

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of History
REPORT**

**Mercy Secondary School
Inchicore, Dublin 8
Roll number: 60872A**

Date of inspection: 8 March 2010



**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 Mercy Secondary School, Inchicore. 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 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 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

In line with Department of Education and Skills regulations, Mercy Secondary School, Inchicore offers History as a core element of the junior cycle. It is commendable that the school also makes History a compulsory subject in Transition Year (TY), helping in the development of social and local studies within that programme. The school offers History for senior students annually in its senior options, using an open choice initially to find the most suitable bands. This is good practice. The number of students seeking to opt for History two years ago was not sufficient for there to be a history class in the current sixth year but it is encouraging that a class of ten students has been established in fifth year. In the current fifth year, students' preferences have resulted in History being timetabled opposite Geography. Maintaining a class in next year's fifth year should be an important target to aim for with a view to consolidating History in the longer term.

Timetabling of History is very good. All junior classes have three single periods per week, which is good provision. TY History has two single periods per week, which is good provision, while the fifth-year class has a double period and three single periods spread across four days. All lesson periods are of forty minutes duration. In every year, a very satisfactory effort is made to spread the lessons across the timeslots and days of the week. One third of the school's timetabled lessons occur after lunch and it is testament to the fair distribution of history lessons that the ratio of history lessons is almost identical to this, with seventeen morning slots and eight in the afternoon.

It is commendable that all history classes at the school are taught by highly qualified personnel, or have a student teacher under the supervision of one of the school's history teachers. The school is urged to explore what means may be available to expand the present core teaching team of just two teachers. History classes at the school are all of a very manageable size and are generally

taught in mixed-ability contexts. History is invariably taught in the base rooms of teachers, which allows for ready access to storage facilities and wall-display areas relevant to the subject, while good access to the school's computer room as required is also evident. It is planned that the next roll out of information and communication technology (ICT) at the school will see all classrooms, including those used for History, being equipped with a data projector. This is commended.

Some very good whole-school supports for History and other subjects have been developed in recent years. The fact that the school is a participant in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative has led it to adopt target setting, annual performance reviews and whole-school literacy strategies. Portable broadband internet access has been financed, to enable teachers to access teaching materials as required without system blocks. The school has also purchased digital video equipment and the possibility of using this as part of local studies has been discussed by history teachers. All subjects are allocated an annual budget, and the school is happy to have a portion of this budget used to fund membership of subject associations, including the History Teachers' Association of Ireland, as decided by teachers. A teacher of Leaving Certificate History has been released for all relevant in-service training provided for the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus. The development of the school's library over the past years, funded out of school resources, has been intrinsic to the school's literacy and numeracy policies, and has seen it become a bright and very student-friendly facility. The stock of history books is already good and the library manager is very aware of the need to have interesting and challenging history books, and books which offer avenues of access for students of all abilities and aptitudes, which is applauded.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Although there are just two teachers of History at the school, it is commendable that a subject coordinator has been appointed, and that this role is rotated at intervals. A sensible approach to subject planning has been adopted, and the team generally has formal meetings two to three times annually. The minutes of department meetings show teachers discussing some practical issues such as the need for storage space and the merits of mixed-ability or streaming in certain contexts. The specific context of the school has also featured in such planning, with good engagement in the renewal of library resources for History, maintaining History as a subject in senior cycle, getting research study reports (RSRs) completed in the face of some student absenteeism and discussion of how best to make European history relevant for non-European students. One area which requires review is the selection of a core textbook in junior cycle, as at present there are two books in circulation in some classes and this may cause confusion. Department members are commended for their outreach planning, on occasions bringing students to nearby historical sites such as Kilmainham Jail and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and to a play based on the final days of James Connolly's life.

In all lessons observed, the material being covered was appropriate for the year group and the stage each class was at in the relevant course. Annual plans for junior cycle ensure that adequate revision time is available. In third year for example, following the pre-examinations, some very structured planning affords the opportunity to revise material from two previous years' work, while completing the course as well, which is very supportive of students. The focus in fifth year is logical, covering two topics from the field of Europe and the Wider World. These have degrees of connectivity in the current year, and Irish history topics will be covered in the following year. Planning for students' individual research study work is already advanced in fifth year and good arrangements are in place for the storage of finished reports next year.

Planning the TY history programme has provided a particularly useful link with school context factors. The TY plan has a strong focus on women's studies, including some very good cross-curricular links for International Women's Day, the day of the evaluation visit. Local studies also feature strongly, with a local expert and nearby library facilities being accessed, and a very impressive series of projects on sport, buildings, transport networks and personalities such as Thomas Kinsella and Kathleen Behan being done by students. A project on war songs was another particularly innovative aspect of TY planning. Modern songs and lyrics, with great resonance for students, were analysed alongside more traditional World War I anthems. TY planning also retains a desire to make History interesting for students, to the point that if topics are not of interest to students, they may be altered or dropped at the teacher's discretion. Such fluidity in terms of course content is sensible, as many areas of study can help achieve the same learning outcomes in TY and where it is feasible to achieve these in tandem with high student interest, so much the better.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all lessons observed, teachers displayed high levels of preparation for their classes and a very good standard of teaching was evident. A more uniform identification of the learning intentions for each lesson, ideally left on the whiteboard for the duration of lessons, ought to be considered. Otherwise, the level of organisation, preparation of handouts and of ICT and televisual resources as required, was very good in all lessons. A particularly important feature of individual lesson preparation, and relevant to the school's DEIS involvement, is the level of awareness among teachers of the individual learning needs, language competency and attendance records of their students. Much of this was documented and even where not, the supportive role of a special needs assistant (SNA) was very evident. The requirements of students with special educational needs or from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds, were impressively considered by teachers in their planning and lesson delivery.

