An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

Cashel Community School
Cashel, County Tipperary
Roll number: 91497A

Date of inspection: 30 November and 1 December 2009
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Cashel Community School. 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

It is commendable that Cashel Community School offers History as a compulsory subject in junior cycle, in keeping with the strong tradition of History at the school and with the historic nature of Cashel itself. This lays a very important foundation in social studies for the school’s students. The overall number of periods allocated to junior History is good, particularly with three periods weekly in both first year and third year. The provision of just two periods per week at present in second year is explained by curricular pressures but is a concern. Management is urged to re-examine this situation, as the optimum number of periods for the delivery of History in junior cycle is three per week in each year. There is also some bunching of junior classes on the timetable, including two second-year classes which have their weekly complement of History on two consecutive days. This should be avoided if practicable in future timetabling.

The school is applauded for its inclusion of History as a core module on the Transition Year (TY) programme. Each of the three TY class groups currently studies History for an excellent four periods per week in a ten-week module. There may be a danger in that students who have studied History in the first ten-week block can be less likely to opt for Leaving Certificate History when asked to select their subjects some six months after they have last studied the subject. This is worthy of investigation, ideally by the history department and management, to see if the modular blocks may give a better eventual uptake, as opposed to a provision of a reduced number of periods in TY across the full year. It must be pointed out that the current uptake levels in senior History are excellent, resulting in two classes in both fifth year and sixth year at present. Subject options prior to fifth year are based on a survey of students’ preferences and the fact that History and other option subjects then have an average of five and a half periods per week over the two years to Leaving Certificate is excellent time provision.

School structures are very supportive of History. The school has a satisfactory number of qualified history teachers to deliver the subject. In recent times, augmentation of the information and communication technology (ICT) at the school has resulted in a classroom being equipped
with a laptop computer and data projector. This is situated adjacent to the Geography room and has become a *de facto* History room, with very good storage and display space for History included. While this is a base room for one history teacher, there is good access to the room for others as required. Some teachers have their own base rooms and others have to share rooms, mostly with access to overhead projectors and televisions if needed. The school’s current policy of banding students into largely higher and ordinary level groupings from early in second year is deserving of review. The results in Certificate examinations achieved by the school’s history students are certainly very good, but there is a possibility that the early assignment of student into such groupings may have a demotivating effect on some who might otherwise strive to take higher level papers in the Junior Certificate. This is compounded by the fact that students in the lower-band classes are also assigned additional textbooks, more suited to ordinary-level course coverage. This needs ongoing review and management and the history department is applauded for the active consideration being given to the position.

Outside the classroom contexts, good whole-school support for History continues. A flexible approach to purchase of resources as needs arise is satisfactory. The school supports membership of the History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI) for interested teachers and has also facilitated release for all senior teachers attending in-service training for the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus. There is also good support for historical trips and activities, and department planning is facilitated by the provision of annual meeting time and assignment of a subject co-ordinator post.

**Planning and Preparation**

Departmental planning activity at Cashel Community School is very strong. With a dedicated co-ordinator in place, a good subject planning folder has evolved over recent years, with yearly outlines of work to be completed, a catalogue of resources and minutes of meetings all in place. The department is commended for its willingness to reflect on its own practice and adapt accordingly. For example, the reduced time available in second year has resulted in the department actively planning to cover an element of the second-year syllabus in first year in order to ensure that the second-year syllabus can be covered. Similarly, meeting minutes show good reflective practice as the department has reconsidered issues like the history book stock and what periodical subscription would best suit the students in Cashel. The strong traditions of local history in TY are continuing but also evident is the department’s desire to ensure that TY historical study can provide a broad base for students to build on in Leaving Certificate if they continue with History. Very good links have been set up with the local library and heritage services, and with the HTAI. In terms of the subject plan itself, it is recommended that the department ought to consider deciding on and specifying the learning outcomes anticipated for History in each year group, including TY, as the opportunity and reflection time allow.

