Subject Inspection of History

REPORT

Coláiste Ráithín
Bray, County Wicklow
Roll number: 70821M

Date of inspection: 22 September 2009
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Ráithín carried out as part of a whole school evaluation. 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 one day 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 and deputy principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Coláiste Ráithín is commended for very good timetable provision for History. The subject is a compulsory one for all junior cycle students and this is commended. Three single periods per week are allocated to almost all class groups, which are of mixed ability, which is very satisfactory, with one junior class having an excellent four periods per week to compensate for a previous shortfall. For both Transition Year (TY) and Leaving Certificate, History enters an options system. Within this, the timetabling of four single periods per week across the year in TY is excellent, while the provision of five periods in each of fifth year and sixth year is also very good. These are generally configured as two double periods and a single period for each group, in order to facilitate the practical subjects which often form the option bands with History. This is satisfactory.

Subject options pertaining to History at Coláiste Ráithín are good. The departmental plan for History states that TY History is generally offered against Music and Technical Drawing. The policy is to offer students in fifth year an open choice of subjects and to then form option bands according to students’ preferences. In the present fifth year, History has been placed opposite Technical Drawing and Chemistry, while sixth-year history students were asked to choose the subject from a band which also included Technical Drawing and Business. This shows the flexibility of the options themselves from year to year. Uptake levels for Leaving Certificate History had decreased somewhat in previous years but the current numbers in fifth year are very healthy, suggesting that the open choice of subjects is helpful.

The general level of whole-school support for History is good. Management has ensured that a core team of qualified personnel has been put in place to deliver History across the curriculum. While some staff members are relatively new to the school, teachers have been freed to attend in-service as required. Good engagement has taken place over the years with the History In-service Support Team (HIST) and with An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG). Budgetary supports are available as needs arise. The school and history department are also commended for their engagement with historical trips, to places like Ferrycarrig National
Heritage Park and to the World War One Western Front, and for notable success in the Trinity College history competition in recent years. While there is a small history section in the school’s own library, the history department has also been loud in its praise of the nearby Bray public library, particularly for senior cycle research study work.

Some challenges for whole-school support include the desirability of extending the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) in the delivery of History as time and resources allow. There is no written programme for History in TY at present, due to several factors, and this is an important area which must be given attention when practicable. It has been reported that local studies have featured in past TY history lessons, which is a good idea, but a clear structure needs to be developed as a priority and discussed at departmental level. It may be possible for the school to consider a notice board or some other form of permanent display area where matters of historical interest, local or topical, could be displayed and so help enhance the place of History across the school. Space does not allow for a designated history room but the availability of some subject-specific display space, which could, of course, incorporate school history, could certainly help to offset this.

**Planning and Preparation**

While the teaching team in History at Coláiste Ráithín is relatively small, it is good to note that significant departmental structures have been put in place nevertheless. The subject has a designated co-ordinator, who engages with HIST and COGG and organises meetings approximately three times each year. Minutes of such meetings are recorded and those examined during the inspection have shown that a clear focus has been retained on practical matters, ranging from textbook selection to some common assessment work, while also identifying a number of sensible planning supports for students with special educational needs.

In terms of suggestions for the future, contacts have been established by the co-ordinator with the History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI) and these should be pursued. If the school is in a position to expand its ICT facilities in time, the use of data projectors in lesson delivery, or of a relatively inexpensive intranet system for resource storage, deserve departmental discussion. It is suggested that at least one meeting each year should also take, as its focus, the core theme of sharing ideas in relation to teaching and learning among department members. The plan as presented does not contain details of the history resources available to teachers. Acquisition and use of resources are discussed informally and, as time allows, would be worth formalising to a greater extent.

Individual teachers showed a keen awareness of the value of planning and preparation in the lessons observed. All lessons were clearly focused on relevant syllabus content, with significant preparatory work including the preparation of handouts, the identification of opportunities for group work and the introduction of objects and materials to support lesson delivery at key stages. Such planning for the use of handouts and objects helped to offset the lack of display space for History on classroom walls, as the classrooms are all general purpose facilities rather than teacher rooms or subject base rooms. A particular feature of lesson planning involved the efforts by teachers to ensure comprehension in the context of textbooks being in English, or subject specific materials and terminology being in complex Irish, and the sensitivity shown in planning for students’ learning needs is commended.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching observed in history lessons at Coláiste Ráithín was good and often very good. Work began immediately in all lessons and was characterised by teachers giving a clear introduction to the aims of lessons and posing short questions to students to gauge previous learning. All students were equipped with textbooks, invariably in English, and other necessary resources, and had good sightlines to the teaching area and the board in all classrooms. Even when some students were unavoidably delayed in getting to class, due to having to come from another building, lesson introductions remained clear and purposeful, with everyone settling down to work very readily.

