



Looking at
History

Teaching & Learning History
in Post-Primary Schools



INSPECTORATE

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Introduction

This report has been compiled on the basis of the findings and recommendations made by inspectors of History in a total of fifty schools where subject inspections were carried out between September 2004 and May 2006. Some inspection reports formed part of a whole-school evaluation (WSE), while most were written as a result of separate subject inspections. The fifty schools selected as the basis of this report comprised thirty-four voluntary secondary schools, four community or comprehensive schools, and twelve VEC schools or community colleges, representing the range of second-level school types in which History is taught.

A subject inspection report in History, as in other subjects, looks at the subject under a number of clearly defined headings: whole-school provision and support; planning and preparation; teaching and learning; and assessment and achievement. The format of this composite report follows these headings and in the same order in which they appear in a subject inspection report. In this report, however, to facilitate a greater development of issues generally and to include more detail, commentary, and exemplars, it has been found useful to subdivide the headings further into what are felt to be logical and relevant areas.

This report has, in essence, a twofold purpose. Firstly, it should be taken as a summary report of what inspectors found during school visits between 2004 and 2006. By concentrating on a relatively recent and time-bound body of evidence, this report may be taken to reflect closely what is current practice in the teaching of History. Secondly, it is intended to assist schools generally, and teachers of History specifically, in their efforts to improve History throughout the range of areas outlined. The report contains many of the findings and recommendations that inspectors have made to schools but has also been informed by many examples of good practice in schools, which the inspectors seek here to disseminate to a wider audience of schools and teachers.

The past few years have seen significant developments in the teaching of History. A Junior Certificate syllabus introduced in 1989 was reviewed and had its examinable content revised in 1996. More work is being undertaken on this syllabus by the NCCA course committee as this report is being prepared. Since 2004 the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus has been introduced to schools, with the first cohort of students having sat the first examination in this syllabus in June 2006. Feedback to inspectors suggests that the revised syllabus, particularly in its emphasis on documents and research, as well as the degree of built-in choice and the variety of aspects of study, has been well received. Of recurring concern, however, have been the difficulties encountered in covering the syllabus content and in dealing with documents and research work within the expected time limits.

The work of the History In-service Team (HIST) has been another important catalyst of development in the teaching and learning of History, reaching, as it has, more than 1,500 teachers of the subject between 2004 and 2006. When added to the considerable changes otherwise afoot in schools, including the introduction of new subjects, the opportunities provided by information and communication technology, and the need to meet the continuous challenges of a fast-changing society, it is appropriate that stock is taken of where History stands in order to ensure that it moves forward in an educationally sound position in schools and classrooms. The need for students to study History, to acquire an understanding of the world and the skills necessary to navigate through it, has never been more obvious. The role played by the study of History in maintaining a balanced, liberal education as the mainstay of the Irish system has been and remains a central one. It is hoped that this composite report will provide a solid and viable base of advice and support to those involved in teaching History.

1 Subject provision and whole-school support

Timetable provision

In a significant majority of schools the timetable provision for History is three single periods per week in each year of the junior cycle. All schools are urged to see this as standard. Occasionally, where schools offer first-year students the opportunity to sample a number of optional subjects before making choices, the provision for History may be only two periods per week in first-year classes. This is understandable but presents a challenge to the successful coverage of the relevant section of the syllabus. Care needs to be taken in the construction of timetables to minimise the effect of any class having fewer than three periods per week for junior History.

In the senior cycle the majority of schools offer a Transition Year (TY) programme, which is generally optional. Most schools which have a Transition Year offer History or historical studies of varying types. Quite often, historical studies have been incorporated in social studies, citizenship and human rights, politics, or other related areas. A historical element is compulsory in the TY programme of many schools, while other schools make it optional. As TY may indeed be the last time that many students will study History as part of their formal second-level education, inspectors are very much in favour of provision for the subject within a school's TY programme. Whether with whole-year or modular access, the inspectors have recommended that provision should exceed one period per week, to avoid a risk of perceived marginalisation of the subject and also to facilitate already popular activities, such as project work, field trips, and cross-curricular activities. The following is an example of the type of comments included in inspection reports on provision for History in TY:

In senior cycle, there is currently no History or historical studies element in Transition Year. In light of the broad aims of TY in the areas of social studies, the promotion of local studies and project work, it is recommended that the introduction of a historical studies element into the Transition Year programme be given active consideration. Such an element, whether in whole-year, modular or cross-curricular form, could offer students excellent opportunities for self-directed learning and analytical-skills development. These would benefit students whether they continued with History to Leaving Certificate level or not.

Timetable provision for Leaving Certificate History is quite uniformly an allocation of five periods per week each year, although some schools have been found to allocate four or even fewer periods per week. This latter situation is not satisfactory in the light of the considerable amount of material that the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus requires to be covered. In most schools the five-period allocation is structured as three single periods and one double period. This is felt to be satisfactory, with the double period being seen by the inspectors as more valuable than it had been before the advent of the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus, because of the greater emphasis on document-handling and research work.

Access to History

In voluntary secondary schools and those derived from a voluntary secondary background, History is a core junior-cycle subject. Vocational schools and community colleges may offer another subject in place of History in the junior cycle in accordance with the Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools. In practice roughly 89% of these schools offer junior History and most visited by inspectors do so in a similar fashion to voluntary secondary schools. Where History is offered as an optional junior-cycle subject in such circumstances it can sometimes have a timetable allocation of up to four periods per week. In such cases it is quite usual to find between half and three-quarters of the students opting for History. While this is satisfactory, a number of smaller schools that operate such a system have found it difficult to retain a viable number of students to form a regular Leaving Certificate class in History, given

that the pool of students who might select senior History has already been thus reduced. There are, in addition, a small number of schools in the vocational sector where History is not offered at all to junior-cycle students, even as an option. This almost inevitably means that History is not available beyond the junior cycle either and deprives second-level students of any study of History beyond their primary-school experience of the subject. This is unsatisfactory.

Provision for History has been maintained where schools have become involved in the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). History lends itself well to such JCSP ideas as the setting of short-term goals and the identification of terms. Where schools have considered developing Environmental and Social Studies (ESS) as an alternative to History and Geography it is important that they remain mindful of the historical elements of that syllabus and of regulations on access to this subject being restricted to schools that formerly offered the Social and Environmental Studies Programme (SESP), as outlined in the *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools* and in Department of Education and Science *Circular M42/91*.

In the majority of cases examined, History is taught to mixed-level or banded groups in the junior cycle and almost always to mixed-level groups in the senior cycle. Some schools operate a streaming system. The inspectors found it to be very rare for students who are allocated additional support, such as resource, learning-support or language tuition hours, to be removed from History in order to gain access to such support. This approach to the provision of the subject is commended. Where observed, special-needs assistants (SNAs) have been found to be used supportively and seamlessly in facilitating the learning of History in the classroom. In instances where students whose first language is not English have been observed in particular lessons, the inspectors found these students to be generally integrated very successfully in the lessons.

