

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of History
REPORT**

**Saint Benildus College
Stillorgan, County Dublin
Roll number: 60261R**

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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. Benildus College, Stillorgan. 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 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 subject teachers and to the principal and deputy principal. 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

Subject provision for History at St. Benildus is very good. All students in junior cycle study History, in line with the Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools. The subject is taught to each junior class over three single periods each week, which is satisfactory, and these periods are well spaced on the timetable. Transition Year (TY) is optional at the school but is hugely popular, and it is commendable that all students in TY also study History. The subject is offered across a range of modules, each of roughly fourteen periods' duration, which include American history, local studies, archaeology and general historical studies. This interesting and varied provision in TY, can both build on learning from junior cycle and provide a platform for Leaving Certificate study as well.

History provision for Leaving Certificate classes is comprehensive and supportive of the subject. The subject is offered within an open choice before students begin fifth year, and is generally timetabled in two separate option blocks thereafter. These option blocks are altered from year to year depending on students' initial preferences, which is good practice. At present, there are two fifth-year history classes and two sixth-year classes. Uptake of History is low in one senior year among students in the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), as History is excluded nationally from the vocational subject groupings (VSGs). Good numbers of students opt for Leaving Certificate History annually and the provision of five periods per week for each history class is good. These are sometimes configured as a double lesson and three single lessons, and sometimes as five single lessons, depending on the subject blocks.

In relation to pedagogical organisation, history classes are taught in mixed-ability contexts in all years. The school has low numbers of students with special educational needs and reports no students for whom English is an additional language at present. Rooms are class-based rather than teacher-based. School management has ensured that the school is well supplied with qualified history teaching personnel. Just two of the eight members of the teaching team are currently

involved in delivering Leaving Certificate History, although management has ensured that some others teach TY History and it should be feasible to extend the numbers of teachers involved in Leaving Certificate over time. This would be sensible planning for the future and is recommended.

The level of information and communication technology (ICT) available to teachers in the classrooms has been augmented substantially in the past year, to the effect that all classrooms visited during the inspection had laptop and data projectors available to teachers if required. This is a very important potential support to teaching and learning. Three computer rooms are also available for whole-class use. At the time of the inspection, it was reported that an intranet system had been put in place and that the history department was in the process of storing departmental and individually held resources on this system, for access as teachers require. This is very sensible support, as is the fact that the department has been allocated its own email address. ICT usage was not uniformly observed in the lessons visited but these are all important supports for future development of History.

A number of other whole-school supports for History deserve particular commendation. Up to four teachers have been released at different stages to avail of the in-service training for Leaving Certificate teachers, given by the former History In-service Support Team (HIST). There is also a fine library of departmental resources available in the school. In recent years, the history department has established a small but highly interesting museum on one of the school corridors, with displays being changed from time to time but always linking to curricular requirements. The school has also developed a marvellous series of visual displays, especially of real and replica manuscripts in cooperation with the art department, and also of school sporting history. Budgeting for History is as needs arise, which is satisfactory, and there is good support for school historical trips and History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI) activities. A good mentoring structure is also in place, as and when any student teacher is teaching History at the school.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

History has a clearly defined department structure, with a rotating volunteer co-ordinator from year to year. A very good and subject-relevant mission statement has been developed by the department, including an excellent policy statement on supporting student teachers. The department plan is updated annually, although consideration needs to be given to sharing this task around among department members or groups of teachers from year to year, rather than leaving such work to the same person annually. Minutes of the three formal meetings of the department each year are retained and show the degree to which the department has engaged with pooling resources on the intranet, the HTAI, subject promotion and with planning for differentiation and cultural diversity. It is recommended that future planning items ought to include a focus on teaching and learning, specifically to identify practical ways in which the recent improvement in ICT provision can impact on History. A more cohesive approach to TY planning also needs to be sought. This should seek to identify common threads and overall aims, agreed methodology and assessment practice and possible links between the different TY historical studies courses. The disparate elements of TY historical study are good however, at present.

The history department has been particularly strong in the areas of reflection and self-evaluation in recent years. It is commended for taking the outcomes of a subject inspection some six years ago, identifying any areas for development referred to in that report and then systematically working towards these targets. Also impressive is the five-year planning strategy which has been implemented over that period, where the department identified a number of aims, such as

resource development, syllabus implementation, the formulation of a department plan, formalisation of a department structure and raising the profile of History. The second such plan has now begun to be implemented and deals with issues like ICT and library development in History, evaluating the impact of five years of the revised Leaving Certificate and a complete review of junior cycle schemes of work.

