

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

Subject Inspection of History

REPORT

St. Mary's Secondary School

Macroom, County Cork

Roll number: 62320R

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Mary's Secondary School, Macroom. 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. The board of management was given the opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St. Mary's offers History as a core subject for all junior cycle students, with the subject offered after that on an optional basis in senior cycle. The compulsory nature of junior History is satisfactorily in line with the Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools. Owing to the school's laudable efforts to provide a subject taster system for first-year students, it has not proved possible to provide History for any more than two periods per week on the first-year timetable. This level of provision can make completion of a first-year element of the syllabus something of a challenge and the school is thanked for its appreciation of the need to ensure that the two periods are offered in timeslots not likely to be affected by school activities or meetings and not on consecutive days, to optimise teacher-student contacts. The provision of three single periods per week in both second and third year for History is more in line with desired levels of provision but it is also important that these periods are fairly spread across the days of the week and between morning and afternoon timeslots.

It is noted that History is offered to all Transition Year (TY) students. This is done in a form of option system which asks students to pick six subjects from a list of nine possible subjects, in addition to core subjects like Irish and English. Although this means that not all TY students study History, this is a reasonably fair system and has resulted in approximately twenty-five per cent of TY students studying History. Timetabling provides for a double lesson and a single lesson each week for the subject, for half the school year. This is good, with the bonus that the double lesson facilitates project work or library visits, which are productively undertaken. The fact that TY is not seen as an opportunity to get a head start with Leaving Certificate material is also applauded, with a fine

commitment evident to the development of students' research skills, awareness of local history and historical field trips, including a very comprehensive one to Dublin.

In fifth and sixth year, students who study History have opted to do so from an initial open choice of subjects and this is very fair. The development of subject blocks from this process has seen fifth-year History offered opposite Chemistry and Home Economics, with sixth-year History across from Geography and Physics. Given that the blocks are arrived at through a 'best-fit' approach to the initial open choice, the system is satisfactory. It is merely pointed out that the placing of History against Geography (which is not available elsewhere in the sixth-year options) might not always be conducive to students who have a leaning towards doing Arts subjects in third level.

From the point of view of general resourcing of the subject, there is certainly much to commend. Management is thanked for its financial support of teachers' membership of the Cork branch of the History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI), and for supporting teachers' desire to access in-service training for the Leaving Certificate syllabus. This has included the facilitation of a recent in-school session by a member of the History In-Service Team (HIST). Support for school history outings, both in terms of time facilitation and financially, is also very commendable. Due to the ongoing building project at the school, access to both library and ICT facilities is somewhat curtailed at present, which is totally understandable. Yet, it is also heartening to note that a generous annual budget is allocated to History, as to other subjects, and that a healthy stock of periodicals, books and films has been developed. In turning to the possibilities presented by the aforementioned building project which will include ICT upgrading, it is recommended that very active consideration be given to the provision of a data projector and accompanying laptop computer, for use or shared-use by the history department. The highly visual nature of the subject, the dominance of both images and documentary materials, including films and web-based resources, within both junior and senior history syllabuses point to the renewal of the school plant as an excellent opportunity to move provision for History forward. In doing so, it should also be kept in mind that even previously renovated facilities may need some reconsideration, as with the location of sockets in one room which are much too far away from the whiteboard area to facilitate desired usage of television (or other electronic supports) and whiteboard in tandem.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Some excellent work has been done in History over recent years, in terms of formalising departmental structures. A designated subject convenor is in place, with records showing that department meetings are held at regular intervals during the academic year, with minutes and attendance recorded. A subject department plan has also been developed, using the generic template provided by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The planning folder seeks to address a number of significant issues pertaining to History, such as gender perspectives in junior History, dealing with students within the autistic spectrum and, indeed, with the process of subject inspection also. This is very good, productive work which offers a significant support to teachers, including any substitute teachers or trainee teachers from year to year. It may be possible, in time, to retain such materials completely in electronic form, which could facilitate the updating of plans as the needs arise. Given that the majority of first-year history classes are taught by a trainee teacher in the current year, it is particularly important that department materials and supports have been made available to the teacher and also that the teacher's inclusion at subject meetings has been factored into the equation when practicable. The commitment given in the current circumstances, where a substitute teacher has met with the teacher being temporarily replaced, in order to ensure satisfactory progress, is highly commended.

