An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

Coláiste Íosagáin
Portarlington
County Laois
Roll number: 68068R

Date of inspection: 30 November and 1 December 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Íosagáin, Portarlington. 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 progress records. The inspector reviewed school and subject 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 deputy principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision for History in the school is generally good. The subject is compulsory through junior cycle, where each class group is allocated three periods of History per week. The resource classes, one in each year, are provided with four class periods per week. Transition Year (TY), which is optional, includes History as a core subject and is allocated three class periods per week. Leaving Certificate classes are provided with five class periods per week, one double and three single classes, in each case. This is good allocation, although the spread across the week and across the timetable is somewhat inconsistent and needs attention in future timetabling provision.

It is noted that there are two class groups taking History in sixth year, but only one in fifth. While this is stated to be because of more efficient computer-generated subject option allocation, the outcome is that the single class group in fifth year is bigger than the total number in the two classes in the sixth year. This makes individual attention for students in the larger, single, group more difficult, and may require reconsideration for forthcoming years.

All classes, with the exception of the resource class groups, are mixed ability, in both junior and senior cycles, and this worked well in the classes inspected. Teachers are well deployed in most instances, although there are cases where it has not been possible for a teacher to follow through with a class to the end of a course or cycle. Particularly when approaching the end of a cycle, it is best practice for the one teacher to complete that course with their class if at all possible.

The subject choice system has recently been updated using new computer software. The teachers of History feel that although there are a good number of students opting for Leaving Certificate History, there is a larger number opting for other subjects in choice groups. They also stated that there appears not to be an even spread across the ability ranges in those being allocated History. This point was made at the end of the inspection to the management, who feel that the new system should deliver an equitable and balanced allocation. Attention needs to be paid to this aspect in the immediate future.

Classrooms are teacher based and this works well as regards atmosphere and environment for the subject. Stimulus material placed on the walls of several classrooms created a good historical atmosphere. To date, there is no dedicated history room or resource centre. The school library, while spacious and providing large study areas and stocked bookshelves, lacks modernity in the
history section and relies to a large extent on previously used text-books. There is room for development here, particularly as the library offers great potential for all students.

There is a fairly good stock of audio-visual and ICT equipment provided in the school, but more access to data projectors and laptops would improve the delivery, and maximise the usage, of materials available for the new Leaving Certificate history syllabus in particular.

It was noted that management supports the history team and provides both time for meetings and an annual budget for the subject. An analysis of the school’s performance in history assessments, including the state examinations, is being undertaken by the management and this is to be commended. The history team is involved in this and is making contributions to the ongoing study.

**Planning and Preparation**

Meetings of the history teachers are held regularly. There is a co-ordinator in place, appointed in rotation, agendas are prepared and minutes are recorded for these meetings. Preparation and planning for the forthcoming year are attended to at these meetings, as are elements of methodology, continuing professional development (CPD) and cross-curricular contacts. It would be beneficial for the subject and the teachers of History if the meetings were also to discuss strategic planning for the future direction of History in the school, if even for a year or two in advance.

The subject plan is well laid out and it contains good ideas and information. Some of the items could be described as aspirational and it would be a positive way forward to discuss ways of implementing these. Course materials and teaching methods listed in the plan are good and the team needs to continue advancing these, in some instances with the support and input of management. Examples here would include development of the use of ICT, establishment of a history resource area, and the modernisation of the history section of the school library. At the same time, it is important to recognise that history teachers have some very good resources for the subject, including some of their own books and materials. These form a sound basis for teaching and learning in the subject, particularly with regard to the Leaving Certificate. It is recommended that teachers store resource material electronically, where possible, so that it can easily be developed and replicated for future use. This will also facilitate sharing of resources.

Much work and planning is put into teaching and learning in the resource classes. The teachers of these classes are well briefed and, commendably, bring a sensitive and well-informed approach to their work.

Teachers of history are conscious of the importance of CPD in their subject, and several of them have attended in-service courses in the recent past. The History In-Service Team (HIST) and, more recently, the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) courses run for the Leaving Certificate have been beneficial. There is some involvement with the History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI): some teachers have been members of the organisation. Management is prepared to assist with the annual subscriptions to such organisations, out of the subject budget, and this opportunity should be pursued by the history teachers. Some teachers are eager to make contact with history teachers outside the school and there are many opportunities for doing this: it clearly broadens horizons and enriches the history experience. In relation to CPD, it is worth noting that all teachers of History should be given encouragement to avail of courses and to have the opportunity to teach their subject to all levels and in all cycles.
All lessons inspected were well prepared and made use of a variety of media and support material.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Good active teaching methods were observed in all the classes inspected. Some very good examples of the use of mixed media in teaching complex material were also observed: the use of modern methodologies is increasing in the school and the blend of older and newer methods is progressing well. This blend needs perfecting but moving older methods to electronically-based storage and development is progressing and is to be encouraged.

