REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Wexford CBS. 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 two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had informal discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Overall subject provision for junior and senior History at Wexford CBS is good. The school offers History as a compulsory subject in junior cycle, in line with the Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools, in mixed-ability class groupings. Timetable allocations of three single periods per week for each junior history class are good, with most classes being well-spaced on the weekly timetable. Commendably, students may select History for Leaving Certificate as part of an open choice system initially and the school is rightly proud of the uptake levels achieved in History annually, which are impressive. In a number of years recently, two full senior history classes have been timetabled due to the high levels of student demand, which is a tribute to the History department also. The weekly provision of a double period and three single periods for each history class is good.

An area requiring some review is that of Transition Year (TY) history timetabling. It is commendable that History is offered as a core TY subject this year, an improvement on last year. However, the provision of just one single period per week for TY History is of uncertain benefit and if at all possible this should be increased to two periods in order to maximise this aspect of TY social studies. If this increased provision is not deemed practicable, it would still be preferable if the History component was offered as a half-year module of two periods per week, as the current single period means that students may miss out on History altogether in some weeks where TY activities may take precedence. Provided that the two-period provision can be accessed weekly, it is then desirable that management and teachers would consider whether single or double-period timetabling is preferred, depending on the degree to which project work or field trips might be factored in to a revised programme.
The school’s general supports for teaching and learning have impacted positively on History. The gradual enhancement of information and communication technology (ICT) has so far resulted in a laptop computer and data projector being provided in the main history-teaching facility. The fact that most teachers also have their own base rooms has been a further support, resulting in good display and storage space being available and the development of a fine stock of books, DVD and video resources in the history room particularly. Budgeting for the subject is on a needs basis, and it is acknowledged that some funding for historical trips has had to be curtailed in recent years. However, management remains very supportive of resource requests and encouraging of teachers’ involvement in the Waterford branch of the History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI) and at continuing professional development (CPD) courses, particularly those linked to the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Departmental and individual levels of planning and preparation at the school are very good and very active. Management is commended for making reasonable time available for departmental meetings, and it is good to note that the position of subject co-ordinator has been taken up by a teacher on a voluntary basis. The duties of the subject coordinator have been clearly set down and they include the convening and recording of departmental meetings, as well as co-ordinating practical issues like book selection and school trips. Good links have been established with the HTAI, the Wexford Historical Society and local library service. It is highly commendable that the co-ordinator and other members of the department have developed guidelines on methodology, intended as supports to newer teachers of the subject at Wexford CBS. An excellent catalogue of the available resources, classified by resource type and chronologically, has been compiled.

Agreed plans for the completion of work in junior cycle and for Leaving Certificate have been put in place. These include very good awareness of students with additional educational needs or those from culturally diverse backgrounds, as well as of potential cross-curricular links. The decision to include African and Asian Nationalism in the junior plan is a valuable one, and may bear further fruit when this field forms the basis of the compulsory documents topic for the Leaving Certificate examination in 2012 and 2013. Planning for completing the Leaving Certificate syllabus is very clear and well structured, and includes an appropriate staged approach to research study reports (RSRs) as well. The fledgling TY plan concentrates at present on Holocaust studies and work here has included a recent visiting speaker who proved very interesting. The co-ordinator’s desire to include some local historical studies after Christmas is applauded, while a more general re-think of this plan will be needed if, as recommended, a move to two periods per week can be facilitated in timetable planning for 2010-11.