Despite the current building work, and its consequent disruption of access to some resources for History, the department is highly commended for its commitment to maintaining an impressive bank of teacher supports. From the content perspective, it has been suggested that once the paperwork elements of the department plan have been satisfactorily dealt with, as much emphasis as practicable might be placed on the discussion of teaching and learning, sharing ideas and issues. This has been accepted by the department for active consideration, as has the possibility of using future ICT supports to enhance the department's already excellent resource base via the development of a visual resource bank, scanned and stored onto DVD for use by any teacher when he or she sees fit. This can certainly be considered over time and in a collaborative manner, with a view to making teachers' work easier in the long term. It is good to note also that yearly outlines of the material to be

covered have been agreed upon and have subsequently informed the planning of individual teachers, which is sensible.

Individual teachers have developed quite staggering amounts of subject-specific resources, which is evidence of an excellent commitment to teaching and learning. These resources include video material (ranging through local, national and international topics), personal or school-owned books which are used to support student research projects, copious amounts of materials from the HIST team, the Department of Education and Science and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Despite the building difficulties, it was good to note in one class that regular research visits to the school's ICT facilities have been undertaken, as well as to the local branch library and elsewhere. Evidence of considerable individual links with the History Teachers Association, resource packs for several interesting historical periods and events, and literally hundreds of handouts have been developed by some teachers and there is no doubt that such preparation has impacted positively on subject delivery in the classroom. For this they are sincerely commended.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all lessons observed, a very positive and work-oriented atmosphere was evident throughout, which is a tribute to both teachers and students. This was reinforced in many instances during lessons by pleasant interaction and some very good banter at times. Classrooms on occasion had some good displays of History-relevant material but the absence of this in other rooms is not a concern at present, given the ongoing building work. The issue of socket location in one room has been referred to earlier, while the manner in which teachers and students have dealt with somewhat cramped conditions pending the construction of new rooms has ensured that teaching and learning have not been significantly hindered, which is applauded.

In the lessons observed, some very good work was undertaken with a view to engaging students with the work to hand. In one lesson, for example, students engaged in group work on some historical documents on Nazism, with designated *rapporteurs* giving the class feedback on the groups' deliberations. Elsewhere, students had been assigned to groups, working on some complex Reformation material beforehand, so that their spokespersons were in a position to bring clarity and reinforcement to matters under discussion in the subsequent lesson. These are good, simple strategies which promote self-directed learning. In another lesson, the development of an entire historical topic was achieved by dealing with modern Macroom, asking students to recall what they could about the school's own surrounds or to look out the window, in order to help them visualise how an early monastic site would have developed. This was an excellent support to students' learning and engagement simultaneously. Frequently also, teachers linked historical material to student-relevant topics, from ploughing matches to local churches, and to other historical events that they had learnt in their junior years. It has been suggested that where historical warfare is being covered, seeking students' views on how such events compare and contrast with modern wars, as seen in TV news programmes and documentaries, could be another useful way of engaging students.

Questioning by teachers was an ongoing feature of lessons, and was successful in further developing students' focus and engagement. Early questioning centred around the monitoring of homework or previous learning, while topic development saw teachers employ questions quite frequently to ensure students' comprehension. Where a war documentary extract was employed, a fine set of questions was developed on an accompanying handout, again supporting students' learning and engagement. It has been suggested in a number of lessons, particularly with the mixed-ability nature of all history classes at the school in mind, that a slightly greater emphasis on mixing questions between volunteer answerers and nominated students be considered, and indeed that teachers pausing for a few seconds after such questions have been asked can be simple strategies for encouraging the more reticent or more challenged students to respond. Naturally, pin-pointing questions a little more can also allow teachers to tailor the questions to suit the aptitudes of students and hence it also facilitates differentiation in teaching.

A good emphasis on the use of teaching supports has been observed during the inspection. As previously alluded to, a war documentary helped students to gain important insights into the plight of both soldiers and civilians, despite some problems with subtitle visibility and sound. Elsewhere, some

excellent political cartoons were deployed for analysis, as were some propaganda-oriented photographs and drawings. Perhaps more use could also be made of illustrations from textbooks in this regard, with again the reminder that mixed-ability contexts can work best where an emphasis is placed on a number of different learning styles, in this instance a combination of verbal and visual being recommended. Where handouts were employed, the focus on syllabus-relevant work, such as document interrogation and detection of bias, was very well done. Student project work was also observed as a hugely beneficial means of subject delivery, with some wonderful projects done by students on their family history, affording an opportunity for the class to engage with visual, verbal and tactile stimuli as part of their learning process. The facilitation of project work on a historic home site by a newcomer student is also applauded as a good support to integration and understanding through History.

