

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of History  
REPORT**

**Mercy Heights Secondary School  
Skibbereen, County Cork  
Roll number: 62490T**

**Date of inspection: 25 November 2013**



**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 HISTORY**

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**INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION**

<b>Dates of inspection</b>	25 November 2013
<b>Inspection activities undertaken</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review of relevant documents and intranet resources at the school</li><li>• Discussion with principal and teachers</li><li>• Interaction with students</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Observation of teaching and learning during four class periods</li><li>• Examination of students' work</li><li>• Feedback to principal and teachers</li></ul>

**MAIN FINDINGS**

- The overall standard of teaching and learning observed was very satisfactory and was typified by a very positive atmosphere in all lessons
- Significant amounts of effective group work and role play enhanced the student voice in most lessons
- The timetable provision for History, and the manner in which the timeslots are dispersed across the week, are very supportive of subject delivery
- The development of information and communication technology (ICT) and related resources, by management and the history department respectively, is highly commended
- Departmental planning, and teacher planning and preparedness, is very satisfactory, with the electronic subject department folder being particularly impressive in its scope.

**MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Occasionally in lessons, there was a need to link anticipated homework tasks to the aims of a lesson more clearly.
- Opportunities to promote self-review and peer evaluation a little more in lessons should be sought out, in the context of augmenting student engagement further
- It would be preferable, and in line with the aims of Transition Year (TY) nationally, if all students encountered some form of historical studies in TY and not just those who select History as a likely Leaving Certificate subject at the start of that year.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Mercy Heights Secondary School is a voluntary secondary school for girls in Skibbereen. The school currently has 409 students. Transition Year (TY) is compulsory at the school, although within TY, History and other subjects are optional. Preparations are under way to amalgamate Mercy Heights with the other two post-primary schools in the town, and some elements of planning for this move have already been undertaken.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

- The standard of teaching and learning observed in History was impressive and was characterised by a very good teacher–student dynamic and pleasant atmosphere in all lessons, with nice touches of humour and levity.
- Most lessons saw a clear identification of aims and learning outcomes to focus students' minds on what was at hand.
- Lesson content was always appropriately pitched to the relevant year group, and in line with overall planning. There was occasional overload of content, or an overemphasis on verbal to the exclusion of visual stimuli, but teachers were quick to realise this themselves and adjusted pace and emphasis accordingly.
- There was generally good encouragement of the student voice, via group work, oral feedback and dramatic role playing in particular.
- It is suggested that teachers should encourage note-making for group feedback, rather than have entire sentences written and then read out, as the former will encourage student reflection and discernment of the most relevant points.
- Teaching strategies included very good use of resources in class, ranging from theatrical props and wigs to prompt sheets and handouts, while ICT was expertly deployed to provide presentations, still photographs and video clips as required. Textbooks were appropriately used as supports to and resources for learning.
- Homework tasks, in most lessons, were identified at the start, in keeping with good assessment-for-learning practice, as it helps to focus students' minds on what they need to learn from the lesson. In some instances this strategy would benefit from teachers explaining links to the lesson aims a little more specifically.
- Oral correction of learning tasks was well done. Teachers are also urged to try to mix lower and higher order questioning a little more and perhaps try peer review occasionally, where students reflect on how to improve each other's answers.
- A good mix of homework tasks was noted in copybooks, some corrected by teachers with formative comments and some with a mix of formative and summative marking.
- It is good to see projects and model-making used to support students' learning and, allied to the promotion of historical role playing, these played an important role in encouraging student engagement and empathy with historical figures.
- Some student writing tasks were a little loose in their purpose, and teachers are urged to consider a slightly more focused approach, such as requiring just a paragraph in answer to a specific question in senior cycle, or getting students to engage with the concept of significant relevant statements in junior cycle.
- Although few opportunities to enhance students' numeracy presented themselves during lessons, the strong emphasis on promoting oral literacy via discussion in most lessons and, in one instance, through song, was very impressive.

## **SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

- There is very good time allocation for History in junior cycle and for Leaving Certificate, and all lessons are very well spaced across the days of the week and timeslots available.
- Although History currently finds itself offered against two science subjects in both fifth year and sixth year, the open choice and flexibility of the option blocks are very fair and uptake levels for Leaving Certificate are satisfactory.
- Students are asked to select subjects, including History, at the start of TY, rather than have the opportunity to sample a wide range of experiences. It would be in keeping with national TY philosophy to see all students exposed to some form of historical studies during that year and this could, in turn, support greater uptake of Leaving Certificate History in the future.
- Management is very supportive of co-curricular work in History, such as teachers' organisation of visits to historical sites and links with the local historical society.
- Management has facilitated good continuing professional development opportunities for staff in assessment and other aspects of teaching and learning.
- History teaching has been strongly supported by the school's commitment to ICT provision, including fixed and tablet computers and web connectivity.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

- The school's history department structure is very good. A volunteer coordinator organises regular meetings. Minutes of these meetings are maintained, and show a strong focus on practical, organisational issues.
  - It is excellent practice that a collaborative folder of resources and materials relevant to history teachers is maintained on the school's intranet.
  - Department members have shown a keen desire to learn from, and disseminate good ideas gleaned through involvement in, co-operative learning and instructional leadership training, and the Bridge 21 project at Trinity College Dublin.
  - The department plan seeks to promote discussion of teaching strategies as much as possible at its meetings. This is a very sensible aspiration.
  - The History department has an assessment policy which promotes student self-assessment, and it is recommended that this be given more emphasis in class, as identified in an earlier point in this report.
  - Individual lesson planning and preparation was very good in all instances, and overall termly and yearly plans are clear and relevant to the respective syllabuses. A good range of topics and aims is covered in TY planning also.
  - Teachers' commitment to history trips, often quite a distance away, to assisting student attendance at seminars and hosting visiting speakers is very impressive. If ties with the Cork branch of the History Teachers' Association of Ireland can be strengthened, further collaborative opportunities will undoubtedly arise.
  - A consistent approach to role taking, keeping records of monthly tests, parent-teacher meetings and end-of-term reports is adopted across the department.
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The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

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