

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT**

**Pobalscoil na Trionóide
Youghal, County Cork
Roll number: 91513S**

Date of inspection: 25 November 2011



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

Dates of inspection	24-25 November 2011
Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of relevant documents• Discussion with principal and teachers• Discussion with special needs assistants• Interaction with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of teaching and learning during eight class periods• Observation of extra and co-curricular activities• Examination of students' work• Feedback to principal and teachers

MAIN FINDINGS

- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was good, with some very good practice frequently witnessed. Teachers' knowledge of, and visible care for, students is a significant strength of the school as is the communication with home and relevant others.
- Pobalscoil na Trionóide strives to be inclusive in both its policies and practices, recognising the interdependence between the promotion of inclusive learning and overall school improvement.
- Senior management and the co-ordination team have a clear understanding of their role and their leadership supports the inclusive practices and self-review undertaken in the school.
- Policies and practices are student-centred with good lines of communication evident among staff. Continuing professional development is a central feature of the school's improvement agenda and some teachers have shown considerable leadership in this regard.
- While there are some areas that merit attention, in particular those relating to timetabling and the use of additional resources, planning, preparation and assessment are well co-ordinated.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- The key role of the mainstream teacher requires that ongoing attention is given to building capacity among mainstream teachers through formal and informal learning opportunities.
- Renewed attention to timetabling issues and the place of team-teaching in the provision for special educational needs is recommended.
- It is recommended that an overarching policy on inclusive learning be created so as to best address and respond to the wide range of needs and abilities presenting. This could inform, in turn, a review of other school policies.

INTRODUCTION

Pobalscoil na Trionóide is a large post-primary school with a current enrolment of 850 students. The school offers a broad curriculum and adopts an inclusive approach to meeting the diverse needs of all enrolled. 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.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- A total of eight lessons were observed over the course of the two-day inspection. Lessons focused on a range of learning outcomes including the development of literacy and numeracy skills, and curriculum-related learning goals associated with English, Mathematics, History, Chemistry, and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme
- Classes ranged in size from individual and small group withdrawal to whole-class teaching and team-teaching. In response to its own review and that of the whole-school evaluation (WSE) conducted in 2009, the school has made tentative and successful steps with regard to implementing team-teaching as a mode of delivering support for learning.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was good, with very good practice frequently evident. In all lessons, teachers and students enjoyed good working relations which supported learning through individual and, on occasions, collaborative practices. High, but realistic expectations for students' learning, and their application to their learning were evident throughout. Appropriate levels of praise and affirmation for effort were the norm in the classrooms visited and students displayed an admirable confidence in themselves.
- Teachers' knowledge of individual students and the course content were used effectively to create positive learning environments. Best practice was observed where teachers engaged and motivated students in their learning through a combination of effective questioning, structured activities which held students accountable for their learning, and focused feedback.
- Very effective practices relating to differentiation to support student learning was seen in some of the lessons taught to whole-class groups. In the classes formed by small group withdrawal, teachers took full advantage of the opportunity to provide individualised instruction, including wise use of information and communication technology (ICT). Similarly, team-teaching was effective in meeting individual needs and allowed students to learn together or individually as well as competitively or collaboratively.
- A noticeable feature of Pobalscoil na Trionóide is the varied and effective seating arrangements in classrooms. Individualised instruction was facilitated in some of the larger classes by these seating arrangements and by the use of co-operative learning activities among students. However, purposeful formal co-operative learning opportunities were the exception rather than the norm. Similarly, attention needs to be given to teacher questioning. The intentional framing and distribution by teachers of lower-order and higher-order questions merits consideration at whole-school, subject and individual teacher level. In such deliberations the degree to which students self-evaluate and are held accountable for their learning, both individually and collectively, should be kept to the fore.

- It is recommended that teachers, possibly through their subject departments, continue to focus on how they can best support learning by the quality of the questions they frame, the activities they facilitate in class and the feedback they provide during and after the activity.
- As seen in some lessons, the good use of graphic organisers and of peer support merits discussion at whole-staff level as does examination of how students' work can be shared with peers. This can happen through peer-evaluation exercises or displays of students' work in classrooms or on the schools ICT facilities. Public sharing of students' work can add to student motivation and resilience as well as promoting a sense of belonging and a sense of place.
- Teachers recognise the interplay between academic progress and social-emotional development among their students. The increasingly wide range of abilities presenting, including those described as exceptionally able, is welcomed by the school and the school is well placed to provide an equally wide repertoire of teacher-led responses.
- Students in team-taught lessons spoke positively of the experience and ongoing work in this area is recommended in this report. In these, and many other lessons, students were comfortable asking questions of teachers or seeking clarifications which were used wisely by teachers to gauge learning. The confidence shown by students in this regard reflects well upon the positive and purposeful learning environments created by their teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Pobalscoil na Trionóide is responsive, flexible and thoughtful in its engagement with learners and their learning. The school strives to be inclusive in both its policies and practices, recognising the interdependence between the promotion of inclusive learning and overall school improvement.
- Provision for special educational needs is significant and the dedication and commitment of both co-ordinator and assistant co-ordinator is a noticeable strength of the school. This close-working team hold qualifications in, and have a passion for, special education. They are supported by senior management in their task and by a team of special needs assistants whose good work is also duly noted in this report.
- A total of 209 additional teaching hours, which equates to 9.5 whole-teacher equivalents, are allocated to the school. Such an allocation, as recognised by the WSE recommendations in 2009, brings with it time-tabling challenges. There are currently forty teachers involved in delivering these additional resources and upon examination of some students' timetables it was found that the support was fragmented across such a wide range of teachers as to take from the quality of the provision and of the learning.
- It is recommended that the school timetable all known provision in tandem with the mainstream timetable, otherwise it will be very difficult to create a cohesive use of the allocated resources. Extension of the use of team-teaching will also assist in this regard, it will reduce the need for students to be withdrawn from class and facilitate teacher collaboration and communication.
- It was found that a significant number of resources are not being availed of by students who do not wish to be withdrawn from class. The advantages of team-teaching arrangements regarding such resources were discussed at the time of the inspection and