International students whose primary language is not English receive supportive tuition to strengthen their competencies in dealing with the linguistic challenges they encounter in studying subjects such as History, Geography and Science.

In all schools that offer History up to the Leaving Certificate, this is done as part of an options mechanism. It has been pointed out that it is important for guidance departments and individual counsellors to stress the point that the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus in History has subsumed the former Economic History syllabus, making the revised syllabus more relevant for some careers than may have been perceived heretofore. A number of history departments have made very good use of designated subject notice-boards for information regarding the revised syllabus, careers, and items of general historical interest for students. Additional resources and ideas on promoting History can be found on the HIST web site (www.hist.ie). The inspectors have otherwise identified best practice in the area of Leaving Certificate subject choice as the annual tailoring of option blocks to best fit the preferences expressed by students.

While the Leaving Certificate (Applied)) programme does not include access to historical studies directly, the inspectors found that many students who take History for the Leaving Certificate do so within the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). This is encouraging, particularly in the light of the continued absence of History from the approved list of vocational subject groupings, which means, in effect, that History is the final Leaving Certificate subject selected by many of these LCVP students. Anecdotal and sometimes direct evidence gathered in schools suggests that this is a situation that is not conducive to the uptake of senior History, particularly as it means that in practice students have to select six of their eventual subjects before even being able to consider History as a possible seventh and last selection.

One caveat which school management has identified within the senior cycle options, however, is that the popularity of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme within the school is impacting on the uptake of subjects outside the Vocational Subject Groupings, i.e. History, Geography and Classical Studies in the context of this school's curriculum. This is a cause for concern as the school seeks to maintain the viability of having two classes of History in each Leaving Certificate year group.

In some schools with a compulsory TY programme students have been asked to select their Leaving Certificate subjects before Transition Year. This is felt by inspectors to reduce the chance that they will gain from the broader educational experience that lies at the heart of TY philosophy, in addition to losing an extra year of maturation before making important subject choices for the Leaving Certificate. Where schools have been found to cover exclusively Leaving Certificate material in TY History or historical studies, this has been discouraged. It is strongly recommended that TY be used to employ varied teaching methods and to develop research and source-handling skills and historical awareness in students. This would certainly complement what might subsequently be covered in the revised syllabus where students opt for Leaving Certificate History but should not be focused narrowly on covering merely the content or examination components of that syllabus.

Teaching resources

In general, inspectors found schools to have enough qualified personnel to be able to offer History to all levels practicable. Among the recommendations the inspectors have made in the area of teaching personnel is the desirability of ensuring that student-teachers and newly appointed teachers are offered mentoring support as needed. It is also important that a class retain the same teacher as far as possible throughout the junior cycle, as it is at the Leaving Certificate level too. Sometimes the needs of the school have been cited as a factor in reducing the number of history classes that qualified history teachers actually teach. This may sometimes be inevitable but it is also something that ought to be balanced as far as possible with the desire of qualified teachers on the staff to teach History to the highest level they feel happy with.

A further difficulty obtains where junior and senior teachers of History form two distinct groups within a history team. Having senior history teachers with whom junior students may already be familiar and having junior teachers who are fully comfortable in dealing with students' queries about the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus is regarded as important supports in maintaining a viable presence for History throughout a school.

In general, the support of school management for teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) has been commended in inspection reports. In recent times, CPD has concentrated on the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus. The positive response of teachers to the support offered by the HIST team and from the web site at www.hist.ie has frequently been made known to inspectors during school visits. It has been strongly recommended in inspection reports as best practice for schools to release for CPD all teachers at present teaching or likely to teach this syllabus, even where a senior history class is not always viable.

The school acknowledges that there is every reason to anticipate a regular Leaving Certificate history class to function in the near future and there is certainly a need for some "catch-up" on in-service training for the likely senior cycle history teachers. Details of upcoming in-service training dates and venues have now been supplied to the school and management is commended for its acceptance of the need for teachers to attend.

General resource provision

With regard to the provision of specific resources for History, inspectors found that designated history rooms remain the exception rather than the norm in schools. Wherever such a facility has been found practicable it has been encouraged in inspection reports.

The provision of a designated history room, access to audio-visual equipment and the availability of the school's learning-support facilities to the history teachers and their classes are indicative of the supportive environment that exists within the school. This is also true of the allocation of an annual budget to the history department.

Much support for History has also accrued from policies whereby teachers have been allocated their own base room, although again it is acknowledged that this is not always possible unless an adequate

number of classrooms is available in the school. Even within the confines of teaching History in ordinary classrooms, much has been done by teachers to develop a historical atmosphere in their classes through the display of subject-specific wall charts, maps and student projects in written, pictorial or model form.

Where teachers have their own classrooms it is possible to display subject-relevant material and students' work; this opportunity is taken in some instances and should be developed as part of the planning and preparation process in others. Providing a stimulus-rich environment for students is a major part of engendering interest and enthusiasm, and this in turn can play a part in encouraging students to select History for the Leaving Certificate.

An area of resource provision that has been found to create difficulty in a number of schools is the school library. Pressure of space has resulted in school libraries having to be used substantially as classrooms, while many are simply not adequately equipped with resources to facilitate the teaching and learning of History. The compulsory research requirements of the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus have placed additional burdens on some school libraries, with the difficulty of obtaining and providing acceptable research material for ordinary-level students being a matter of particular concern in several schools. Some excellent examples of schools developing links with the local library service, particularly in promoting local historical study and senior research work, have been noted and are heartily encouraged by the inspectors. The willingness of many county and city library and archive services to engage with the revised history syllabus and to assist in finding and providing resources for research study work in particular is deserving of praise.

Budgeting for History tends to occur more frequently as needs arise than as part of an annual or termly allocation. The inspectors found no significant difficulties with either method of providing financial support for the subject. Schools have frequently been commended for the level of support made available for history field trips, quizzes, visiting speakers, and student projects. It has also been found to be quite common for the school management to fund membership of the History Teachers' Association

of Ireland for teachers who express an interest in membership. Where there has been a genuine will, some schools have had remarkable achievements in creating a sense of historical awareness within their budgetary constraints. The contribution by teachers to the organising and preparing of such activities has been vital to their success and is given the highest praise. On occasion, some effective involvement of students as organisers has also been noted and encouraged.

A most commendable feature of History in the school is the existence of an independent student history association. This is organised and run by the students, who appoint their officers and committee. Each year they hold quizzes, run projects to assist the developing world, invite specialist speakers to address the students, and run a student history “rag day” to raise both awareness and funds. The association funds itself from modest student subscriptions while the funds raised are used for specific charitable purposes. There are also plaques, monuments, memorials and projects around the school and its grounds to which the students have had a major contribution. The association, whose news items feature in the school newsletter, is a valuable addition to the life of History in the school.