Students' learning was considerably well facilitated by the emphasis placed by teachers on giving clear explanations. Sometimes, key concepts like money, power and propaganda were used to develop more complex lesson themes, to very good effect. Where possible, the examples of historic sites which were used included local as well as national or international ones, which is again applauded. Difficult words, central to the syllabus, were very well explained, through breaking them down etymologically or indeed through parallels like the concept of Counter Reformation being linked with a counter-attack in sport. Occasional recommendations have been made, including one on the need to give students concrete examples when dealing with distances or measurements in metric or imperial form. Some excellent diagrammatic representation of complex or lengthy material on Nazism has been observed, and the recommendation made that such diagrams ought to be noted by students as an aid to structuring their own answers. Similarly, diagrammatic tasks could be assigned to students to ensure comprehension where there is a significant amount of contrast and comparison involved, as between Reformation and Counter-Reformation beliefs. Beyond such isolated suggestions, students' responses to the inspector's questioning in lessons has confirmed the overall work done in history lessons in terms of promoting students' understanding, and learning has certainly been satisfactory.

ASSESSMENT

The school operates a form of continuous assessment, with first-year, second-year and TY students having regular tests and their average results recorded on the Christmas report. There is a full summer examination for these classes, with common assessment instruments used as far as is practicable, including in History. Other year groups sit examinations at Christmas and in summer, with the state examination classes also having pre-examinations in the spring each year. This is thorough whole-school assessment practice, complemented by a system of annual parent-teacher meetings and end-of-term reporting.

The commitment of history teachers towards the assignment of regular homework, and its correction, has been very impressive, with many supportive comments inserted on students' copybooks. It is noted also that the school is currently in the process of drafting a general homework policy, which has included input from the history department. Some recommendations have been made around the desirability of clarifying precisely how many significant statements may be needed for a homework task to be completed thoroughly, while elsewhere very good clarity was given to students on the same issue. The maintenance in some classes of separate notes and homework copybooks is applauded as a sensible support to students' homework, as are the clear instructions generally given to students on homework tasks to be done.

The approach taken to project work in some classes is deserving of great praise. In senior cycle, students commence work on their research studies in fifth year, using the computer and library facilities as previously mentioned. It is also noted that among the items being researched by current senior students are many from post-1945 history, which is refreshing and quite sensible, given the amount of material available on such topics. The junior students' projects on their own families were superb examples of how project work can be achieved without the need to devote significant class time to them. The enthusiasm and learning brought about, not to mention the high quality of the work in evidence, makes such work very worthwhile indeed, both as a means of assessment but also a means of promoting self-directed learning.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- History is available for study at all levels and in all year groups across the school.
- Timetable provision for History from second year through to sixth year is satisfactory.
- Management has been very supportive of teachers' planning, membership of the HTAI and attendance at HIST training.
- Plans for the future development of facilities and equipment at the school hold very exciting potential for History.
- Collaborative and individual planning has been very satisfactory, with the commitment to developing significant amounts of teaching resources being highly commended.
- The school's broad-based TY history programme is commended.
- Good informal supports are in place for trainee and substitute teachers of History at the school.
- Very good teaching strategies have been observed in general, including fine teacher-student rapport, the use of teaching supports, the linking of historical material to student-relevant topics, and a strong emphasis on student engagement and retention.
- Good assessment and homework practices obtain in History, with the commitment to homework correction and the assignment of student projects being deserving of considerable praise.

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

- Efforts should continue to be made to provide good timeslots for first-year History, given the relatively low timetable provision for the subject.
- Timetable provision for junior History should seek to avoid having periods on consecutive days.
- Re-equipping the school once the building project is complete presents an ideal opportunity to modernise provision for History, hopefully to include open access for History teachers to a data projector and laptop computer.
- An additional focus in teaching through the use of visuals and varied questioning has been recommended in some instances.

Post-evaluation meetings were 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.

Appendix
School Response to the Report
Submitted by the Board of Management

Inspection Report School Response Form

Area 1 Observations on the content of the Inspection Report

We welcome the positive report on the History department. The school has noted the recommendations made with regard to timetabling. History classes in first year are limited in number by the schools policy to provide students with a taste of all subjects initially. The school will be happy to provide IT and Audio Visual equipment for the History department once the building project is complete.