

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

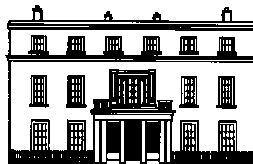
**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of History  
REPORT**

**Sandford Park School  
Ranelagh,  
Dublin 6.**

**Roll number: 60640C**

**Date of inspection: 19 January 2011**



**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**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Sandford Park School. 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 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**

There is strong whole-school support for History in Sandford Park School. History is accessible to every student in the curricular programmes provided namely the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY) and the established Leaving Certificate. TY is mandatory for all students. The history team of teachers comprises four members, each of whom is deployed to teach History. The subject is taught in mixed-ability class settings in all year groups.

The study of History is a compulsory component of the school's Junior Certificate and TY programmes and is provided as an optional subject choice when the students undertake their leaving certificate coursework. The junior cycle and TY students are organised into two base class groups in their respective years. There is one history class group in fifth year and one history class group in sixth year.

Junior cycle students have three history class periods per week. TY students have two history periods weekly and the two TY class groups are concurrently timetabled for both lesson periods. The fifth and sixth-year history students have five lesson periods that includes one double period per week. The timetabled allocation of history lessons and their distribution throughout the week supports the teaching and study of the subject.

The full deployment of the history team allows the teachers to remain actively engaged in supporting the ongoing development of History in the school. For example, one member of the team has responsibility for teaching History to the first-year students. This arrangement enables the teacher, who has a senior management role, to get to know the students well and to enrich the teaching of the first-year history coursework with the experience gained in teaching History specifically to this year group.

The teachers assigned to teach the second and third-year class groups remain with the same group until the students sit their Junior Certificate history examination. This arrangement also enables the history teachers to bond with their students, acquire knowledge of their learning and support the students' progress. In the senior cycle two history teachers have responsibility for teaching the TY history coursework and the same two teachers are deployed to teach Leaving Certificate

history. The frequency of the teachers' contact with these senior cycle history programmes ensures that their expertise in teaching the coursework is maintained by their experience of regularly teaching History to the senior cycle students.

The provision of resources that are available to the history teachers and their students strongly support the teaching and study of History. Two members of the history team have their own base classrooms, one of which is the designated history room. All classrooms are equipped with a data projector and a computer or a SMART board and have internet access. The school's computer room may be booked for use when required for a history lesson. The staff resource centre is another important facility for the teachers. The centre is equipped with computers that have internet access and work stations. Both teachers and students have the use of the school's large library which has a well-stocked history section, computer work stations and additional seating for reading and study purposes. The computers in the library have internet access. The history teachers have also a bank of teaching aids such as DVDs, CDs, magazines, books and photocopying facilities at their disposal.

Management supports the collaborative work of the history department in maintaining the continuous development of History. Collaborative planning is an important aspect of the organisational framework of the school as the weekly timetabled meeting of the history department indicates. Attendance at in-service courses is accommodated and members of the history subject team have attended in-service training and seminars relating to the leaving certificate and junior certificate coursework. Management also encourages and supports the engagement of the history teachers with History Teachers' Association of Ireland (HTAI) by paying the membership fees and assisting with the costs incurred in attending conferences and seminars. Furthermore, the proactive stance of management in organising whole-school events such as seminars, workshops and presentations to support the professional development of the teaching staff has also contributed to the supportive environment for History.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The history subject team give focused attention to planning as their subject department plan, weekly planning meetings and shared history folder in particular, illustrate. The commendable collaboration of the history teachers is also fitting testimony to the effective management of the department for which the subject co-ordinator has special responsibility. The position is voluntary and the agreed duties of the post include overseeing the smooth running of the department, setting the agenda for meetings in consultation with the other members and collating the minutes of the departmental meetings. In addition, the co-ordinator undertakes the monitoring, review and evaluation of the subject plan in consultation with the history team, seeks additional resources where necessary and ensures common papers at each level for the formal in-house examinations. The co-ordinator is also responsible for the compilation of the lists of agreed textbooks that the students will use in their study of their history coursework.

The subject department plan is a detailed document that provides information on the many aspects of teaching History that inform the work of the history teachers such as the subject aims and objectives, effective teaching methodology, planning for students with special needs, homework and assessment procedures. This important document also contains the year plans that have been prepared for each year group and minutes of the formal departmental meetings. The laudable quality of the subject department plan reflects the time and work invested in it.

The year plans clearly outline the sequence in which the named topics will be taught, the learning outcomes to be achieved and the variety of methodologies that will be employed. Effective

planning is always a work in progress and in order to support the continued development of the year plans it is advocated that reference to the main teaching methodology on the part of the teacher and the main active learning methodology on the part of the students that are employed in each lesson be identified in the column headed "Methodology". Such references, where they are not already indicated, will give greater clarity to the main activities undertaken by both teacher and students during the lessons and strengthen the lesson plan. For example, the reference to pair work as the methodology employed in some class lessons indicates clearly what the students will do but is less clear about how the teacher utilises this differentiated learning activity to consolidate student learning prior to and following completion of the task.