Individual planning and preparation work by teachers was observed to be good. In all lessons, the material taught was fully relevant to the syllabus or, in the case of TY, to the documented course plan provided. In over half of the lessons observed, teacher planning incorporated the deployment of ICT, mainly through powerpoint presentations. On one occasion, ICT planning also made very good use of available websites to identify important anniversaries and heighten historical awareness, and another instance involved planning to incorporate a pertinent and amusing film excerpt as a summary of core lesson details. Most teachers had prepared handouts to support student learning, ranging from summary documents to visual and text-based sources and these were well integrated into the lessons concerned. While seating in all rooms was along traditional classroom style, it was noted that one or two teachers also planned to incorporate simple pair activities into their lessons, which is commended. As classrooms are not teacher-based, the degree to which wall décor was reflective of historical material was understandably limited. However, very good displays were still evident in some rooms and, as previously intimated, reflective of a fine artistic tradition in the department also.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching observed in History varied from good to excellent. In some classes, including some using ICT, clear headings detailing the anticipated progress of the lesson were displayed on screen as proceedings commenced. In a number of instances, it was recommended that this practice be extended, with a view to placing learning intentions on the board as lessons begin, to be revisited from time to time and certainly before lessons conclude. A key enquiry-based question placed on the board at the outset of one senior lesson was a very good variation on this theme. In another lesson, a source-based handout was used as an icebreaking strategy and to identify a core theme of the lesson ahead within a few minutes of student engagement with the task. In all lessons, very good teacher-student rapport was evident from the start. Minor student inattention was well handled by teachers if it occurred at all, and some very good encouragement of students' effort was noted in most lessons, typified by the exhortation: 'don't doubt yourself, you know it.'

The material taught in all lessons was fully relevant to the syllabus. It is good practice, especially at the time of year when this inspection occurred, for teachers to remind students of what the syllabus prescribes. This was done very well in almost all lessons and ought to include reference to stated key concepts and key personalities in the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus as they arise. Occasional digressions from the syllabus occurred in one lesson, mainly in response to students' queries, while other lessons used opening minutes to focus on historical anniversaries, not necessarily relevant to the lesson topic. These variations worked very well, as they added colour and interest for students and made them more receptive learners, with insignificant loss of teaching time or of students' focus.

Lesson development methods took a number of forms. Teacher-led questioning was an important feature of all lessons. In a number of lessons, it was recommended that more pinpointed questions be asked of individual students, avoiding 'hands up' or volunteer answering for periods if possible. Some very good interrogative questioning was employed in senior lessons, particularly

in examining the causes of war or motives behind a government's actions. Some very good student-centred activities were also used in a number of lessons. These included source work in pairs and small-group work and would be worth extending a little more if possible. Where student activity was included, there was good circulation around the room and support of students' efforts by the teacher. One particularly good structured task asked students to identify and develop the key stages required in a question answer while consulting in small groups. This doubled as good training for examination handling too.

In general, teaching methods observed made good allowances for different learning styles and for the development of different skills which are going to be tested in the Certificate examinations. Some very good use of visual sources to stimulate discussion was noted, in areas like the Industrial Revolution, American history and Ireland in the 1930s. Nevertheless, an overall increase in the emphasis on visual learning strategies would be worthwhile. Isolated recommendations were made urging the use of some questions focusing on the visuals in textbooks, for example on art history. Similarly, while much good use of boards and screens was noted in lessons, the use of the board to remind students visually of key terms as they arise has also been recommended in individual lessons. Maps or simple map-style diagrams could bring clarity to potential challenges around the location of American or Balkan states, or the intricacies of the Boundary Commission. Some very good use of developmental timelines on the whiteboard was observed in some lessons and was recommended for greater use in others as a means of tying, visually, the threads of a topic together for students at a time of revision. ICT, when used, was well deployed as a visual learning tool. This was particularly so where the interrogation of visuals from a Certificate examination paper was required. The use of a comedy film excerpt, downloaded to summarise the complex causes of a war, was an excellent combination of visual and verbal stimulation for students.

The quality of teacher explanations was uniformly strong in the lessons observed. Teachers focused, where necessary, on word origins, links between historical words and modern ones and, where needed, on repetition. Words like 'perspective', 'anatomy', 'spirit of enquiry' and many others were explained with great clarity for junior students. The highlighting of key words in red on a computer screen was another support to comprehension and retention. Textbook reading was used sparingly, and was generally focused on getting students to identify key issues through short reading tasks and thus helping to develop their interpretative skills and support understanding. Some very good use of classroom discussion was observed, and linked to the development by teachers of board diagrams in a mind map format. A prepared mind map on the causes of World War I brought great clarity to a very complex topic. Otherwise, word diagrams worked best where student input was the driving force supplying the details, and where students were asked to make short notes for themselves of the diagrams or core points.

