

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of History
REPORT**

**Saint Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School
Dublin 8
Roll number: 60660I**

Date of inspection: 25 March 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | A N D S K I L L S**

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Saint Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 interacted with students and teachers, examined students' work, and had informal discussions with 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In line with Department of Education and Skills regulations, St. Patrick's offers History as a core element of the junior cycle. All junior history classes are taught in mixed-ability contexts and each has three single lessons per week, which is good provision. These lessons are spaced across the full week and are mostly allocated morning timeslots, which is supportive. Two teachers share junior cycle history teaching duties and in the current academic year a postgraduate diploma in education (PGDE) student has also been involved in delivery of some junior classes, mentored by one of the subject teachers. This is satisfactory.

It is commendable that History is studied by all students in Transition Year (TY) and, given that uptake levels in the school's TY are high, this is a good support to social studies as students move into senior cycle. For Leaving Certificate, History is offered in a fixed option block against Biology. This arrangement could be re-examined as part of the current review of the subject option system. Although attendance among senior students was poor on the day of the evaluation visit, uptake levels in History are healthy in each current senior year. The placing of History opposite Biology has resulted in senior history lessons being mainly configured as double periods, which is not ideal for History. Of more concern is the fact that fifth-year History currently has a total of just four lessons per week, in two double periods, and it is recommended that every effort be made to increase this to five periods, as is the case in sixth year. One of the school's history teachers takes all TY and Leaving Certificate classes in the subject.

Among broader supports for History at the school, it is commendable that some lessons are taught in a teacher-based classroom which has very good storage facilities and excellent wall displays. The classrooms which were visited were both equipped with data projectors, which can be important supports to lesson delivery in History, as was observed in one classroom. Management supports teachers' attendance at in-service courses when possible and is also willing to cover the cost of membership of the History Teachers Association of Ireland when asked. The school does not have a significant library facility but is very aware of the advantages to historical study which its location beside St. Patrick's Cathedral offers, and evidence of engagement with valuable class

visits to the Dublinia experience and a visit to Christ Church Cathedral was noted during the evaluation. A number of items on display around the corridor also add to the sense of the school's historical nature, dating as it does from the 16th century, although the development of a full history notice board which could detail school history and also be used to link to local history and curricular issues deserves consideration if space and time allow.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

With a core teaching team of just two teachers, one of whom teaches junior History only, it has not been felt necessary to date to develop a formal department structure in History. Accordingly, there is no designated subject convenor or co-ordinator and subject-related meetings are held informally. This situation deserves review. There are many areas of common ground which can be explored in a departmental structure, including the development of common course plans and pooling of resources for Junior Certificate classes, sharing ideas in TY planning, and possibly sharing co-ordination duties, attendance at HTAI branch meetings and minute-taking at history department meetings. Some of this is happening informally but a more formal approach would undoubtedly support collaborative planning further and would augment supports for existing teachers and for any new or student teachers. The collation of the individual year plans which have been documented into an overarching subject plan is also desirable. This could include any minutes of department meetings, lists of resources, copies of relevant syllabuses and other materials.

The development of yearly plans has been of somewhat mixed quality and is an area which needs attention. The written plan for first year, which has had a combined teacher and student-teacher input, over-emphasises some aspects of the syllabus which do not merit it. This is being ironed out as the year progresses. Second-year, third-year and particularly TY year plans are good, with the TY plan showing a very important focus on utilising the local historical sites which surround the school, to optimum advantage. Links with St. Patrick's Cathedral, Marsh's Library and the National Archives have all been forged, and studies made of local involvement in world wars, sports history, women's history, modern warfare and history through song are all planned for, as is a project on the French revolution. It may be that too many topics are included in the TY plan. If this is found to be so in practice, the use of timetabled history lessons for delivery of core aspects of the programme, with the possibility of including local studies, women's studies, sports history or other more focused elements within a modular format, is worth considering.

