

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

Subject Inspection of History

REPORT

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Report on the Quality of Learning and Teaching in History

This Subject Inspection report

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Margaret Aylward Community College. 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 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

Margaret Aylward Community College is committed to meeting the needs of the school's students and providing them with an enriching and rounded education. The school provides the Junior Certificate Programme, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the Transition Year Programme (TYP), the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). During the current academic year 2005/2006 all junior-cycle students are following the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). The junior-cycle cohort of students is organised into one mixed ability class in each of the three year groups apart from the present first-year students. The learning needs of a number of first-year students are being met through the formation of two classes in this year group so that there is one mixed-ability class and a class which caters for the students with learning needs who prompted the initiative.

The potential of History to make a strong contribution to the holistic development of the students is recognised. All junior-cycle students study History as part of their JCSP. Three of the four junior-cycle classes study History as a discrete subject and one first-year class studies Environmental and Social Studies (ESS), which combines the study of History and Geography in the syllabus of the subject. Consideration of the inclusion of History or a History module in the school's TYP is encouraged. The TYP is a very important component in the breadth of education available to the students and History has a real contribution to make to the aims and objectives of the TYP. The provision of History in TYP would also help to maintain students' contact with the subject and encourage the students to continue their study of History as part of their Leaving Certificate coursework. Management's facilitation of three sixth-year students in pursuing their study of History is acknowledged.

A study of the time allocation to History shows that the discrete junior-cycle History class groups have three periods per week in the case of the first-year class “1 Heather” and the third-year class “3 Hawthorn”. The second-year class “2 Hazel” has four History class periods due to the composition of that class’s curricular studies. The sixth-year History class is blocked with Geography and has been allocated five class periods per week. This provision is supportive of the teaching and learning of History in the school. Attention, however, is drawn to the distribution of the three History class periods in the case of class group, “1 Heather”. The timetabling of two of that class’s History periods on one day has meant that there is a long interval in teacher-class contact time between the last class in the week and the first class of the following week. It is advocated that a wider distribution of History class periods throughout the week be provided. The efforts made by management to ensure the provision of teachers to teach History to the classes has had to contend with a shortfall in qualified History teachers among the teaching staff. The three teachers deployed to teach History have helped to maintain the long tradition of History being taught in the school and are rendering important support for the subject. Management’s initiative has tapped expertise among the teaching staff for the immediate future and it is hoped that the difficulties encountered regarding the deployment of teachers to History class groups will be surmounted through recruitment in times ahead.

Modern teaching practices in History require the provision of teaching aids and access to learning support facilities. The resources available to the history subject team include audio-visual equipment, a school library and access to information and communication technology (ICT). There are heavy demands on the school’s ICT room but management is asked to continue to encourage the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of History. The continued strengthening of the History section of the school library is also important. The accommodation of management in facilitating attendance at the in-service courses for the new Leaving Certificate History syllabus and the willingness to fund the necessary purchases for the teaching of History as well as membership of the History Teachers’ Association of Ireland is acknowledged.

Planning and Preparation

The teachers’ preparation of the format and structure of the lessons were underpinned by an informed understanding of their students, and the aim of consolidating student learning. In keeping with good teaching practice the teachers chose a definite topic for their respective lessons. Individual teachers incorporated the students’ textbook into the presentation of their lessons to enable the students to benefit from direct reading and the study of pictorial sources relating to the lesson topic. Handouts were prepared for a number of classes to facilitate class assignments such as a revision test and the familiarisation of students with the names of some early Irish monasteries and their founders. The inclusion of a map of Ireland as a visual stimulus in the latter handout supported student learning. The practice of including pictorial illustrations in

handouts is encouraged whenever feasible because the visual depiction of information can be helpful to students in readily recognising the key facts.

It is advocated that the History teachers meet formally as a group at set intervals during the academic year notwithstanding the amount of informal contact that takes place between them and their participation in the JCSP meetings that are organised. The suggested purpose of meeting formally is to provide a structured way for the History subject team to formulate agreed year plans, pool skills and establish a store of resource materials to assist the teaching and study of History throughout the school. Collaboration in the compiling of a History folder that contained agreed year plans, a catalogue of History resource materials, and the documentation of the teachers' recommendations relating to projects, field trips and strategies for exploring the potential of ICT as a teaching and learning device would provide the History teachers with a useful reference manual. The manual or folder is also likely to facilitate discussion of the continued development of History in the school. The Transition Year Programme (TYP) is an important component in the breadth of education available to the students and the History teachers are encouraged to explore with management the inclusion of a History module in the school's TYP.

The planning documentation studied and received on the day of the inspection visit was informative. The portfolio of the JCSP students' target statements outlined the objectives and progress being made by the students and this planning strategy is commended. The target statements are an important means of assisting students' progress. Individual teachers also presented year plans detailing their teaching schemes of the coursework. It is recommended that due emphasis be placed on teaching and learning methodologies in year plans in addition to the naming of the topics as it assists teachers in ensuring that the needs of the many different kinds of learner are met through the use of a range of appropriate teaching styles. One suggested way of doing this is to draw up year plans and extended schemes of coursework in linear columns that outline the list of coursework topics, the intended allocation of time for the coverage of each topic, the teaching and learning methodologies to be incorporated into the study of the topics and, the resources to be used. It is not envisaged that the strengthening of year plans in the manner suggested would stifle teachers' own initiatives. Year plans should always be live documents that can be adapted as the need arises rather than a finished product.

