

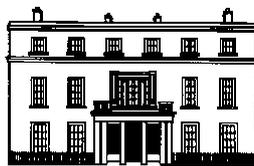
An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of History
REPORT**

**Loreto Secondary School, Saint Michael's
Navan, County Meath
Roll number: 64370T**

Date of inspection: 21 October 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | 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 Loreto Secondary School, St Michael's, Navan, 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 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision for History in Loreto Secondary School, St Michael's, Navan, is generally very good. There is an enthusiastic well-qualified team of history teachers, one of whom is nominated as co-ordinator for the subject, and this responsibility rotates from year to year, which is good practice. Provision of class time is good, with three class periods per week for each junior cycle class, and five periods a week for senior cycle Leaving Certificate classes. The Transition Year (TY) is allocated two periods per week for its class group. This is the first year that History has been a 'stand-alone' subject in TY and provision of time, while adequate, should be reviewed at the end of the first year of its implementation.

Classrooms are teacher-based or subject-based which allows for the rooms to be well provided with history stimulus material and create a resource base for the subject. All rooms are provided with a digital projector which is a positive development, although it was noted that most teachers have to provide their own laptops to use with the projectors during lessons. This should be reviewed as use of ICT develops.

History is a core subject in junior cycle where all class groups are mixed ability. There is a reasonably small class in TY where the programme is optional but history is compulsory. The uptake in History for the established Leaving Certificate classes is quite low, although the subject is popular in junior cycle and is developing well in TY. With the percentage uptake amounting to just about half of the national figure, it is important to continue analysing possible reasons for this situation. As subject options for the senior cycle are stated by the management to be open and researched every year, further enquiry should be undertaken to ascertain the underlying reasons for the low uptake. A review of the subject-choice documentation issued to students and their parents would be a good starting point, as its facts and statistics need updating and correction. A suggestion made by the teachers that Leaving Certificate history students should talk to the third year classes about their experience of the subject is positive and is certainly worth trying out, even on an experimental basis. As outcomes for students of History are good, and have been consistently good over several years, new approaches are recommended to the question of subject uptake for the senior cycle.

While the classrooms are well equipped, the absence of a functioning school library is a disadvantage, especially where research and document study have become central to the study of the subject, particularly in Leaving Certificate. It is noted that history teachers bring or direct their students to the local public library which is understood to be very good. While this is a very useful resource to have available locally, the revival and provision of a school library should be actively considered as a matter of importance to the subject, and to the school as a whole.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Planning and preparation are firmly established in the history department in the school. Meeting times are provided by school management and there are also many informal meetings of the history team throughout the school year. A co-ordinator is appointed in rotation and takes responsibility for the planning function and records. It is important to note that all members of the team participate in the planning process, which has produced a good and detailed history plan for the school. There is also an element of forward or strategic planning which is commended as good practice.

Planning records for the history department are kept in folders and the plan is used to develop ideas, to maintain progress in delivering the syllabus and to inform preparation of lessons by the history teachers. This facilitates collaboration and common objectives for the department. A great deal of work has been completed on the introduction, preparation and use of ICT in the teaching and learning of history. This is in part due to forward planning, training and collaboration among the teachers of the subject and was evident in the materials used in the preparation and delivery of lessons.

The history teachers are members of their subject association and are supported in this by school management. They have attended in-service training sessions for the revised Leaving Certificate history syllabus, and utilise this information and the methodology developed by the in-service team in planning and delivering the syllabus. They also attend the annual conference of the History Teachers Association of Ireland which they find useful and helpful in their work, and especially in new elements of the syllabus. This is good practice and further involvement with in-service and the activities of their subject association is encouraged.

The history teachers are enthusiastic about their subject and spend much time in preparing material for their classes, at both junior and senior cycle. The displays of relevant historical material in their rooms bear witness to this, especially as that material was used in the teaching and learning process in the lessons inspected. In every lesson observed during the inspection, good material had been prepared for the lesson, whether in electronic or hard-copy format, with a view to delivering varied and well-paced classes. The material was also well differentiated to include all ability levels in the classes and to encourage discussion, further class activity, or group work on the topic. In preparation for their history lessons, teachers had researched or sought out relevant and appropriate video-extracts, archive material, contemporary illustrations or press cuttings. This was evidence of well-planned preparation and carefully researched sources to enhance the teaching of history at all levels. The history teachers are commended for their attention to detail and imaginative approaches to providing good historical material for their classes.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all lessons observed, the topic for the lesson was clear and in several instances the title of the topic was written on the board or screen. Learning objectives for the lesson were shared with the students in many cases and, in some lessons, examples were brought to a conclusion at the close of the lesson with an examination of the learning outcomes. This is good practice which should be extended to all classes in History.

