An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School Warrenmount,
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Roll number: 60792C

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Presentation Secondary School Warrenmount. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in History 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 observed teaching and learning in selected lessons, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teacher. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and the teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and the subject teacher. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Presentation Secondary School Warrenmount supports the progress of the school’s students and caters for their needs by providing the Junior Certificate and the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) for junior cycle students and the Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) for senior cycle students.

The degree of accessibility that junior cycle students have to History varies because it is dependent on the curricular programme provided for the classes into which they are placed. The junior cycle students are organised into three class groups in first, second and third year. The more able students in each year are organised into two mixed-ability classes. The two academically stronger class groups have three history lesson periods per week in first year and four periods in second and third year. The students in these classes sit History as an examination subject in their Junior Certificate examinations.

One class group in first, second and third year is provided with a more modified curriculum that requires the students to sit fewer subjects in their Junior Certificate examinations than their peers in the other class groups. They follow the JCSP in gaining their certification. JCSP class groups have one period of History per week in first and second year. History is not provided for JCSP students in third year nor do they sit History in the Junior Certificate examinations. It is recommended that the limited accessibility to History of students in the designated JCSP class groups be reviewed and that History form part of the curriculum provided for the third-year JCSP class group. The timetabled allocation of history class periods should also be increased in order to support the students in their study of their Junior Certificate history coursework.

Senior cycle students have the choice of opting for Transition Year (TY) before proceeding to commence their leaving certificate studies. The TY students are currently organised into two class groups each of which studies a module in History as part of their curricular programme. The module is allocated two class periods per week and is delivered in its entirety for half of the
academic year to each TY class in turn. Students undertaking their leaving certificate coursework choose either the established Leaving Certificate or the LCA. History is offered to Leaving Certificate (established) students as an optional subject. There has been insufficient uptake among the students in the last two years to create a viable class. Management should discuss with the history department strategies to support the uptake of History among senior cycle students. A change in the range of subjects in the option band in which History is placed should be considered. It was reported for example, that History is traditionally set against Geography. It may be that the composition of the option block in which History is placed impacts negatively on the uptake of the subject.

The history subject team for 2010/2011 comprises two teachers; one is a permanent member of staff and the other is a student teacher studying for the postgraduate Diploma in Education. They are both deployed to teach History to designated class groups. The student teacher has been deployed to teach History to the three first-year class groups, the second-year JCSP class group, which means effectively having total responsibility for the teaching of History in the school’s JCSP, and the TY history module. The responsibility delegated to the student teacher is significant and should be critically reviewed in order to avoid the recurrence of a similar situation in future years. It is acknowledged that mentoring support is provided by senior management on a weekly basis and that the permanent member of the history team acts as the co-operating teacher for the student teacher.

Access to the school’s facilities and resources strongly support the teaching and study of History. The permanent teaching staff have all been provided with base classrooms, each equipped with high speed broadband, desktop computer and data projector. Use of the school’s computer room, one of the three classrooms equipped with an interactive whiteboard and the Apple Mac mobile classroom may be pre-booked. Teachers also have access to staff laptops and desktop computers for planning purposes, the school’s three digital display screens, the JCSP library and a range of resources such as photocopiers, printers and overhead projectors. The storage press containing the bank of resources for the use of the history subject team is another valuable resource.

The collaborative work of the history subject team and the organisation of formal subject meetings are facilitated by management. Funding is provided on a needs basis following the receipt of a request for a specified purchase and pending a decision of the board of management to allocate a budget to each subject department. Management encourages teaching staff to join their subject associations and is willing to pay the cost of membership. The importance of in-service training is recognised. The organisation of field trips to places of historical interest is supported.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The lessons observed were well prepared. The individual lesson plans received provided a clear outline of the focus, aim and intended development of the lessons. The new terms or key words that the students would encounter during the study of each lesson topic were identified and strategies incorporated into the structure of the lessons to help the students become well acquainted with them. The resources that were prepared to support the teaching and study of the lesson material included a PowerPoint presentation, video clip, class handouts, a worksheet, laminated copies of the key words and a selection of relevant pages in a supplementary textbook. The lesson plans also indicated the use of a variety of teaching and learning strategies.

The history department has long maintained a proactive role in supporting the development of History in the school as evidenced by the planning documentation contained in the department’s
records. The subject department plan for History is indicative of the importance that continues to be given to planning. The document clearly details the framework that informs the teaching and study of the subject. Information is provided about many important aspects of History such as aims and objectives, curricular planning, effective teaching methodologies, resources supporting students with special needs, homework, assessment, and reporting procedures.

