Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

Arklow CBS
Coolgreaney Road, Arklow
County Wicklow
Roll number: 61770U

Date of inspection: 16 November 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Arklow 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 discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teachers. The board of management 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

The management of Arklow CBS provides strong support for History within the organisational framework of the school. History is a core subject for all students pursuing the Junior Certificate. Transition Year (TY) was made a compulsory programme for senior-cycle students at the commencement of the academic year 2010/2011. A history module is provided as a core component of the programme. When the students progress to their leaving certificate studies, they are offered a choice of the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). History is provided as an optional subject for the students in both leaving certificate programmes. As a result of TY becoming a compulsory programme there is currently no fifth-year cohort of students.

The timetabled allocation of history class periods and the pattern of their distribution throughout the week are supportive of History. Junior-cycle students have two history class periods per week in first year and three periods per week in the second and third years of their Junior Certificate programme. TY students have two history lesson periods per week and the sixth-year students have five periods. It is advocated that the allocation of two history periods per week for the first-year class groups be kept under review and the feasibility of providing three history class periods per week in each of the three junior-cycle years be explored. Two lesson periods in first year is a limited timeframe that could present an increased challenge in relation to completing the Junior Certificate history curriculum in the following two years for both teachers and students.

Management deploys the three members of the history subject team to teach History and this good practice enables the teachers to remain actively involved in teaching the subject and to contribute to the development of History in the school. The importance of maintaining continuity of contact with the class group is also recognised when deploying the history teachers. For example, the teachers assigned to the first-year class groups are likely to remain with the same class until the students sit their Junior Certificate examination. The deployment of the history teachers is subject to considerations that must be given to timetabling the teachers in their other
subjects. One member of the history team is assigned to teach the leaving certificate coursework. It would be worthwhile reviewing this arrangement in order to build capacity within the team.

The provision of teaching resources and the accessibility to the school’s facilities that are available to the history teachers and their students support the teaching and study of History. All classrooms are equipped with a multi-media personal computer and data projector and have internet access. History class groups may also be brought to the computer room for individual research. Two members of the history team have their own base classrooms and the third member shares a designated room. The history teachers have access to a range of teaching aids and subject materials as well as photocopiers and computer work-stations in the staffroom.

Subject planning is promoted and supported. Management facilitates meetings of the history department and recognises the key importance of collaborative planning in the development of the teaching and study of History in the school. An annual budget is allocated to the department and additional requests for funding are considered on a needs basis. Attendance of individual members of the history subject team at the leaving certificate history in-service courses is accommodated. The involvement of the history teachers in the organisation of co-curricular activities and outings is also supported. In the wider context of whole-school planning management organises staff development days and has engaged support services such as the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) and the Special Education Support Service (SESS) for a number of such occasions. Members of the teaching staff who undertake a professional development course receive financial assistance to help offset the cost of fees.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The commendable collaborative work of the history teachers is evidenced in the first instance by the infrastructure that they have established to support the ongoing development of History. The history department provides the forum where the history subject team meet together formally as a team. A subject co-ordinator has been appointed to chair meetings and to maintain the momentum of collaborative planning. The position is a voluntary one and is to be rotated among the team at agreed intervals. Departmental meetings are minuted. A subject plan has been documented and includes agreed year plans for teaching the various curricular programmes. The department’s shared electronic folder is another laudable initiative.

The good progress being made with regard to departmental planning is encouraged. The subject department plan is a vitally important document that informs the teaching and study of History throughout the school. Proactive planning is always best viewed as work in progress and the development of the subject plan should therefore be maintained. Suggested areas for inclusion in the plan include a section detailing the function and purpose of the history department, the agreed responsibilities of the subject co-ordinator and the frequency of departmental meetings. The section on the planning for students with special educational needs should be elaborated upon; details should be provided as to how the analysis of students’ achievements in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations inform collaborative planning and a list of the resources available to history teachers should be compiled. It would be worthwhile including a section on forward planning following departmental discussion of planning for History in the school.

The planned schemes of coursework that have been documented for each year group, including TY, reflect the commitment of the history teachers to ensuring that their students are well taught. The development of the year plans is also evidenced by the attention currently being given to the
section on learning outcomes in the extended schemes of the coursework for all year groups apart from TY. In the context of supporting the development of the year plans it is recommended that the plans include details of the methodologies and resources that will be incorporated into the teaching of the various coursework topics. The strategies and resources that have proved very effective for teaching particular topics should be collated from the meetings of the history teachers over a period of time in the course of completing this task.

The shared electronic history folder is a commendable resource that contains a wide range of subject materials to support History. The continued exploration of the potential of the shared folder is encouraged. It is recommended that the contents of the folder be grouped into specific files e.g. PowerPoint presentations, in order to facilitate ease of location. The records of the history departmental meetings should also be stored electronically in the shared folder and records of the meetings inserted into the hardcopy of the subject department plan in an appropriate section or appendix. It is recommended that the template currently being used to record details of the departmental meetings be modified to include feedback regarding the results of the actions agreed at the previous meeting and the progress made.

