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The perspective from the Specialist Schools Trust

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During the Cold War era, the American school system ran a very patriotic history syllabus. I loved history, but it seemed to stop abruptly with the Korean War; because the United States won all wars, we could not go any further than that in our studies! One of the reasons why I have loved teaching for many decades here in England, mainly in London, is because I have had the opportunity to see history as rigourous enquiry. I am now working for the Specialist Schools Trust as Humanities Coordinator for the Humanities Colleges. I am going to give you a little background about what the Humanities Colleges actually are because they can appear rather mysterious. They have been in existence for a year, although many of you may already be familiar with them, having provided input into their creation.

The Specialist Schools Trust aims to set up a constantly expanding network of innovative schools. There are currently about 2,400 specialist schools, and it is expected that eventually all the schools in the state secondary system will become specialist schools in one way or the other. There are ten types of specialism, including maths and computing, language, arts, music, science, sports and technology. Having only come on stream in 2004, Humanities is one of the newest specialisms.

The Trust is keen to support innovation in teaching and learning and supports the timely review that Ofsted and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) have been doing into the history curriculum. The Trust wants to raise the achievement and aspirations of young people, and the interesting role which history takes within Curriculum 2000 looks towards this. A level history classes used to be largely comprised of historians who planned to study history at university; with Curriculum 2000 we have begun to see, for example, medics who are taking history as their fourth subject, which has had an impact on the ways that teaching and learning are taking place in the classroom. The rigour remains, but with an altered perspective. Student engagement in history is something which the Specialist Schools Trust is hoping to promote.

When the Humanities Colleges were established, they were set guidelines by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES): to work within the school itself, raising achievement, and also, crucially, to work with partner schools and with the wider community. So a Humanities College usually collaborates with four or five primary schools and identifies areas to work together on. For example, many primary school teachers have not had as much specialist history training as they might like and so will have the opportunities to do in-service training with colleagues in secondary schools. Humanities Colleges also work with partner secondary schools – at least one, usually two and sometimes three – sharing expertise in a range of ways, and they work with the wider community as well, perhaps with a local history club, or with some elderly people who are keen to learn about and share their own past, perhaps culminating in a publication of some sort.

So how does history fit into the Humanities College system? Each college has to choose a 'lead' subject (either English, history or geography), plus two others to focus on, which could include citizenship, drama, Latin and RE. There are currently 83 Humanities Colleges and more than 50 of them are using history as their lead subject. It appears that where history is one of the three lead subjects, schools are putting a great deal of effort into improving their history teaching.

I am going to give a few examples of what some Humanities Colleges are doing in history. The idea of a historian in residence is being explored, and some schools are thinking of very creative ways of working with their partner primary school and their historian in residence or with their wider community group. At Brimsham Green school in Bristol, money has been used to refurbish the library and make a reading room with comfortable chairs, putting a lot of money into reading books in order to promote what seems to be a dying art. Other schools have put a lot of money into new technology and into training staff to use new technology effectively for the study of history.

It is my job to provide support for and facilitate communication between the Humanities Colleges across the UK. The Specialist Schools Trust, in collaboration with partner organisations, runs annual competitions for schools. Working with the Imperial War Museum in 2005, we called the competition 'A day to remember'; in 2006 we took the title 'A place to remember' and in 2007 it will be 'A name to remember'. The Trust also works closely with librarians in humanities colleges because libraries are the lynchpin of humanities colleges and, in many cases, are under threat. The Trust also runs a national conference for Humanities Colleges, as well as local conferences, and is building up regional networks of heads of departments. Regular information about activities taking place across the country also appears on our website and in our newsletter.

In a sense, Humanities Colleges are unknown quantity. They have huge potential and are a seedbed for innovation, stretching across the continuum of history for young people; and it is the young people who are sure to benefit from their work.

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