The extended coursework plans that have been compiled for the history class groups reflect the commitment of the history team to teaching their students well and to strongly supporting their learning. The good work being done with regard to curricular planning should be continued. In some coursework plans the planning for topics to be taught during the first term is outlined in a columnar format and is more developed than the format used to outline the planning for topics to be taught at a later stage in the year. It is advocated that the columnar format be applied in planning the teaching and study of all topics insofar as this can be appropriately done. It is also advocated that consideration be given to combining the columns entitled “Homework” and “Assessment” and subsuming them into the broader category entitled “Methodologies”. Greater detail should be included about the learning outcomes for the various sections of the coursework outlined in the planning documentation.

The provision and development of the modular history programme for TY students are commended. The modular coursework includes a study of genealogy, local history, the Irish Constitution, the study of History through pop music and the organisation of class visits to a number of interesting locations. It provides students with the opportunity to develop their interest in History and is helping to maintain the students’ contact with the subject. Regarding the section on the Family Tree and Genealogy, the opportunity for students to explore the families of historical figures should be considered in planning this section of the coursework.

The three year plan outlined in the subject department plan for History is a key component of the document because forward planning is crucial to the continued development of History in the school. The plan identifies the need to re-introduce History to the curricular programme provided for the third-year JCSP class group and the reintroduction of History as a viable subject option for fifth and sixth-year leaving certificate students. The realisation of these important objectives is of fundamental importance in maintaining the development of History in the school. There is a need for the history subject team to discuss and develop strategies to achieve these important goals and to meet formally with management in order to secure support for the implementation of the strategies. The discussion with management relating to the third-year JCSP class group should include a review of the accessibility of History to all JCSP class groups.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Good quality teaching and learning were the hallmarks of the two lessons observed. The prior planning that had been undertaken provided the teacher with an informed overview of their pace and structure. The students remained engaged and on task at all times. The good relationship between teacher and students was very evident. The teacher’s practice of displaying history materials on the classroom walls further helped to create a positive learning environment for the lessons and to visually stimulate the students’ interest in History.

The student’s introduction to their respective lesson topics was accomplished by using a variety of strategies such as recapping on material previously studied, the correction of homework and the silent reading of the opening section of a prepared handout where the students were also directed to note unfamiliar words. The recapping and correction of homework established links with prior learning while the reading of the stipulated section in the prepared handout provided the class, for whom the handout was prepared with a direct introduction to their lesson topic.
These activities were then followed with time given to familiarising the students with the new terms or key words that would arise during the course of the study of their lesson topic.

The teacher monitored and supported students’ learning while utilising the aforementioned strategies during the initial stage of the lessons. This was done through questioning, informative comments, directing students to call out the answers to homework questions and the purposeful use of selected resources. The impact on learning afforded by the correction of homework was enhanced by the use of PowerPoint slides to display the correct answers given by the students in order to visually reinforce learning.

The familiarisation of the students with new terminology was consolidated by distributing a laminated copy of one of the new terms to each student in the class. The students then went in turn to the classroom board, called out the key word to their class group and affixed it to the board. The teacher also posed questions to the individual students and interacted with the class during the course of this learning activity. As a result there was increased awareness and understanding of the new terms.

The development of the lessons continued to impact on student learning. A PowerPoint presentation and the reading of the prepared handout were used effectively to provide students with a good understanding and knowledge of the lesson topic for which each was prepared. The impact that the PowerPoint presentation made on learning was enhanced by the strategies that were integrated into the presentation. These strategies included the teacher’s interaction with the students, the directing of individual students to point out the geographical location of places in particular slides, note-taking by the students, and the allocation of time for the undertaking of directed reading from a class textbook.

The study of the account of the lesson topic in the class handout was undertaken by selecting students to read aloud while their peers followed what was being read, teacher-led questions and the noting on the classroom board of points arising from the answers received. The students were then shown a DVD clip relating to the subject of their study during which they were required to complete a worksheet that was subsequently corrected.

The teaching and learning methodologies employed provided the students with a range of positive learning experiences. Homework was given in the final phase of the lessons to consolidate the learning achieved and to encourage the students to take responsibility for their own learning.

