An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

Comeragh College
Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary
Roll number: 72400V

Date of inspection: 12-13 November 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Comeragh College. 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; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Comeragh College, under the auspices of South Tipperary Vocational Education Committee (VEC), offers History as an optional subject in junior cycle. This is in line with the Rules and Programme for Second Level Schools. Commendably, the school has managed to retain a history class group in each junior year to date, and also offers the subject as an option for students doing the Leaving Certificate. The school does not offer a Transition Year (TY). While junior classes are currently small, the numbers of students taking History for Leaving Certificate in the fifth and sixth year groups are very encouraging. First-year History has an allocation of four periods per week, as does third-year History, while in second year the subject has three periods. This is very good time provision. It is not ideal that a significant number of these periods are configured as double periods but this is understandable given that History is timetabled with two subjects which have significant practical elements. There are two qualified teachers of History on staff, which is enough for the level of subject provision required. It is recommended, however, that each of these teachers be assigned to junior and senior classes, ideally in rotation. At present, all junior classes are taught by one teacher only, with senior classes shared between both teachers on a more satisfactory rotational basis.

It is suggested that the school needs to examine the manner in which History is offered in first year. Following a period of six to seven weeks, during which all students sample History and two other subjects in rotation, they then select their preferences from a band including Home Economics and Materials Technology (Wood). History has tended to get smaller numbers of students in this set of options, and there is a danger that such numbers may not help the retention of History in junior cycle in the longer term. A review of the first-year options is recommended, as a possible means of improving the numerical balance doing History. It is also recommended that the history department concentrate on identifying a core suite of lessons, which could be delivered in the limited sampling time available. This should aim to ensure that students get the best visual and verbal flavour possible of the work of the historian and archaeologist in the few
weeks of exposure provided. Identifying what has been covered in History in some of the school’s main feeder primary schools and building on that in the limited taster time available would be a worthwhile strategy to employ in this regard, if time allows. Certainly, a significant focus on working from the outset with interesting visual material and possibly localised sources would be in keeping with the first-year syllabus and could help with student engagement at that stage too. Senior cycle choice systems have been a little more flexible than in junior cycle and the uptake levels in History suggest that the current choices are supportive of the subject at that level.

The school has coped very well with the difficulty of being spread across two distinct campuses, one for junior classes and one for senior classes. This has contributed to the restriction in terms of matching teachers and classes at times, and also to issues like resource provision and storage space for History materials. Budgeting for History is as needs arise, which is satisfactory. In recent times a new extension to the senior building and significant upgrading of information and communication technology (ICT) have improved the supports available for History and other subjects. At present, a new social studies room, to be used substantially for History and Geography, is being fitted out in the junior building. This will require some collaborative planning between teachers of History and Geography, and careful timetabling to ensure that each subject has optimum access to the facility, at both junior and senior levels. This development is very encouraging for the consolidation of History at the school.

**Planning and Preparation**

There is a very strong planning culture in evidence at Comeragh College, both at whole-school and departmental levels. Significant work has been undertaken in areas such as policy development and curricular planning, under the school development planning co-ordinator. This impetus has impacted on subject department planning too. Some suggestions have been made on the matter of curricular review, to ensure that the best balance of subjects at junior cycle can be found, and it bears emphasising that achieving viable numbers in junior classes is in the school’s best interests in terms of its resource use. The expansion of training in ICT use for teachers is also recommended as the school’s own ICT capacity expands. With networked classrooms now the norm in the school, it is worth exploring how a relatively inexpensive intranet system could facilitate the electronic storage and use of any subject-specific resources in any classroom equipped with a data projector.

A good departmental plan has been developed in History. Given that there are just two teachers involved, they have agreed to share any co-ordination duties annually, which is satisfactory. The planning folder is clearly laid out and has an appropriate focus on curricular issues for junior and senior cycles. Minutes of past departmental meetings are contained in the folder, although it is noted that just one formal meeting per year has been the norm. Given the small size of the department and the degree to which informal contacts have been managed, this is not a major issue. It is recommended that future planning meetings should focus as much as practicable on sharing complementary ideas and practice in the classroom and identifying some local historical material or project competitions which could help enthuse first-year students sampling History. Department engagement with the training offered for Leaving Certificate teachers by the History In-service Support Team (HIST) has been good, while it is recommended that more contacts with a branch of the History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI) would be beneficial.

The level of preparation and planning evident for individual lessons was very good. Teachers presented outline schemes of work fully in line with the relevant syllabus and some resource lists and handouts for use with the class, some of which had a fine mix of visual and verbal stimuli and
one including an excellent questionnaire to assist with document analysis as a lesson proceeded. ICT had been prepared for possible use in both classrooms visited but was not deployed. None of the lessons suffered from this, although obviously the potential for visual reinforcement and variation, which ICT can offer, is deserving of serious consideration in future lessons, and especially when the new social studies facility is available.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A very positive atmosphere prevailed in the lessons visited and the classrooms themselves were bright and spacious, with good desk layout facilitating viewing of the board area and opportunities for teachers and students to move, if required. Students were focused and attentive from the start and in all lessons, teachers were very supportive and encouraging. Aims were outlined for students early in lessons and it is suggested that these should also be placed on the board as a visual reinforcement for the duration of the class.

