Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

Clonkeen College
Blackrock, County Dublin.
Roll number: 60092U

Date of inspection: 25 November 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Clonkeen 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 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, deputy principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Clonkeen College offers students the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). History is a core subject in the curricular programme provided for junior cycle students and is an optional subject choice for senior cycle students. TY is compulsory for the students upon completion of their Junior Certificate. Their contact with History is maintained in TY mainly through the Tourism module and organised outings that form part of the TY programme. History therefore, is accessible to all the college’s students. The adequacy of the present arrangement for maintaining TY students contact with History rather than the provision of a designated history module should, however, be kept under review.

The timetabled allocation and distribution of history class periods are supportive of the teaching and study of History in the school. Junior-cycle classes are allocated three history lessons per week in each of first, second and third years. Senior-cycle history students comprise one class group in both fifth year and sixth year. Each class group has five history class periods per week. This allocation consists of one double period and three single periods. Notwithstanding the strong and positive support provided by the timetable for History, attention is drawn to the fact that the distribution of history lesson periods for class groups S1, R2, R3 and the fifth-year history class group has resulted in the majority of their history lessons having afternoon time slots. The provision of a more even distribution between morning and afternoon lesson periods in the next academic year is recommended.

The school has a complement of eight history teachers, seven of whom are currently deployed to teach History. Two members of the history subject team have responsibility for teaching the Leaving Certificate class groups. Management’s deployment of the history teachers is supportive of the subject because it enables almost the full complement to remain actively involved in teaching History. The demands of the timetable are responsible for one history teacher being deployed to teach another subject specialism. It is suggested that means of enabling all the history teachers to remain actively involved in teaching the subject be explored.
Established practice in this school is that history teachers are assigned to their class groups until the students complete their certificate examinations. This practice is commended, because it enables the history teachers to bond with their students, acquire knowledge about their learning and maintain continuity in the delivery of the coursework. It is recommended that management discuss with the history subject team the introduction of a rota that would increase the capacity within the subject team to teach the Leaving Certificate history curricular coursework. It is important that a framework plan be devised that will support the teachers who will be deployed to teach History in the senior cycle in the foreseeable future. The plan should draw upon the expertise and experience that is present in the team.

There is a good range of resources available to support the teaching and study of History. These include portable data projectors, televisions, DVD players, video players and overhead projectors. The staffroom has a designated annexe that is equipped with computer work stations and there are two photocopiers for the teachers’ use in another section of the room. A comprehensive video and DVD library and collections of history books and magazines are also available to the history teachers. Funding is provided for the purchase of specified items on a needs basis. There is limited accessibility to the school’s computer room because of the considerable demand made upon it. As the layout of the room poses a degree of difficulty for classroom teaching purposes, the teachers of History do not generally seek access to it.

Management is committed to supporting the professional development of the teaching staff. Members of the history subject team have been facilitated in attending in-service for the new Leaving Certificate History syllabus. Management also encourages the teaching staff to become members of their professional associations such as the History Teachers’ Association of Ireland (HTAI). Moreover, the board of management facilitates and supports professional development courses undertaken by the teaching staff. Mentoring support is provided for student teachers. There is currently one student teacher being mentored by two members of the history subject team who have allocated history lesson periods to him. Attention is however, drawn to the fact that the attendance of the full complement of the school’s history teachers at scheduled subject planning meetings has yet to be achieved. Senior management is asked to discuss this matter with the history subject team with a view to overcoming this difficulty.

**Planning and Preparation**

The importance that the history teachers give to collaborative planning is evidenced by the subject development plan that has been compiled, the record of subject planning meetings, the electronic history folder that is in the process of being developed and the informal discussions relating to History that take place between members of the history subject team. This good work is to be commended and encouraged. The formal establishment of a history department and the appointment of a subject convenor are recommended in order to provide the infrastructure that will sustain collaborative planning in the long-term. It is further recommended that the position of subject convenor be rotated at agreed intervals such as biennially. This will enable the individual history teachers to make their contributions to the common goal and to facilitate the sharing of the responsibilities of this position. The attendance of the full complement of the history subject team at the subject departmental meetings is crucial in order to support effective collaborative planning and, as has already been pointed out, is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

The subject development plan is an informative document that contains details of the aims and objectives underpinning the teaching and study of History in the school, curricular planning, homework, assessment and reporting procedures, strategies to promote the profile of History and
a range of subject-related matters. This important document informs the work of the history teachers and has a key role to play in supporting the continuous development of subject planning. Effective planning is always a work in progress and it is, therefore, recommended that the section relating to curriculum content be further developed over a period of time. Additional sections on forward planning and the mentoring of student teachers should be documented; the sections on homework procedures and assessment procedures should be elaborated upon and the resources should be catalogued. The section on homework procedures should contain reference to the merits of providing written, constructive, feedback comments on students’ homework assignments and the assessment section should contain details of the common examinations that are organised for various year groups of history students.

