Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

Blessington Community College
Blessington,
County Wicklow
Roll number: 70760S

Date of inspection: 19 October 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Blessington Community College, conducted 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 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The students of Blessington Community College have very good access to History. The school provides History as a core subject for all students pursuing the Junior Certificate programme and Transition Year (TY). Incoming fifth-year students decide between the Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and are provided with the opportunity to continue their study of History as an optional subject choice. There is currently one history class group in both fifth and sixth year. A combined total of thirty-four students, 40% of the eighty-five students in these two senior-cycle year groups, study History.

Management deploys the three members of the history subject team to teach History. This good practice enables each history teacher 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 recognised when deploying the history teachers. This practice is also praiseworthy because it enables the teachers to bond with their students, acquire knowledge about their learning and maintain continuity in teaching the coursework.

The timetabled allocation of the history class periods and their distribution throughout the week support the teaching and study of the subject. The junior-cycle class groups have three single periods per week, the TY class groups have two single periods per week, fifth-year students have five lesson periods that include one double period and sixth-year students have five lesson periods comprising two double periods and one single period. The school’s timetable consists of lessons of forty and thirty-five minutes duration.

The range of teaching resources that are available to the history teachers supports the teaching and study of the subject. These include information and communication technology (ICT), audio-visual equipment, sets of textbooks, sets of workbooks, history reference books and magazines. All classrooms are equipped with a data projector and a laptop and have internet access. Two members of the history subject team have their own base classrooms. The latter facility is of considerable advantage to the teachers in teaching their class lessons, displaying subject materials.
and storing personal resources. The school’s Computer Room may be pre-booked but there is a heavy demand on the availability of the room.

Management supports the collaborative work of the history subject team in maintaining the continuous development of History throughout the school. Formal meetings of the history department are facilitated. Funding is provided on a needs basis for the purchase of resources. In-service training is encouraged and attendance at in-service courses is accommodated. The organisation of outings to places of historical interest is sanctioned.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The history department proactively supports the development of History in the school as evidenced by the appointment of a subject co-ordinator, the collaborative work of the history subject team and the documentation contained in the departmental planning folder. The co-ordinator’s role is voluntary and the history team meets formally and informally during the course of the academic year. Records of the formal meetings are maintained. A subject department plan has been documented and agreed schemes of the coursework compiled for each year group. The important contribution that the department is making to the continuous development of History and the betterment of the subject is commended.

The subject department plan is a framework policy document that gives shape and focus to the work of the history subject team. Effective planning is always best viewed as work in progress and, therefore, the document should be formally reviewed at set intervals in order to sustain the ongoing development of History. The subject department plan could be strengthened by providing organisational details about the function and purpose of the history department, the duties of the subject co-ordinator and the frequency of formal meetings. With regard to the latter, it is recommended that a formal meeting of the history subject team be convened once per term.

The sections in the plan relating to assessment and planning for students with special educational needs require greater elaboration. Details regarding the liaison between the department and the learning support teachers, and the advice received regarding the implementation of suggested strategies to support students with special educational needs, should be included in the aforementioned sections of the plan. It would also be worthwhile considering the inclusion of additional sections on forward planning for History and the analysis of examination results.

The planned schemes of the coursework that have been prepared for each year group are indicative of the commendable collaboration in which the members of the history subject team engage. The plans reflect the good grasp that the teachers have of their subject and inform their teaching of the syllabuses for the various curricular programmes. The potential of the plans to assist teachers in reflecting on the teaching and study of the coursework could, however, be strengthened. It is recommended that the list of the coursework topics be extended where appropriate, and greater information about the resources, methodologies and learning outcomes be given in respect of the individual topics. It is further recommended that the use of the standard template be extended to detail the planning of the TY history module.

All the lessons observed were prepared in advance. Individual teachers provided copies of their lesson plans. In keeping with good teaching practice the teachers chose a definite topic or decided on a particular focus for the lessons. The prior planning involved the preparation of a PowerPoint presentation, overviews of the lesson topic, the selection of overhead transparencies, class
handouts and worksheets, the noting of relevant pages in the students’ textbook, and determining the teaching and learning strategies to be incorporated into the lessons.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The primary focuses of the lessons observed included the presentation and study of new topics, the revision and consolidation of material previously covered and the delivery of presentations on a historical subject of choice by members of a TY class group to their peers. The teachers actively encouraged and supported student learning during the lessons. Classroom management was uniformly good. The students settled quickly to work and remained on task. The range of teaching and learning strategies employed reflected the teachers’ commitment to supporting the progress of their students. Where the coverage of the lesson topic proved to be over-ambitious for the limited time available, appropriate adjustment was made during the lesson regarding the amount of material to be taught.

The focus of the lesson was made clear to the students at the outset and in a number of instances the topic was noted beforehand on the classroom board. The teachers proceeded to further engage their students in a variety of different ways such as the recapping on prior learning by posing questions in order to provide their students with an understanding and knowledge of the context relating to the subject of their study. The projection of an overview of the key points of a lesson topic onto a screen coupled with elaboration from the teacher was another means adopted to introduce a class group to the subject of their study. The purpose of the TY history lesson having been explained and the equipment ready for use, the presentations by individual students commenced.