The students for their part were attentive and remained on task throughout the lessons observed. The quality of their learning was good as evidenced by the interest that they displayed in the lesson topics, their overall responsiveness to the teacher’s questions and their contributions to their class lessons including the completion of assignments. Based on the lessons observed a more even balance between the practice of addressing questions globally to the class and to named individuals should be explored as a means of encouraging the responsiveness of the quieter members of the class group.

**Assessment**

The progress of the students is tracked formally and informally. In the classroom a combination of assessment modes is used such as observation, questioning, the setting of assignments and class tests. The students’ homework is regularly corrected and this good practice further helps to keep the teacher informed about the application and progress of the individual students. The assessment of the JCSP class groups studying History also includes recording their degree of
success in realising targets set out for the coursework. The target statements are set out on a tracking document that is maintained for each JCSP student.

The two academically stronger first-year class groups sit a common history examination at the end of the year. The composition of the classes is then reviewed and the students are regrouped based on their overall performance in the summer tests, application, behaviour and the views of their teachers. The two class groups again sit common Christmas and summer tests in second year. The final decision as to whether a student should sit higher or ordinary-level history in their Junior Certificate examination is taken in third year. It would be worthwhile indicating in the assessment section of the subject department plan how the results of the analysis of the students’ performance in History in the state examinations inform this process.

Formal school examinations are organised at the end of the first and final terms before the Christmas and summer holidays commence. The third and sixth-year examination classes sit trial certificate examinations in the spring term in preparation for the state examinations in June. School reports are sent to the homes of the students following each of the formal examination sessions. The parents and guardians of the TY students receive monthly progress reports. The parent-teacher meeting that is organised annually for each year group provides the opportunity for teachers to meet with parents and guardians to discuss the progress of their charges. Appointments to discuss the progress of individual students may also be arranged.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Access to the school’s facilities and resources strongly support the teaching and study of History.
- The history department has long maintained a proactive role in supporting the development of History in the school. The subject department plan for History clearly details the framework that informs the teaching and study of the subject.
- The collaborative work of the history subject team and the organisation of formal subject meetings are facilitated by management.
- Good quality teaching and learning were the hallmarks of the two lessons observed. The teaching and learning methodologies employed supported student learning and provided the students with a range of positive learning experiences.
- The assessment and monitoring of the students’ progress are actively pursued.

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 limited accessibility that the students in the designated JCSP class groups have to History be reviewed and that History form part of the curriculum provided for the third-year JCSP class group.
- The responsibility delegated to the student teacher is significant and should be critically reviewed in order to avoid the recurrence of a similar situation in future years.
- Management and the history team should meet formally to discuss and develop strategies that will bring about the reintroduction of History as a viable subject option for fifth and sixth-year leaving certificate students.
A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teacher of History and with 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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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

After meeting with the History Department and reviewing the report, we concur with the findings and are very appreciative of the positive comments and affirmation of the good work undertaken by the Department. It is clear that a number of changes outlined in the recommendations need to be addressed immediately. The Board have given their approval for all recommendations to be undertaken in the planning for the next school year.

The Department was very happy to read the affirming comments on the quality of teaching and learning. Under Planning and Preparation, they acknowledge the comments on the use of the columnar format for all course work plans, the inclusion of a section on methodologies and the inclusion of exploration of families of historical figures in TY coursework.

The Department acknowledge the suggestion to ensure that responses are elicited from individual students to ensure a balance with global questioning. The suggestion to use the analysis of students’ performance in History in the state examinations is found to be useful in informing decisions on levels for Junior Certificate examinations.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

- The school is currently in the middle of a JCSP Review and the provision of History for JCSP students is being explored in the hope of re-introducing it to the JCSP curriculum with the long-term goal of offering these students the opportunity to take History as a Junior Certificate subject and to sit the examination, always cognisant of students’ individual ability and need. In this regard the Department have formulated a number of creative ideas which would encourage cross-curricular planning.

- We absolutely agree that no PGDE teacher will be taken on in future years unless we can provide the essential mentoring role necessary in this critical year of teacher training. Timetabling of such teachers’ needs will be given critical consideration so that responsibility delegated to that teacher is commensurate with their ability and experience.
• The Principal has met with the History department and will continue to do so to formulate strategies to bring about the re-introduction of History as a viable subject option for Senior Cycle, acknowledging that this may take a number of years.

• In relation to funding, the board has agreed that all Departments will have a budget for their subject, provision to be made in September of each year.

Regarding teaching and learning, the Department plans in time to place all their resources and material on DVD initially, with the hope of moving such resources to the website or school VLE for all members of the school community to access.