Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

Ardscoil Rath Iomgháin
Rathangan, Co. Kildare
Roll number: 70730J

Date of inspection: 14th February 2011
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ardscoil Rath Iomghaín. 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 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 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Ardscoil Rath Iomghaín is a coeducational school in the vocational sector. At the time of the evaluation there were 628 students enrolled in the school. The Transition Year (TY) programme is available as an option to senior cycle students.

School management support the planned teaching programme for History effectively. Most teachers have been assigned base classrooms and management are open to the purchase of resources and a range of resources have been acquired. There is good access to information and communication technology (ICT) resources in the school, including an interactive whiteboard in one of the rooms in which history is taught. History classes may also access the computer room. The school reports that there are plans to increase the availability of ICT resources in the near future. This is to be welcomed. It is recommended that the range of history resources available is expanded and that electronic resources created or acquired are downloaded onto a folder on the school’s intranet system. It is suggested that a history notice board in a prominent area of the school would be a good support for History in the school.

History is not a core subject in the school curriculum at junior cycle. All students have access to History in an optional subject band where it is banded against practical subjects such as Woodwork, Metalwork, Art and Technical Graphics. Students have the opportunity to sample the range of optional subjects for six weeks before settling on subject choice in first year. While it is praiseworthy that all students have access to History, it was noted that there is a gender imbalance in history classes at junior cycle with more female than male students opting for History. This is a cause for concern. History is available on one subject band and between one quarter and one fifth of the student cohort study History at junior cycle. This has a knock-on effect on student uptake of the subject at senior cycle. Although the school has been good at facilitating students who wish to study the subject after school hours, Leaving Certificate History has not been available on the school timetable until this year. To ensure the availability of the subject on the school timetable at Leaving Certificate level and to counter the gender imbalance in history classes, it is recommended that the present organisation of the curriculum at junior cycle is kept under review. Students and parents should be included in any future review that takes place.
Time allocation for History is good across the school. History at junior cycle is an optional subject and has a good time allocation of four class periods per week. History is included in the optional TY programme where it is allocated two class periods per week for the duration of the school year. This is commended as it ensures that those TY students who did not have the opportunity to study History at junior cycle have access to History during their time in school. Leaving Certificate students have five class periods per week which is satisfactory. Timetabling is good across the week and between morning and afternoon classes.

Staffing for the subject is very good. A committed and well qualified team of three teachers is involved in the delivery of the subject. Teachers are facilitated in their attendance at in-service. Very good induction of teachers new to the department was noted and is commended. Membership of the subject association is recommended as a good support to teachers.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Very good departmental planning for this subject is in place. The department is very ably coordinated. Departmental meetings take place three times a year and minutes of meetings show a high degree of reflective practice and self-evaluation in the department. Members of the department are commended for their degree of advocacy of the subject. There is very good collaboration between members of the team in relation to teaching methodologies and resources and also evidence of collaboration between the team and the wider history community. This is praiseworthy.

A well organised subject plan is in place, informed by a very good set of aims and objectives. A very good TY programme with a good emphasis on research methodologies and local history is outlined in the subject plan. It is commendable that teachers have included a short module on the formative years of the Irish state in the TY programme, given that most TY students have not had the opportunity to study History in junior cycle. It is recommended that the TY programme is regularly monitored to ensure that students’ experience of History at this level is a positive one. This should have a positive effect on uptake of the subject at Leaving Certificate level. Given the practical nature of other optional subjects on offer against History in first year, it is recommended that a review of the history taster programme in first year takes place to ensure that students’ experience of History at this stage incorporates some degree of experiential learning.

Very good co-curricular and extracurricular planning was in evidence. The wide range of speakers that are invited into the school to speak to students on subjects of historical interest is highly commended.