In all cases, there were good clear introductions to the day's topic, which often developed into a recap session from the previous lesson. In almost all cases, this took the form of a question and answer session for a short while. Questions were usually but not always 'named', and were interspersed with open questions and some examples requiring higher-order thinking. This is a good mixture which brings all members of the class into the activity. Development of points was encouraged in many instances and this strengthened the impact of the introductory stage of the lesson. Differentiation was in evidence in most classes and an inclusive atmosphere developed as a consequence. This was a strength of the lessons inspected.

A good class dynamic developed in almost all cases, which prepared students to receive information and work from varying sources and media as the topic moved on. A good variety of teaching and learning methods was observed, with frequent but not exclusive use of the digital projector. Much of the PowerPoint material thus displayed drew on contemporary resources, pictures, speeches, film-clips and cartoons. These were used both to develop the theme and to challenge students to think about the topic and to answer questions or consider points of view. Students were thus actively involved in their lessons and participated well.

Mobility of teacher and students was seen in some lessons but more movement is encouraged. This occurred when pair or group work was introduced, and in these cases, moved the lesson and the topic forward in a more active manner. It would be a good development of this classroom activity to organise role-play sessions, especially on more controversial or lively topics. Although this requires careful preparation, the students' study of their role, their experience and outcome of role-play in History reinforces the learning and the message. It can also be reviewed afterwards to consider all the angles emerging in a topic. This can be successfully applied to all years and courses.

Syllabus coverage is good and progress in both junior and senior cycles is well up to par. The approach in TY is bearing fruit, and the student-centred research and presentation on recent topics is most interesting. Students' reaction to the activities was proof of the interest and fascination generated by a source and enquiry approach. The e-portfolios being developed by the students are impressive, and their involvement and enthusiasm are obvious. This project, driven by state-of-the-art technology, is well worth pursuing further and teachers are commended for the progress already achieved early in the school year.

The variety of methods and activities used by the history teachers in their lessons is praiseworthy. There was an absence of monotony, predictability and inattention in all classes, and this is mostly due to the good planning and preparation of materials and the use of modern methods in the history lessons. For all these reasons, History appears to be in good health in the school, and yet the uptake in the subject for Leaving Certificate remains comparatively low. The question of the uptake of the subject at senior cycle should be addressed collaboratively/ proactively by school management with the history teachers.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment takes many forms in History, from oral and written work in class and home work, to topic and term tests to in-house examinations twice a year. There is an emphasis on note-making as opposed to note-taking in history classes. In several examples seen, the note-books and copy-books are kept separately and are both monitored by teachers. Homework both written and oral is given frequently and is corrected in class. The written work is monitored and marked by teachers, with some good examples of formative assessment in evidence. It is recommended that this practice, which is an important aspect of assessment for learning (AfL), is extended to all classes, and especially to their written work. In-house examination papers are in many cases developed in common for the classes in one year. Where this is not the practice, it is recommended that this be developed across all years, as the classes are mixed ability, and common test or examination papers would give a more consistent overview of progress in each year and syllabus.

Assessment progress records are kept by the history teachers, and they discuss class progress at their meetings. Formal parent-teacher meetings are held annually for each year group, and parent information evenings also take place. History students perform well in certificate examinations, and it is school practice to analyse outcomes of these examinations and to discuss them among staff and management. Such information is also made available for history department meetings where it is discussed in relation to plans for the next year, which is good practice.

The further development of sharing learning outcomes, already in practice in several classes, will assist in the overall assessment process and affirm students in the knowledge they have gained and progress they have made in the subject.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Good planning and preparation are undertaken by the history department, which has a co-ordinator by rotation, meets frequently during the school year, keeps records and has a good written plan for the subject.
- There is a well established tradition of history teachers attending in-service courses and participating in the activities of their subject association.
- Rooms are subject-based or teacher-based and provide a positive history environment for students.
- History teachers prepare very well for the teaching and learning of the subject and successfully integrate ICT into their teaching in the classroom.
- Teaching and learning are of a high order in all years, and there is good use of learning objectives in many classes. There is a wide variety of methods in use and classes are made interesting and varied, with much student participation.
- There is a particularly positive use of historical sources which is common to all classes but very evident in senior cycle.
- Transition Year has History as a stand-alone subject for the first time this year and the methods and activities in use are most appropriate for the students who are enthused and thoughtful in their approach and involvement in the subject.

- There are good and frequent modes of assessment in History with assessment for learning in evidence in several classes.

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

- While History is firmly established and well taught in the school, there is a relatively low uptake in the subject for the established Leaving Certificate. It is recommended that subject choice procedures, information delivery for students and information sheets for parents, be reviewed as part of a strategy to strengthen the senior cycle uptake in the subject.
- Research and wide reading are integral parts of history courses and it is recommended that updating and development of the school library be treated as a matter of priority by school management to facilitate this.
- Methodology in History is good and would be further developed by introducing more mobility in the classroom and, in particular, through the use of role-play in many topics in both junior and senior cycles.
- In developing assessment practice, it is recommended that formative assessment and other aspects of assessment for learning (AfL) be employed by teachers in the work of all classes.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of History and 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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