

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of History
REPORT**

**Faithful Companions of Jesus Secondary School
Bunclody, County Wexford
Roll number: 63550Q**

Date of inspection: 28-29 April 2010



**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ) Secondary School, Bunclody. 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 informal 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 deputy principal and subject co-ordinator. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

History is very well provided for on the timetable at FCJ Secondary School. All junior cycle classes have three single periods of History per week, in most cases well spaced across the days of the week and with a good balance between morning and afternoon timeslots. It is very commendable too that the school is well staffed in terms of History. Not only are there seven qualified teachers of the subject delivering it in junior cycle, but it is a further support to History that a key member of the education support team also has a history background and has been heavily involved in developing supports for History. It is also commendable in a school this size that a strong mentoring culture pertains for new or substitute teachers, with supports given by the subject teachers and also by a two-teacher team involved in more general mentoring.

In senior cycle, it is very satisfactory to note that the optional Transition Year (TY) has a very healthy uptake, and that all three class groups take History as a core subject over three periods per week throughout the year. Good provision continues into Leaving Certificate, where History is offered as part of an open choice structure. The subject has high uptake levels and in each of the current fifth-year and sixth-year groups, there are two history classes. It is positive also that even among students who have opted for the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), uptake levels in History are good despite History not being a recognised element in vocational subject groupings (VSGs). Timetable provision sees each Leaving Certificate history class have a double period and three single periods per week, which is satisfactory. There are three teachers involved in Leaving Certificate History, with a fourth in TY, giving the school a good pool of senior teaching personnel in the subject.

Subject budgeting is on a needs basis, which is working satisfactorily based on the evidence presented. A history notice board has been provided and is well used for subject-related displays, including items on why History is worth studying, information about a visiting speaker on the Holocaust and a commemoration of the student who won first place in Ireland in Leaving

Certificate History some years ago. The subject department has also been provided with a laptop computer and has good storage space for books, magazines, acetate sheets and DVDs.

A lot of developmental thinking has been undertaken around History and across the school generally in recent years. The subject department has been seeking a base history room, which would be a strong further support to the subject's profile and to teaching and learning. However, at present, given the growing number of students and space constraints at the school, neither the provision of a history room nor teacher-based classrooms appears to be practicable. It is simply urged that these possibilities be given ongoing consideration, especially as the roll out of information and communication technology (ICT) and broadband internet access is continuing across the school.

Commendable on-going provision for History has included whole-school support for teachers' continuing professional development. This includes payment of teachers' subscriptions to the History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI), releasing teachers for training courses provided in the past by the History In-Service Team (HIST), and the provision of in-school training in education support and other areas. A number of very good practices pertaining to assessment for learning were evident in different classroom contexts during the inspection, building on a formal training input on assessment for learning which was given in late 2009. Whole-school support for historical trips and projects has been good over the years, and despite more difficult financial times it was good to note an imminent outing to Dublin which was to include visits to Kilmainham Jail, Croke Park and the Titanic exhibition.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There is a formal History department structure in place at the school, with a co-ordinator who fulfils a range of duties, including the chairing of roughly three formal meetings per year, making provision for minute taking and informing the principal of the outcomes of such meetings. In addition, the subject co-ordination duties include ordering books, ensuring that teachers' resource requirements are identified and distributing information, news items and other issues pertaining to History. The minutes of departmental meetings show a range of practical issues being discussed, including common assessment, looking for a history room, ICT provision and development of an electronic history file. This latter plan deserves to be prioritised, as it will greatly enhance the resource pool available to teachers, will complement the roll out of ICT previously discussed and can offset the lack of a subject room or teacher-based rooms by making the department's resources, and the internet, available to all teachers in all classrooms.

The history teaching team has developed an excellent departmental plan, which is very thorough and relevant to teaching and learning. It is very encouraging to note a department mission statement which emphasises the idea that students should enjoy History. The plan also details the many instances of teacher attendance at CPD events, including the significant and on-going involvement of the co-ordinator and others in the HTAI. The plan contains a catalogue of all the history resources available to teachers at the school, organised on a topic-by-topic basis. Yearly plans are very clear, very supportive for any new teacher and full of resource guides. They are also appropriately syllabus focused. Leaving Certificate plans vary slightly from recommended guidelines on the time needed for syllabus coverage but this has been done in light of experience and reflection. A very good range of TY topics is planned for each year, ranging through personal history through the history and geography of hurling and the GAA, the 1916 Rising in Wexford, the Holocaust, Crusades and student-selected research projects. As previously intimated, history

resources have been developed for students with additional educational needs and it is very positive to note that a special needs teacher attends and contributes to some history meetings.

