

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT**

**Hazelwood College
Dromcollogher, County Limerick
Roll number: 71850B**

Date of inspection: 10 December 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL
NEEDS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Hazelwood College, Dromcollogher, County Limerick. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in the provision for special educational needs and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of students with special educational needs 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 and examined students' work. 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 teachers. The board of management of the school 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

Under the guidance of an effective and reflective senior management team, provision and whole-school support for students identified with special educational needs is of a high standard in Hazelwood College. Learner-centred, as well as learning-centred, practices and policies are well established in the school. Ongoing development and improvement, at whole-school and classroom level, are closely aligned with the promotion of inclusive practices which benefit all who attend the school. The positive findings in this report are considerable. The school is well placed to respond to the recommendations outlined, many of which are in keeping with those already highlighted by the school's own self-evaluation exercises.

The school's allocation of 155.4 additional teaching hours for provision for special educational needs is used appropriately and effectively. Among the needs identified are students with low-incidence and high-incidence disabilities as well as students requiring support with learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy. A continuum of support is provided in a flexible and student-focused manner and includes individual student withdrawal, small group withdrawal and team-teaching, where two teachers work together with students in one classroom. The school is mindful of the possibility of students with English as an additional language also presenting with a range of special educational needs, including being exceptionally able and gifted.

The school has considerable expertise with eight staff members, including the deputy principal, possessing recognised qualifications in the area of special education. Under the co-ordination of the deputy principal, these teachers work closely with one another and with their colleagues to deliver supports for learning in a variety of ways. Interventions to support students usually focus on specific language and mathematical needs, and a suitable balance is struck between providing for individual student's prioritised learning needs and access to the broader curriculum.

Classes are of mixed ability in first year with students having access to the full curriculum. Thereafter, flexible and appropriate timetabling arrangements are in place. Students with exemptions from Gaeilge are usually facilitated with additional supports while Gaeilge lessons are taking place. On the rare occasion where students are permanently withdrawn from subjects, other than Gaeilge, decisions are only made following consultation with students, their parents and their teachers. This system of withdrawal is usually decided upon at the beginning of second year and every effort is made to ensure that such decisions are made in the best interest of the student and that they don't diminish a student's self-perception of himself/herself as a learner or diminish future career choices.

The school has two special needs assistants who are appointed to meet the additional care needs of a small number of students. Their non-teaching duties are undertaken in a manner that supports students while also respecting and promoting students' independence. The school also enjoys good working relations with personnel from external agencies who support the school in the promotion of inclusive learning. The inclusive culture of the school is also reflected in the mentoring programme available to newly appointed staff members and to those on teaching practice from the adjacent third level colleges. A range of peer-related initiatives are also undertaken. These activities, combined with an impressive and varied range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities, promote a shared sense of belonging and a sense of being valued. The range of photographs and artistic displays on the corridors, as well as the general atmosphere throughout the school, also assist in this regard. There are good material resources available in the school including designated support rooms which house relevant and suitable materials, and which offer access to information and communication technology (ICT).

There is very good provision and support for students with special educational needs in Hazelwood College. There is a welcoming atmosphere and a collective understanding in relation to meeting the needs of individual students.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Early communication with primary schools and ongoing engagement with parents facilitates good collaborative planning and preparation. The significant number of teachers with recognised qualifications in special education, combined with the deputy principal undertaking the additional duties of co-ordinating provision, positively impacts upon the quality of planning and preparation at whole-school level. At classroom level, the work of individual teachers in planning and preparing their lessons to meet the needs of students on a collective and individual basis was seen to be of an equally high standard.

Very good lines of communication, both formal and informal, exist among the teaching staff. Led by senior management, the school adopts a whole-school approach to meeting the needs of students. The school's special needs policy is a comprehensive and well-written document that identifies, and honestly appraises practices that are undertaken, or aspired to be undertaken, by the school. Issues addressed include, 'roles and responsibilities', 'the management of information', 'timetabling of resources' and other associated aspects including parental involvement, collaboration among teachers in engaging with individual educational plans (IEPs) and the promotion of social inclusion within the school. Those involved in devising and implementing such a policy are deserving of much praise and many aspects of the policy merit inclusion in the school's newly constructed staff handbook. Over time other additions, to both the

policy and the handbook, could include specific pedagogical topics such as co-operative learning or the multiple roles and configurations of team-teaching.

