

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of History
REPORT**

**Christian Brothers Secondary School
Kilkenny
Roll number: 61550G**

Date of inspection: 25 November 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Christian Brothers Secondary School (CBS), Kilkenny. 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 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 of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

History is compulsory on the timetable of CBS Kilkenny for junior cycle, in line with the *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*, and is also a core subject in the school's Transition Year (TY) programme. In fifth and sixth year, the subject is offered initially as part of an open choice before inclusion in option bands which vary from year to year, depending on student preferences. The school offers a Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), for which between 30% and 40% of students traditionally opt. This has been identified as a factor in some students not choosing History for the Leaving Certificate, as the subject is outside the vocational subject groupings. Despite this, overall uptake levels in History are satisfactory, as is overall student access to History across the school.

Timetable provision for History is very good. In junior cycle, the subject has three single periods per week in first year and third year, which is normal, and there is excellent provision of four periods per week in the present second year. TY sees History taught to all classes, each having three single periods per week across the full academic year. This is a strong support for History. The provision of single periods has an added advantage in that the activities that are germane to TY are less likely to disrupt class contact times as much as if there were double periods involved. There are five periods per week in all Leaving Certificate history classes, configured as a double period and three single periods in each case. This is satisfactory.

There is very strong whole-school support for History at CBS Kilkenny, going well beyond satisfactory subject provision and timetabling. Most history lessons are taught in classrooms where the base teacher is involved in the delivery of History, allowing for very good subject-specific wall displays to be developed. The school's corridors also reinforce the sense of History through displays related to the school's 150th anniversary celebrations and other events. The school's situation could not be closer to historical sites, city walls and medieval streetscapes and these are very well used to support students' engagement with the subject. The school has a library and also a significant history resource room which doubles as the deputy principal's office. Among other examples of whole-school support, staff days have included a focus on CBS history and tours of Kilkenny Castle. There are displays about famous past students and a

historical award in honour of one of these, and work is currently taking place on a history of the school as part of a TY enterprise project. Walking tours of Kilkenny city feature prominently in a number of classes and good links have been established with the local library, cathedral and other relevant establishments.

A huge commitment to historical trips across the school is deserving of great praise. Individual year groups have been facilitated in visiting places linked to the junior cycle syllabus, such as Newgrange and Bodenstown. Very thorough planning goes into the now-annual trip to Bavaria which is undertaken by most TY students and which has a significant emphasis on Nazism and on aspects of German cultural history, as well as on linguistic and geographical education. Parents have been briefed on the historical merits and details of these trips, and excellent contacts have been built up with key personnel in places such as Nuremberg, Munich and Wurzburg. A significant number of teachers have been involved at different stages of these tours, which have included visits to the USSR and elsewhere in the past. On the trips, the emphasis on getting students to stand, literally, in the footsteps of historical personages from Dürer to Chamberlain and Hitler is an excellent means of developing historical empathy and understanding.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There are currently eight members of staff involved in the delivery of History at the school. This team has formed a cohesive history department. The position of co-ordinator is rotated at intervals and is currently held by one of the senior teachers. The work ethic and enthusiasm which have been brought to the co-ordinator's role by present and previous incumbents is very evident. It is also good to see that leadership is devolved in a number of ways within this departmental structure. This includes the rotation of the tasks of meeting convenor and minute-taker among all members, and the facilitation of focused meetings, sometimes in teachers' own time, where the needs of a specific year group are to be discussed. This is very committed practice.

The departmental planning folder for History is very clear and well laid out. It is not overburdened with unnecessary detail but is clearly focused on the mission statement declaration that: 'A sense of its own history and that of the wider world permeates the culture of CBS Kilkenny.' The plan is testament to the high level of involvement of history teachers in the History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI) and attendance at in-service training sessions. Strong departmental involvement with local historical bodies and sites is also evident, as it is in planning the Bavarian trip already mentioned. The latter includes related activities such as briefings for parents on the history of Bavaria and facilitating visits by a Holocaust survivor at three-year intervals. Minutes of departmental meetings are carefully retained and include the identification of follow-up actions, and of those personnel who will undertake this follow up. Current matters for discussion include the roll-out of information and communication technology (ICT) and how the school's intranet can be used to store the current and future resources electronically. This is a very sensible aim and is grounded in seeking out ways in which ICT development can enhance teaching and learning, not become simply a goal in its own right.