Information and communication technology

Another area of general resource provision that can significantly affect History is information and communication technology (ICT). A number of schools have experienced delays and other difficulties in securing broadband internet access, although this has begun to improve somewhat in the past year. Most teachers are now well aware of the material that is available to them and to students from the internet, not least through the work and the web site of the History In-service Team. Inspection reports noted a slow but certain growth in both the awareness and the use of ICT by teachers, and reports have also mentioned whole-school support in this area.

In many schools, access for history classes to ICT facilities, particularly for those seeking to undertake the compulsory research study element of the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus, has been limited because of the individual school's computer room (or rooms) being required for other ICT-assisted classes. This has occurred particularly where the school has Leaving Certificate (Applied) or post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) classes using the ICT facilities. A number of inspection reports recommended that access by senior history classes to the computer room, even *ad hoc* and preferably during some double periods, would be invaluable for students and would also facilitate teachers in monitoring the progress of students' research work.

Some excellent examples of whole-school support for ICT in History have been identified. It is clear that history teachers in a number of schools have begun to identify constructively ways in which support for the subject needs to be channelled, and the inspectors are fully supportive of this.

The history team has also made detailed applications to management for resources to implement ICT-driven classes in the subject, and this application is currently pending. The history teachers want to access data projectors to enable them to use PowerPoint and other applications, particularly with reference to the revised syllabus for Leaving Certificate.

A small number of schools have been active in promoting historical awareness through establishing links with schools abroad, using videoconferencing or e-mail and occasionally tapping in to the facilities and support structures of local companies. Elsewhere, schools have engaged in significant development of their ICT facilities, and some history teachers have been to the fore in identifying ways of employing such facilities to best effect.

The prospects for development of information technology in the teaching and learning of History have been strongly enhanced in recent years at the school. A very well-appointed computer room, substantially equipped through the support of teachers, parents and

former students for a fundraising event, offers modern equipment with broadband internet access. In addition, the teachers currently involved in History have all enrolled in an “ICT and History” course, under the auspices of the National Centre for Technology in Education, as a follow on from HIST in-service training that some have attended. This is an outstanding commitment by both school and staff to ICT development.

Summary of main findings and recommendations

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

- ❖ The provision of three periods per week for junior History, more than one period per week for Transition Year and five periods per week for other senior history classes is the norm.
- ❖ Inspectors note with disappointment that a small number of schools in the vocational sector do not offer History at all in the junior cycle.
- ❖ In voluntary secondary schools, and those derived from a voluntary secondary background, History is a compulsory junior-cycle subject.
- ❖ Best practice in senior subject options involves the tailoring of option bands annually to suit students’ preferences.
- ❖ The non-inclusion of History in the recognised vocational subject groupings remains a challenge to the uptake of the subject among LCVP students.
- ❖ Teachers have responded very favourably to the support of the History In-service Team.
- ❖ Where practicable, the provision of a designated history room or, alternatively, of teacher-based classrooms has been found to facilitate the teaching of the subject in several ways.
- ❖ The contribution of teachers to the organising of activities and acquisition of resources has been very valuable.
- ❖ Reports note a slow but certain growth in the awareness and use of ICT in the teaching of History.

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

- ❖ The provision of a history element is recommended in all TY programmes.
- ❖ Guidance of students in relation to History should take account of the fact that the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus has subsumed the former subject of Economic History.
- ❖ Facilitating qualified and willing history teachers to teach a satisfactory number of history classes is very desirable, as is a support structure within schools for newly appointed teachers.
- ❖ The release for continuing professional development of teachers now teaching or likely to teach the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus is strongly recommended.
- ❖ It is recommended that the development of school library facilities and contacts with external support agencies be seen as an important support for research study work for Leaving Certificate history students.
- ❖ Access by senior history classes to the computer room is recommended to facilitate teaching and research work within the revised syllabus.

2 Planning and preparation

Collaborative planning

Inspectors found that an increasing number of schools have engaged in subject planning on a more formal level than previously. A typical initial activity of a subject department has been the designation of a subject co-ordinator or head, usually voluntary and often rotating annually among history personnel to ensure a spreading of responsibility as equitably as possible. Some large schools appoint a head of History as a post of responsibility, but this is found to be the exception rather than the norm. Issues that tend to predominate in subject department meetings, particularly when only one or two such meetings have been practicable during a given year, include providing information on courses and in-service training dates, the discussion and selection of textbooks, and the development of common assessment instruments and resource banks, including library stock. Such a subject department structure is recommended by the inspectors as being particularly valuable in all school situations. The desirability of having such a formal structure for planning increases where a large number of teachers are involved and where many of them teach a small number of history classes each.

The history team, despite comprising seventeen teachers, is very active, has a volunteer co-ordinator, and meets at least once a term to plan for the subject's needs and future. Good records, minutes, plans and syllabus ideas as well as schemes of work for each year are retained by the history team and show much hard work, thought and ingenuity on the part of the history teachers. This is to be commended. Aims and objectives are laid down for each class and these were apparent in the classes visited during the inspection.

Inspection reports have also noted that a growing number of history departments have accepted the principles of developing a subject plan, going beyond the fundamental issues described above and using a structured approach to subject planning, as promoted by the School Development Planning Initiative

(SDPI). As an additional resource in this regard, the HIST web site (www.hist.ie) contains some useful material on departmental planning, adapted from the SDPI materials to meet more readily the requirements of a history department. An example of the kind of thorough departmental planning that the inspectors have commended is described as follows:

There is a culture of planning in the school, and the history team has been afforded time and space to meet, discuss and plan work for the subject. This has partly evolved from the overall approach of the school to School Development Planning, which has been strongly focused on subject planning and development. Three planning meetings have taken place in recent months: agenda, minutes and action plans are drawn up for each meeting, in which all history teachers participate. Excellent plans for syllabus delivery, modules, programmes and individual classes have been drawn up as a result of these meetings, and teachers use folders of relevant information to plan and manage their classes. While these meetings have been of great benefit to the teaching and organisation of History, it is also recommended that one meeting per year be dedicated to strategic planning for the subject, in the context not only of the subject itself but also in conjunction with overall school development planning.

Inspectors have been very conscious that finding time for such formal planning has not been easy, either for subject teachers or for management. In schools where there are a number of history teachers but where many are multi-disciplinary teachers, facilitating planning meetings that even a majority of history teachers can attend is an issue requiring careful organisation. In many schools a quota of three subject planning meetings per year has been seen as an achievable target, and the inspectors have seen little reason to go beyond this in practical recommendations. The value of continuous informal planning should likewise not be underestimated. Some very productive work has been done in such circumstances, and the inspectors have been very supportive of the efforts of teachers to share ideas, problems and teaching resources beyond the bounds of formal departmental structures. Whether in a formal or

informal way, much can be gained from teachers sharing their experiences, positive and otherwise, in the day-to-day work of teaching History in the classroom. Some fine examples of what might be termed “informal” planning (simply in that it takes place outside scheduled meeting times) but is nonetheless structured and purposeful work have also been observed, again through the fostering of a collaborative approach to organisation and the provision of resources. Such collaboration can also assist teachers in dealing with what is perceived by many teachers to be a very lengthy, if stimulating, Leaving Certificate syllabus.