The details of the planned coursework schemes are strongest on the timeline and the order in which the named topics will be taught. It is important, however, that the coursework plans be further developed and draw upon the experience of the members of the history subject team in teaching the coursework topics. It is recommended that the format of the coursework plans be extended to include a more comprehensive listing of the coursework topics to be taught, the teaching and learning methodologies that will be incorporated into the study of each topic, the resources to be used and the learning outcomes to be achieved. It is advocated that the new section on forward planning contain reference to the ongoing development and review of the subject plan, the framework plan for building capacity to teach the Leaving Certificate coursework in the team and, the identification of strategies to support and develop the teaching of History in TY.

The strategies that have been developed to promote the profile of History encourage the students to develop their interest in History and enhance the vitality of the subject in the school. The senior students regularly participate in the activities organised by the Dublin branch of the HTAI such as the Sixth Form Seminar and the branch’s Annual History Table Quiz for schools, which the school has won on a number of occasions. Visits to places of historical interest are frequently arranged for the TY students. Individual history teachers also participate in the courses and seminars that the HTAI organises for teachers. The time and effort given to promoting History by these means is commended.

The setting up of a shared electronic planning folder for History is a very worthwhile initiative. The folder is an important resource for supporting the teaching and study of History and the development of departmental planning. It can facilitate easy access to history departmental planning documentation, PowerPoint presentations, and a range of useful subject materials such as worksheets, handouts, and examination papers. The continued development of this resource is encouraged.

There was ample evidence of prior preparation for all the lessons observed. The teachers displayed a good grasp of the syllabus and, in keeping with good teaching practice, chose a definite topic for each lesson. Planning for the lessons included the preparation of appropriate resources to support teaching and learning such as PowerPoint presentations, overhead transparencies, handouts, work sheets, selection of relevant pages in class textbooks and homework assignments.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was a positive teaching and learning atmosphere during all the lessons observed. The teachers taught their lessons in a purposeful manner and classroom management was uniformly good. The relationship between the teachers and their students was characterised by mutual
respect. The teachers guided and supported student learning throughout the lessons. Students quickly settled into the study of their lesson topics and remained on task. They were frequently affirmed for their contributions. Individual teachers informed their students of the focus and the intended learning outcomes of the lesson at the outset. It is recommended that this practice be universally adopted in order that the students are provided with a clear understanding of the purpose of the lesson. It is particularly important when engaging in the study of a broad topic over a period of time.

The variety of teaching and learning methodologies employed was effective in establishing the positive learning atmosphere in the classroom and providing the students with an informed understanding of their lesson topics. For example, the teachers’ interaction with students at the commencement of the lessons facilitated their introduction to new material in some lessons. The recapping on prior learning that occurred in other instances provided the students with greater knowledge and understanding of the context in which their lesson topic was situated. The correction of homework at the start of the lesson also provided the opportunity to consolidate student learning of material previously studied. The setting of written assignments in the initial phases of the lesson impacted most effectively on students’ learning where the assignment was directly linked to the lesson topic. In one such example, the students completed a worksheet while watching a DVD clip that formed part of their introduction to the subject of their study.

Reading from the class textbook and prepared handouts was incorporated most often into the development of the lessons at a stage where this activity helped to draw students deeper into the study of their lesson topic and increase their knowledge. Directing named students to read aloud while their peers followed what was being read was the most common approach adopted. Individual teachers read from the textbook or class handout and in one instance, the students engaged in a brief period of silent reading. Reading supported student learning while also helping to vary the pace and structure of the lessons where it occurred. This activity also provided a good link to subsequent activities as, for example, setting a class the task of writing answers to a number of questions based on what had been read. A second example was where the class wrote notes on the personality who was prominent in their reading. It is recommended that prepared handouts be typed rather than handwritten, where this practice has yet to be fully adopted.