Planning for Leaving Certificate course coverage needs immediate attention. To date, aspects of a wide range of topics on the revised syllabus have been covered, with a focus on case studies in particular. It is strongly recommended that further planning focus more specifically on covering the compulsory documents topic, which changes currently in a two-year cycle, and three other topics, to achieve a balance which sees two core topics covered in Irish History, 1815-1993, and two topics covered in History of Europe and the wider world, 1815-1992. This would ensure a more defined route through the syllabus, taking close to half an academic year on average to cover the various elements, case studies, concepts and key personalities in any one topic, rather than the more fluid approach currently employed. Although not in the written planning presented, the general approach taken to research study work is satisfactory but should also be written into the fifth-year and sixth-year plans for future reference.

Good evidence was presented of individual teacher planning and preparation, with teachers making use of a wide range of handout materials, including text-based and illustrated materials, summary notes and assessment instruments. Where used in one lesson, planning for the

integration of information and communication technology (ICT) was good and included a good emphasis on visual stimulus materials which is worthy of further development.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A good standard of teaching was observed in most lessons. Good teacher preparation was evident in all instances, with a substantial folder of resources drawn on in some lessons and with a computer and data projector successfully deployed in another, as a means of offering text and visual reinforcement. As the rooms visited both appear to have ICT installations, it is recommended that increased use of ICT for the delivery of lessons rich in visuals and content be considered. In some lessons, the wall displays were an obvious enhancement to the historical atmosphere and while all classrooms had traditional seating arrangements, not ideal for group activities, there was no difficulty with sightlines to the board for students, or with teacher access along the aisles if desired.

In all classrooms, students settled very well to work and a pleasant teacher-student rapport was very evident. Sometimes, student focus was assisted by teachers placing the lesson aims on the board as the work began. This is sensible practice and deserves to be done in all classes, with a view to making it clear what aspect of the syllabus or core concept is being addressed in any particular lesson. Where isolated misdemeanours occurred, as with a student chewing gum or another lacking concentration, the teacher dealt with these firmly but without any disruption to the developing lesson dynamic, which is good.

Teacher-student interaction was an important feature of all lessons observed, and was dominated by the use of oral questioning. Sometimes, this worked as an ice-breaking technique, as when students were asked to think of any movies they knew which were set in Rome, as an introduction to ancient Roman history. Questions were spread among volunteer answerers and selected students in all lessons, and appropriately required students to give opinions, or to link historical Latin words to any modern equivalents. Some very good document-analysis work was also done through oral questioning, and at times the reading of short textbook extracts was done to stimulate further questioning opportunities. In one instance, teacher questioning of students was carried out from a seated position and it is recommended that this be reconsidered, as it makes establishing eye contact and clear communication more challenging.

A reasonable commitment to self-directed learning was evident in the lessons observed. Group activities were not specifically planned for but good pair-working opportunities were identified in some lessons, mainly around document-analysis tasks on the Romans, plantations or the 1798 Rebellion. It was also interesting to note that a previous topic linked to plantations had been covered by means of a short class play. Where textbooks were read from, this was done mainly by the teacher. Some reduction in textbook or handout reading with increased questioning on visual and written sources would be worthwhile. In addition, if students, rather than the teacher, were to read this material aloud, it would be a useful means of assessing comprehension. Another area where simple opportunities for students' self direction could be considered is in the use of underlining or marking of texts. Rather than the teacher telling students what to mark and why, it is recommended that students be asked what they feel is important and why it should be so marked.

A very good use of Power Point to identify aspects of Roman life in visual and summary form in one lesson deserves commendation. Apart from this, teachers made good use of a variety of teaching aids, most of which were self-generated. A very good mock newspaper on ancient

Rome, a very detailed handout on French political developments in the inter-war period, text-based resources on plantations and primary sources, and a song and crest from 1798 showed the variety and extent of the resources used in the lessons observed. The use of the classroom whiteboard for simple summary lists or diagrams, and of available wall maps where matters of geographical relevance are being discussed, are worthy of some consideration. If it proves possible for a subject department structure to be created, the electronic pooling of such resources over time, for common use by history teachers at the school, could be an important mutual support to teachers as the quality of all materials used was very good.