Individual teacher planning in History is very good, with all classes at or close to where they should be in terms of course coverage at this stage of the year. All lessons had clear structures, with some having clearly identified learning outcomes for students to focus on and revisit as lessons proceeded. This is a feature of assessment for learning and is deserving of more uniform consideration and use. All lessons were planned in line with syllabus requirements and showed that progress with syllabus coverage was broadly in line with the targets set down in the subject plan.

Very good practical preparatory work by teachers was evident in all lessons, with unanticipated delays in getting started in two lessons not causing any difficulty. ICT was prepared in advance for use in some lessons, an overhead projector in another and recorded music in yet another. In all lessons, significant amounts of handouts, questionnaires, flash cards and other materials were ready for use as required. It was noticeable also that a number of items pertaining to lesson preparation, such as cloze tests, mind maps, sequencing exercises and matching exercises, had direct links to the advice received from the special educational needs department. This is sound practice and testifies to very good planning for differentiation in the mixed ability contexts in which most lessons in History are taught.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A uniformly strong standard of teaching and learning was evident in the lessons observed. Very good teacher-student rapport obtained in all lessons, and was in no way inhibited by the relatively large size of most class groups. Some simple settling tasks, ranging from roll taking to the return of test papers or homework and distribution of revision handouts, were all undertaken within minutes. In one or two lessons, short ice-breaking tasks for small groups were used to link past learning with the core content of the new lesson to very good effect. In many lessons, the learning intentions for the lesson were identified by teachers and placed on the board. This is recommended for use in all lessons, and for revisiting at key stages as the lessons proceed as well.

Lesson development employed a significant amount of teacher-led questioning. This questioning was of a very good standard overall. On occasions, a little too much emphasis was placed on seeking volunteers to answer questions but in general, a very good mix of higher and lower order questioning was used, with good reference to visual stimuli at times also. Some very good questioning observed sought the identification of contrasts between visual stimuli, such as Renaissance paintings or the weaponry of different armies. Other interesting questioning sought personal responses from students regarding what they had seen on a screen or had listened to. Other good questioning with senior students delved into deeper issues such as liberalism, stereotyping, desegregation and equality in modern historical development.

In roughly half of the lessons observed, teachers made use of ICT to add visual dimensions to lesson delivery. In all instances this was done very effectively. Such material ranged from a collection of images dealing with the Holocaust, to image and text combinations on rebellions, art history and other topics. There is no doubt that the enhancement of ICT provision across the school should be seen as an opportunity for History teaching too, but this does not take from the very good practice also observed where ICT was not employed. In other lessons, very good use was also made of a set of overhead transparencies on the Renaissance, and of a musical performance. Sometimes, teachers employed images from textbooks or past examination papers

to very good effect. Individual recommendations have been made to augment the use of visual stimuli through linking questioning a little more strongly to such visuals, including those in textbooks, and also to include the use of maps showing the locations of key places referred to in lessons, even where these places are in Ireland. Overall, a slight increase of emphasis on visual stimuli is recommended, to balance the emphasis on oral or textual material, especially in mixed-ability lessons.

In all lessons, teachers were proactive in giving students opportunities to learn by doing. Sometimes, group or pair sorting tasks, questionnaires and in-class tasks on sources were used to stimulate student activity. In some instances, students were asked to come to the board, either to place key terms on flash cards under the correct heading on medieval life, or to write a summary of information provided by the brain-storming sessions which students had engaged in on the War of Independence. These were all very successful. Senior history classes engaged in lively, discursive engagement and participation, with some expert probing by teachers seeking the justification by students of their own views on events in American history or in Nazi Germany.