There was good though limited use made of visual resources to impact on student learning. For example, effective use was made of a PowerPoint presentation on Stalin’s Show Trials to support students in their study of the topic. The teacher further consolidated student learning by posing questions, drawing attention to key points and providing informative comment during the course of the presentation. A selection of overhead transparencies was integrated into a class’s study of the Battle of Britain and individual teachers drew their students’ attention to pictorial illustrations in the class’s textbook at relevant times. The classroom board was used to emphasise points relating to the lesson topic in some lessons. The noting of information on the board was most effective where the board had been cleared of material from a previous lesson and the information noted was clearly displayed. There was scope overall to make greater use of visual resources such as a map or a DVD clip in order to impact on student learning.

The students contributed to the quality of the lessons through the interest they displayed in the study of their lesson topics and their participation in the lessons. They listened attentively to their teachers, responded to the questions put to them and co-operatively undertook the assignments that they were set. They frequently demonstrated their learning by showing a good knowledge of their coursework during these activities. In the context of supporting student participation in the class lesson, there was occasion where the structure of the lesson could have been modified in order to facilitate to a greater extent the input that the students made to the lesson. It is
acknowledged however, that the students were engaged and maintained on task from the outset of all lessons.

ASSESSMENT

The history teachers monitor the progress of their students during the course of their lessons through the noting of attendance, observation, interacting with their respective class groups to gauge their understanding of the lesson material, the setting of tasks and the correction of homework assignments. The performances of their students in periodic class tests are another means used to track their application and achievements. The teachers also work closely with special needs assistants (SNAs) to respond to the specific needs of individual students where this is warranted. If it is necessary, individual history examination papers are prepared for students with special education needs, when they sit the school’s formal end-of-term examinations. These good assessment practices are commended.

The setting of homework is part of each teacher’s practice. Perusal of a sample of the students’ written work reflected their application and steady coverage of their coursework. It is recommended that teachers make more frequent use of comment-based feedback. This worthwhile practice provides students with clear direction on how to improve the quality of their answers. At the time of the inspection visit, the use of written, constructive, feedback comment on students’ homework assignments varied among the members of the history subject team.

Formal in-school examinations are organised at the end of the first and third terms before the Christmas and summer holidays commence. The first and second-year history class groups sit common examinations for their respective year groups. This strategy is laudable, because it allows for comparison of students’ progress. It is also supportive of students in their study of the higher-level coursework because it affords all students a long period of time to demonstrate their ability to succeed at the higher level. The third and sixth-year class groups sit trial certificate examinations during the spring term in preparation for the certificate examinations in June. The Leaving Certificate history teachers supervise the preparation and completion of the research study reports that are a mandatory component of the students’ Leaving Certificate history coursework.

Senior management and the history subject team analyse the performances of the students in the certificate examinations. The consistently high uptake of higher-level history papers in both Junior and Leaving Certificate History and the level of success achieved by the students are commended. It is however, advocated that the suitability of the higher-level history paper for a small number of junior-cycle students in recent years be discussed at departmental level.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Whole-school support for History is very good overall.
- The history teachers attach importance to subject planning and have made good progress in this regard.
- There was a positive teaching and learning atmosphere in all the lessons observed. The teachers taught their lessons in a purposeful manner, engaged their students well, and supported student learning throughout the lessons.
• The variety of teaching and learning methodologies employed was effective in providing the students with an informed understanding of their lesson topic.
• The students contributed to the quality of the lessons and demonstrated their learning through the interest they displayed in the study of their lesson topics and their participation in the lessons.
• The history subject team actively promotes History in the school.
• Senior management and the history teachers track the academic progress of the students both informally through observation and interaction, and formally through systematic analysis of attainment.

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

• Senior management and the history subject team should discuss how to achieve attendance of the full complement of the school’s history teachers at scheduled subject planning meetings.
• A formal history department should be established and a subject convenor should be appointed.
• A teacher deployment rota should be agreed in order to increase the capacity within the subject team to teach the Leaving Certificate history curricular coursework.
• The format of the coursework plans should be extended to include a more comprehensive listing of the coursework topics to be taught, the teaching and learning methodologies that will be incorporated into the study of each topic, the resources to be used and the learning outcomes to be achieved.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of History, 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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