The incorporation of visual resources into the planned format of the lessons enhanced the presentation of the lesson material and the consolidation of student learning. A PowerPoint presentation was used well to increase students’ knowledge of a subject of their study. The slides also provided opportunities for the teacher to interact with the class through additional comment and questioning. Similarly during the course of some lessons, the projected display of information relating to the topic being studied together with the teacher’s interactive strategies helped students to become more informed. Overhead transparencies were used in another lesson for the same ends. On balance the use of PowerPoint was the more effective; while each medium used both colour and visual stimuli to impact on students’ learning, the amount of detail displayed in the overhead transparencies diminished their impact.

The preparation and presentations of the TY students on historical subjects of their own choosing to their peers helped them to develop their interest in History and increase their computer, research and public speaking skills. It is advocated that pair work and treatment of the subject of choice in increasing depth using several sources be encouraged over a period of time in order to support the development of this praiseworthy strategy. Means of increasing the interaction between the presenters and the audience comprising their fellow peers should also be explored.

There was limited use of the classroom board during the lessons observed but examples of the effective use of this resource were noted. For example, the display on the board of an aide memoire with which the students were familiar and some additional information helped to provide a class group with an understanding of the historical context in which their lesson topic was situated. The meaning of the aide memoire was incorporated into the teacher’s introduction of the new subject of study. In another instance the headings under which the students’ introduction to their lesson topic was to be pursued were placed on the board. The teacher
subsequently noted the most important points of information under the appropriate headings that were gleaned from interacting with the class. This strategy also helped to provide the students with an understanding of the background to their lesson topic.

The consolidation of student learning was an integral part of the lessons. The students for their part actively participated in their lessons and remained attentive to their teachers. Commendably, the planned structure of the lessons encouraged the active participation of the students by including active learning strategies such as note-taking, the completion of written assignments, PowerPoint presentations, responding to teachers’ questions and reading from the class textbook. The students completed their set tasks as directed in a positive and willing manner. There remains scope, however, to make greater use of differentiated tasks in setting assignments for students, particularly the more able students.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment of the students’ progress is an intrinsic aspect of classroom teaching and the educational objectives of the school. In the classroom the history teachers use a combination of observation, questioning techniques, assignments and class tests to monitor continuously their students’ progress. The regular setting and correction of homework is part of each teacher’s practice and serves to help students to consolidate their learning while at the same time encouraging them to develop their study skills. The teachers’ correction of homework assignments is also affirming of their students’ application to their coursework. As a means of realising the full potential of the impact that the teachers’ correction of homework assignments can have on student learning it is recommended that greater use of comment-based feedback be made. This will ensure that students are more frequently provided with clear direction on how to improve the quality of their answers.

The performance of the students in the formal in-house and state examinations is recorded. The first, second and fifth-year students sit formal school examinations at the end of the first and third terms. The third and sixth-year examination classes sit formal first-term tests in November and trial certificate examinations during the spring term. TY history students are continuously assessed. They are individually awarded credits based on the quality of their work and their participation upon completion of the history module. The credits awarded are added to the number of credits gained by each student for the other TY modules. The cumulative total determines a student’s overall grade in the TY programme. The progress of students with special educational needs is monitored continuously by the learning-support team and their subject teachers in addition to the formal examinations. Students with special educational needs who qualify for reasonable accommodation supports in examinations are provided with similar arrangements for in-house examinations.

The school has formulated an assessment policy and a homework policy to direct and inform practices in these areas. School reports are sent to the homes of the students following each of the formal in-house examination sessions. Senior management and the history subject team analyse the achievements of the students in the state examinations. The good work of the history team in helping the students to achieve their results is encouraged. The organisation of a parent-teacher meeting annually for each year group provides parents, guardians and teachers with the opportunity to meet and discuss the progress of the students.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The students’ access to History is very good.
- Management deploys the three members of the history subject team to teach History and supports the collaborative work of the team in maintaining the continuous development of History throughout the school.
- The range of teaching resources that are available to the history teachers supports the teaching and study of the subject.
- The history department proactively supports the development of the subject in the school as evidenced by the appointment of a subject co-ordinator, the collaborative work of the history subject team and the documentation contained in the departmental planning folder.
- The history teachers share a commitment to supporting the progress of their students as evidenced by their preparation of lessons and good work in the history classroom.
- Assessment of the students’ progress is an intrinsic aspect of classroom teaching and 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 subject department plan should be further developed.
- A formal meeting of the history subject team should be convened once per term.
- The planned schemes of the coursework that have been developed for each year group should be elaborated upon where appropriate, and greater information about the resources, methodologies and learning outcomes be given in respect of the individual topics.
- The standard planning template should be used to detail the planning of the TY history module.
- The scope to make greater use of differentiated tasks in setting assignments for students, particularly the more able students, should be explored.
- The correction of students’ homework assignments should include greater use of written comment-based feedback in order to ensure that students are frequently provided with clear direction on how to improve the quality of their answers.

Post-evaluation meetings were 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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