Common yearly schemes of work have been developed. These are well constructed and teachers have shown initiative in occasionally moving away from the usual syllabus guidelines on course coverage where they have felt the needs of their students merited it. The first-year plan, for example, covers the early sections of the course at a slower pace than normal, in order to ease students into the subject and work with sources, with the time being made up via the four periods in second year. Further variation occurs in Leaving Certificate, where the nominated documents topic is left until sixth year in order to give teachers adequate time to access and employ their in-service training. The research study is done from start to finish in sixth year, in order to maximise

students' maturity and further develop their writing skills. These are decisions based on reflection by department members and on looking at what best suits their students, which is good practice.

Individual teacher planning is very good. In all lessons observed, the material being taught was consistent with the relevant syllabus or in line with agreed programmes of work in TY. Teachers all retain copies of the agreed yearly plans and these are followed broadly at a similar pace in each year group. Individual folders of teacher resources were available for scrutiny in all lessons and contained a good variety of handouts, tests and other materials. These are deserving of collation on the school's intranet on a phased basis. It was also good to note in several instances that teachers had copies of agreed educational plans for students with special educational needs and, where relevant, were planning for having special needs assistants (SNAs) in the classroom.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning observed during the evaluation was generally either good or very good, and in some instances was excellent. Almost all lessons observed took place in rooms with a strong history focus, accentuated through laminated photographs, newspaper articles and some impressive student projects, both of a written nature and in model form. Rooms were almost all equipped with computers and data projectors and several had televisions available as required also. While many class groups were large, a very positive atmosphere was evident in all rooms visited, and students set to work with little fuss. Teachers generally gave an oral outline of the aim of each lesson, and on a number of occasions this was complemented by a written heading or aim on the whiteboard. It is suggested that the employment of both oral and written learning outcomes be considered formally across the department, as a reinforcement of student learning and of the good practice already obtaining informally. In some instances, short brainstorming exercises were used in advance of identifying what the learning intentions of a particular lesson were and this worked well when used.

Teachers had very good rapport with students in all lessons observed. Some very good banter was engaged in at the outset of lessons and at intervals afterwards, ranging from jokes about local hurling rivalries to the creation of links for students between the historical material being studied and things in their own lives. Advertisements, computer games and television programmes were all alluded to in different lessons, to explain the historical importance of land, the teamwork behind the Moon Landing or the importance of camerawork and language in propaganda. A football match was used as a fine example of how people look at events subjectively. The general dynamic in lessons was very good, and revolved around teacher-student discussion and questioning. Occasionally, an emphasis on writing or reading tasks in class deflected from this dynamic somewhat, but overall the atmosphere and pace of lessons was very impressive.

Teacher questioning in general was good, with most teachers spreading oral questions around the class comfortably, involving both volunteers and nominated students. Some very good questioning of students on a visual dealing with life in ancient Ireland was successful because it asked students to look, identify and draw conclusions from the evidence available. This approach is worth developing in other lessons, maintaining the emphasis on interrogating the visual or documentary source. As all classes observed were of mixed ability, it is recommended that the combination of an increased focus on source interrogation, using photographs and maps for example, and the frequent asking of 'why?' and 'how?' questions be used in all classes.

Teachers made significant and impressive use of a wide range of materials and resources as lessons progressed. Objects, including a Soviet hat, a ration book, cooking utensils, World War I cap badges and the very substantial built heritage around the streets of Kilkenny were very

impressively deployed in a number of lessons. ICT was used in most lessons but was never over-used. Visuals with captions and slide shows, short Powerpoint presentations, as well as YouTube videos on show trials, ancient cooking methods and space exploration were very well used at strategic points in lessons, to build on earlier questioning and development and to stimulate some discussion. Some very good documentary sources were also used in some lessons, including speeches by politicians and a World War I poem. More imaginatively still, an extract from 'The Field' was well used and powerfully brought home the issues involved in land tenure and plantation. In terms of hands-on historical study, the emphasis during an outdoor lesson on how Kilkenny was built and evolved was another very effective means of bringing History to life for students.

