

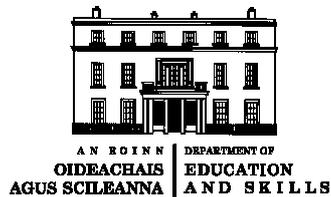
**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs  
REPORT**

**Nenagh Vocational School,  
Co. Tipperary  
Roll number: 72440K**

**Date of inspection: 10 May 2010**



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

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## **SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Nenagh Vocational School, Co. Tipperary. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching in provision for special educational needs (SEN) 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, 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. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

## **SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Nenagh Vocational School has a keen understanding of the interconnection between the quality of provision for special educational needs and overall school improvement. The school is allocated a range of additional teaching hours which reflect the diverse needs presenting. These hours are used for the purposes for which they are intended. The provision includes an allocation of 26.4 teaching hours for students with low achievement in literacy and numeracy, with an additional 85.8 teaching hours accessed for those students identified with low-incidence and high-incidence special educational needs. Additional hours are also made available to meet the needs of students from the Traveller community who receive a further 12 teaching hours and students with English as an additional language (EAL) are allocated an additional 14 teaching hours. The school is mindful of the potential for these students to also present with special educational needs including being exceptionally able and gifted. As well as additional teaching hours, the school also has three special needs assistants who are appointed to the school to assist with the care needs of a small number of students.

Classes are formed on the basis of mixed-ability grouping in first year and this affords every opportunity for individual students to engage with their peers across a range of subjects and avoids premature foreclosure on students' subject choices or subject levels. This good practice is extended into second and third year with concurrent timetabling in place for English, Mathematics and Science. Consequently, opportunities for students with particular skill sets are accommodated and encouraged. All students study a modern language and those with exemptions from Gaelige are timetabled to receive additional support at that time. In the senior cycle, provision to support students' learning is also made through the formation of smaller class sizes.

Until recently the coordination of provision for students with special educational needs was undertaken by an assistant principal with recognised qualifications in special education. This report wishes to acknowledge the long service, dedication and good work undertaken by this co-ordinator. It reflects well upon the school's priorities that the newly appointed co-ordinator also holds an assistant-principal post of responsibility. This appointment will further assist with the promotion of inclusive practice and in particular with the school's understanding of the key role of the mainstream subject teacher. The school has many teachers, including the deputy principal, who possess recognised qualifications in special education and this, in combination with the leadership shown by the principal, contributes significantly to the overall inclusive atmosphere in the school. Ongoing opportunities for individual teachers, and staff collectively, to access professional learning opportunities, should continue to be explored through engagement with the Special Education Support Service ([www.sess.ie](http://www.sess.ie)).

Interventions to support identified students usually focus on specific language and mathematical needs. A suitable balance is maintained between learning interventions targeted at the needs of individual students and access to the broader curriculum. Of note is the school's effective use of team-teaching as the dominant mode of delivering additional supports to identified students and others. Such practice is very much in keeping with Department of Education and Skills' guidelines and gives testimony to the school's recognition of learning and personal development as a social activity that is dependent upon a range of interdependent factors.

Teachers are purposely not over identified with any particular student group and teachers' individual skills and talents are used to good effect in working with particular students. Good timetabling practices are used to ensure that consistency of interaction takes place between students across the school week and throughout the school year. Ongoing efforts to facilitate team-teaching in a similar consistent manner are recognised by the school as equally important and will be most successful when arrangements are made at the time of the construction of the master timetable.

The promotion and maintenance of good lines of communication among all staff was regularly alluded to during the course of the inspection and there was much to indicate that this was the norm in the school. In promoting communication and co-ordination, the allocation of a regular meeting time for the core team, including special needs assistants or a representative of, is recommended.

The school's effort to nurture and sustain a sense of belonging among students and adults alike is reflected in the mentoring programmes and praiseworthy handbooks that are available for new students and new members of staff. The school may wish to consider the use of peer-support structures such as paired-reading and paired-maths to further support existing programmes among the student population. Extracurricular and co-curricular activities are open to all students and the pride associated with student successes is captured by the photographic displays throughout the school. The school is in line to undergo considerable refurbishment including the purchase of furniture, fittings and information communication and technology (ICT) hardware. Such developments will afford opportunities to enhance the quality of learning in the school, and the use of ICT to allow students produce and display their own work merits consideration. The upgrading of the school website is another forum that may offer similar opportunities where the promotion of learning and of a sense of belonging can occur in tandem. The acquisition of furniture, that easily facilitates co-operative learning through pair-work and group-work, should also be considered as should the display of more work by students in certain classrooms.

Provision and whole-school support for students with special educational needs is of a high standard, and is organised in a manner that is systematic and yet flexible and responsive to individual needs.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The presence of four qualified teachers to collaborate with one another and with colleagues demonstrates the school's recognition of the importance of planning and preparation to support learning and teaching. The allocation of assistant principal duties to co-ordinate provision is also indicative of the school's priorities. The school has a *Learning Support and Resource Policy* which is regularly reviewed and was adopted by the board of management in 2008. This document, while mainly procedural in nature, also gives recognition to the interconnection between the promotion of inclusive practices and school improvement.