The TY history programme consists of two component parts: a module on Classical Greece and a module comprising a study of Racism and a study of the format and presentation requirements of an extended research essay on a historical subject. The two modules are taught in turn to the two TY class groups by the two members of the history team who have responsibility for teaching the programme. During the first school term for example, one TY class group studies Classical Greece while the other class group studies the module on Racism and the extended research essay. The teachers then switch class groups at the start of the spring school term and teach the module again to their new TY class group.

The planning documentation that underpins the TY history programme outlines the aims, objectives, course content of the two modules, teaching and learning methodologies, resources and modes of assessing the students' progress. The history teachers also continuously monitor the programme throughout the year and conduct an end-of-year review. In this context the inclusion of a section in the planning documentation that states the rationale for the composition of the programme could be considered. This would provide greater clarity about the choice of subjects for each module given that they mainly relate to two periods of History that are separated by a lengthy timespan. Consideration should be given to the inclusion of the role of women in the coursework outlined for both modules to a greater extent than is apparent from the planning documentation.

The current allocation of coursework time that has been apportioned to the two parts of the module on Racism and the extended research essay, as indicated in the planning documentation, is five weeks for the study of Racism and nine weeks for the extended research essay. The allocation made for the latter is generous and it is recommended that the time allocated to the study of Racism be increased in order to support and facilitate the planned study of the subject. Moreover, a stated aim of the TY history programme is "to enhance students' awareness of and promote tolerance of other cultural groups" and a greater allocation of lesson time to the set coursework on Racism will also further support the achievement of this important aim.

The shared electronic planning folder is a commendable resource for supporting the teaching and study of History and the development of departmental planning. It facilitates easy access to history departmental planning documentation, PowerPoint presentations, and a range of useful subject materials such as worksheets, handouts, and examination papers. It is also laudable that the history teachers provide their students with useful lesson materials in electronic format such as a Powerpoint presentation by placing them in the students' folder on the school's intranet system to which the students have access.

The development of the students' interest in History and the enhancement of the profile of the subject in the school, through co-curricular, cross-curricular and extra-curricular activities, are commended. The history teachers organise visits to museums and exhibitions of relevance to the subject such as the Collins Barracks Museum. Field trips are also organised to sites of historical

interest both in Ireland and abroad. On the school's Open Day, the history room is used to highlight the work of the history department and to display the project and research work undertaken by the students. The school participates in the HTAI annual quiz and history material is provided for publication in the school's Griffin Yearbook. On the TY celebration night individual students make Powerpoint presentations on their history projects and work that was completed during the year. A permanent collection of first-year project work is maintained in the library.

There was ample evidence of prior preparation for all the lessons observed. The teachers displayed a good grasp of the syllabus and in keeping with good teaching practice chose a definite topic for each lesson. The placement of the lesson in the context of the wider teaching scheme of the coursework was also indicated in the planning documentation provided. Planning for the lessons included the preparation of appropriate resources to support teaching and learning such as PowerPoint presentations, handouts, the selection of relevant pages in class textbooks and homework assignments.

### **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was a positive teaching and learning atmosphere during all the lessons observed. Classroom management was uniformly good and the good relationship between teachers and students was a marked feature of the lessons. The teachers employed a variety of teaching and learning methodologies to guide and support student learning. The development of the lessons was underpinned by the prior planning. The students quickly settled into the study of their respective lesson topics and remained on task.

The quality of teaching and learning was very good overall. The teachers informed their students of the lesson topic at the start of the lesson or at a pre-determined point in the early part of the lesson. Individual teachers also noted the lesson topic on the classroom board. The learning objectives of the lesson were communicated to the students in like manner in almost all cases. These good practices are commended and are always to be encouraged because they provide the students with a clear understanding of the focus of the lesson and provide them with a reference point during their subsequent study of the lesson material.

A variety of effective methodologies were employed to establish a clear context for the study of the lesson topic. For example, where the lesson topic formed part of a continuum of study of an extended topic such as the Roman Empire or the Fianna Fáil government 1932-1939 the link with prior learning was established before progressing to the new lesson material. This was done in a number of different ways such as the correction of the students' homework, posing questions to the class about aspects of the subject already studied and the noting of the key points on the board or, interaction with the class and the setting of a brief task involving pair work. In those lessons where the students were introduced directly to the new lesson topic, strategies such as displaying an overview of the main aspects of the lesson topic or reading a short excerpt from a prepared handout quickly engaged the students' attention.

The prepared Powerpoint presentations and choice of selected slides enhanced the students' study of their lesson topics and helped to consolidate their learning. This was well illustrated by the impact of the Powerpoint presentation that was incorporated into a class group's study of Roman Houses for which the students were also provided with a prepared handout. The teacher interacted with the students during the course of the presentation by commenting on the images displayed and addressing questions to the students in order to provide them with an informed understanding of their lesson topic. The students in turn were responsive to the teacher and gave focused

attention to the presentation. In another instance a Powerpoint presentation provided students with an overview of Russia under Stalin 1924-39. The students were directed to note the main positive and negative points of Stalin's rule during this period as a basis for later discussion.

