

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science**

**Subject Inspection of History
REPORT**

**Castleknock College
Castleknock, Dublin 15
Roll number: 60100Q**

**Date of inspection: 8 May 2006
Date of issue of report: 15 December 2006**

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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 Castleknock College, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. 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 deputy principal and subject teachers.

Subject Provision and Whole School Support

History is an integral component of the three curricular programmes that the school provides. These programmes are the Junior Certificate Programme, the Transition Year Programme (TY), and the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE). History is compulsory study for all junior-cycle and TY students and is available to senior-cycle students as an optional subject choice for their Leaving Certificate coursework. Management deploys the six History teachers to teach the subject fairly. This practice is commended as it enables every member of the History subject team to remain actively involved in supporting the continuous development of the teaching and study of History in the school. The timetabled allocation of History class periods and the pattern of their distribution are supportive of the coverage of the coursework. Junior-cycle classes have three History periods per week. TY students study a History module that is delivered in a half-yearly bloc to each of the four classes in the school's TYP. The classes have been allocated two History periods per week for the duration of their History module. There are two History class groupings in fifth year and one History class group in sixth year. The Leaving Certificate class groups have five class periods per week apart from one fifth-year History class group that has six periods weekly in the current academic year 2005/2006.

The provision of teaching resources and the accessibility to school facilities that are available to the History teachers and their students support effective coverage of the coursework. The History teachers have their own classrooms, which facilitates the teachers in the delivery of their class lessons. Teaching aids such as audio-visual equipment, information and communication technology (ICT) and a school library are readily available. Management recognises the importance of in-service training and has accommodated the History teachers in attending the full complement of in-service courses for the new Leaving Certificate History syllabus. In addition, management appreciates the importance of field trips to places of historical interest in enriching the students' study of History and facilitates teachers who organise these activities.

Management supports and promotes departmental planning. The History department has an appointed coordinator; time is given to the convening of departmental meetings at regular intervals throughout the year, and budgetary expenditure is provided on a needs basis. It is recommended that consideration be given to rotating the appointment of subject coordinator after set intervals of one or two years to enable the individual members of the History subject team to contribute to the development of the teaching and learning of History in the school. The TYP is an important and mandatory programme in the breadth of the education provided for the students of Castleknock College. The provision of the opportunity for all History teachers to become actively involved in teaching the TY History module will help the History department to draw from a wide pool of experience in maintaining the development of the module. The assignment of

History teachers to junior-cycle classes for the three years of the Junior Certificate Programme or for a two-year period that incorporates second and third year of that cycle merits consideration. The advantages of such a system are that it enables teachers to bond with their students, acquire knowledge about their learning, and steadily consolidate their teaching of the coursework with the same class group over a longer period of time. The good classroom relationships that were observed between the History teachers and their students support the case for assigning the History teachers to junior-cycle classes for two or more years, where such an assignment can be made.

Planning and Preparation

The History department is a vital forum for maintaining the continuous development of the teaching and study of History in the school. The History teachers are commended for their collaboration which has helped to establish the structures that stand the department in good stead. A coordinator has been appointed. The department has produced a "Handbook of the History Department", which is in effect a framework policy document. Every departmental meeting has a definite agenda and the minutes of the meetings are recorded. The good work of the History department has generated a momentum that merits every encouragement. The allocation of the time available for subject planning should be discussed with management if there is a perceived need. It is recommended, as has already been mentioned, that the role of subject coordinator be rotated among the History subject team to enable the members of the team to make their own individual contributions in that role.

The Handbook of the History department is an informative document that details the aims and objectives of the History subject team, agreed year plans, the teaching resources compiled by the department, suggested TY field trips, cross-curricular links, school awards for History and examples of questionnaires for evaluating the teaching and learning of History. It is advocated that the Handbook of the History department be developed further to include statements on the variety of teaching methodologies employed in the delivery of the coursework, the aims, objectives and organisation of the TY History module and the integration of ICT into the History classroom. The Handbook should also detail agreed departmental policy statements relating to issues such as assessment procedures, homework, students with special learning needs and the role of the subject coordinator. In addition to the listing of the coursework topics, it is advocated that year plans include mention of recommended classroom methodologies and resources that are drawn from the pooling of the teachers' own experiences in teaching the various topics. The inclusion of recommended strategies and resources for teaching particular topics in the year plans will enable the planning documentation to continue to evolve based on the experiences of the History teachers. It is not intended that any agreed year plan would become so rigid a blueprint as to stifle teachers' own initiatives for effective year plans are always work in progress that can be adapted as the need arises.