Individual teachers’ planning and preparation was very good in all cases. Those who had ready access to ICT made very good use of it in preparing materials, including notes, visuals and documents, for classroom use. In these and most other lessons, significant amounts of student handouts were prepared in advance, and generally students were given the lesson aims at the outset, which is good practice. Very good outline written planning for individual lessons was evident in all cases observed. It is commendable that methodology plans have been drawn up and are available to teachers for consultation on the staffroom computer. In time, the consideration of a means of pooling resources electronically, for use in networked classrooms as ICT development continues, will be worthy of departmental consideration. Before that, departmental discussion should also focus on the optimum ways in which the use of visuals, even through overhead projectors and textbooks, can be enhanced in lesson preparation, and of how optimum learning can be achieved from student-centred activities.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

All lessons observed took place in a positive atmosphere where good teacher-student rapport was to the fore. Opening teaching strategies varied considerably from lesson to lesson, although a strong commitment to outlining lesson aims at the beginning was evident in most cases and this is applauded. In a small number of classes, greater clarity about lesson aims was needed due to there being a relatively wide range of topics to be covered or a wide time span within the lesson topic, which can cause confusion for students. Best practice was observed where the aims and learning outcomes, accompanied by an outline of the lesson structure, were placed and left on the board for the duration of the lesson, so that students could see at all times how they were progressing. On some occasions, the anticipated homework task was also outlined early in a lesson, which added an extra focus to students’ engagement. Some very good use of a short document-analysis task was observed, serving as an ice-breaker or introduction to the lesson content. On another occasion, a longer transcription task was deployed in the opening quarter of a lesson, and shortening such a task with a view to getting into core lesson development sooner has been recommended.

Oral questioning was a significant element in all lesson development and was generally carried out in a lively, interactive manner which encouraged students’ participation. This questioning was of a good standard and was used to review previous learning, sometimes to correct homework too, before moving on to new material. Some excellent questioning on source material was observed, pushing students to consider matters like bias and the author’s perspective, and a good mix of factual and analytical questioning was used in lessons overall. A particularly effective use of questioning to liven up a lesson was noted where ad hoc quiz teams were formed and competed with each other for points in a stimulating and enjoyable fashion. At other times, a little more emphasis by teachers on asking questions of non-volunteers, while tailoring the questions to the ability levels of more reticent students in doing so, has been recommended. Overall, oral questioning was an important and valuable feature of the teaching observed.

The overall use of primary sources in lesson development was good. Where documentary material was used, it was done best with short, sharp excerpts which students could engage with in a relatively short space of time. On occasion, a little more pre-teaching by teachers of what students needed to look out for in such documents, or key questions to consider in reading the documents, would also have assisted learning. Where film excerpts were employed, it was good to note that not only the images but also aspects such as the commentary and interviews with personalities were also considered as important sources of information to be analysed. The overall use of primary language-based material was very good and when secondary sources such as the textbook were used, the reading of extracts was done sparingly.

Some very good pictorial stimuli were used to engage younger students in a structured manner, using reproductions of 16th century woodcuts and diagrams of early monasteries. Pictorial material was used in a variety of ways, including a number of engaging handouts and the placing of a type of picturegram story on the classroom board as a Reformation biography was developed. The use of some excellent ICT-generated visuals, PowerPoint slides and film clips of modern Northern Irish and eastern European material is further commended. The latter worked very well despite the lack of speakers, and in one instance very productive use was made of the side area of the background whiteboard to develop outline notes and key words as the lesson generated such information. In some lessons, opportunities to increase the emphasis on visuals were not always
taken, with neither overhead projectors, wall maps nor textbook illustrations used as much as they might have been to support visual learning. These are recommended for future use, particularly as the roll-out of ICT across the school will understandably take time.

Some good strategies to promote student activity, including oral questioning and quizzes, have already been commented upon favourably. Sometimes, small groups of students were productively engaged in the analysis of documents or visuals and this is certainly worth expanding on in a number of classes. It is recommended that simple activities such as asking students to make brief notes of key issues, or to work more in pairs or small groups, should be employed to promote greater self-direction. It remains important that any in-class tasks given are not merely duplicating work already covered but building on previous learning, and that teachers avoid the temptation to give too much information to students before they have an opportunity to find out for themselves. The use of a whiteboard diagram, such as a spider chart, has been recommended in some instances as a means of garnering the responses from students’ group work and of promoting overall understanding.