deployment in this manner will assist in maximising the allocation provided. Similar use of resources at the initial phase of the first-year programme also merits consideration.

- The key role of the mainstream teacher requires ongoing attention being given to building capacity among teachers through formal and informal professional learning opportunities. This point is all the more prevalent given the increase in the diversity of students' needs and abilities. Continuing professional development (CPD) is central to responding to needs and to promoting school improvement. Due regard should be given to such provision emerging from within as well as from outside of the school staff. Student access to the full curriculum is facilitated by the school's flexible approach, though there is a need to ensure that exemptions from Irish are decoupled from an automatic non-engagement with modern languages.
- Students' engagement, achievements and attainments are communicated home on a regular basis. Extra and co-curricular activities, including leadership activities between sixth-year and first-year students, allow fellow students to support inclusive actions. In light of this purposeful interaction, more formal peer support, such as paired-reading and other similar activities, merit consideration.
- Reasonable accommodation for certificate examinations (RACE) resulted in thirty-four special centres last year and the school, despite such large numbers, has strategies in place to provide practice in such accommodations in advance. New cognitive ability tests have been put in place reflecting the school's ongoing attention to improvement and to its understanding of the interdependence between assessment and learning.
- The school's focus on literacy and numeracy development will be informed by these and other standardised tests and by the expertise among staff qualified in the area of special education.
- As discussed with teachers and senior management, there are some areas of assessment that require attention. More nuanced and intermediate assessment practices such as work samples, classroom observation schedules and case studies should be considered as should the manner in which such findings may be disseminated to colleagues so as to inform teaching and improve learning. As the initial cohort of students prepares to complete their final year in the school, it offers opportunities to demonstrate success through case studies across the continuum of their time in school. An exit poll of these students, based on the school's own values and beliefs, may yield useful insights that can inform the school's own self-review.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Contact is made with the relevant primary schools and this work combined with good relationships with personnel from external agencies adds to the quality of planning and preparation. Of note is the school's development of a subcommittee of the parents' association which adds to the quality of planning and preparation undertaken by the school.
- Individual files are constructed and teaching staff and special needs assistants are made aware, in a timely manner, of the needs and strengths of students newly enrolled in the school. Good lines of communication are sustained by the resources made available in the staffroom.

- Ongoing engagement with individualised planning for students with low-incidence needs will add further to the quality of this work as will the adaptation of existing practices to create a student register. This register can facilitate the implementation and impact of all additional hours allocated to individuals or in the form of learning support provision. Where it merits attention, student attendance can also be tracked on the register. Sharing of information through the ongoing development of shared files and other ICT platforms will assist with this and other related work. The role that the special needs assistant can play in informing and supporting individualised planning should be kept to the fore and more opportunities for the team of special needs assistants to meet would further assist such an initiative.
- Future planning should give consideration to forming an overarching policy on inclusive learning so as to best address and respond to the diversity of needs and abilities of students. Such a policy could emerge, in part, from collating existing policies and once formed can be used to stress test other policies and practices in relation to the school's understanding of inclusion, including the existing practices associated with mentoring and inducting teachers new or returning to the school. The formation of such a policy will also serve school review well as it will highlight areas that may not have attracted as much attention as others to date.
- The well-constructed staff handbook is another means of communication for established and new staff, which could usefully identify some key aspects of teaching and learning as outlined above. It could also assist in further highlighting and clarifying the role of the mainstream teacher and that of the special needs assistants in the promotion of inclusive learning in Pobalscoil na Tríonóide.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management welcomes the publication of Report on the Quality of Learning and Teaching in Special Education.

Specifically we welcome the main findings;

- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was good, with some very good practice frequently witnessed. Teachers' knowledge of, and visible care for, students is a significant strength of the school as is the communication with home and relevant others.
- Pobalscoil na Tríonoide strives to be inclusive in both its policies and practices, recognising the interdependence between the promotion of inclusive learning and overall school improvement.
- Senior management and the co-ordination team have a clear understanding of their role and their leadership supports the inclusive practices and self review undertaken in the school.
- Policies and practices are student centred with good lines of communication evident among staff. Continuing professional development is a central feature of the school's improvement agenda and some teachers have shown considerable leadership in this regard.
- While there are some areas that merit attention, in particular those relating to timetabling and the use of additional resources, planning, preparation and assessment are well co-ordinated.

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

The school endeavours to further build capacity among mainstream teachers through formal and informal opportunities.

Team teaching will continue to be promoted in the school, as part of timetabled provision.

The school will consider an overarching policy on inclusive learning in responding to the wide range of needs and abilities presenting.

The Board of Management thanks and compliments the DES Inspectorate for their positive and affirming Inspection Report.