Question and answer techniques were seen in almost all classes and were well balanced for the most part. Both open and closed questions were used in most instances, but an increased use of students’ names in asking questions, and greater differentiation in phrasing and weighting questions, would improve the effectiveness of the process. It would also reaffirm students in their knowledge of a particular topic. There was great affirmation and encouragement of students in the lessons inspected and, in all cases, they were confident enough to respond to the questions asked of them. There was not an over-reliance on these techniques, and it was noticeable that teachers changed direction and method several times during classes. This is to be commended as good practice.

Good use of parallels to modern society and contemporary culture and media were in evidence in several classes. Students in many classes were lively, enthusiastic and co-operative in undertaking their work. In some instances, group and pair work were seen and there were other instances where there would have been great potential in employing these methods. It was clear, even among the more senior students, that group work enhanced the learning experience and encouraged self-expression and thought.

There was excellent use of PowerPoint, video-clips and internet material in several classes and students readily responded to the different stimuli being employed to focus their attention on various aspects of the topics being explored. It was particularly noteworthy that teachers utilised the history material displayed on the walls of classrooms, whether maps, photographs, posters or information sheets, and these were well worked into the rhythm of the class. All of the methods referred to here enhanced the learning process and sparked interest among students.

It would further develop the sense of students’ security in their learning if all lessons started with the title of the topic clearly displayed on the board or the screen. Key words for the lesson could be clearly written on the board or screen so that students could note these down as major points to be reviewed. However, it is important not to use internet or prepared material on the screen as a source for writing down notes. This tends to negate the advantages of using ICT and students would be better using the key words to develop their own notes from the material used during the class.

It was noticeable that there was very little reliance on text books in most of the classes inspected, though they were referred to appropriately at points during the lesson. This is good practice, especially as the positive use of documents, illustrations and maps from text books proved a most useful method of advancing knowledge of the topic. Document use was augmented in several instances by the judicious use of information leaflets, illustrative material or test-papers circulated by the teacher.
Students were, for the most part, at ease in their history classes and were articulate and often confident in answering questions. They engaged well with their lessons and showed interest and ability in most classes inspected. A good work-like environment existed in classrooms and student attention and behaviour were of a high order.

Progress with the curriculum and the syllabus for each year was well advanced and this is particularly positive in instances where classes had had a succession of teachers. The history team are to be applauded for their well-measured progress with the history courses. Great strides had been made in Leaving Certificate classes and students were well capable of handling research and documentary material. This is a positive feature of history teaching in the school and should be maintained.

There had been some history outings and suggestions of some cross-curricular work. This is an area for further development as such ventures bring the subject to life and provide enjoyable learning experiences for the students. TY history is developing well, with interesting modules, and the use of further and sometimes outside contact, will help in advancing the process.

**ASSESSMENT**

There are various modes of assessment in use in History. Homework is given in line with the school’s homework policy. Examination of students’ copybooks revealed that written homework is set regularly in each of the classes inspected. It is monitored by the teachers in a variety of ways, with some good examples of formative assessment being evident. Teachers clearly take care in correcting and assessing written work and further use of positive comments and formative assessment techniques will serve to enhance this. There was a wide variety of standard in the work seen and a watchful eye needs to be kept on students’ progress at all times, especially as the standard is widely spread across the mixed-ability classes.

Teachers keep records of homework, tests, examinations and other work. These records are used in the annual parent-teacher meetings that take place for each year group. Teachers also write notes in student journals and contact parents when the need arises. Parents of TY students are invited to the school to view students’ work and projects. This is a commendable practice.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- History is well provided for in the school at both junior and senior cycles, with adequate class time at all levels.
- History teachers in the school are generally well deployed and, for the most part, follow their classes through the cycle in which they start to teach them.
- Rooms are allocated on a teacher basis and this works well as regards subject organisation.
- There is a good and increasing supply of audio-visual and ICT equipment in the school.
- Time is provided for history team meetings. There is a coordinator, on a rotational basis, and planning meetings are held regularly, with records of agenda, minutes and plans for the subject.
- History teachers provide and organise a resource cupboard for students. This is a good facility.
Teaching and learning in history are good, utilising multi-media approaches and good preparation and planning of lessons. The curriculum is being well covered and the individual syllabuses are well up to date.

Question and answer techniques in classes are good, yet there is not too much reliance on this process.

Teachers are enthusiastic about their subject and are constantly changing the focus in their lessons.

There is evidence of good student-centred learning, and examples of pair and group work observed were very successful.

Assessment of students’ work is consistently good across the classes inspected, with positive examples of formative assessment in several cases. There is good communication with parents at various levels.

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

- There is a need to keep the timetable and spread of classes in History under review.
- The creation of a dedicated resource centre for History, whether in a classroom base or in the library, would be of great benefit to the preparation, teaching and learning of the subject.
- Greater access to laptops and data projectors for the current history syllabus should be a priority.
- The library should be developed as a more relevant resource in relation to history, with a wider variety of more modern books, as far as can be achieved within budgetary constraints.
- Enhancement of some teaching methods would be beneficial, for example in writing the topic and key words for the lesson in a visible and noticeable way on the board or screen.
- There should be a department-wide approach to attending in-service, and to engaging with history organisations which will enhance the history experience in the school.

A meeting was held with the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

Published, December 2010