Good levels of student learning were evident in all classes, aided by a fine quality of teacher explanation in all classes. Very good practical explanations were given in response to students’ queries, for example comparing distances to equivalents which students could relate to, rather than merely stating a numerical measurement. Students responded well to questioning from teachers and from the inspector and their concentration levels remained very good to the end of classes. On occasion, retention should have been supported by the placing by teachers of key words on the board, for reinforcement, or by some oral review questioning instead of over-long dictation of notes which happened in a minority of instances. Good word-puzzle tasks were used to assist students’ retention in some lessons. In all classes observed, the material covered was fully syllabus relevant and pitched at an appropriate level for students who were given very solid advice by teachers on the core issues and information which they needed to retain.

**ASSESSMENT**

Whole-school assessment structures are supportive of History at Wexford CBS. Annual parent-teacher meetings, reports home after end-of-term examinations and regular communication facilitated by the student journal all form important links with home regarding student progress. Teachers are also commended for the thoroughness with which they maintain records of attendance and of attainment in class tests and some homework assignments, and this also feeds into a thorough whole-school assessment regime. It is good to note that two staff training days have been facilitated in 2009, with the theme of assessment for learning at their core.

The history department has done very good work in developing common formal assessment practices over recent years. Plans for course coverage have allowed for the setting of common examinations for junior year groups at Christmas and summer each year. Copies of such examinations have been placed within the curricular documentation folder. It is recommended that such end-of-term assessments ought to include more stimulus-driven questions on visuals and documents, in order to test the full range of skills being acquired by students and likely to be assessed in certificate examinations. The department engages in an annual review of results in certificate examinations and can be well pleased with uptake levels and with the outcomes for the vast majority of students.

A fine range of informal assessment tools has been included in departmental assessment planning also, including cloze test and word-puzzle games, while most lessons observed had a strong
emphasis on preparing students to meet the requirements of certificate examinations, including the use of significant relevant statement (SRS) marking. With some Leaving Certificate homework, the use of an interrogative in framing homework questions, rather than a discursive essay format, is recommended to keep things in line with the general style of questioning used in the certificate examination itself under the revised syllabus. In-class questioning was of a fine standard in all classes observed, as was the overall level of informal assessment practices observed.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
- Good whole-school support for History has been evident in timetabling, provision for student access and overall resourcing.
- Uptake levels in senior cycle History are commendably high.
- Departmental planning is very well advanced in History and significant work has been done in developing methodology guidelines, curricular planning and in the cataloguing of resources for all teachers to use.
- Departmental and individual teachers’ engagement with outside supports and visiting speakers to enhance students’ experience of History are commended.
- A fine standard of teaching has been observed in History classes, particularly evidenced by clear explanations, good teacher-student interaction, a focus on using documentary and pictorial materials and on reviewing students’ learning.
- A good range of assessment methods is employed in History and the school’s overall engagement with assessment for learning training in 2009 is also commended.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
- A review of TY time provision for History is urged, as the current provision is low and presents a challenge to planning for significant course coverage.
- The history department ought to discuss the pooling and sharing of resources electronically as the augmentation of ICT provision occurs in the coming years.
- In some lessons, a greater focus on question variation, student activity and on the use of non-computerised visual and documentary materials is recommended.
- The inclusion of stimulus materials in history examinations and of more interrogative questions with senior students are recommended to augment the good assessment practices in place.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management welcomes the very positive affirmation in the report of the quality of teaching and learning in History in Coláiste Eamonn Rís. The increased use of ICT has been impeded by the Department of Education’s failure to follow through on ICT grants as promised. Progress in this area, i.e. ICT, has depended on the school’s resources.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

- Review of the report and recommendations by the History Department and the Board of management.
- Transition year 2010-2011 – two periods per week for History, as recommended.
- Recommendations re. stimulus material in exams, increased use of visual and documentary material incorporated into subject plans for 2010-11.