A number of successful teaching strategies were employed by teachers in seeking to ensure broader student engagement. Humour was used quite often in most lessons, and always appropriately. Where opportunities arose to affirm the work of students, even if not directly relevant to History, these were availed of. While most topics being taught on the days of the inspection were dealing with non-Irish events, some very good opportunities were availed of in linking local events, from rebellion to industrial development, to the material being studied. Similarly, the use of student-relevant issues like sport and music to help explain and add interest to issues like Renaissance city rivalry, medieval society and American racial tensions was very impressive in a number of lessons. The linking of a lesson on concentration camps with an imminent visit from a Holocaust survivor to speak to TY students was a further support to student engagement. In all lessons, the use of language by teachers was very well tailored to the age and ability ranges of students. Key terms were reinforced, often by short note-taking tasks for students, and difficult items of historical vocabulary were explained very clearly. In addition, where key concepts or key personalities relevant to Leaving Certificate study were identified, students were asked to pay particular attention to these, which is good practice.

Given that the inspection visit occurred at a time when preparation for examinations was an important feature of most lessons, a very strong emphasis by teachers on revision and retention of learning was noted and was wholly appropriate. For example, one lesson on Ireland in the 1930s factored in a short period for revision of a second-year course topic, with a view to Junior Certificate preparation and this was very successfully done. Across all lessons, an emphasis on core facts, examination requirements and understanding of historical vocabulary was in evidence, though in no instance did such work detract from learning in the broader sense. Though not uniformly employed, some very good reinforcement strategies were also noted, ranging from judicious student note-taking, textbook marking and the filing of handouts. An agreed approach to ensuring that students retain their learning is worthy of consideration, but this is by no means a significant concern and is already being progressed at department meetings. Some very interesting reading-for-understanding challenges were given to senior students, and overall it was good to see textbook reading rarely indulged in without a reinforcing purpose. In all lessons, students were given ample opportunity to seek any clarifications they needed, and once homework had been assigned, review questioning to focus them once more on key learning was the general manner in which lessons concluded. This is good practice.

ASSESSMENT

Very good informal assessment methods were observed throughout the evaluation. Within classes, oral questioning was well used despite a tendency in some instances for teachers to ask for hands to be raised rather than pinpointing and tailoring questions to individual students. Homework is regularly assigned and monitored, with teacher commentary in many copybooks. It was notable that many students have hardback copybooks for longer homework tasks, and that regular monitoring and initialling by teachers of completed work is the norm. Some of the work examined was corrected using the significant relevant statement (SRS) model employed in Junior Certificate marking, while senior work employed similar Leaving Certificate marking. These worked well, especially where the rationale behind the marking had been explained to students. Some very good use of formative assessment was also noted and, again, as the school continues to engage with assessment for learning on a more formal basis, this form of comment-based marking should be enhanced.

Individual teachers made very good use of a variety of assessment tools. These included timelines to gauge and structure student learning, certificate examination questions, some drawing of labelled sketches. Many assessment tasks employed placed a strong emphasis on skills development and assessment through source work. This is highly commended. So too is the use of family archival projects with younger students, and of project work with TY students, cloze tests, true or false questionnaires and sorting tasks which worked particularly well as differentiated assessment strategies.

Assessment policy at history department level reflects the range of practices outlined above. The department also acknowledges the role that can be played by occasional learning tasks, for example around key words and definitions. This is acceptable and is not over-emphasised. The acknowledgement of high performance in History in house examinations through a certificate is a very good department strategy, as is the commitment to giving common assessment papers to all year groups at both Christmas and summer. These tests allow for some divergence where needs arise, which is sensible. It is noted that project work is given high prominence in junior cycle and especially in TY, where the use of oral presentations by students, portfolio assessment and interviews about students' research studies are all evident. Leaving Certificate assessment practice includes a keen awareness of research study report (RSR) requirements and appropriate themes for such reports. These subject-specific assessment practices are further supported at whole-school level by the holding of annual parent-teacher meetings for all classes, the regular monitoring of attendance and performance, and the daily use of student journals to record homework and any teacher-parent communications that may be required.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Whole-school provision and support for History is very good.
- The commitment of management and staff to CPD, including HTAI involvement, is very praiseworthy.
- Very thorough departmental and individual teacher planning and preparation was in evidence.
- The quality of teaching observed was uniformly strong, characterised by syllabus relevance, good rapport, clear explanations and good use of visuals and student-centred approaches.

- Student learning was of a high standard in the lessons observed.
- Whole-school and departmental assessment practices are good and are supportive of student achievement.

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

- The possibility of having a subject-specific room for History, or teacher-based classrooms ought to be kept under review.
- Slightly more emphasis on teachers' use of visual stimuli and varied questioning is recommended in some lesson contexts.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the deputy principal near the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board is very pleased with the excellent report and wishes to commend the History Department.