As a continuing process, the history teachers are building up a valuable resource of the materials prepared for use in ICT-facilitated lessons. They are also in the process of creating an accurate archive, on disk, of all the audio-visual materials available in the school in their subject. This is an example of best practice and is to be encouraged as an ongoing process, as it will benefit not just the current generation of teachers and students, but also their successors.

Liaison with outside agencies

The inspectors pointed out very clearly the importance and value of teachers attending HIST in-service courses, and in the great majority of instances the response of teachers to the training and to the continuing support given by HIST team members, both on line and in person, has been very positive. In a small number of schools the involvement of history teachers with the in-service training and support mechanism offered by HIST has been somewhat disappointing. Factors in this situation have included management difficulties in releasing all relevant teachers, particularly where they are also teachers of another subject for which in-service training is being provided, as well as unforeseen changes in history personnel, the lack of a regular Leaving Certificate history class in some schools, and occasional reports of communication failures in relation to notification of in-service courses. Teachers’ involvement in other

in-service training in their own time has tended to be stronger where there is ready access to the local education centre. This is understandable, but it is nevertheless highly commended where it has obtained, as for instance in the case of National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) support courses in ICT use for teachers.

Membership of the HTAI is another obvious and valuable support for teachers, particularly at a time of considerable syllabus change and the advent of significant changes in methods and resource possibilities. The inspectors found a variety of practices in schools in this regard. Commonly, a small number of history teachers in a school are active HTAI members, and these act as unofficial liaison with other members of the staff as needs arise. Involvement with the HTAI also tends to vary in relation to the distance of schools from regular meeting venues. Nevertheless the inspectors noted a healthy level of active membership of the HTAI among teachers in the schools visited and have readily endorsed this involvement as a significant aid to teachers of History throughout the country.

As a further support to teaching History, membership of the local branch of the History Teachers Association of Ireland has been recommended. Even if it is only possible to attend some of the branch meetings, and mindful that some of these may deal exclusively with Leaving Certificate issues at present, membership of the branch is heartily encouraged as a support mechanism and an opportunity to share ideas and concerns with a wide circle of other history teachers. Membership also entitles teachers to a copy of the magazine "Stair" and access for teachers and students to a number of other useful events and resources during the academic year.

One significant effect that the work of HIST and of the HTAI has had on general planning and continuing professional development has been in the area of ICT. Several examples of the collaborative employment of resources provided by the HTAI and of continuing use of the HIST materials and web site have been identified during inspections.

Continuing professional development is apparent in the enthusiasm of the teachers for their subject association, history teachers' conferences, in-service meetings and Department-provided in-service training for the new Leaving Certificate history syllabus. There is also in-house training in the use of ICT and all the teachers are competent in that area. This was evidenced in the preparation for classes and the delivery of ICT-driven materials during lessons. Students are also encouraged to be proficient in the use of computers and in one class are required to give a PowerPoint presentation to their class. This is commended and encouraged as good practice.

Individual planning and preparation

While significant moves have been made in the area of collaborative planning in schools, at both the formal and the informal level, the inspectors generally reported a satisfactory degree of individual teacher planning as well. *A Guide to Subject Inspection* suggests that yearly or term plans should be maintained, and this has generally been found to be so, with some teachers maintaining substantial files of individual lesson plans as well. The inspectors have also been happy to acknowledge that much constructive planning and preparation for the teaching of History goes beyond the confines of documented schemes of work, for example, and can involve a wide range of documents, teacher-generated resources, and syllabus management.

At individual levels, the commitment of teachers to planning and preparation has been both very evident and impressive. Folders containing student records of achievement, termly and yearly outlines of work as well as examples of tests were seen. Excellent handouts were also observed, some using web-based resources, including those from the National Library of Ireland, which are very worthwhile. Furthermore, in all lessons visited, the material being covered was fully appropriate to the year groups concerned and took good account of the mixed-ability nature of the classes. Some excellent teacher-generated charts, covering

historical terms and date lines, were also in evidence, as was provision for table quizzes and students' storage of handouts.

Where individual lesson plans have been made available to the inspectors, these have generally been impressive in their thoroughness and sensitivity to the needs of the relevant class groups as well as in the range of issues brought into consideration in the preparation for lessons.

Teachers' lessons planning displayed an awareness and understanding of their class groups. In keeping with good teaching practice, the lesson plans stated the aims, objectives, methodologies and resources that were to underpin them. The plans indicated that the students would be maintained on task in a variety of ways including teacher-led questions, reading, role play and the setting of class assignments. The determination of homework also formed part of the lesson plans and provided another means of helping students to make progress in their studies.

An important point that bears reiteration is that the core aim of individual teacher planning and preparation, as the inspectors have seen it, should be the enhancement of teaching and learning and not the mere development of paper trails. Instances where no written planning has been made available have arisen in the course of subject inspections, as have cases where the written planning has borne less than full resemblance to the actual lesson observed. Neither of these situations is satisfactory. In a number of instances, planning documents have dealt almost entirely with outlining the topics to be covered in a given term or year, with insufficient emphasis on teaching methods. Yet even in such instances the focus of the inspectors has been substantially on the outcome achieved by planning and preparation, not on documents in themselves; and where the focus of planning and preparation has influenced learning and outcomes, this has been applauded.

There was clear evidence of individual planning and preparation for all the lessons observed. The teachers' lesson planning displayed an awareness and understanding of the capabilities of their class groups. The thought that had been given to deciding the means of encouraging student learning was reflected in the range of items prepared and in the modification of the content of individual lessons to facilitate student learning.

Reports have also recommended that the maintenance of any planning documents in electronic form would be an additional help for teachers, in that it more readily facilitates the updating of both individual and departmental plans, as required. Using electronic copies of the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus to assist in the development of termly and yearly plans is another strategy that may assist teachers in planning and subsequently recording their progress through the content of the syllabus. If shared with colleagues, such documents could be particularly valuable for teachers coming new to the syllabus and seeking to learn from the experience of colleagues in regard to time management and general organisation.

Summary of main findings and recommendations

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

- ❖ An increasing number of schools have engaged in subject planning more formally than previously, and this is applauded by the inspectors as good practice.
- ❖ The organising of formal subject planning meetings in schools can be a valuable support for collaborative planning in History.
- ❖ Valuable formal and informal planning continues to facilitate the teaching and learning of History in many situations.
- ❖ Membership of the History Teachers' Association of Ireland has been a valuable resource for collaborative and individual planning and for history teachers generally.
- ❖ Most teachers have presented satisfactory evidence of individual planning on a termly or yearly basis and sometimes lesson by lesson.

