

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of History
REPORT**

**St. Mary's College C.S.Sp.
Rathmines
Dublin 6.
Roll number: 60560E**

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**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Mary's College C.S.Sp., Rathmines. 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 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

History is very accessible to every student in St. Mary's College C.S.Sp., Rathmines. All junior cycle students study History to Junior Certificate. Transition Year (TY) is mandatory and the students study a history module as part of their TY curriculum. Fifth-year students are offered History as an optional subject choice when they commence their Leaving Certificate programme. History is a popular subject choice among the school's senior students as indicated by the fact that 58 (39%) of the school's total cohort of 147 students currently in fifth and sixth-year elected to continue their study of History to Leaving Certificate.

The timetabled allocation and distribution of the history lesson periods support the teaching and study of the subject. Each of the school's three junior cycle year groups have three single history periods per week. TY students have also three history periods comprising one double period and one single period per week for the duration of their history module. The module is taught in turn to the three TY class groups. There are two history class groups in both fifth and sixth year and the students in these class groups have a weekly allocation of five history lesson periods apiece that includes one double period.

Management deploys the six members of the school's history subject team to teach History and this good practice enables the entire team to remain actively involved in teaching the subject. Two members of the team have responsibility for teaching the Leaving Certificate history curriculum and one of them teaches the TY history coursework. The remaining four members of the team teach History to the junior cycle class groups. The teachers are assigned to their class groups for the duration of their particular curricular programme whenever it is feasible to do so. This is good practice as it enables the history teachers to bond with their students, acquire knowledge of their learning and support their progress over a relatively long period of time.

Management's deployment of the history teachers takes into account factors such as their experience, interests and the restrictions on their availability to teach History arising from the timetabling of the other subjects that they teach. Ways of avoiding the emergence of a division of the members of the team into two distinct groups with responsibility for teaching either junior

cycle or senior cycle class groups should be discussed and implemented. The recommendation that is made in the next section of this report regarding the involvement of a greater number of history teachers in teaching the TY history should be helpful in that regard.

History is well resourced in the college. The majority of the teachers have their own base classrooms, one of which is the designated history room. The classrooms are equipped with a data projector, interactive whiteboard and computer. Access to the internet is facilitated by the school's WiFi network. The history room has a library of various resources that are available to the history teachers such as books, magazines, DVDs and CDs to supplement their own personal resource materials. The displays of posters, history subjects, and students' projects that adorn the walls together with the collection of students' research projects that are maintained in the room enhance the profile of History among the students and create a stimulating environment for history lessons.

The school library is another important resource for both students and teachers. This well-maintained facility is managed by a full-time librarian and has an extensive history section that includes books, DVDs and CDs. There is seating provision and tables for the students and teachers in the library and a number of computer work stations are available there for their use. The computer room and photocopying facilities are also at the disposal of the history teachers.

Management supports the collaborative work of the history teachers. Meetings of the history department are facilitated and budgetary assistance is provided on a needs basis. The importance of in-service training is recognised and attendance at the in-service courses for the new leaving certificate syllabus is accommodated. Management also encourages the teaching staff to become members of their professional associations such as the History Teachers' Association of Ireland (HTAI). Moreover, the board of management facilitates and supports the teaching staff in undertaking professional development courses subject to the board's approval of the courses. School-based in-service such as information and communication technology training (ICT) is organised and supports the ongoing continuous professional development (CPD) of the history teachers and their colleagues.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The history department fulfils a key role in maintaining the ongoing development of History. The subject coordinator, for example, has responsibility for convening departmental meetings, collating the yearly subject plans, liaising with management, distributing literature and resources and mentoring new colleagues. The position of coordinator is voluntary and commendably is to be rotated among the members of the history subject team. The formal meetings of the history department facilitate and support the collaborative work of the history teachers by providing them with the opportunity to meet together to progress subject planning and discuss issues pertinent to History. The history teachers meet at regular intervals during the academic year and this good practice should be continued.

The history department plan is a framework policy document that outlines and informs the work of the history teachers. The contents of the plan include the mission statement and details of the planning that underpins the teaching and the students' study of History for each of the college's curricular programmes namely the Junior Certificate, TY and the established Leaving Certificate. The collaboration of the history teachers in compiling this important and informative document is commended. Moreover, the history team are strongly encouraged to maintain the momentum of their planning because effective planning is always a work in progress rather than a finished product. The departmental plan should be progressed by further developing the year plans for

teaching the coursework and including sections in the plan on the role of the coordinator, students with additional needs, and the minutes of departmental meetings.