Some very good and humorous early banter in one lesson helped considerably to encourage teacher-student interaction. While some individual recommendations were made to teachers about varying their base standing position or developing questions to more reticent students, the overall level of teacher-student interaction in classes was good and sometimes excellent. At optimum level, a lesson was essentially an ongoing dialogue between students and teacher, in joint analysis of documentary and visual material. This was done in part through pair work and was very well facilitated and monitored. Elsewhere, good oral questioning was used to develop a complex topic and a good range of lower-order and more complex questions was employed. When visuals in particular are used in such formal questioning, it is important to integrate these into the question-and-answer process too, by asking students to identify first what they can identify from the sources, rather than giving them the answers immediately.

While teaching styles differed quite significantly from one lesson to another, teachers deserve particular commendation for the quality of historical explanation in evidence in all lessons. The language register, syllabus relevance and general pitch of the material was excellent in all lessons, with repetition used sparingly but when necessary. Complex issues, like the shaping of political entities in modern France were explained along clear left-wing and right-wing guidelines. Elsewhere, the teasing out of how both sides in the Irish Civil War were essentially ‘republicans’ but with different views on how to achieve a republic was done with great clarity and political sensitivity. European fascist material was very well explained by drawing comparisons with Irish equivalents, while in another class a potentially tangential discussion on cigarette advertising was used very appropriately to point out contrasts between Ireland today and in the 1920s. These and many other examples of good quality explanation by teachers were the norm in all lessons and were very impressive overall.

Good use was made of available resources, despite the non-deployment of available ICT equipment. Some excellent handout material delving into contemporary sources on the Irish Civil War deserved particular commendation. It provided a wide range of visual and verbal stimulus materials for analysis and learning. A linked questionnaire assisted students in identifying author perspective, bias, fact and opinion in a very systematic manner. Elsewhere a very solid summary handout was used to support students’ learning of core points on a political system. Textbook use varied widely and was perhaps overdone in one lesson. If textbook reading is used, it is best to ask students to read short excerpts rather than have the teacher do so consistently and the integration of pictures, graphs or maps from the book would add variety and a visual element if deployed more regularly. As handouts were used to lesser or greater extents in all classes, it may
be worthwhile discussing how such materials can best be retained and filed by students, as it is easy for loose-leaf materials to be lost if not stored systematically.

The overall quality of learning opportunities provided for students in history lessons was good. In addition to the quality of explanations and other factors already discussed, some very good summary notes were given in one lesson, tying together core issues in a difficult topic. It is recommended that a focus on some student note-making be considered in all lessons, ideally with a view to encouraging them to make discerning notes, learning to identify key points for themselves. It is also important that overuse of notes be avoided. Sometimes, note-taking from teacher dictation tended to duplicate what was already given in a summary handout and this is of limited benefit. In all lessons, the whiteboard deserved somewhat more use as a means of identifying key stages as the lesson proceeded, highlighting key learning from documents work or key concepts and personalities from the syllabus as they arose. Towards the end of the lessons visited, good review questioning by teachers ensured that core learning had been reinforced and this is also commended. Arriving at a more balanced consensus around issues like note-making and the use of visuals could be agenda items for a future meeting of the history department.

**ASSESSMENT**

Informal assessment strategies observed were good in all lessons. Pre-assigned homework was corrected orally, and oral questioning was well used in all lessons, sometimes to excellent effect in teasing out issues in documents-analysis work. This was well supported with a questionnaire template. Where double periods occur, it is important to maintain the spread of questioning and teacher-student interaction throughout the lesson and not move to more static activity for too long. It was, however, good to note that time was created towards the end for some discussion of the homework task to be completed, helping students to put a structure on their ideas in advance of attempting the question. The copybooks examined showed a good commitment by the teacher to comment-based assessment. It is recommended that the shaping of Leaving Certificate homework questions through the use of an interrogative, as is the norm in the Certificate examination, is preferable to the more discursive type of essay sometimes assigned. Good assistance on the use of official marking criteria can also be accessed on the website of the State Examinations Commission (SEC) at [www.examinations.ie](http://www.examinations.ie).

At whole-school level, it is good to note that the school holds mid-term assessments and tests at Christmas, Easter and summer for all classes, with pre-examinations replacing the Easter tests for classes due to sit Certificate examinations. Communication with parents is through a number of well-established systems, ranging from the use of student journals from day to day, to formal school reports at the end of term and annual parent-teacher meetings. Among other good overall supports, assessment procedures in History are adapted as required for students with special educational needs, while research study reports (RSRs) submitted by candidates for the Leaving Certificate are securely retained by an assistant principal. Good, clear policies on homework and assessment have been developed, although the time suggested for homework in the History element of the plans may be a little optimistic in reality.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- History has good time provision in both junior and senior cycles.
• Uptake levels in senior History are very good.
• ICT upgrading and the current development of a social studies room are key whole-
  school supports for History.
• Very good levels of whole-school planning take place.
• Good departmental and individual planning and preparation are evident in History.
• Good quality teaching and learning has been the norm in history classes, with the overall
  quality of teacher explanation and some excellent use of source material being
  particularly commended.
• Good informal and formal assessment practices obtain at the school.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following
key recommendations are made:
• A re-examination of the first-year options system is required as a possible means of
  addressing the low numbers taking junior History.
• Both history teachers should be deployed in a more even manner to teaching junior and
  senior classes.
• Achieving consensus on the use of source materials, questioning and note-taking in
  classrooms is recommended for consideration by the history department.
• A closer focus on the questioning style and marking processes in Leaving Certificate
  History is recommended in some homework tasks.

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

Published November 2010