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

- ❖ The development of a history department in all schools and engagement with the relevant guidelines of the School Development Planning Initiative are encouraged.
- ❖ Attendance at HIST training and the use of its support are encouraged as valuable aids to both collaborative and individual planning and preparation.
- ❖ Membership of the History Teachers' Association of Ireland is strongly recommended.
- ❖ It is important that subject planning meetings be organised in such a way that teachers of History can attend the relevant meetings.
- ❖ The electronic development and retention of planning documents is encouraged as a very adaptable and easily disseminated aid to planning and preparation.

3 Teaching and learning

General methodology

Given the desirability and the relative prevalence of individual planning and preparation by teachers, as described above, the impact of good preparation on classroom methods has been evident from the initial moments in lessons observed. Most teaching observed employed a number of methods of introducing lessons, including short recap sessions on previously covered material, oral questioning on similar topics, the use of spider diagrams to facilitate brainstorming, distributing hand-outs, and monitoring homework, if applicable. These worked satisfactorily as methods of introducing lessons. Somewhat less common but nonetheless impressive introductory tactics observed during inspections that deserve wider application included posing provocative questions to engage students in historical debate and introducing photographs, maps, cartoons or short audio or video clips to set them thinking about the lesson ahead. Whatever method was employed, reports frequently referred to the desirability of making it clear to students in the initial stages what the aims and objectives of the lesson are, and this should be a central plank in the construction of lessons.

In almost every lesson observed, a central feature of teaching methods has been the use of questioning. In most instances this questioning has been teacher-led, although inspectors noted several interesting examples of the onus for developing questions for each other being placed on students through pair or small-group work. Sometimes too an entire senior lesson was observed to be successfully developed around a number of questions, reflecting the inquiry-based approach encouraged in the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus. Such methods worked very well and certainly deserve further use in classrooms. In looking at more traditional teacher-led questioning processes, the inspectors noted how these provide for a healthy degree of interaction during lessons generally but stressed the need for variety in the

employment of such questioning. Reports frequently urged the mixing of lower-order and higher-order questions as well as the use of individually directed questions alongside those seeking volunteered answers.

Students were involved in lessons from the outset and responded well, particularly where questions and contributions were asked of individuals, usually by name. Where students offered correct information, they were affirmed, and where more information was required, other students were brought into the discussion until the matter was resolved. This was in evidence in almost all classes, and was particularly obvious in Leaving Certificate classes where students were actively engaged in the learning process at all times.

Good questioning was particularly noted as an important feature of effective teaching in mixed-ability classes where the questions have been carefully tailored to meet the needs of different students and where the questions themselves act as springboards for the identification and retention of central learning objectives. It is also recommended that the process of questioning seek to draw as many students as possible into active participation in the lesson.

Whether in special class situations or in regular, mixed-ability classes, teachers showed great care in tailoring questions to the aptitudes and ages of students. Effective questioning was sometimes reinforced by strategies such as the placing on the board by teachers of key terms which students gave in answers or drawing students' attention to sections and illustrations in textbooks which reinforced the answers given. Sometimes too, questioning was clearly structured so as to draw students to a point of contact with the new material about to be introduced in the body of the lesson. All these questioning techniques worked very well and are simply recommended for continued application.

The importance of encouraging students' engagement with the central terms and concepts associated with History has already been touched on in this report. Teachers have employed an impressive range of methods for bringing this engagement about. The inspectors pointed out the appropriateness of this approach on many occasions, ranging from the Junior Certificate School Programme's emphasis on key words to the emphasis on central concepts at the Leaving Certificate higher level. On occasion teachers have complemented this emphasis on understanding with the use of time lines, some of which are permanent features of classroom walls, allowing for them to be studied at will as topics are being studied. Another effective idea has been the development by students of a form of "history dictionary," in which they record important words and definitions in a systematic fashion. Placing historical knowledge in such frameworks clearly aids the development of an understanding of time and the vocabulary necessary for writing good "History", which should be the ultimate aim of such work.

In keeping with syllabus guidelines in both the junior and the senior cycle, much of the emphasis in the use of visuals has been on interpretation, identifying historical clues about the past and essentially analysing images as sources. This has been best accomplished where the emphasis has been on getting students to offer interpretations rather than accepting teacher-driven analysis without considering things themselves, and developing analytical skills as much as possible. Again, such a source-based visual approach was considered by the inspectors to be particularly adaptable to mixed-ability class groups, with the opportunity for teachers to vary the emphasis appropriately between comprehension, comparison, criticism, and contextualisation, as syllabus guidelines suggest.

Student-centred approaches

The degree to which teachers have felt in a position to employ student-centred teaching methods, such as pair work, group work, and role playing, was found to be quite limited. The perceived length of the Junior Certificate syllabus, the novelty and length of the revised Leaving Certificate course and insufficient class contact time have been cited as serious obstacles to the development of such strategies. Slightly

more use of these methods was noted in TY History, but this should not be exaggerated. The inspectors noted the difficulties experienced by teachers in these areas and have encouraged experimentation and the use of short segments of lessons to try to develop such strategies further, in the realisation that they can provide valuable avenues for students through the material and can develop critical thinking skills, empathy, teamwork, and self-confidence. Short brainstorming sessions by students, facilitated by the teacher, were found by the inspectors to be a positive means of involving students at the start or finish of a topic or issue, whether in junior or senior classes. Where group work has been observed it has been well structured and conducive to students' engagement and learning. The employment of such methods does not necessarily involve a significant amount of time beyond what would have been needed in any event to cover the content of the lesson. Group work has also been observed to assist in adding a visual aspect to the lesson content and so to reinforce learning, often very simply and unobtrusively.

The group tasks assigned to a junior cycle class quickly had them engaged in studying their prepared handouts to find the answers to the questions asked. The students were required to write the correct answers on coloured strips of paper which a member of each group affixed to the classroom board.

Role playing was seen more rarely than group or pair work during inspection visits. This is also disappointing. Where it was observed it added variety, topicality and often humour to lessons, sometimes being very effective in assisting with revision work for examination classes or short recapitulation of material as lessons near their end. Role playing took no more time than demonstration by the teacher or teacher-student questioning where it was observed. It worked most successfully where the ideas were simple and easily conceptualised.

Occasionally, such topicality enabled students to become active in their own learning, with some magnificent examples of role playing being seen, always developing students' understanding of their History, perhaps without them even realising it at times. Interviews

with a Celtic “celebrity” and an advert by a *fulacht fiadh* salesman were simultaneously entertaining and educational... The students’ enjoyment of the lesson was quite apparent and their applause for the re-enactment of the medieval dubbing ceremony replete with a silver sword was in effect a sign of appreciation of their own learning.

The inspectors occasionally witnessed class debates employed as a method of teaching and learning History in a student-centred manner. Some reports drew attention to excellent debate and discussion processes employed as senior students were encouraged to tease out important concepts and elements in the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus. Such a discursive approach was also found to work well in junior classes, particularly where revision issues were a priority. In some instances such discussions sought to refresh students’ memory and understanding while avoiding the mere repetition of previously studied material for revision. This worked well and is recommended for further use in regular and revision situations if possible.