Some good learning opportunities were offered to students in the lessons observed. In all cases, students' concentration and engagement remained very good to the end. The level at which lesson content was pitched was, in the main, appropriate to the class groups concerned. If practicable, more use of visual stimulus materials would assist learning in the mixed-ability junior cycle lessons. A more comprehensive and measured approach to topic coverage, in line with the recommendations made earlier in the Planning and Preparation section, is required in senior cycle, ideally with a differentiation for higher-level students which would encourage them in extra reading, and keener awareness of key course concepts and the important developments in modern left-wing and right-wing politics.

In some lessons, in both junior and senior cycles, a greater focus on encouraging students to make short notes for themselves, or to develop historical dictionaries of any important or complex terms they encounter, would further support longer-term learning. A more systematic approach to how and where students retain any handout material given to them is also deserving of consideration, ideally by the teaching team collaboratively. Where the opportunity arose to ask students questions about the material they had covered in class, their engagement and understanding was satisfactory.

ASSESSMENT

Good informal assessment strategies were employed in all lessons. The success of oral questioning has already been referred to. Teachers also monitored students' homework, sometimes during the in-class tasks which were assigned. This was a time-efficient strategy. Students' copybooks were examined by the inspector in most lessons and these showed a good commitment by teachers to the assignment of regular written homework and to formative commentary on longer items of students' homework, which is commendable. Worksheets, mainly focusing on short-answer questions, were well used and it is merely suggested that mixed-ability contexts in junior cycle could benefit from the assignment of some drawing or diagrammatic tasks in addition to the fine written ones observed.

Turning to more substantial assessment instruments used in History, class tests were also in evidence with junior students and were marked, although the use of significant relevant statement (SRS) marking is recommended for consideration as students move towards the Junior Certificate. This would help to train students in the writing of clear, relevant history. A good regime of written homework was evident in senior students' copybooks too, although the emphasis in question phrasing needs to focus more on the interrogative style common in the questions on the revised Leaving Certificate. It was good to note that where a handout has been compiled on a topic for Leaving Certificate study, it also included a sample of past questions from the certificate examination, which is a good means of focusing students' minds on what is required of them. The use of family-tree projects and other imaginative assessment strategies in TY is highly commended.

At whole-school level, some of the elements supporting the principles of assessment for learning have been evident in History, including the use of formative assessment, and it is recommended that the school continue to look at these principles as it develops its overall assessment policy. The importance of learning intentions, learning outcomes, review strategies and self-direction should all be factored into this policy development. It would be worthwhile for the history department to examine more closely the outcomes of certificate examinations. Uptake levels in higher-level papers are generally very good but there has been considerable variation in terms of outcomes and numbers doing the subject for Leaving Certificate in some years. Whole-school assessment practices include the holding of Christmas and summer examinations, or of mock certificate examinations for third-year and sixth-year classes. Parent-teacher meetings are held for each year group on an annual basis, and contacts with home are further assisted by written reports after examinations, and by the use of the student journal.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- General timetable provision for History is good, although low in fifth year.
- Good levels of individual teacher preparation have been evident, especially in terms of handouts and resources.
- An interesting approach to TY planning, with a fine focus on local history, is commended.
- Lessons took place in pleasant classroom environments and were characterised by very good teacher-student engagement.
- A good standard of teaching and learning was evident in the majority of lessons, with good use of oral questioning, support materials and some historical sources in particular.
- Good use of formative assessment and of imaginative project work in certain contexts is commended.

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

- The restoration of a fifth period per week to fifth-year History deserves prioritisation.
- A formal departmental approach to subject planning is desirable.
- A review and reconfiguration of the approach taken to planning for Leaving Certificate History is strongly recommended.
- Greater emphasis on student self-direction, source work and reading for understanding is urged.
- A more in-depth and differentiated approach to course coverage with senior students is needed.
- Strategies to promote students' retention of information and learning, such as note-making, the creation of summaries, historical dictionaries and proper storage of handouts need greater emphasis.

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

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