In a number of lessons the teachers displayed selected images such as an historical figure or cartoon to stimulate discussion and augment the students' knowledge of the lesson topic. Notable examples were a cartoon entitled "Horn of Plenty" that related to American society in the latter half of the twentieth century and a photograph of some members of the Blueshirt organisation that was prominent in Ireland during the 1930s.

Throughout the lessons the students were afforded opportunity to participate actively in the study of their lesson topic. For example, the teachers' interaction with their respective class groups and the addressing of questions to their students encouraged the students to be responsive and contribute to the class lesson. The interactive manner of the teachers during the PowerPoint presentations and the study of selected images to which reference has already been made were cases in point. However, closed questions that required factual recall relating to prior learning and factual information relating to the study of the lesson topic tended to be the most frequently asked. The posing of higher order questions that required the students to articulate a more considered answer could have been explored to a greater extent.

Reading aloud from the class textbook or the worksheet given for a homework assignment was a feature of some lessons and was another means employed to facilitate the students' participation in the class lesson. This activity was further enriched by the inclusion of informative comment and questions on the part of the teacher. However, on one occasion, the reading of the class textbook was somewhat overlong due to the time required to read the relatively lengthy coverage of the topic in the textbook.

Independent learning activities that required the students to take responsibility for their own learning were incorporated into the lessons. The range of these activities included note-taking, the completion of a written assignment, pair work and group work. The pair work and group work are particularly commended because they provided the opportunity for the students to engage in co-operative learning. Best practice was observed where sufficient time was available for the students to complete the task and, where the activity solely involved discussion, time was allocated for the provision of feedback to the class.

Homework tasks were assigned at either the start or the end of the lesson. The homework assignments also provided the opportunity for the students to assume responsibility for their own learning and to consolidate their learning outside the classroom. The teachers regularly set and correct their students' homework and this commendable practice was clearly evidenced by the sample of the students' copybooks and folders perused during the inspection visit. In the context of the teachers' praiseworthy practice of providing a feedback comment, the elaboration of succinct affirming comments on homework assignments is encouraged in order to ensure that the written feedback provides the students with clear direction as to how to continually develop the quality of their written work.

## **ASSESSMENT**

A variety of formal and informal assessment modes are used to track the progress of the students. In the history classroom the history teachers used a combination of observation, questioning, the setting of tasks, and homework assignments to monitor the progress of their students. In addition, the history teachers use the results achieved by their students in class tests, the formal in-house

examinations, the state examinations, and their students' portfolio and project work to inform judgements.

A member of the history team in consultation with the school's learning support department also currently provides supplementary support in History for a number of students with additional needs during their examination year. The students are supported in preparing for their history examination and the students' progress is tracked by both the teacher and the learning support department.

Common history examination papers are prepared for the students in each year group when they sit their formal Christmas and summer examinations. Moreover, common higher and ordinary level papers are prepared whenever this accommodation is required. These praiseworthy practices allow for comparison of students' progress in relation to the entire year group and further inform the teacher's judgement about the progress being made by the individual students. The students are also given detailed feedback on their performance in the Christmas, summer and trial certificate history examinations in order to support their progress. This good practice is commended.

The new, prospective, first-year entrants complete an assessment test before the commencement of their secondary education and the relevant support structures are organised for students presenting with additional needs. The formal in-house examinations that are organised for the students include the October mid-term tests, the Christmas tests, the Easter tests and the summer tests. The October mid-term tests and the Easter tests are class tests. The October mid-term tests and the Christmas tests are taken by all students. The third and sixth-year examination classes sit trial certificate examinations in February in preparation for the state examinations in June. Easter tests and summer tests are organised for the non-examination year groups. However, TY history students are assessed on the basis of their portfolio of work for the year that includes two research reports and they do not sit a formal summer examination.

School reports are sent to the homes of the students following the in-house examination sessions. The parent-teacher meeting that is organised for each year group affords the opportunity for parents and guardians to meet with the relevant member of the history subject team. Parents and guardians can also make an appointment to meet the history teacher.

The principal analyses the results of the school's students in the state examinations and compares the achievements of the students against the national norms. The principal then discusses the examination results with the staff at the first staff meeting of the year. The members of the history team in turn, conduct their own analysis of the students' results and use this information to inform their teaching of History. These good practices and the consistent achievements of the students in the Junior and Leaving Certificate History examinations are commended.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is strong whole-school support for History as evidenced by the accessibility of the subject to the students, the provision of resources that are available to the history teachers and management's support for the collaborative work of the history department.
- The history department is a proactive forum and the history teachers are engaged in ongoing collaborative planning.
- There was ample evidence of prior preparation for all the lessons observed.

- The history teachers give focused attention to teaching their students well and supporting their progress. The quality of teaching and learning was very good overall.
- A variety of formal and informal assessment modes are used to track the progress of the individual students.

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 current allocation of coursework time that has been apportioned to the two component parts of the TY history module, Racism and the extended research essay be reviewed.
- The methodology section of the annual schemes of the coursework should be further developed.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of History and with 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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