The evident levels of individual teacher planning and preparation in History are very good. All teachers were teaching topics in line with the agreed curricular plans, and pitched at an appropriate pace and level for the year groups involved. Lesson preparation also took cognisance of whether a class was a higher or ordinary stream, although the range of methodologies employed was sufficiently varied to be successfully employed in mixed-ability contexts too, which is commended. In some lessons, preparation included ICT-based resources such as PowerPoint summaries, visuals, graphs, film extracts and music. In other lessons, teachers made advance preparation of overhead projector technology or of other support materials. A wide range of student handouts was developed for use across the range of classes observed and included
some pooled resources from other department members and a number of good in-class assessment tools.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

General classroom atmosphere was very good in all lessons. Some history lessons were held in rooms equipped with ICT, while other had more basic equipment available. Similarly, the designated history room was superbly decorated with subject-specific visual material while this was not possible in other shared rooms. Seating arrangements in classrooms were along traditional lines but did not impede teacher movement or student engagement. Regardless of the level of equipment or subject resources available, teachers adapted very well to all circumstances. They were comfortable with ICT when using it, or with overhead projectors and the board otherwise. The procurement of a remote mouse for the computer in the base history facility would be a relatively inexpensive investment which would allow for greater teacher movement and flexibility as desired. Wherever necessary, teachers showed good awareness of issues like lighting, board visibility and other potential challenges for students.

The quality of teacher-student engagement which developed in all lessons was very good. Teachers gave clear directions and outlines of work to students, whose behaviour and concentration were very good from the outset of all lessons. All teachers showed a fine ability to link with students from the start, with colloquial and student-friendly language used appropriately to help set the scene for the lessons. It is suggested that the use of initial moments of lessons to identify what the core learning intentions of the day are, and ideally what the anticipated homework task may be, would add further direction to proceedings if deployed across the department. Where a lesson sought to identify a structured way through a detailed topic, it is suggested that asking students to identify what the key headings are, rather than the teacher giving these first, would be a good support to analytical thinking. The placing of such headings or stages on the board as they arise would be an additional visual support to students in identifying the core direction of the lesson.

Students were very well engaged in the learning process in all lessons. Teachers used a range of good questioning strategies, with very good balance achieved between lower and higher order questioning, between questions pitched at volunteer answerers and selected students, and between boys and girls in each lesson. Occasionally, there needed to be a little more emphasis on getting students to answer, requiring teachers to delay giving the information too quickly, but overall this was a minor issue. The questioning observed, although done in ability-banded classes, was of a variety and range to suit the needs of all students. In most lessons, a very good emphasis was placed on student activity as an important support to engagement. Pair work, or small-group work was used in a number of instances, to dissect documents or pictures, or identify key issues about a topic previously discussed. Some excellent work was done with documentary handout material on the local Famine, which had the additional element of tying information together in graph form. Student feedback from such activity was successfully garnered through a template in some instances, while the use of the white board to collate the views of groups was effective in another lesson and could tie in well with students making mind-map summaries for themselves as lessons proceed.

A very good variety of stimulus materials was used in lessons. Handouts were used in all lessons to varying degrees, with most reflecting the visual and verbal nature of the subject very well. Some handouts were developed in the form of blank templates, or cloze tests, and were well integrated into lessons on the Romans, plantations, Fascism, the Cold War and other topics. In
In some instances, where ICT support was available, excellent use was made of songs and documentary film excerpts to stimulate interest in the Apprentice Boys. It is recommended that a little more emphasis on some forms of visual stimuli could be worthwhile, including maps on classroom walls, in textbooks or electronically generated, to help students understand the places associated with the historical events being studied. Sometimes, projecting images onto the basic whiteboard in classrooms could allow for students to come to the board and insert comments and details about the sources, while another suggestion offered is to use the pictures on a particular topic in the textbook to get students to identify for themselves the core features of a particular society or political system. Such tactics would assist self-directed learning and are offered to complement the very good levels of stimulus use seen across the lessons observed.