Teachers' worked hard to identify connections between History and students' prior knowledge or interests where possible. This was an important feature of learning in many lessons. For example, excellent clarity was achieved between the great industrial inventions and subsequent development, employment and wealth. Elsewhere, links were drawn between Johann Gutenberg and the displays around the walls in school and in the museum. Similarly good links were made between the effects of World War 2 and urban migration on Black America. The novel *Ulysses* was used as an interesting and unusual source of information on 1904 social history, while even the changes in telephone technology were used to give a structure to societal development in a very clever manner. Some senior students were very well engaged in the study of the outbreak of World War I through comparisons between the policing challenges at Sarajevo in June 1914 and those facing stewards at Croke Park. Other senior students were suitably challenged by the nuanced concept of Cumann na nGaedheal 'working within the framework of the Treaty but at

the edge of it'. These were all imaginative and interesting ways of making History intelligible and interesting for students and are commended.

ASSESSMENT

Whole-school assessment practices are thorough. House examinations are held for first-year, second-year and fifth-year classes at Christmas and summer, with pre examinations for third-year and sixth-year classes in Spring each year. Some good assessment practices in TY include forms of portfolio and project assessment, while a more traditional in-class test was also noted as having some value. A more cohesive approach to assessment would be one of the desired outcomes from the streamlining of TY planning previously recommended. Some of the ingredients of assessment for learning, like the use of learning intentions and formative assessment have been evident in a number of classes. However, a whole-school engagement with this initiative, ideally through a formal training input, is worthy of consideration in bringing more uniformity to assessment practices.

The history department maintains a close eye on performance trends in certificate examinations annually and results are very good by national standards. It is recommended that the practice of comparing students' performance with national norms be given less emphasis. In the school's context, it would be better to examine the outcomes in History vis-à-vis how students have performed in in-house IQ and aptitude testing, and their progression in History over time. Fluctuations against national norms can occur very easily when the cohort involved, as in a Leaving Certificate class, is not very large. On the other hand, the school's socio-economic catchment and small cohort of students with additional needs makes comparison with national norms of less value. The good levels of ICT availability across the school also offer opportunities for training students in how to write better answers, homework and research study submission by email, and student PowerPoint presentations on their projects. These are worthy of consideration as the department moves through its current planning schedule.

In relation to informal assessment, in most of the samples of student work examined, very good homework regimes were in evidence. In all lessons observed, clear homework tasks were assigned, sometimes with instructions regarding the number of significant relevant statements (SRS) needed for full marks in Junior Certificate. Good examples of home tasks assigned to junior students included asking them to prioritise in order of importance the results of the Renaissance. At other times, students were asked to build written answers from stimulus words, which is good practice in that it maintains a focus on using good historical vocabulary and on the quality rather than just the quantity of work done. In two instances, in-class tests or writing tasks were given which required more time than was really available, so that consideration ought to be given to using valuable class time simply to identify core issues in the task and then assigning them as homework instead.

The culture of in-class testing is strong. In one instance, a non-certificate class was having their seventh test of the year returned to them, which testifies to significant continuous assessment. Some really pertinent advice on handling examination questions was given in one or two junior lessons, as was the case in the formative assessment of senior written work in other lessons. In some senior copybooks, it was good to note that students were asked to write short plans of their answers to questions, which is good formative training. In some senior contexts, a little more focus on the use of interrogative questions rather than broader essay-style tasks was

recommended. Otherwise, the overall level of assessment practice observed across the department was certainly satisfactory.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Whole-school provision for History is very good, and includes good timetable and subject-choice provision, and more recently the significant enhancement of ICT facilities.
- Very good subject department structures and plans are in place.
- The on-going development of an intranet resource bank, a department email address and a school history museum are all very positive supports to History.
- The history department is particularly strong on forward planning and reflection on previous inspection outcomes.
- The quality of teaching observed varied from good to excellent.
- Teacher-student rapport, the quality of teachers' explanations and the relevance of the material taught to the syllabus and to students' lives were particularly strong features of the lessons observed.
- Good whole-school, departmental and individual teacher assessment practices were noted.

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

- An increase in the number of teachers operating at Leaving Certificate level is desirable as a means of ensuring longer term subject provision.
- Departmental planning ought to maintain its focus on ICT, including its practical use in teaching and learning, and seek a more cohesive planning structure in TY historical studies.
- A clear focus on the use of learning intentions, individualised questioning and visual stimuli is urged in lesson delivery generally.
- Formal training for teachers in assessment for learning principles would enhance and expand some of the good practice observed in individual lessons.

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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