The positive learning atmosphere which obtained in all history lessons observed deserves particular commendation. It was unusual but very refreshing to see students and teachers use first names in all communications. Discipline was natural and unforced, and on the rare occasions when a student became a little unfocused or lively, a mere glance from the teacher sufficed to bring back order. Where key aims and objectives of lessons were communicated orally only, it was recommended that brief written equivalent, placed on the white board at the outset of lessons, would add a further support to student engagement as lessons proceed. Beyond that, the natural nature of the classroom interactions was of the highest quality.

The use of oral questioning was a central feature of lesson development in all classrooms visited. Teachers employed a good mix of lower and higher order questions, and in a few instances dealt very supportively with some unanticipated questions from students about peripheral issues. In fact, the two-way nature of questioning was a particularly unique feature of history lessons. Some very good questioning sought to encourage students to use their imaginations, to empathise with the people from the past that they were studying, and this is good practice. It was recommended in one instance that more use of questions to students who don’t automatically put their hands up would help encourage the more reticent individuals towards greater participation in the lesson.

In most lessons, a good emphasis on student activity was seen. Sometimes, students were placed into group-work teams after a time, and this took place with no interruption to progress. Groups of four or five students happily set to work on tasks and good use of rapporteurs ensured that the feedback from such activity provided general learning opportunities also. Where groups were working to complete a template, it would be useful when feedback is being taken from the groups if a similar template was completed on the board simultaneously by the teacher, to reinforce learning and perhaps assist key note-making. The use of ICT would help in this regard. On occasion, a little too much detail about background events, and on writing out notes, was one focus where a biographical approach to covering a topic was employed, and some refocusing is recommended. However, in all instances, provision for student activity worked well, with clear structure and good pacing evident.

Very purposeful use of resources and varied methodology were characteristics of the good teaching observed. In one lesson, the use of a globe to track Columbus’ west-east theories, and of actual spices for students to taste, were very effective in bringing the topic alive. Similarly, good pictorial comparisons and discussions allowed students to appreciate the differences in scale between caravels and the larger nau ship design. On a minor point, wherever numerical measurements are being used in descriptions, it can be useful to ask students what such a measurement means by comparison with known objects, like the dimensions of the classroom, as this assists the development of historical empathy further. In another context, the students had an opportunity to handle the kinds of equipment used by archaeologists on a dig, with concurrent
opportunities to learn the Irish words for such objects and develop a historical dictionary in their copybooks to aid retention. Various political cartoon handouts and review crosswords were deployed in a senior lesson, helping to develop students’ analytical skills, as previously mentioned, as well as their understanding of reasonably difficult concepts such as ‘Home Rule means Rome Rule’. Overall, the work observed in all lessons included very good opportunities for student learning to take place and deserves to be commended.

**ASSESSMENT**

Within the lessons observed, a fine variety of suitable assessment strategies was employed. Very high quality oral questioning has already been commended. The focus on skills development through assessment was also significant, with students asked to analyse political cartoons and their messages, to examine objects and their purpose, or to draw maps pertaining to voyages of exploration as homework. A task on a document was made more real for students when they were given it in a handwritten translation, resembling an original document, as well as in typed form. Although at a very early stage in the school year, in the copybooks which were examined as part of the inspection, a good mix of homework types was evident. Good monitoring of learning and of homework was carried out through oral questioning in some instances and by the teacher spot-checking a selection of homework copybooks on another occasion.

There is limited reference to assessment in the subject plan, although a good awareness of its value among teachers themselves at Coláiste Ráithín, was evident. Ideally, issues like the appropriate forms of homework for different class groups, a focus on common assessment strategies and discussion of results and uptake levels in Certificate examinations should be placed on a more formal footing than at present by the History department. Some good common assessment strategies have been adopted, as for example with second-year Christmas and summer examinations, and an extension of this practice is a reasonable target, given the mixed-ability nature of the class groups in different junior cycle years. The overall school assessment structure is satisfactory, although while it is reported that a homework policy is in place, it was not evident that a school assessment policy exists. Traditions of holding mid-term assessments and end-of-term assessments include the holding of formal tests for History and this is good practice.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The very good timetable provision for History at Coláiste Ráithín is commended
- Subject options are fair to History and a number of other whole-school supports are in place
- Good departmental planning, co-ordination and activities have been noted
- A very high degree of teacher preparation for individual lessons played an important part in successful lesson delivery
- The quality of teaching and learning observed in History was good and often very good
- Oral questioning and variation in homework types have been successful features of assessment in History at Coláiste Ráithín.

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

- A formal written plan for TY History should be prioritised and implemented
• The enhancement of ICT facilities at the school, as resources allow, should be used as a support to the teaching of and planning for History
• A more formal departmental focus on identifying subject resources available for teachers, and on sharing classroom practice among members, is urged for consideration.
• Within classrooms, varying recommendations include lessening coverage of background material, posing more questions to reticent students and encouraging more focused note-making.
• A stronger focus on assessment issues, including common homework and assessment policies, is recommended for departmental consideration.

Post-evaluation meetings were held 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.

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