Very good individual planning for classes, including planning for resources, was in evidence. Good examples of reflective practice, where teachers adapt teaching methodologies and resource materials to suit the needs of a particular class group, are noted and applauded. Some good planning for the range of student needs was also in evidence. One member of the history team is also on the special needs team. This ensures that good expertise in relation to differentiation is available to the history team. With regard to areas for development and to progress further the very good work that has taken place, it is recommended that planning for students with additional educational needs, including the exceptionally able takes place regularly at individual and departmental level.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

A high standard of teaching and learning was observed over the course of the evaluation. All lessons had a very good structure and transitions between the different elements of lessons were well managed. In one instance the lesson’s objectives were communicated at the outset and a review of the degree to which they were achieved was conducted prior to the lesson end. This very good practice should be adopted as standard practice across the department.

Very good use of ICT was seen during the evaluation. It was evident that there is good expertise in ICT on the team. In one lesson observed optimum use was made of an interactive whiteboard and a very good teacher-produced PowerPoint presentation was used to present a lesson on Weimar Germany. The whiteboard marker was used to highlight key terms in the case of text, or characters in the case of a historical cartoon. The quality of students’ responses to questions in the same lesson indicated that very good quality learning was taking place. In another well-planned lesson on local history that took place in the school’s computer room, students were introduced to the 1911 on-line census and other relevant websites. Students interviewed expressed a good degree of interest and enthusiasm for the subject matter of the lesson.

Teachers had also produced a range of good quality handouts to support their lessons, such as the documents and cartoons relating to revolutionary France in one lesson. Good attention to the difficult terminology in the handout was noted in the same lesson. It is suggested, in this instance, that key terminology should be noted on the board and in student copybooks to further enhance the good learning that was taking place. In many lessons students were active in their learning and were asked to complete individual tasks. Good differentiation was in evidence in one lesson where an additional, more difficult worksheet was given to certain students who completed the first worksheet with ease. This attention to differentiation is highly commended.

Teachers are applauded for introducing students at all levels to original source materials. Good attention was paid to historical second-order terminology such as bias and prejudice. In all lessons observed, teachers used questioning to advance students’ understanding of the sources being used and a good spread of questioning and a good balance between higher and lower-order questioning was in evidence.

A very good classroom atmosphere prevailed in all classrooms visited over the course of the evaluation and classroom behaviour and student engagement were very good.

ASSESSMENT

Very good practices in relation to assessment were in evidence. It is highly commended that the department has developed an assessment policy for History. An examination of students’ copybooks and journals indicated that the good practices outlined in the policy in relation to the frequency and monitoring of homework are adhered to. Good examples of a wide range of work including extended writing, visuals and short answer questions were evident in copybooks examined. It is praiseworthy that teachers regularly give students formative feedback on their written work. The use of writing frames is suggested as a means to support students who experience difficulty with longer writing assignments.
Good preparation for certificate examinations was also in evidence and good outcomes are in place. It is laudable that, as a department, the certificate examination results are analysed and that the results of this analysis contribute to team planning and review.

Very good record-keeping in relation to student assessment is in place in all classrooms. Parents are kept informed of student progress by means of reports twice a year and parent-teacher meetings.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School management support the planned teaching programme for History effectively.
- A committed and well qualified team of three teachers is involved in the delivery of the subject.
- Very good departmental planning for this subject is in place.
- A well organised subject plan is in place, informed by a very good set of aims and objectives. A very good TY programme with a good emphasis on research methodologies and local history is outlined in the subject plan.
- There is very good collaboration between members of the team in relation to teaching methodologies and resources and also evidence of collaboration between the team and the wider history community.
- A high standard of teaching and learning was observed over the course of the evaluation.
- Very good practices in relation to assessment were in evidence. It is highly commended that the department have developed an assessment policy for History.
- It is laudable that, as a department, the certificate examination results are analysed and that the results of this analysis contribute to team planning and review.

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

- To ensure the availability of the subject on the school timetable at Leaving Certificate level and to counter gender imbalance in history classes, it is recommended that the present organisation of the curriculum at junior cycle is kept under review.
- It is recommended that the range of history resources available is expanded and that electronic resources created or acquired are downloaded onto a folder on the school’s intranet system.

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

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