The coursework plans being used at present vary somewhat in format and detail regarding course content, learning outcomes and how the history topics are taught. It is recommended that a common template for planning the teaching and the students' study of the history coursework in the three curricular programmes be developed and adopted in order to maintain greater consistency in departmental planning practice. The common template that is developed should place a clear focus on the learning outcomes to be achieved and the methodologies and resources to be employed in teaching the itemised topics. It is important that the completed coursework plans draw upon the collective experience of the history teachers by detailing the methodologies and resources that they would recommend for teaching the various topics. A columnar format should be considered when deciding the structure of the template because it has advantages in respect of providing a broad overview of the planned coursework and later reflection.

TY makes an important contribution to the breadth of education provided for the students and the inclusion of the history module in the curricular programme is enabling History to make a valuable contribution to the educational experience of the TY students. This is evidenced by the fact that the module provides a very good opportunity for the students to develop their interest in History and to undertake historical research on a subject of their own choosing in a context free from the pressure of state examinations. The teacher also has greater freedom to decide the content of the coursework and to explore a variety of teaching and learning methodologies. It is recommended that a greater number of history teachers become involved in teaching the TY history module. This will build capacity within the team to teach this important module and facilitate a wider distribution of the responsibility for teaching the module among the history subject team.

At the time of the inspection visit plans were afoot in the college to provide shared electronic subject folders for the teaching staff. The history teachers are encouraged to explore the potential of the history folder when it becomes available. This valuable resource will support their collaborative work and the ongoing development of History. The folder will provide a useful facility for filing and accessing history resources such as worksheets, handouts, PowerPoint presentations and examination papers. It will also facilitate collaborative work on the development of the departmental planning documentation including the coursework plans and the compilation of the records of departmental meetings after they have been electronically saved in the shared folder.

Planning for the lessons observed included deciding on the focus and format of the lesson, the teaching and learning methodologies to be utilised, the determination of assignments for the students including homework tasks and the preparation of supplementary resources. The attention given to maintaining displays of history materials such as posters and student projects on the walls of the base classrooms of the history teachers was also noted. Moreover, the teachers plan and organise co-curricular outings for the students to places of historical interest. The nurturing and support of the students' interest in History by these means is laudable.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The teachers commenced their respective lessons by recording the attendance of the students. In one instance the students were first subdivided into small groups because the format of their lesson was to be a quiz and the roll was then taken. The teachers quickly engaged their students as a result of these preliminary activities. The teachers proceeded to inform their students of the

focus of the lesson. Individual teachers also noted the focus of the lesson on the classroom board. Best practice was demonstrated when the intended learning outcomes were shared with the students as well. Classroom management was uniformly good and the students were frequently affirmed for their contributions. The variety of teaching and learning methodologies employed overall consolidated student learning. The positive and mutually respectful relationship between teachers and students was evident throughout the lessons.

The checking of written or oral homework occurred during the initial phase of a number of lessons in order to emphasise the importance of independent learning to the students but also to establish the context for the study of the lesson topic. The recapping of material previously studied was another means used to consolidate prior learning before introducing the students to the new lesson material. The teachers' interactions with their students together with informative comment and the use made of the classroom board during these activities engaged the students and enhanced their learning.

The range of teaching and learning methodologies employed during the lessons included the effective use of ICT. For example, a class's viewing of a short historical documentary on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the USA in the post-World War Two period that had been sourced on the internet made the students more informed about the subject of their lesson. Similarly, a class's study of the D-Day landings during the Second World War was enhanced by the viewing of a video clip on the Teheran Conference in November 1943 at which the Allied leaders, Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill agreed to the landings. This was followed at a later point in the lesson with another presentation about the progress of the Allied invasion force following upon the D-Day landings. However, the study of the latter at an earlier stage in the lesson merited consideration given that it dealt with an important aspect of the lesson topic.

A PowerPoint presentation that replicated the format of the popular television show "Who wants to be a millionaire?" provided the quiz model that was used to conduct a class's revision of a section of their coursework. In this instance however, the format was adapted to facilitate the simultaneous participation of the groups into which the students had been organised. Yet, notwithstanding the efficacy of the PowerPoint presentation in enhancing the format of the quiz and strongly engaging the students, a limitation of the quiz itself was the type of question asked. The questions required only the factual recall of information. Strategies such as perhaps, the awarding of bonus points during the quiz should have been included to ensure that higher order questions were incorporated into this activity. The higher order questions could have been used to challenge the students to demonstrate a greater understanding of the historical developments and the key concepts that were pertinent to the period revised than the recall of factual information allowed.