The visit to the class preparing to stage a debate on the Reformation revealed the classroom to be already well laid out. There were four desks for the principal speakers representing the Pope, Martin Luther, John Calvin and Huldreich Zwingli facing the rows of seats set out for the partisan audience, which comprised the remainder of the class. A number of students wore T-shirts indicating whom they supported. Their enthusiasm for the debate was readily apparent.

A considerable amount of work has been done by teachers of History in the area of helping students to engage with the subject beyond the realm of teaching methods in the narrow sense. Many instances of careful explanation of difficult concepts and words, appropriate pacing and lively biographical approaches with younger students were observed and are applauded by the inspectors.

Given that the school operates a banding system in junior cycle and has distinct higher and ordinary-level history groups in senior cycle, it was very significant that the teaching seen very rarely took the need for clarity lightly, regardless of the class groupings being taught. Important or difficult words, like “gerrymandering,” “blockade,” “saturated” and many others were routinely focused on and explained clearly to students. Individuals central to some complex lesson topics, such as the Cold War or World War II, were highlighted and their backgrounds, including political viewpoints or biographical details were drawn on as relevant to place them in appropriate contexts for students. Teachers regularly paused in their lesson development to check student understanding.

An extremely important student-centred element of much of the lesson content observed during inspections was the effort made by teachers to link the historical material being covered to events, people and current affairs, including citizenship issues, to which the students can readily relate. In this regard, drawing parallels between History and television programmes, connecting sport with historical events, using lyrics from popular songs and a host of other tactics have been employed very successfully in lessons in engaging students and showing them that History is relevant and interesting. In the same regard, the inspectors applauded the commitment of teachers to developing local historical parallels and examples to add further relevance to the national and occasionally international material being taught. This is important with junior classes and perhaps even more so in the senior cycle, where the relative freedom of TY and the research study component of the revised Leaving Certificate are felt by the inspectors to be particularly suited to such a local emphasis.

Use of resources and support materials

The development by teachers of considerable banks of resources has already been referred to under the heading *Planning and preparation*. The inspectors observed a significant use of such materials in the lessons visited, with hand-outs of both visual and textual content, overhead transparencies and video

material being the most widely used of such resources. In the great majority of instances these support materials were used productively, adding variety and often bringing a visual aspect to an otherwise verbal message. Wall-mounted or board-mounted charts and maps were found to be consistently beneficial in adding clarity to topics and in engaging the students, some of whom may not be as comfortable as others with aural or written messages alone.

Hand-outs with visual as well as verbal content produced impressive results with students. Very good hand-outs included maps, photographs, political cartoons, and fact sheets. The idea of giving senior students a copy of the relevant section of the syllabus they are covering has also been felt by inspectors to be a very sensible idea. It is recommended that students be encouraged to maintain folders or binders for such hand-out materials as may be given out in class, as an obvious support for learning and retention.

At other times, teachers incorporated video extracts or referred briefly to textbook illustrations to reinforce the content of lessons. Occasionally, historical artefacts and student-generated models were also employed, bringing a “hands-on” and three-dimensional aspect to students’ engagement. The preparatory work involved in the use of such materials is again fully acknowledged and applauded.

Visual and tactile stimuli abounded, ranging from laminated photos of archaeological sites and finds, through handouts containing political cartoons, archival photographs, maps, drawings and even models of ancient dwellings which students had constructed as projects. On one occasion, a copy of a historical newspaper was also introduced to help bring events to life. A very good emphasis on individual facial characteristics of historical figures who could appear in exam papers was also evident.

The most consistently used resource in teaching History is certainly the blackboard or whiteboard in the classroom. The inspectors have generally been satisfied with the level of use made by teachers of this simple but still valuable resource. Rarely have reports suggested that the board has been overused,

although it is naturally important that any such resource be used in conjunction with others and integrated with general teaching methods. Indeed the board has been recommended in several reports as an aid to clarification to help students visualise issues being covered, to identify sites of historical significance on simple map outlines, to generate spider diagrams by means of brainstorming, and to draw up lists of important or difficult terms as lessons proceed. Frequently the board has been a central tool for teachers in reinforcing the spelling of difficult terms, emphasising dates, breaking down foreign or lengthy words into understandable constituent parts, and - with senior students in particular - developing answering and organisational skills with students. The basic maxim of seeking to reinforce verbal messages coming from class discussion or questioning with visual ones on the board bears reiteration here.

An area where inspectors have offered recommendations in an effort to make optimum use of board work is that of students' engagement with the work. Inviting students to come to the board and write important words or dates as part of a revision strategy has been observed to work very effectively in a number of history lessons. It remains important that the writing in such situations should be heavy and clear enough for other students to read comfortably. Where teachers have encouraged students to make notes of important points presented to them by means of the board, this has also been found by the inspectors to be an effective learning method. Some reports have drawn a distinction between getting students to "take" notes—simply writing in their copybook whatever is written on the board—and the preferred option of asking them to "make" notes. This requires them not merely to transcribe what they hear or see but to select the main points or words for their own notebooks. This is a practice that, if developed over time, can assist students in learning to identify for themselves what is important and what is not, encouraging the development of skills of analysis and collation while at the same time ensuring that the important material that may end up on the classroom board is also retained by the students for further use.

In many classrooms the teacher was observed to make productive use of an overhead projector as an alternative to use of the board. Projectors offer the possibility of presenting illustrations, maps and other material to students in a way not readily possible through use of the board alone. Reports commented at times on the importance of ensuring that screens are clearly visible to all students and that room lighting facilitates the use of the projector, and also on the need to avoid including too much material, either visual or verbal, on individual transparencies. In the main, however, the use of overhead projectors in classrooms has been considered a valuable and relatively simple reinforcement of learning, with the fact that some teachers have made hand-outs of the transparencies being valuable to students. Where such transparencies have been generated initially on computer, the storable, amendable and reusable nature of such material is an obvious additional advantage for teachers that has been commended when observed in practice.

The difficulties that have obtained in relation to developing access to and use of information and communication technology in schools, already referred to, have also arisen in the classroom. There is no doubt that the professional development for teachers offered by the HIST and the National Centre for Technology in Education has begun to have effect in a number of schools, including the use of ICT for research work and (less frequently) for class teaching and learning. Where classrooms have been equipped with computers and data projectors, inspectors noted the degree to which such resources have been employed, not least in adding to the visual and interactive aspects of teaching and learning. On the occasions where ICT had become a regular part of classroom life, with teachers actively employing the computer and data projector as a central teaching aid, the benefits were very evident.

Where a laptop computer and data projector were employed for document work, the quality of analysis, visual impact and overall student engagement was outstanding. The incorporation of video and data projector use with oral and board reinforcement was most appropriate in the relevant classes, especially where the key points of emphasis in the syllabus and guidelines were used to inform such work. It was particularly good to see the use made of material available through the History In-service Team.