It is recommended that a departmental review of the TY History modular programme be undertaken periodically in order to assist its ongoing development. The module has a real contribution to make to the school's TYP and the work of the History teachers in this regard is noted. The TY History module also maintains the students' contact with History and provides the opportunity to nurture and develop their continued interest in the subject. It is important that the TY History module retains its own clear identity and makes its own special contribution to the students' study of History. The current History modular programme is based on a study of the United States from 1945. The modular coursework would seem to have much in common with Topic 6 of the Leaving Certificate History syllabus, The United States and the World 1945-1989. The study of this period of U.S. history should, therefore, continue to be explored in ways that provide the TY students with a wide range of stimulating learning experiences such as the project tasks, field trips and usage of ICT that already form part of the modular programme. Consideration should also be given to introducing a degree of local history into the

module, given that Castleknock College itself is a considerable asset that is close at hand. Obviously, the greater the number of History teachers, who have had the experience of teaching the module, the greater will be the pool of expertise on which to base decisions. It is advocated that the History department discuss with management the feasibility of providing the opportunity for all History teachers to gain experience in teaching the TY History module.

In the advance planning and preparation of the lessons observed the teachers chose clearly identifiable lesson topics. Thought was given to the pace and structure of the lessons, and to maintaining the engagement of the students. The variety of teaching resources to be used included a replica of a Roman sword, the students' textbook and handouts containing relevant lesson material that had been sourced on the internet and in newspapers or compiled by the teacher. The handouts were prepared to help students acquire a greater understanding of the lesson material and to facilitate particular activities including the students' own future revision of the topic prior to their examinations. Individual teachers supplied documented lesson plans that outlined the proposed presentation and content of the lessons. The selection of homework tasks for the students was another aspect of the preparations made.

Teaching and Learning

There was a positive teaching and learning atmosphere in all the classes visited. Students were addressed by name and the classroom skills of the teachers ensured that discipline was sensitively maintained. The teachers informed their students of the purpose of each lesson at the outset. This strategy helped the students to engage quickly with the lesson and gave them a definite focus for their attention. Good teacher-student interaction was observed and the good classroom rapport also encouraged the students to be attentive and responsive. The display of History materials in the classrooms included examples of students' work. This practice is both commended and encouraged as it promotes students' interest in History in a visual way.

Having informed their classes of the purpose of their respective lessons, the teachers maintained the engagement of their students in a variety of ways. These strategies included the collection and correction of homework, a brief discussion of current affairs, showing the class a replica of a Roman sword which, besides gaining the immediate interest of the students, also established a connection with a previous lesson, and the introduction of the class directly to the lesson topic. The strategies were effective in nurturing the students' participation in the class lessons from the outset. Individual teachers directed students to read aloud their answers to homework questions and/or posed questions and invited comment. Particular use was sometimes made of the classroom board during the initial phase of the lessons as in the case of a class's introduction to Hitler's foreign policy from 1933 onwards. An outline map of Germany had been drawn on the board prior to the students entering the classroom and was used to show the students the location of the places mentioned during the course of their introduction to the lesson topic. The map provided the class with a clear understanding of the geographical considerations that had a bearing on Hitler's foreign policy during the period studied.

Prepared handouts were given to the students in the majority of the lessons observed and these facilitated their study of the lesson topic. The handouts provided the students with detailed information about the subject of their study and provided the means to include a variety of learning activities such as reading aloud, paired work and class discussion. In some cases the attention of the students was drawn to the source of the information, e.g. the internet or a local newspaper, to impress on them the usefulness of the sources for obtaining historical information. Study of the handouts and the recording of important points and terms on the board were often effectively combined to impact on student learning during the course of the lessons. Individual teachers also followed the study or discussion of the content of the handout with the setting of a task such as paired work. These practices are commended. It is recommended that handouts that are prepared for classroom purposes be relatively brief rather

than lengthy in order to facilitate the study of them and allow time, whenever possible, to set the students a task that will consolidate their learning within the structure of the lesson.

