources and assessment instruments to be used.
- Increased liaison with the learning support department is recommended in the development of differentiated teaching and learning strategies to cater for the variety of learning needs in the mixed ability setting.
- Teachers should review the focus on physical Geography in 1<sup>st</sup> Year and provide for the introduction of map and photograph skills at an early stage.
- The Geography teachers should give consideration to the increased use of small-scale project work as a vehicle for learning and instrument of assessment. This work should then be displayed to enhance the visible presence of the subject.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Geography and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.