However, this also remains an area where much more can be achieved, particularly if history departments can successfully pool pictorial and documentary resources using ICT and have regular access to the equipment needed to make use of ICT in the classroom. A quite typical finding in inspection reports states:

While some of the preparatory material and notes for classes had used ICT, there was little evidence of computer-generated work or visual aids in the classes inspected. Given that there is one computer room, which can occasionally be used, it is important for the future planning and delivery of the subject that greater use be made of ICT material. The website for the new Leaving Certificate syllabus carries a wealth of usable material, including visuals, interactive classes and further sources to be consulted and should be exploited more regularly and systematically.

A final area involving the use of resources that the inspectors frequently commented on was that of textbooks. In general, inspectors found that the most effective use of textbooks was as a support for students' engagement and as aids for clarification, homework tasks, and revision. In junior lessons particularly, textbooks can provide a wealth of visual stimuli that can be drawn on, as is the case with documentary sources in both junior and senior lessons. Senior classes also made considerable and often productive use of textbooks, although it is important to remember that the content to be covered in the revised Leaving Certificate is substantial, and therefore it is always important to be mindful of what the syllabus actually requires to be covered, whether textbooks are employed or not. The inspectors noted with satisfaction that the mere reading aloud of lengthy extracts from textbooks, either by the teacher or by selected students, was the exception rather than the norm in teaching History. Selective or focused use of reading of the textbook can certainly be productive in some class situations. However, if students are to be engaged in answering questions, in student-teacher interaction and discussion, in group work and generally in self-directed learning strategies, the use of textbook reading as the core feature of classroom method has in general not been encouraged in inspection reports.

Summary of main findings and recommendations

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

- ❖ A wide variety of effective strategies for introducing history lessons has been observed.
- ❖ Most class questioning was teacher-led, although some very effective use of student-student questioning through group and pair work was also observed.
- ❖ The combining of lower-order and higher-order oral questions and variation between individually directed and volunteer questions is encouraged.
- ❖ Much oral questioning observed allowed for careful differentiation to facilitate appropriately the varying ability ranges within class groups.
- ❖ Although a good deal of discursive lesson development was observed, limited evidence of group work, pair work and other innovative methods was found.
- ❖ A good emphasis on ensuring students' comprehension of difficult terms, dates and other subject-specific data was found during inspections generally.
- ❖ Significant and successful work was seen in making historical material relevant to students' contemporary experiences, including local awareness, and this is applauded.
- ❖ In a very large number of instances, effective use was made of a range of support materials in the development of lessons.
- ❖ The blackboard or whiteboard remains a main resource used by teachers, and where this is used in a structured and clear manner, reinforced by students' engagement, questioning, and note-making, the inspectors found it to be effective in many circumstances.
- ❖ On occasions where ICT has become a regular part of classroom interaction, the inspectors noted and encouraged such work very positively.
- ❖ Textbooks have considerable value in the teaching of History, particularly as aids to clarification, as visual and textual sources of information, and for homework tasks.

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

- ❖ The objectives of individual lessons should be made clear at the outset of each lesson.
- ❖ Group work, pair work and role-playing are recommended as good student-centred teaching methods that need not take any more time than more traditional methods.
- ❖ Where students are given hand-outs it is important to ensure that these are maintained and remain accessible for future revision and homework.
- ❖ Teaching through verbal messages can be most positively reinforced by a visual one in tandem, by means of the board, hand-outs, television, overhead projector, or data projector.
- ❖ The pooling of documentary and pictorial resources by a school's history department, preferably in electronic and hence easily usable formats, is recommended as a support for teaching and learning.
- ❖ Over-indulgence in the mere reading aloud of textbook extracts is not encouraged as a method and indeed is not encountered to an excessive degree during inspections.

4 Assessment and achievement

Assessment methods

The use of oral questioning in class is an invaluable form of continuous assessment that is widely used by history teachers. As previously noted, this was observed by the inspectors to work most successfully where consideration was given to mixing lower-order and higher-order questions, combining individually directed questions with whole-class questions, and consistent efforts to differentiate such questioning to challenge and meet the needs of students of varying ability ranges.

The assigning of homework tasks has also been found to form a regular part of assessment procedures in History. As a rule, these tasks involve written answering of specific questions, drawn from textbooks or past examination papers or developed by the teacher. Somewhat less often, students have been assigned reading tasks designed to deepen their understanding of material covered in class or to serve as an introduction to future material. Accepted procedures generally require inspectors to monitor a selection of homework copybooks in the classes visited. Among the recommendations made in relation to the types of homework assigned, the desirability of incorporating visual exercises, such as stimulus-driven tasks or occasional drawing exercises for junior students, has been referred to. The use by teachers of cloze tests, crosswords and other focused assessment methods has been found to be particularly suitable for students with lower literacy levels but for whom the need to develop an awareness of important terms and concepts is as important as for any students.

Within mixed-ability groups at junior level, it has also been suggested that occasional assignment of visual tasks—simple diagrams, drawings, visual stimulus-based questions, etc.—be considered as an additional means of assessing students, some of whom may not be totally comfortable in written work alone.

Regular testing of students was also found to obtain in most history lessons observed. Whether in whole-school Christmas or summer examinations, individual class tests, or occasional “ten-minute tests” to round off a particular topic, the inspectors noted a considerable use of such testing as a means of gauging students’ progress. With a growing emphasis in many schools on the development of subject planning, the inspectors also commented on an increasing use of common assessment strategies. These are commended in inspection reports as a valuable means of measuring students’ progress and ability levels vis-à-vis their peers. Common assessments are also conducive to collaborative planning by teachers, even where it may be possible for only one or two elements in a particular examination to be in common.

Of the less traditional methods of assessment possible in History, the use of debates and public speaking is deserving of wider application, as previously intimated. The degree to which project work has featured as a means of assessment in History has been varied. The difficulties experienced by teachers and students in seeking to cover all relevant sections of the syllabus have been cited as contributory factors where such assessment practices have not been found to be possible. Despite this, the inspectors also found some excellent examples of project work done by students in all year groups, including the generation of wall charts, CDs, models, and booklets, which are acknowledged as examples of very good practice. Such project work offers a means for students to deepen their interest in History while at the same time affording them the chance to experience a sense of achievement by completing their projects.

Reports note also that the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus has given an additional impetus to project work. The support of teachers for this work has been applauded, as has the backing of outside bodies and colleges for such initiatives through their sponsorship of competitions and provision of support materials and facilities. On occasion, schools had organised substantial historical tours or collaborative projects to help enthuse students undertaking compulsory research study for the Leaving Certificate. Such commitment has been heartily applauded in inspection reports. Reservations that were outlined in a number of schools included the difficulty encountered by some ordinary-level students in completing

research study reports and, more generally, the sense that the completion of this element of the Leaving Certificate has been considerably more time-consuming than had been anticipated.