The consolidation of student learning was a strong feature of all lessons. For example a notable feature of the teachers' interaction with their students was the addressing of questions to the class and to named individuals. This strategy enabled the teachers to gauge and guide learning. In one lesson however, the questioning of the students regarding their oral homework was overlong. Individual teachers also made good use of the classroom board to highlight important points of information that emerged according as their students' study of their lesson topic progressed. Exploration of the scope that the interactive whiteboard provides for the teacher to display selected images when commenting on the information recorded is encouraged in order to further support learning. The good practice observed where the combined use of board and data projector was used in this manner is commended.

The integration of independent learning methodologies such as the setting of written assignments, note-taking tasks and on one occasion the organisation of a peer discussion group activity into the development of the lesson is both commended and encouraged. The setting of a written assignment during the lesson and as homework was the more common occurrence. Note-taking was a feature of the senior cycle class groups in particular. The peer discussion activity involved two class groups discussing a motion relating to the lesson topic from opposing points of view and subsequently providing feedback that was noted on the board. These active learning strategies provided valuable opportunities for the students to assume responsibility for their own learning.

ASSESSMENT

A variety of assessment modes is used to monitor and evaluate the progress of the history students. These assessment modes are informed by the school's assessment and homework policies. Formal school examinations are organised at the end of the first term for all year groups. The third and sixth-year examination classes sit trial certificate examinations in the spring term as part of the students' preparation for the state examinations in June. The non-examination year groups sit summer examinations. However, the grade achieved by the TY students for their history module is based on the assessment of the project work that they are required to complete and not a formal examination.

The history teachers continuously assess the progress of their students in the classroom. During the inspection visit the teachers' judgements were informed by their knowledge of their students, the recording of attendance, observation, interaction, and the setting of assignments. Learning is also assessed through the class tests that are set by individual teachers. Homework is regularly set and corrected. The teachers' good practice of providing a feedback comment on the students' corrected assignments is commendable. However, it is advocated that increased use be made of constructive feedback comments in order to provide the students with a greater insight into the strengths and areas requiring further development in their written assignments. In this context the elaboration of concise and affirming comments such as "Good" and "Very Good" should be considered.

Parents and guardians are kept informed about the progress being made by the students. School reports are sent to the homes of the students every three weeks and following each of the formal in-house examination sessions. A parent-teacher meeting is arranged annually for each year-group. Parents and guardians can also arrange to meet with subject teachers during the year.

Senior management and the history subject team analyse the performances of the students in the state examinations. The students sit the higher-level paper in History in the Leaving Certificate examinations and almost all students have sat the higher-level paper in History in the Junior Certificate examinations in recent years. The suitability of the higher-level paper rather than the ordinary level paper in the Junior History examination for a very small minority of students who sit the higher-level paper should be kept under review. The overall level of success that is consistently achieved by the students in both the Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate History examinations is commended.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- History is very accessible to the students and is well resourced in St. Mary's College.
- The timetabled allocation and distribution of the history lesson periods support the teaching and study of the subject.
- Management's deployment of the six members of the history subject team enables the entire team to remain actively involved in teaching the subject.
- Management supports the collaborative work of the history teachers.
- The history department fulfils a key role in maintaining the ongoing development of History.
- The history teachers have developed and documented a department plan that includes coursework plans and the plan informs teaching and learning in the history classroom.
- Teaching and learning in the history classroom is underpinned by good practices such as the planned development of lessons, the employment of a variety of teaching and learning methodologies, the active engagement of the students and the consolidation of their learning.
- A variety of formal and informal assessment modes is used to monitor and evaluate the progress of the history students.

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

- The history department plan should be further developed.
- The adoption of a common template for planning the teaching and learning of the history coursework in the college's three curricular programmes is recommended.
- The capacity among the history subject team to teach the TY history module should be increased.
- Ways of avoiding the emergence of a division of the members of the history team into two distinct groups with responsibility for teaching either junior cycle or senior cycle class groups should be discussed and implemented.
- More use should be made of constructive feedback comments on students' assignments in order to provide the students with a greater insight into the strengths and areas requiring further development in their written work.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers 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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