Informed by the Department's publication *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines* (2007), the school's policy document may benefit from highlighting the following; the criteria for accessing support, the central role of the subject teacher in the promotion of effective teaching and learning opportunities, the various modes of delivery associated with such support, and an inventory of successful strategies and methodologies deployed by teachers. In light of the school's commendable use of team-teaching as a mode of delivery, it may be useful to examine and capture the different types of team-teaching arrangements that the teachers deploy in working with one another in the classroom. As discussed with the principal, the completed policy document may in turn be a stand alone special educational needs policy or emerge as a central feature of an overarching inclusion policy.

The varied care duties performed by the special needs assistants are recognised and valued by the school community. In this regard, it is recommended that both special needs assistants and teachers draw up guidelines to document existing good practice and clarify roles, responsibilities and procedures relating to the work of the special needs assistants, both within and outside the classroom. The school is encouraged to regularly review all its policies in relation to its inclusive nature. The school's admission policy requires additional commentary regarding admission and participation of students identified with special educational needs. Such clarification will afford the school an opportunity to capture and document the inclusive practices as witnessed over the course of the two-day inspection.

It is recommended that the school consider how the expansion of the existing staff handbook could also support the communication, implementation and review of policies by devoting a section of the handbook to a range of associated context-sensitive concepts. Clear statements on agreed school-based interpretations of terms such as 'inclusion', 'differentiation', 'assessment', 'whole-school approach', 'literacy' and 'numeracy' may be of benefit. Detailed reference in the handbook to the successful teaching and learning practices engaged in by teachers may also prove useful, as would reference to the various configurations associated with team-teaching.

In planning and preparing for the arrival of new students, the school engages with a large number of feeder schools in advance of student enrolment and works well with parents and relevant personnel from external agencies. Ongoing engagement with relevant personnel from National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and support services is encouraged in supporting a whole-school approach to meeting the needs of all enrolled in Nenagh Vocational School. In order to support the mainstream teachers in their classrooms, it is suggested that sharing of existing good practice be undertaken at subject-department and whole-school level. The special

educational needs support team members can play a key role in determining suitable resources and teaching methodologies through discussions with individual colleagues and subject departments. Additional online-professional learning is also accessible via the aforementioned SESS website.

The school is encouraged to examine how collective responses, in the form of educational plans for individual students, can be framed to meet individual needs as mediated through the curriculum and syllabi being pursued. Such plans could dovetail with a student register, detailing individual student's needs, additional hours allocated, the teachers and non-teaching staff involved, the models of delivery and the programme of work being undertaken. With some additional information, this register will serve to inform and guide all staff in their engagements with individual students. Additional information could include an outline of students' learning styles and strengths, the progress made and when further progress will be reviewed, and by whom. Furthermore, such a register would assist in tracking the cumulative effect of certain delivery models, in particular the admirable use of team-teaching, upon the overall additional hours allocated and their impact upon achieving optimal outcomes for students.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of learning and teaching observed during the inspection was of a good standard. Eight lessons were witnessed over the course of the two-day inspection and involved ten teachers. These lessons ranged in size from individual and small group withdrawal to whole-class teaching groups and spanned both junior and senior cycle programmes. The lessons focused on a range of learning outcomes including the development of literacy and numeracy skills, specific individual learning needs as well as attending to certain subject disciplines and activities including, Mathematics, Science, Home Economics, and English as an additional language.

All lessons were well planned with material resources used effectively. This ensured that lessons were appropriately paced. Classrooms facilitated teacher movement and all teachers were comfortable in walking the room and assisting students as needs be. In the larger class groupings there was, overall, an equal divide between the number of students who sat on their own and those who sat next to another student. Apart from the specialist classrooms, there was generally little evidence of students' own work on display in the classrooms. The school may wish to address this and examine the benefits of students displaying their work publicly and the influence an external audience has on the quality of the work produced.

Teachers and students were seen to engage respectfully with one another both in the classroom and in the school environs in general. A high level of teacher-student dialogue was witnessed and students were sometimes encouraged to voice their opinions and express their preferred means of learning. To a lesser extent student-to-student dialogue was promoted. Where students were given an opportunity to engage directly with one another, as witnessed in the home-economics' lesson, this proved very effective in reinforcing and advancing students' learning. It also allowed the teachers in the room to work more closely with individual students and with the small groups formed. In general, the use of co-operative learning strategies were rarely formally availed of by teachers in the lessons observed, but it was interesting to note, particularly in the team-taught lessons, how students often engaged informally to support each others learning. This may well have been as a result of the good modelling of co-operative practices generated by the dynamic of two teachers teaching in the classroom.