There was careful preparation for the lessons observed. The teachers displayed a good grasp of the relevant syllabuses. The prior planning involved determining the focus of the lesson, the preparation and selection of a range of resources, and the integration into the structure of the lesson of the teaching and learning methodologies to be employed. The history teachers also encourage their students’ interest in History by displaying students’ work and subject materials on the walls of their classrooms. The time and attention given to visually enhancing the setting for the history lessons by these means is praiseworthy.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Teaching and learning in the lessons observed took place in a positive and supportive atmosphere. The classroom skills of the teachers and their interactive style of teaching ensured that the students were engaged and maintained on task. The development of the lessons was underpinned by the prior planning. The teaching and learning methodologies employed impacted on student learning and facilitated the development of the lessons. The students settled quickly into their study of their lesson topics.

The teachers frequently engaged their students at the outset by informing them of the focus of the lesson and sharing the learning outcomes with them. Individual teachers also noted the learning outcomes on the classroom board. These good practices provided the students with an immediate understanding of the purpose of the lesson and are universally encouraged. The communication of defined learning outcomes is particularly helpful in providing students with a clear understanding of the objectives of a lesson that encompasses a broad topic.

The teachers’ interaction with their students was a strong and effective aspect of the lessons observed. The posing of questions and the making of informative comments at the commencement of a class lesson, for example, helped the students undertaking a study of The Emergency in Ireland 1939-1945 to gain an informed understanding of the background to their lesson topic. Similarly, during the correction of a homework assignment, the teacher’s interaction with the class helped to consolidate student learning of the subject material previously studied before progressing to their new lesson topic. The teachers continued to gauge and support student learning by utilising their interactive skills according as the lessons progressed and the students were introduced to new information. In such instances, the questioning techniques of the teachers and the provision of informative comment often complemented the use being made of a selected
resource such as the data projector or the class textbook. However, notwithstanding the good use made of questioning to impact on student learning there remained scope to make greater use of targeted and higher order questions.

The teachers’ guidance and support of student learning was augmented by their planned use of teaching resources. The data projector facilitated the visual display of information as did the drawing of the students’ attention to relevant pictorial illustrations in their class textbook at appropriate times during the course of the lessons. A DVD clip was another resource used to consolidate a class group’s understanding of the key points relating to their lesson topic. Individual teachers made good use of the classroom board to introduce the lesson topic, to provide an outline of important dates and events that clearly established the historic context for the subject being studied and, to note information. The recapping of the main points of the lesson was also successfully undertaken with the aid of the information noted on the board. Reading from the class textbook and prepared handouts, was incorporated into a number of lessons.

The methodologies employed engaged and supported the students in acquiring an informed understanding and knowledge of their lesson topic. One commendable example involved the organisation of a co-operative learning activity in which the students were directed to discuss the short-term causes of the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement 1973. The students were organised into small groups and provided with the necessary materials to gradually identify the three most important reasons for the breakdown of this proposed powersharing agreement among the main political parties in Northern Ireland. Again the data projector was effectively used to introduce the topic and engage the students in the plenary class discussion that followed the group discussions. Overall however, there was limited use of the setting of an independent learning task for the students such as a written assignment, pair work or group work. It is recommended that independent learning opportunities be integrated into every lesson where practicable.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment and evaluation are important aspects of classroom teaching and of the educational objectives of the school. In the classroom the history teachers used a range of assessment modes to track the application and progress of their students. These included observation, the addressing of questions and the setting of assignments. The teachers’ practice of setting and correcting homework was also noted during the lessons observed and in the sample of students’ copybooks perused. It is recommended that greater use be made of constructive feedback comments that provide students with clear direction as to how to develop the quality of their written work. It is also advocated that feedback comments regarding the quality of the students’ work such as “very good” be elaborated upon.

Formal school examinations are organised for students prior to the commencement of the Christmas and summer holidays. The third and sixth-year examination classes sit formal mid-term tests during the first school term and they also sit their trial certificate examinations during the spring term in preparation for the state examinations in June. School reports are sent to the homes of the students to inform parents and guardians of progress in the formal in-house examinations. A parent-teacher meeting is organised annually for each year group.

Senior management analyses the results of the school’s students in the state examinations and compares the achievements of the students in each subject and level against the national average. The students’ results are presented to the teaching staff and the teachers are encouraged to analyse the results of their respective students. The principal also presents the findings of the analysis to the board of management.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The management of Arklow CBS provides strong support for History within the organisational framework of the school.
- Subject planning is promoted and supported by management.
- The history teachers work collaboratively.
- The subject departmental plan that has been compiled supports the development of the teaching and study of History.
- The commitment of the history teachers to teaching their students well was evidenced by their prior planning of the lessons, their guidance and support of student learning, and the variety of teaching and learning methodologies employed.
- Assessment and evaluation are important aspects of classroom teaching and of the educational objectives of the school.

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

- The development of the history departmental subject plan should be maintained. All year plans should include details of the teaching and learning methodologies that will be incorporated into the study of the various coursework topics and the resources that will be used.
- It is recommended that independent learning opportunities be integrated into every lesson where practicable.
- Greater use of constructive feedback comments should be made in the correction of students’ homework assignments.

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

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

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

- We do intend to continue and build on our subject planning process.
- We will endeavour to link learning outcomes with teaching methodologies.
- In terms of our timetable we will review our current structure under our curriculum review process.