An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

Sacred Heart School, Westport, Co. Mayo
Roll number: 64710R

Date of inspection: 7 May 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Sacred Heart School, Westport. 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 deputy principal. 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

Sacred Heart School is a secondary school in the town of Westport and has a current enrolment of 596 pupils. History is a core subject at junior cycle and classes at this level have the satisfactory provision of three class periods per week. Provision at Leaving Certificate level is good. Classes have five periods per week, one double period and three single periods. Timetabling is generally good with a good spread of classes across the week. It is recommended that management avoid an occasional tendency to timetable junior cycle History on three successive days, or afternoon lessons only, if at all possible.

Transition Year (TY) is optional in the school. At present there is no history element in the TY programme, apart from a brief taster programme at the end of the TY year to enable students to make an informed choice about Leaving Certificate subjects. It is recommended, in the interest of having a broad and balanced programme, that the TY programme be reviewed, to include a history module.

On transfer into fifth year, students are offered a choice between the established Leaving Certificate programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. Those students opting for the established Leaving Certificate are provided with an open choice of subjects. This allows for the creation of option blocks of subjects from which the students then choose their final combination of subjects. Students are well supported when making their choices. This student-centred approach is commendable. This year it was not possible to form a viable history class in fifth year. However management were confident that this would be remedied in the next school year. It is recommended that the maintenance of a continued presence for the subject on the Leaving Certificate timetable should be seen as a priority in the coming years and that the history department should look at ways that this could be achieved. It is suggested that a history notice board in a prominent area of the school could be a valuable support to the promotion of History in the school.

School management effectively supports the delivery of the planned teaching programme for History. Management is open to the purchase of resources and some resources have been acquired. These are stored in a resource room or in teachers’ lockers. It is recommended that the
resources available for History teaching be added to, catalogued, and the catalogue updated as new resources become available. History classes are, for the most part, taught in student-based rooms. Some of these rooms are outfitted with data projectors and management plans to extend this provision to other rooms in the years ahead. This is to be welcomed. It was noted that, in some cases, the walls of classrooms were free of any posters, maps or samples of students work and any shelves available in these classrooms were bare. In the interest of providing a stimulating learning environment for students, it is recommended that dedicated History and Geography rooms with information and communication technology (ICT) equipment be provided in both the senior and junior end of the school and that the walls of the rooms be utilised as a display and learning resource. Furthermore, as an additional support for teaching and learning in History, it is recommended that a set of maps be purchased for those rooms in which History is taught.

Management facilitates history field trips to places of historical interest. It is laudable that a number of whole-school and subject-specific continuing professional development sessions have been facilitated by management. A member of the history department is an active member of the History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI). This is commended as this organisation provides very good support to history teachers. Group membership of this subject association should be considered.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject planning is well established in the school. A coordinator is in place and minutes of meetings are available. Minutes show clear evidence of collaboration in the development and implementation of the subject plan in the form of a yearly review of the plan. This is commended. Minutes also show good awareness of students’ progress in certificate examinations. Students are encouraged to achieve at a high level and this is reflected in the good numbers of students taking higher-level History. It is recommended that the analysis of certificate examination data devolves to the history department and that this information be used to inform team planning and review.

The department folder contains a good range of relevant documentation including schemes of work with agreed timeframes for delivery. At present the schemes of work for junior cycle history show an overreliance on the textbook as a template for planning. It is recommended that these schemes of work be gradually expanded to include topics, rather than chapter headings, agreed learning outcomes and suggested methodologies and resources for the different topics on the course.

With the core elements of subject planning already well established in History, department members are urged to build on possible strategies to support one another. Even before the anticipated improvement in ICT availability, discussion of how ICT can enhance teaching and learning can begin. Teachers are encouraged to share practice in how they use overhead projector acetates and data projectors with a view to informing overall department practice. This collaboration could be extended to include the pooling of resources in a shared history folder, either in hard copy, electronically or both. A similar collaborative approach could identify how best to differentiate for student access to the curriculum, including the very able and students with additional educational needs. The merits of different approaches deserve discussion at future departmental meetings, as time permits, with a view to developing as much cohesion as possible in subject delivery within the classroom.

Although no individual planning documentation was presented during the course of the evaluation, lessons observed were well structured, good pace and timing were evident and teachers planned well for the use of resources.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning across the department was good and in some instances very good. The practice observed in some lessons, of outlining the learning outcomes of the lesson to students on the board in writing at the start, is a good one. An instance where the lesson outline was left at the side of the board for the duration of the lesson is commended as it meant that the lesson structure was clear to students at all times. It is recommended that these good practices be adopted by all teachers in the department.