Assessment for learning

In reviewing homework copybooks the inspectors found quite a variety of monitoring approaches being used by teachers. In many instances homework was corrected orally by means of teacher-student questioning as lessons began, with students then marking the answers on their own homework. Sometimes students were asked to mark each other's homework, with guidance from the teacher. In general, teachers take up students' copybooks at intervals, either monitoring the completion of homework or correcting longer-answer homework, as assigned. Inspectors observed that the rotation of these two methods worked well, given that it is very difficult for teachers to correct personally the written homework of every student every day. Yet it is naturally desirable that teachers maintain cognisance of how students are engaging with homework and with the material covered in lessons; and inspectors have recommended the use of the personal correction of homework by teachers as often as is practicable.

The degree to which teachers have engaged in formative assessment in dealing with homework or testing has been mixed. The use of simple ticks, or of mark-only monitoring, was more prevalent than comment-only marking, particularly in the junior work seen by the inspectors. Self-assessment or peer assessment, apart from the peer-monitoring of homework as previously described, was observed rarely beyond occasional portfolio assessment or presentation tasks assigned in TY history classes. The formative, comment-based marking of students' work was more productively employed by teachers in the correction of longer, usually senior, work. This is understandable, given the time available to teachers for such work, but is again a very productive form of assessment when it is employed. Although rarely seen, some excellent use of the change-tracking facility in word-processor programs was made in the

correction of computer-compiled senior answers, helping students to develop their question-answering skills in a very formative manner. In general, the inspectors stressed the benefits of a more formative approach to marking, moving the emphasis from marks towards guidance and incorporating the guidelines of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, wherever practicable. Benefit can also accrue from an awareness of the marking schemes and principles of state examinations, particularly where these are used to inform both students' work and teachers' correction.

As classes progress towards Junior Certificate, it is suggested that a focus on showing students how the Significant Relevant Statement (SRS) marking principle which is at the core of Junior Certificate should be developed, training them in how to write good "History" in a gradual, formative manner. This should not add considerably to the time required for homework correction and can be a very valuable means of getting students to concentrate on what a question is asking them and what information is required to answer it.

Teachers of senior History in particular have reported difficulty in adjusting to the assessment requirements of the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus. The non-availability of sample examination papers and marking principles until the second year of implementing the syllabus, in accordance with the normal procedures of the State Examination Commission, has been felt by teachers to be an additional difficulty, in that there has been uncertainty about how students ought to approach both study and answering, in addition to the volume of material to be covered in the syllabus itself. Uncertainties related to the examination began to ease somewhat during the second year of implementation of the revised syllabus, and inspectors expect that the experience of the 2006 examination will help to bring further clarity for teachers and students to the requirements of the syllabus and the examination.

In senior History, teachers had felt themselves to be operating in something of a limbo until the availability of marking principles for the revised syllabus. They have engaged very thoroughly with the altered requirements of the syllabus from the point of view of assessment, particularly in relation to the new, stronger focus on question-answering rather than broader essay-writing as was more the case with the old syllabus.

Supporting students' achievement

Inspection reports have identified very uniform practices by schools in maintaining contact with students' parents or guardians in an effort to promote optimum achievement in History and all other subjects. Reports on students' progress based on examination results but also on mid-term appraisals are very much the norm, as is the holding of an annual parent-teacher meeting in school for each year group.

Teachers in general maintain thorough records of students' progress, particularly in the form of attendance records and the results obtained in class tests or in homework assignments. This maintaining of records was noted by the inspectors as very good practice and as symptomatic of an increasing emphasis on planning in school history departments generally. Teachers have sometimes also maintained records of the comments they have made to parents or guardians in reports or at parent-teacher meetings. This is a particularly good, if time-consuming, policy, as it helps to create a clear and thorough picture of students' progress and expected achievement in forthcoming examinations, their suitability for higher-level or ordinary-level papers in state examinations, and even the appropriateness of opting for History at all in the senior cycle. In common with the State Examination Commission itself, inspectors noted with some concern the increase nationally in the proportion of students opting for ordinary level in the Junior Certificate history examination in particular and feel that all junior students who are considered capable of sitting higher-level papers should be given every encouragement to do so.

In finding means of encouraging students' achievement outside the scope of examinations generally and of state examinations in particular, some schools have been active in promoting awards for students' achievement in History. Such awards have included the celebration of results in state examinations but also essay-writing, model-making, project displays, and involvement in local heritage initiatives. They have the added benefit with regard to History of helping to raise the profile of the subject throughout the school.

There are further significant ways in which History is supported in the school. One instance of this is the policy of recognising student achievement and recording work, awards and competition entries in cabinets and on boards in the public areas of the school. Thus the history department has been able to display award-winning work, by students, on both local and international history. These displays are updated and remain of interest to all who work in or visit the school. The provision of such facilities is appreciated by the history team.

The inspectors found a degree of focus, though not uniform, in history departments on issues relating to results in state examinations, ranging from the monitoring of uptake levels in higher-level and ordinary-level papers to the eventual performance levels of history students in relation to the national norms. These are sensible strategies, designed to identify achievement levels and to ensure that optimum levels are being maintained, and are deserving of more widespread employment. In general, inspection reports found a satisfactory level of achievement among history students in both the senior cycle and the junior cycle and commended teachers highly for their work in ensuring that students achieve their potential.

In both History-specific terms and at whole-school level, the assessment structures outlined above are conducive to promoting student achievement. From observation of lessons, examination of student work and interaction with students in the classes visited, it is evident that students have been successfully challenged and are reaching optimum levels of achievement in the vast majority of instances.

Summary of main findings and recommendations

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

- ❖ The most common assessment strategies found during inspections of History were oral questioning, the assignment of homework, and the use of occasional short written tests.
- ❖ Project work featured less frequently as a form of assessment, but the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus has certainly provided a further impetus to this in recent times.
- ❖ The work done by teachers to facilitate students' research and project work is applauded.
- ❖ The non-availability of sample papers and marking principles until the second year of implementing the syllabus has been a difficulty for teachers seeking to assess students working within the ambit of the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus.
- ❖ Teachers in general maintain good records of students' attainment and report on progress in a structured and regular manner to parents or guardians.
- ❖ The promotion of History award schemes, model-making and other projects are all valuable supports for the learning of History in many schools.

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

- ❖ The employment of varied assessment methods, including visual methods, in mixed-ability classes is encouraged, particularly where it assists students with lower literacy levels in becoming familiar with important terms and concepts.
- ❖ Acknowledging the time constraints involved, the inspectors strongly support the personal correction of homework and teachers' comments as formative assessment methods.
- ❖ The use of common assessment elements, such as end-of-term examination papers, is encouraged in collaborative or departmental planning as a means of gauging students' progress in individual schools.
- ❖ Junior Certificate students who are considered capable of sitting higher-level papers should be given every encouragement to do so.