Until recently, weekly meetings were timetabled which allowed members of the core team to coordinate provision and remain responsive to necessary changes throughout the academic year. The school indicated that it plans to reinstate such meetings in next year's timetable. With regard to timetabling, it is recommended that all available additional teaching hours be factored into the master timetable at the time of its construction. This will further assist the school in its efforts to provide cohesive, structured and ultimately more effective and rewarding supports for students. It will facilitate teachers to work more consistently with students, from week to week and from year to year. It will also support the school's goal of deploying staff in a purposeful and focused manner, with teachers' qualifications, skills, knowledge and interests aligning with students' identified strengths, interests and special educational needs. It may also serve to support parallel instruction time for students exercising exemptions from Gaeilge. With reference to timetabling, it is also recommended that the school give immediate attention to complying with Circular M29/95, and provide a minimum of twenty-eight hours of instruction per week.

The school recognises the key role of the mainstream teacher in determining the quality of learning and teaching experienced by all students in the school. The school's own recognition of the need to provide ongoing professional development for mainstream teachers may, in part, be met by continuing to contact external individuals and supports such as the Special Education Support Service website (www.sess.ie). However, in planning for improvement, it is suggested that the quality of professional learning and good practice that already exists among the teachers should continue to be accessed. It would be worthwhile to provide staff members with ongoing opportunities to share their own good practice with their colleagues. Reciprocal sharing of professional knowledge, both formally and informally, would have the added advantage of being context-sensitive and accessible on a regular basis.

As well as the mainstream teacher, each subject department facilitates inclusive learning by engaging in purposeful planning and preparation. The school has begun to use its ICT infrastructure in an exemplary manner to register and track resource allocations. The continued use of ICT to assist with existing, and commendable, lines of communication around IEPs is encouraged. Sharing subject-specific and generic resources among, and across, subject departments could also be facilitated by intranet-based file sharing.

The overall quality of planning and preparation is very good in Hazelwood College. As well as whole-school planning and preparation, collective planning by subject departments, and individual teacher planning and preparation, are uniformly effective and impacted very positively on the quality of teaching and learning observed.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Learning was at the heart of all twelve classes visited. These lessons involved a wide range of objectives and subjects, across both junior and senior cycle programmes. As well as supporting the development of literacy and numeracy skills, lessons focused on Art, English, Geography, Home Economics, Mathematics and Metalwork. In all cases a differentiated and student-centred approach was successfully fused with requirements as demanded by syllabuses and national certification.

The findings regarding the lessons observed are very positive. There are no recommendations to make in this report in relation to improving the quality of learning and teaching, other than to encourage teachers to examine ways in which they can share the good practice observed. Teachers' instructional practices were based on the premise that attention to identified learning needs enhances the quality of learning for all learners. Lessons were well-paced, with judicious use of humour and banter assisting in retaining students' attention and interest. Learning was also supported by the frequent use of a range of visual stimuli including ICT and graphic organisers.

Classes visited were formed on the basis of whole-class groups, team-teaching, small-group and individual withdrawal. Common features of the lessons observed included teachers' knowledge of, and passion for, their subject area and their students' learning. Many displayed a versatile pedagogical repertoire and all were eager to see their students succeed in a manner that promoted both teamwork and independent activity. Lessons were well planned and drew on a range of appropriate materials, including ICT, and other resources, some of which were teacher-generated. Students, for their part, were eager to participate and learn. They showed admirable confidence in themselves, pride in both their school and in their work, and trust in their teachers. They were always polite and frequently thanked teachers at the end of lesson or came to the assistance of one another in a variety of subtle but effective ways. In all lessons, an appropriate balance was maintained by teachers between the amount of time spent on priority needs and the time spent accessing the wider curriculum. Students were encouraged to be themselves, to express themselves and to ask questions.

