An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

John the Baptist Community School
Hospital, County Limerick
Roll number: 91502N

Date of inspection: 27 April 2015

AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

Dates of inspection	27 and 28 April 2015
Inspection activities undertaken • Review of relevant documents • Discussion with principal and teachers • Interaction with students • Meeting with subject co-ordinator	• Viewing of subject-relevant facilities • Observation of teaching and learning during ten class periods • Examination of students' work • Feedback to principal, deputy principal and teachers

MAIN FINDINGS

- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed has been impressive, ranging from good to very good, with a number of very high quality lessons.
- Among the examples of very good practice observed were very strong teacher-student rapport, the incorporation of imaginative activities, games and strategies, and a consistent emphasis on group work in promoting student engagement.
- Teacher preparedness for lessons was very thorough, and included planning for the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) and some outstanding preparation for role-playing and tasks related to historical themes.
- Despite some areas remaining for ICT development, the school and history department have gathered a significant range of resources to support the teaching of the subject.
- A very thorough departmental folder, diligent coordination work, regular meetings and a clear commitment to subject development are key features of planning.
- Whole-school support for History is very good, including the core nature of History in both junior cycle and Transition Year (TY), open subject-choice mechanisms, good timetable allocations and clear links between subject delivery and school self-evaluation (SSE) themes.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sometimes, a clearer emphasis on learning intentions and a revisiting of these during the lesson, and greater clarity of roles for students in group activities was required.
- While in-class questioning and formative assessment of homework were very good in several instances, there were times when more use of higher-order questioning and of commentary on homework, as a formative support to learning, was merited.
- A specific focus on keywords associated with cause, consequence, deduction and argument, in class and linked to the school's school self-evaluation (SSE) literacy theme, could help to extend students' ability to discuss and write history.

INTRODUCTION

John the Baptist Community School serves a wide rural catchment area across east County Limerick in the main. The current enrolment, consisting of boys and girls, is 951. The school offers the Junior Certificate and established Leaving Certificate, along with the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) as options, while TY is optional but taken by almost all students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed during the inspection was impressive, including a number of very high-quality lessons built around a clear rationale and structure and driven by active methodology.
- In all lessons, teachers used sections of board well to identify lesson aims and key words, and thus supported learning. Sometimes homework was also pre-identified; this strategy and the revisiting of learning intentions as lessons proceed are worthy of some extension.
- Some very imaginative ideas featured in lesson development, with students role-playing as historical characters for a fictitious radio show, learning by using props and implements, or comparing images of ship design as if they were modern motor cars.
- Video clips were used well as stimuli. Sometimes these required a little more interrogation, and pre-identification of related tasks for class work, but they brought an important visual dimension, as did good analysis of paintings, maps and photographs.
- Impressive levels of history-specific décor, posters, actively used time-lines, student projects and keyword displays in classrooms, allied to strong teacher-student rapport, contributed to a most pleasant learning environment in all classes.
- Group tasks were a positive feature of all lessons, and classroom layout supported such activity very effectively. Sometimes, there was a need to pre-identify different roles for members of the group in order for them to obtain optimum benefit from the activity.
- Some good strategies associated with assessment for learning were observed, including the use of ‘traffic lights’ with junior students and anticipation exercises with seniors. The school’s focus on assessment as its latest SSE theme will support this work further.
- In many lessons, students’ white boards were seamlessly used to gauge prior learning or encourage group reflection. This worked well as an informal assessment strategy, and especially when linked to group discussions and a short revision quiz.
- Oral questioning was employed productively by teachers and involved practically all students at different points. There was a need, at times, for questions to delve more deeply in some banded classes, and such deeper questioning can also be supported by the plans to enhance collaborative learning via digital technology.
- Very high levels of teachers’ formative commentary on homework have been noted in several lessons, but this is not universal and its extension has been recommended.
- Several teaching strategies specifically support students’ literacy development, including the use of a 5Ws learning frame, blank templates, cloze tests, mind-mapping exercises and reflection ‘post-its’. A particularly clear approach to advanced literacy, including the organisation of ideas, relevance and structuring an answer, was observed with senior students.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Strong support for History across the school is evidenced by the subject being a core one in both Junior Cycle and TY, and part of an open subject choice for Leaving Certificate.
- Weekly timetable provision for History is very good, with three single periods for every junior class, two single periods in TY and five periods in both fifth and sixth year.
- It is very positive that the school intends to expand its wifi capacity in the coming year, to facilitate a greater degree of intranet collaboration among subject department members, and between students and teachers. The fact that TY history classes have access to the main computer facility each week is a good further support to research work.
- Regular class and termly assessments are carried out, with teachers using a collaborative approach to paper setting. The school has done considerable work on promoting formative assessment practice and has linked this clearly to an SSE theme.
- It is recommended that a focus on terms associated with cause, consequence, deduction and argument, within the school's keywords-literacy SSE theme, could enhance students' ability to discuss and write good History.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Good subject planning is typified by diligent coordination work, which includes a very comprehensive departmental folder containing records of meetings, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analyses, results analyses, details relevant to education support contexts and a range of other issues.
- The electronic storage of resources on the central staffroom computer merits extension, incrementally, to support lesson delivery in all classrooms, whether teacher-based or not, and should encourage general discussion of teaching and learning approaches too in time.
- A very good range of topics is covered in the TY history plan, including sports, cultural, military and political themes, supported by a focus on research and skills development.
- Levels of preparation by teachers were high, and included a range of resources, handouts, ICT-based presentations, props and other supports to student learning. Several teachers had individualised lesson plans, but all made good use of a white board to provide key structural elements of lessons.
- All classes observed were covering material in line with the year plans in the department folder, with syllabus requirements and were pitched at age-appropriate levels.
- Regular record keeping included monitoring of attendance and performance in class tests. This was complemented by focused subject department tracking of results in certificate examinations, including impressive uptake at higher levels, and by the identification of objectives which would support improvement. This is a very sound approach.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation. 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.

Published September 2015