The work of teachers as outlined thusfar had a significant impact on student learning opportunities in all lessons observed. In addition, the level at which topics were covered in all cases was ideally pitched to syllabus requirements and students’ ages. Very good quality explanations of challenging terms were the norm and only isolated suggestions were made to get students to focus on English equivalents of difficult foreign or Latin words at times, or to develop key-word dictionaries for themselves as they proceed through the course. Teachers made good time for review questioning and summaries before the end of all lessons and the level of student response to questioning, by teachers and by the inspector, showed that good learning and understanding had been achieved. The level of student concentration and engagement remained constant to the end in all lessons and was a credit to the very good teaching observed.

ASSESSMENT

As intimated in the previous section of this report, a very good use of oral questioning was observed in classes generally, as a means of engaging students and assessing their learning informally. Very good in-class cloze tests, word puzzles and graph-drawing tasks were deployed on some occasions. Homework was assigned at the end of all lessons observed, and was always linked to the topics covered in the lessons. Such homework was monitored at the start of most lessons by teachers, and sometimes by teacher annotation in students’ copybooks. Some appropriate drawing tasks were noted in first-year homework copybooks, and this is worth extending to maps and diagrams too as further non-verbal means of assessing students’ work. Good commentary by teachers on students’ homework and projects was noted in some classes and this deserves expansion, to include occasional marking of work with the use of the guidelines for certificate examinations and training students in what significant relevant statements (SRS) mean. It is suggested that the adoption of a ‘two-stars and a wish’ strategy, where students are commended on two good points about their work and shown one area for improvement each time would also be in keeping with good practice and with the principles of assessment for learning.

In turning to more formal assessment issues, the format of the instruments used in junior cycle Christmas and summer tests, including a fine mix of documents, short questions, people-in-history and topic-style questions was very good overall, in keeping with the style of questioning found in the Junior Certificate. It is suggested that the history section of the first-year homework policy needs to also incorporate the use of stimulus-driven and drawing tasks in the finalised written policy. Common assessment is used at end-of-term stage in second and third year, although tailored to whether classes are in higher or lower bands. It is recommended that common, mixed-ability assessment be continued for the duration of second year at least, as an additional means of ensuring that students capable of sitting higher level papers are encouraged to think along those lines and be prepared for the different question types and course requirements.
for as long as possible. The History department is deserving of considerable praise for the very good results achieved by its students in certificate examinations over the years.

The school is commended for the supports it offers to student assessment, including student journals for regular contact with home and annual parent-teacher meetings for more formal contacts. In addition to regular examinations for all classes in end of term slots, the inclusion of full class tests at Hallowe’en in third year is a further support to students’ assessment and their learning from assessment. Classes due to sit certificate examinations take pre-papers in spring. A system of sending written reports home on completion of such tests is also commended.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Student access to History in Cashel Community School is very good, with all students up to and including TY studying the subject.
- The general timetabling of the subject is very good, especially in senior cycle.
- Uptake levels in senior History are very good.
- Whole-school support for teachers’ in-service and subject association links, subject resourcing and planning are very good.
- Departmental and individual planning in History are of a very high standard and show significant degrees of reflection by teachers.
- The quality of teacher-student engagement in all lessons was excellent.
- The overall very high standard of teaching and learning observed was characterised by very good use of questioning and stimulus materials, good lesson structuring and clear explanations.
- Both informal and formal assessment practices in History are very satisfactory and high standards in certificate examinations are consistently achieved.

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

- A review of the current provision of just two periods per week for second-year History is urged.
- A review of the impact of modularisation in TY History on eventual fifth-year uptake in the subject would be worthwhile.
- The practice of banding classes as basic higher and ordinary level groups from early in second year needs review to ensure that optimum higher-level uptake can be achieved.
- Within the context of the fine teaching observed, more emphasis on identifying learning intentions and keywords, and on students answering questions is recommended.
- Common formal assessment is commended and recommended for continuation with all classes throughout second year at least.

A post-evaluation meeting 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.

*Published November 2010.*