In the larger classes of Art, English, Geography and Home Economics a range of purposeful and appropriate learning activities was observed. In these lessons, teachers composed and distributed their questions in a manner that differentiated for, and supported, the diversity of learning needs presenting. Where appropriate, lower-order and higher-order questions were asked both at individual and whole-class level. Higher-order questions demanded higher-order responses and teachers were alert to harvesting answers from a number of respondents by asking supplementary questions. Good classroom organisation skills saw students being taught at whole-class level as well as at small-group and individual levels. Peer-support was encouraged through co-operative learning activities and teachers availed of paired-work and group-work to assist individuals with their learning and to guide them with their homework. Good practice also saw student accountability being reinforced when co-operative learning activities were undertaken. In these larger classes teachers used ICT, the whiteboard and graphic organisers to highlight the purpose of the lesson, the context in which keywords were being used and to capture students' contributions. Displays of students' work were a feature of many of these lessons and all are encouraged to continue to provide authentic audiences, both within and outside the classroom. As witnessed, the opportunity to display work can support and motivate students to try their best, and in the process foster their sense of self and their sense of belonging.

The two team-teaching lessons observed were devoted to the teaching of Mathematics in junior cycle classes. As well as possessing many of the positive features as outlined above, these lessons were noticeable for the increased opportunity afforded to teachers to meet individual needs in the collective setting of the classroom. Learning objectives were more easily introduced and subsequently differentiated and assessed according to the range of abilities present. While not identical in their delivery, these teaching pairs drew on a range of appropriate and sophisticated team-teaching strategies, and shared the space of the classroom to make optimal use of their joint presence. Teachers took full advantage of checking for understanding throughout the course of these lessons, making alterations mid-lesson when necessary and encouraging students to share their efforts when appropriate. Clearly some students were comfortable asking questions of teachers openly, while the shyer learners availed of the opportunity to ask questions privately

when the teacher was in closer proximity. When asked of the advantages to student learning that might be associated with team-teaching, students were quick to state that such a delivery model supported their learning in a number of ways - "You get more attention from your teachers...more is covered...the lesson goes faster and you learn more". As for the disadvantages, some students perceived two teachers in the classroom as sometimes being "confusing", which when discussed further was seen as possibly being positively associated with the process of learning. Other more spurious 'disadvantages' expressed by students included the lack of opportunity 'to mess' and the differentiated way in which some students received 'more homework' than others. Further developments to build upon the initial success of team-teaching are planned by the school and encouraged by this report.

There was a good student-teacher rapport in all classrooms visited. This was particularly evident in the lessons that were based on small-group and individual withdrawal. Such lessons usually focused on improving literacy, numeracy and subject-specific skills. Student self-advocacy was effectively supported and encouraged by teachers which promoted students' motivation to learn and their persistence with learning. Some teachers, who were also the students' mainstream teacher, availed of the opportunity to pre-teach and post-teach certain key aspects of their course. Teachers were alert to the interplay between literacy and numeracy and often merged both skills in a seamless and effective manner. The use of imagery and of ICT was also put to good effect as was the display of students' work on the classroom wall. In these lessons, teachers availed of the smaller student-teacher ratio to listen attentively to students and to praise students' for their efforts.

Given the quality of the teaching and learning observed, the school is encouraged to examine how teachers can most effectively share instructional practices with one another. While team-teaching offers one window into how colleagues teach and students learn, the aforementioned staff handbook may also assist with sharing existing instructional practices that promote inclusive learning. It may be helpful, for example, to devote a section of the handbook to aspects of teaching and learning, where the range of teachers' pedagogical skills could be captured, shared and ultimately implemented and reviewed. The use of lesson study among members of the same subject department may also merit consideration.

The quality of learning and teaching observed over the course of this inspection in Hazelwood College is something that all concerned can be proud of, and is in no small way due to teachers' palpable desire to do what is best for all students enrolled.