Teaching and Learning

There was a positive teaching and learning atmosphere in the classrooms visited. Students were addressed by name and the classroom skills of the teachers ensured that discipline was sensitively maintained. The teachers sought to encourage learning at all times and interacted frequently with their students during the course of the lessons. The students were informed of the topic for study at the commencement of each lesson. This strategy is commended as it gives students a definite focus and helps them to settle quickly into their study of the lesson topic. The arrangement of the rooms preferred by the individual teachers also supported the inclusive ambience of the History lessons. The display of historical materials was noted and this practice is encouraged in order to promote visually students' interest in History.

During the initial phase of the lessons observed the teachers engaged their students through the correction of homework and/or the addressing of questions globally to the class and to named individuals. These activities were effective as means of revising prior material and helping students acquire a clear understanding of the context of the new material. The students were responsive to the teachers' questions and their responses were indicative of the good rapport that exists between the teachers and their students. It is advocated that greater use be made of the blackboard during this stage of the lesson to reinforce visually awareness of key points and terms that emerge through the activities undertaken. The recording of information also helps to consolidate students' introduction to the context of the lesson topic before proceeding further.

Good use was made of the students' textbooks during the course of the lessons to draw the students into a more in-depth study of their lesson topics and to help them become more informed. The study of the information and the pictorial illustrations contained in the textbooks increased students' knowledge of the subject of their study and facilitated their active participation in the class lesson. The selection of students to read aloud, the subsequent teacher-student interaction based on the section that had been read and the clarification of points were examples of how the participation of the students was fostered. Handouts were sometimes used in conjunction with the textbook. In one instance, the teacher distributed a prepared handout containing questions relating to the topic studied and the students were directed to consult their textbook if they found it necessary to obtain information for answering the questions. This strategy helped to consolidate the class's revision of the lesson topic. However, it is advised that the teacher read through the questions with the class before the class tackles the written assignment in order to make sure that the individual students clearly understand each question.

The teachers' monitoring and encouragement of the progress of their students was a notable feature of the lessons observed. Increased use was made of the classroom board to record and highlight important details according as the lessons progressed. Students were frequently affirmed for their answers. Individual teachers directed their students to transcribe notes on the lesson topic into their copybooks to aid the students' study and retention of the lesson material. The setting and correction of homework was observed too. The time and interest invested by individual teachers in undertaking project work with their students has clearly nurtured the students' interest in History while also affording them the opportunity to engage in cooperative learning through group work. These methodologies assisted student learning and are commended.

Assessment and Achievement

Assessment and evaluation are important aspects of classroom teaching and of the educational policies of the school. Oral assessments were clearly demonstrated by the questioning techniques of the teachers while the students' responses enabled the teachers to gauge the learning and understanding of their charges. The teachers give class based assessments at appropriate times within their teaching schemes of the coursework. The JCSP target statements for students are

important means of tracking and encouraging students' progress and the use made of them is commended. Homework is regularly set and the standard of work observed in a number of students' copybooks indicated their steady progress. The importance of including a written teacher's comment at the end of the homework exercise is always to be recommended and was noted in many copybooks.

Formal examinations are organised within the school before the Christmas holiday period and at the end of the academic year before the summer holidays commence. The examination classes sit trial certificate examinations during the spring term to help them prepare for the state examinations in June. Reports are sent to the homes of the students detailing their examination results and progress. A parent-teacher meeting is organised for each year group to afford parents and teachers the opportunity to meet. The maintenance of strong links between school and home on a regular basis is a priority of the school. The home school liaison coordinator has an essential role in maintaining this contact.

Celebration of students' achievements figures prominently in the life of the school. The students are encouraged to develop their talents and their achievements are publicly affirmed. The affirmation is demonstrated at the monthly presentation of awards to students from each class and in the award ceremonies for the entire school that are organised in December and May.

Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations

The following are the main strengths and areas for development identified in the evaluation:

- Whole school support for History is evidenced by the accessibility of the subject to junior and senior-cycle students pursuing the Junior Certificate School Programme and the Leaving Certificate (Established).
- The timetabled allocation of History class periods shows that efforts are made to ensure that a helpful distribution of classes and a favourable pattern of teacher-class contact time are provided. The timetabling of the three History class periods for junior cycle class groups on different days avoids the occurrence of long intervals in teacher-class contact time.
- The teaching and study of History is supported by the provision of teaching resources available to the History teachers and their students. These resources include audio-visual equipment, ICT facilities and the school library.
- There was a positive teaching and learning environment in all the classrooms visited. The lessons had a clear focus and the teachers sought to encourage student learning at all times. The students were attentive and responsive.

Assessment, the monitoring of students' progress and the celebration of students' achievements are actively pursued.

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

- It is advocated that the inclusion of History or a History module in the school's Transition Year Programme be considered. History has a definite contribution to make to the education of TY students.
- It is recommended that the History teachers meet formally as a group at set intervals during the academic year to formulate agreed year plans, pool skills and establish a store of resource materials.
- Teachers' year plans should detail the methodologies and resources that will be used in the teaching of the various lesson topics.

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.