Lessons observed accorded with the department plan and relevant syllabuses. At senior level, a good emphasis on the key elements, personalities and concepts of the syllabus brought additional clarity to the learning process. There was an appropriate focus on examination strategy for certificate examinations, given the time of year, and good preparation for those examinations in many lessons observed. Good cross-curricular links and links with students’ experience were also in evidence. For example, in one junior cycle lesson on political developments in Northern Ireland, a poem by Michael Longley was used to explain the background to the peace process. Good links were made to concepts in Civics, Social and Political Education (CSPE) in the same lesson.

There was a good balance between teacher input and student activity in most lessons observed. The use of pair work observed in many lessons is commended as it allows students to direct their own learning and gives an opportunity to the teacher to offer individual help where needed, or to check students’ work. For example, in one senior cycle lesson students were asked, first individually and then in pairs, to write an outline plan for an essay. The teacher then took feedback on the board. Thus students had an agreed structure for their homework assignment that developed from classroom discussion as opposed to teacher direction. This is very good practice. In another lesson, a student was asked to present their project to the class. Members of the class were then invited to question the student about the project. It is commendable that the teacher reminded students of basic ground rules regarding respect for others beforehand. It was observed that, in a minority of lessons in which there was an over-emphasis on teacher talk, students’ attention waned somewhat as the lesson proceeded. It is recommended that some measure of student activity be incorporated into every lesson to bring balance and variety to the lesson.

Good use of differentiated teaching strategies was observed in the course of the evaluation in some classrooms visited. In some lessons, the board was used to identify key words associated with the lesson or to outline main points, for example, in a junior cycle lesson on the Reformation. To build on these good practices, teachers should encourage students to take these words down in their copybooks. In other lessons, the teacher had sourced additional more accessible resources to supplement the textbook. An anagram of Theobald Wolfe Tone used in one lesson was a good way to direct students’ attention to the spelling and word structure of a key name associated with the topic. Students were encouraged to read aloud in many lessons. This good practice should be encouraged. Visual sources, such as photographs of renaissance and medieval paintings distributed in one lesson, had a good impact on student understanding and catered for students with a visual learning style. Teachers are reminded that the textbook and handouts often contain very good visuals that can be used as a teaching tool to supplement the text. It is important that teachers keep the different levels and learning styles in the class in mind, as outlined in the school’s special educational needs and learning-support policy, when planning their lessons. To this end, it is recommended that the use of key words, visual material, including maps, and active learning methodologies should be extended to all classrooms.
Very good pupil-teacher relations were in evidence in the course of the evaluation with good classroom management strategies evident throughout. Teachers dealt with students in a sensitive and supportive manner in all lessons observed. This is commendable.

**ASSESSMENT**

Good modes of assessment are in use across the department including questioning, homework, project-work, frequent in-class testing and formal examinations. Questioning was a feature of all lessons inspected and was used to revise work completed and to check for understanding. In most classrooms visited, a good spread of questions meant that all students were involved in the questioning process. In a minority of classrooms, global questioning and answering was used. It is recommended that this strategy be balanced with directed questioning in order to ensure inclusion. It is laudable that project work is included as an assessment strategy in first-year and second-year classes.

Examination of student copybooks and journals shows that homework is given regularly in all classrooms visited and frequently monitored in the majority of classrooms visited. Many examples of formative assessment strategies were in evidence, with teachers giving students helpful comments on how to improve their work, especially at senior cycle. It is recommended the good practice is extended to all classrooms. Written homework should include extended writing tasks as well as short answer questions to give students an opportunity to practice the skills of history writing.

It is positive that frequent end-of-topic testing is a feature of good practice in the school. Formal examinations are held twice a year. To ensure consistency across the department, it is recommended that common end-of-year examinations be held for first-year and second-year students. These examinations should be differentiated for student access if necessary.

Student outcomes are communicated to students’ homes by means of informal contact, the student journal, parent-teacher meetings once a year and reports home twice a year.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School management effectively supports the delivery of the planned teaching programme for History.
- Subject planning is well established in the school.
- Students are encouraged to achieve at a high level and this is reflected in the good numbers of students taking higher-level History.
- Lessons observed were well structured, with good pace and timing and good planning for resources evident.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good across the department and in some instances very good.
- Very good pupil-teacher relations were in evidence in the course of the evaluation with good classroom management strategies evident throughout.
- Good modes of assessment are in use across the department including questioning, homework, project-work, frequent in-class testing and formal examinations.

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 TY programme be reviewed to include a history module.
• It is recommended that the use of key words, visual material, including maps, and active learning methodologies should be extended to all classrooms.
• It is recommended that common end-of-year examinations be held for first-year and second-year students.

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

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