In all lessons, while the teaching styles varied quite considerably, students were fully engaged and the level of positive teacher-student rapport was high. In some classes, students were presented with an outline of what lay ahead in the lesson and this was good practice. Lessons aimed to build on previously learnt material, or on previous student work on projects. Although a little under-utilised in some lessons, good oral questioning was observed as teachers elicited student knowledge and understanding as lessons began. Students were also comfortable in asking questions, and on the occasions when students asked or answered questions, or made short oral presentations on what they had learnt previously, an atmosphere of mutual interest and respect was very evident among students themselves too.

The pace of lesson development varied considerably and ranged from the use of a wide variety of stimulus materials and strategies to a more measured approach. All students worked well, and in all lessons students were comfortable with the pace of delivery. Good explanations of any potentially difficult words were given, and invariably such terms were then placed on the board for reinforcement. More emphasis on key words and concepts is recommended, in keeping with the learning objectives of Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) delivery and some consideration of word lists, word charts, student-generated dictionaries and wordsearch or hangman games would further reinforce subject literacy. Some very good focus on date parameters, such as a timeline of events in the history of women's suffrage, and before-and-after analysis of the impact of particular inventions provided a good framework for students' understanding of time and change in several lessons.

Some very good use was made of non-textual stimulus material in most lessons. Short documentary film excerpts on the Suffragettes, complete with lively background music, added great interest and clarity for students. These were sourced from the internet and from DVD. In some cases, very good use was made of mind maps, acronyms and simple board drawings, with a view to providing visual reinforcement of learning about the Agricultural Revolution. A very good contemporary drawing of an early printing press and a highly political cartoon based on Johnson's Great Society were very well used to encourage students' visual analytical skills. However, at times more onus ought to be placed on students to interpret for themselves what an image or piece of text is telling them.

The quality of teachers' explanations, positive teacher-student rapport and student concentration were all supportive of student learning. In some lessons, students spontaneously made notes and in others their written tasks had a very specific focus on learning and retention. Finding a few minutes near the end of each lesson to revisit the learning intentions and review or consolidate the learning which has occurred is recommended as a further support to learning. Where students were questioned by the inspector, it was clear that good learning had been achieved during the lessons, and the degree to which students' attentiveness and engagement was maintained to the end of all lessons was very encouraging.

ASSESSMENT

Informal assessment practices observed included oral questioning, as previously discussed, and the assignment of short written tasks as both in-class assessment instruments and as homework. Where in-class tasks were given, teachers monitored and supported students very well, and it was noted that students were generally encouraged to work in pairs. The level of student engagement with these tasks was very good and students were comfortable in responding to questioning by teachers or by the inspector. In one instance, a homework task was assigned a few minutes before a lesson finished, allowing students to make a start on the work and giving the teacher the opportunity to give guidance for completion of work at home. A clever self-assessment idea was noted in one lesson, where students were asked to gauge where their learning stood on a particular topic, using a comparison with traffic light colours and making sure that everyone felt she was at 'green for go' before moving to another item for revision. It was good to see some literacy-oriented tasks assigned, including cloze tests and structured worksheets. It is recommended that some drawing or diagram tasks be given as well, to support more visual learning styles, although some very fine use of stimulus-driven questioning was noted.

Correction of students' work was done orally in most lessons, and in the copybooks examined teachers were seen to employ a combination of grading and short, supportive commentary. If grade marking is employed, it is recommended that the use of marking systems employed in Certificate examinations be used more specifically and be explained in advance to students, in keeping with the principles of assessment for learning (AfL). If students are familiar with significant relevant statements, cumulative and overall marking, paragraph equivalents and other assessment concepts, and their work is marked using such concepts, it can help to improve their writing of History. Some very appropriate assessment strategies were observed in TY, including project work aimed at publication, oral presentations and a 'history mystery' designed to promote an enquiry-based approach to History. This strategy can complement Leaving Certificate study very nicely if students opt for History at a later stage. The use of key personality studies as a form of project task with Leaving Certificate students is commended. It is interesting to note that email communication is used quite frequently as a means of submitting and assessing students' work at Leaving Certificate level.

Whole-school assessment practices are satisfactory. In-house tests are held at Christmas and summer each year, with classes due to sit Certificate examinations having pre-examinations in the spring. Contact with home is maintained through annual parent-teacher meetings, written school reports at end of term and comments in students' journals. Senior management, coordinators and subject teachers monitor results in Certificate examinations on an annual basis and the school is conscious of the importance of such analysis as part of its DEIS remit as well.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- History is well provided for in the school's curriculum and is well timetabled.
- Whole-school support for History is good and includes a fine library facility.
- Appropriate departmental planning has been undertaken in History, including the organisation of co-curricular activities and a fine TY plan for historical studies.
- Fine supports for literacy and attendance have been evident in history lessons.
- Individual teacher preparation in History is good, with teachers' awareness of the individual needs of students being very evident.
- The styles of teaching varied considerably but the quality of teaching and learning observed was very good.
- Oral assessment and monitoring of homework are commended.

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

- It is important that History be maintained on the timetable for incoming fifth-year students.
- Ways of augmenting the current small number of teachers involved in teaching History should be explored.
- The identification of learning intentions as lessons begin, and revisiting them for reinforcement as they conclude, is recommended for greater use.
- Greater incorporation of visual assessment, and the formative use of Certificate-examination marking strategies, are recommended for active consideration.

Post-evaluation meetings were held 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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