The personal contribution which the teachers made to teaching their students well was always apparent. The pace and structure of the lessons reflected the prior preparations undertaken by the teachers. The teachers' questioning techniques facilitated both the recall of information and student comprehension. In addition, the teachers' own knowledge of the historical topics and their personal teaching styles frequently conveyed their interest in History to their students. The noting of important points on the board provided opportunities for the teachers to expand on the points and provide additional interesting information such as how the names given to members of a Roman family were decided. The class-based tasks given to students were important means of consolidating their knowledge of the lesson topic. They also helped to vary the pace and structure of the lessons. The setting of homework was another feature of the lessons observed. The practice of setting and correcting homework is commended. It helps to consolidate students' knowledge of the coursework and nurtures awareness of the responsibility that students have in their own autonomous learning.

Assessment and Achievement

Assessment and evaluation are important aspects of classroom teaching and of the educational policies of the school. In the classroom, the History teachers use a combination of questioning, the setting of assignments, homework, project tasks and class tests to assess continuously their students' progress. Homework is regularly set and the standard of work observed in a number of students' copybooks and folders indicated their progress through the coursework. The writing of a teacher's comment at the end of the students' homework assignments is always to be recommended and was noted in the students' work. The setting of class tests at regular intervals is another means used to track student progress and inform judgements.

Formal in-house examinations are organised prior to the commencement of the Christmas holidays for every year group. The third- and sixth-year students sit mock Certificate examinations during the spring term in preparation for the state examinations in June. All other year groups sit in-house examinations at the end of the academic year. The practice of the History teachers in setting common test papers for the end-of-term examinations is commended. School reports are sent to the homes of the students following each of the school's formal examination sessions. The parents and guardians of first, second, and fourth-year students also receive half-term reports at Halloween and Easter. The parent-teacher meeting that is organised annually for each year group affords parents, guardians and teachers the opportunity to meet.

The recognition and celebration of student achievement is a vital part of school life. Students are encouraged to make progress in their studies and to experience success during their secondary school years. The History teachers support and contribute to the affirmation of their students in their classrooms and in the broader context of school life. The school's award system includes the college medal for History for the student with the best academic performance in sixth year and an award for the Hugh O'Donoghue Memorial Essay. The latter award, which is open to fifth- and sixth-year History students, is made for the critique of a book on an historical subject. In 2005 the winning entrant submitted a paper on the published work, Ireland and the New Architecture 1900-1940.

Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations

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

- Whole school support for the teaching and study of History is indicated by the subject's strong presence in the school's curricular programmes and the accessibility of History to all students.
- The timetabling of the History class periods reflects the efforts made to provide a supportive allocation of teacher-class contact time and a favourable pattern in the distribution of the class periods.
- The provision of teaching resources and the accessibility to school facilities that are available to the History teachers and their students support effective coverage of the coursework.
- The History department is a vital forum for the continuous development of the teaching and learning of History throughout the school.
- There was a positive teaching and learning atmosphere in all the classrooms visited. The teachers displayed a good grasp of the syllabus. Each lesson had a definite aim and purpose. The students were engaged and responsive during the lessons.
- Assessment, the monitoring of student progress and the celebration of student achievement are intrinsic parts of school life.

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 position of subject coordinator be rotated at agreed intervals to enable the individual history teachers to make their contributions to the development of the teaching and study of History in the school.
- The assignment of History teachers to junior-cycle classes for the three years of the Junior Certificate Programme, or for a two-year period that incorporates second and third year of that cycle, merits consideration.
- It is advocated that year plans include mention of recommended classroom methodologies and resources in addition to the listing of the topics in order to maintain the development of the year plans as a planning resource for supporting good quality teaching.
- The provision of the opportunity for all History teachers to gain experience in teaching the TY History module will help the History department to draw from a wide pool of experience in maintaining the development of the module.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of History and with the deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.