ASSESSMENT

The school engages in a comprehensive range of assessment practices and recognises the interplay between assessment and teaching and learning. Daily classroom observation and interaction with students combine with more formal assessment practices to inform teaching and learning. As well as pre-certificate examinations, formal examinations take place at appropriate times throughout the school year. Class-based examinations are administered on a regular basis and results are appropriately monitored, stored and used to track student progress.

Additional interventions are informed by parents and by the observations of subject teachers. Students in first year, while closely monitored to determine needs, are also given opportunities to succeed independent of any intervention. Students' progress and achievement are communicated to home on a regular basis and parents are encouraged and facilitated to meet with teachers.

Standardised and diagnostic tests are used and interpreted appropriately. Some retesting is undertaken to determine progress in literacy and this should be extended to include numeracy skills. In order to further promote and sustain a collaborative and whole-school response, it is recommended that the findings from retesting, along with other student gains, should be appropriately shared with colleagues. Members of the special educational needs team have analysed these test results and have made presentations to colleagues. It is suggested that such good practice should be extended to facilitate sharing of assessment information, based on entire year groups or individual case studies, as well as sharing the diversity of teaching and learning practices that are informed by assessment outcomes. Those involved in team-teaching are also encouraged to share their story.

The views of students are clearly valued in the school and extending the use of questionnaires and other instruments to capture students' views, as witnessed in the Leaving Certificate Applied programme and the paired-reading programme, merits consideration. Feedback from, as well as to, students can assist in informing future decision-making and build upon the palpable sense of ownership and pride which students already have for their school. The OECD publication *Student Engagement At School* (2003) may assist further in this regard. Students' written work was found to be regularly corrected, usually signed or stamped, dated and with concluding comments to encourage students in their learning. Teachers obviously give time to composing their comments and students were seen to value same. As with the lessons visited, appropriate error tolerance was witnessed in these corrections, with students being praised where possible and guided where necessary.

In consultation with the local National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist, the school adopts a systematic approach to arranging Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE). Students are facilitated in becoming familiar with the relevant accommodations provided and are assisted in accessing these when they sit their pre-examinations. The participation and achievements of students with special educational needs in certificate examinations are rightfully a source of pride for all concerned. As well as acknowledging academic achievements, the school seeks always to promote students self-esteem and sense of belonging by recognising student engagement and other achievements.

Future policy development, in conjunction with the above mentioned aspects of assessment, would be well served by examining the interplay between assessment and instruction. Reference to differentiating homework and other assessment practices would sit well with the school's efforts to support all students with their learning and with the differentiated practices witnessed in the classrooms. Ongoing development of individualised plans for students and the use of the staff handbook to share teaching methodologies and strategies are also linked to the development of assessment practices. The benefits to student learning that accrue from peer and self-assessment practices also merit consideration in the development of any future policy document on assessment.

As with other aspects of this report, the quality of practices associated with assessment are very good and do much to inform teaching and support learning.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good provision and support for students with special educational needs in Hazelwood College.
- The quality of learning and teaching observed was of a high standard.
- Under the effective leadership of senior management, ongoing school development and improvement are aligned with the promotion of inclusive practices which benefit all who attend the school.
- A whole-school approach is adopted by the school and considerable expertise exists among the staff in meeting the needs of those students identified with special educational needs.
- Very good modes of collaboration and lines of communication exist among staff.
- The resources allocated by the Department for special educational needs are used for the purposes for which they were intended.
- Overall planning and preparation practices are effective at both whole-school and classroom level.
- The school engages in a comprehensive and effective range of assessment practices which are used to inform teaching and promote learning.

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

- Issues relating to compliance with Circular M29/95 require immediate attention.
- It is recommended that all known teaching hours be factored into the timetable at the time of its construction.
- Further development of in-class supports, such as team-teaching, merit consideration.

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

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The school is affirmed by the very positive nature of the report and its acknowledgement of the quality of the support given to special needs students in our school.

Area 2 Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

All requirements of Circular M29/95 will be effective in our school from September 2011. Advice from the Inspectorate in relation to teachers hours being factored into the timetable at the time of its construction has been taken on board by the special needs department and the timetable coordinator.

The school is continuing to build on its positive experience of team teaching and will provide more of the same in the year ahead.