One area for development concerns the promotion of a little more self-directed learning in some lessons. Sometimes short pair-working tasks were given to students which were difficult to structure in the space available and did not readily stimulate discussion. It is recommended that using visual stimuli and sources with nominated tasks to group members, rather than giving general writing tasks in pairs or groups, be given consideration. Seeking students' viewpoints on their own or their neighbour's homework could be given some consideration within the context of informal assessment. In the few instances where the reading of textbook extracts or lengthy documents was done, this was best done where students were to the fore, allowing teachers to assess their degree of comfort with the material as lessons proceeded.

A number of successful strategies were employed to ensure students' learning and retention. The pace of instruction, clarity of explanations and general language register used were all appropriately supportive of students' learning and understanding. In some lessons, textbook marking or highlighting was encouraged to support retention of key points, while in some others students were urged to make short notes as lessons proceeded, which is a sensible means of ensuring ongoing engagement. The extension of these strategies to include the wider use of summary diagrams or mind maps would be worthwhile. So would the oral revisiting of learning outcomes towards the conclusion of each lesson when they are used. Very good handouts, some containing summary material or visual reinforcements of key issues, were used in some lessons and deserve to be systematically stored in students' folders where possible.

ASSESSMENT

The history department has done significant work in recent years in developing common approaches to assessment. This ties in well with the aims of covering the junior cycle course at a similar pace in all year groups. With common assessment now advanced as far as third year, it is recommended that teachers consider sharing the correction of one another's Christmas tests in third year, and employing Junior Certificate marking principles as far as possible. This is suggested as an additional support to collaborative assessment practice and as a possible support to students who may be making decisions as to whether to sit higher-level or ordinary-level papers in the Junior Certificate. The department is highly commended for its focus on encouraging students to take higher-level papers whenever possible in both Junior and Leaving Certificate, and the overall results of history students annually in both examinations are in line with these high expectations.

Good levels of homework assignment and correction were evident in the copybooks examined in every lesson. Teachers invariably put supportive commentary on significant student work while short questions were usually corrected orally as lessons began. Some good visual or diagrammatic tasks were noted in copybooks and this is definitely an area of assessment and homework which is worthy of further extension, especially in junior lessons. Some in-service training has been

accessed at whole-school level, including a presentation on assessment for learning (AfL), and it is recommended that renewed consideration be given to using some techniques associated with this initiative, such as peer assessment and self assessment, and formative assessment using a 'two stars and a wish' approach.

The school's formal assessment structures see examinations at Christmas and summer for most classes and pre-certificate examinations replacing the summer ones for third-year and sixth-year classes. Parent-teacher meetings are held annually for each year group and homework diaries were observed to be in regular use in different classes. History-specific assessment practice in senior cycle is good. TY students do short projects on a range of topics covered, including family histories and local studies, and present these as part of a portfolio assessment towards the end of the year. This is in line with recommended TY practice nationally. A good, developmental approach in fifth year sees students asked to write relatively open essays initially before moving to more focused interrogative-style questions in sixth year. There is also merit in using significant relevant statement (SRS) marking with older junior students, as when this principle is explained properly and students understand the symbols involved, it can also support formative assessment in a time-efficient manner. In general, teachers maintain records of the performance of students in class tests, held either at monthly intervals or at the end of a topic. This is good practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Student access to and timetable provision for History are very satisfactory.
- Whole-school support for historical study is very impressive, exemplified by the commitment to an annual historical trip to Bavaria.
- A very strong culture of departmental planning is evident in History and is evidence of good reflective practice.
- High levels of individual teacher planning and preparation were evident in all lessons observed.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed during the evaluation was generally either good or very good, and in some instances was excellent.
- Assessment practices in History are varied and thorough and results in certificate examinations are in line with the high expectations set by the history department.

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

- An increased focus on the use of challenging questions, of visuals and source material is urged in some lessons, including those where pair-work is employed.
- Teachers sharing the marking of Christmas examinations in third year would be an extra support to identifying the optimum level for students to take in the Junior Certificate.
- A more structured engagement with some of the principles of assessment for learning would enhance the good practice observed in many lessons.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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