The school is to be commended for advancing team-teaching to the extent that they have, and all involved are deserving of much praise and are now encouraged to determine for themselves the

affordances which this mode of support offers to the promotion of learning in their classrooms. At this point it may prove useful for teachers to be given opportunities to share good practice and identify how best to maximise the learning opportunities afforded to students by the presence of the other teacher in the classroom. An examination of the many different types of team-teaching formats and the challenges as well possibilities they hold, may prove useful. Attention should also be given to the impact of timetabling arrangements for team-teaching, which on the occasions when it is fragmented, would appear to considerably limit its impact upon students' learning and teacher engagement. When asked in class how they felt about team-teaching, students indicated that they appreciated the positive learning atmosphere created by two teachers working together and they highlighted that it was 'handier' and 'easier' to get help if needs be. In the course of the evaluation, the provision of such help was often observed as judiciously given by teachers in a manner that encouraged independence rather than reinforcing dependence. In light of such brief student commentary, the proposed review of team-teaching may also wish to take the opportunity to elicit students' views on this mode of support for learning.

In general, in the lessons observed, when asked directly by their teachers, students were able to answer questions quite comfortably and confidently. On the odd occasion that difficulties were encountered, the teacher sensitively encouraged other students to assist. Best practice saw teachers employing lower-order and higher-order questioning which were appropriately framed and distributed. Wherever possible teachers drew upon students' prior knowledge and promoted individual and whole-group learning. Good rapport and relations between teachers and students helped to promote a safe learning environment where all in the classroom, including special-needs assistants, were treated respectfully. Praise and humour were used shrewdly to motivate students and to keep them engaged. Such engagement was also sustained by good teacher-student rapport which allowed students to frequently ask teachers questions and this was a common feature of most lessons, and in particular, among the older cohort of students. Some teachers, when posing questions, made good use of 'hands up' to ensure that all students had an opportunity to contribute to the lesson and in a similar manner good use was often made of 'wait time' when questions were directed at a particular student or group of students.

In the lessons that involved individual and small group withdrawal the focus, in one case, was on the development of English language skills and in another was on a student's personal development. In both cases, the teachers were alert to creating a safe learning environment and students responded very well to the teachers' visible concern for their learning and well-being. The EAL lesson did much to advance the student's vocabulary, gave plenty of opportunities for the student to practice their language skills and to clarify particular queries relating to, not only the topic under discussion, but also aspects of school life in general. Aspects of school life, and how best to behave in school, formed the focus of the other lesson inspected. Under the guidance of the NEPS psychologist, a programme of intervention was being followed very successfully as witnessed by the student's visible appreciation for the extra effort his school and, in particular, his teacher were making to improve the quality of his experiences and of his learning in school. As discussed with school personnel, the integration of literacy and numeracy skills with those associated with personal development merit ongoing consideration, and the use of the school website may be particularly useful for these students to advance their learning while simultaneously nurturing their own self-esteem and sense of belonging.

In the lessons devoted to Mathematics and Science, a range of learning needs and teaching responses was witnessed across both junior and senior cycle classes. The science lesson focused on key concepts and drew upon the students' own interests and life experiences to advance the learning goals of the lesson. Similar practices were undertaken in the mathematics lessons. The interdependency of literacy and numeracy skills was not lost on teachers. To simultaneously

support the development of both skills, teachers may wish to make further use of the good practice of placing keywords on the board at the beginning of the lesson or pre-teach such words in advance of the lesson. The mathematics lessons were well structured and usually adopted a teacher-led sequence of initiation, response and evaluation. The evaluation phase included the good practice of briefly engaging with students before opening responses up to the whole class. Asking students to compose both questions and answers, relating to the topic being learned, also offers opportunities to assess learning and promote cooperation and peer-support. Formative assessment practices as outlined by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) may also be of benefit in promoting such learning.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The school engages in a comprehensive range of assessment procedures. Students' progress and achievement are communicated to home on a regular basis. Parents are facilitated, on request, to meet with teachers. Appropriate standardised and diagnostic tests are used to determine learning and inform teaching. Information drawn from assessments is appropriately used when students are transferring into the school and in turn, when students have completed their post-primary education and are preparing to transfer out of the school. Students' progress is also assessed on a daily basis by subject teachers and by class-based examinations. Formal examinations take place at Christmas and summer with common assessments being used effectively to determine individual student' ability, particularly in those subjects concurrently timetabled. Students' work is monitored, stored and used sensitively to assess and determine progress.

In order to further promote a collaborative and whole-school response to aspects of assessment such as literacy and numeracy, the school is encouraged to appropriately share findings from retesting, along with other student gains, with colleagues. Such findings could also usefully feed into the aforementioned student register. In more recent times, members of the special educational needs team have presented to colleagues and 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. This information can in turn support subject-department planning where all teachers can identify, for example, the literacy and numeracy demands and developments associated with their own syllabi and programmes. The school's activities associated with development planning and self-evaluation can also be informed by such data.

Participation and achievement in state examinations are rightfully a source of pride for all concerned. In consultation with the local 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 accommodation provided. This year, seven special centres were arranged for the purposes of RACE. It is noticeable that while academic expectations are high, they are transmitted in a way that is supportive and attends to individual student's learning needs. Similarly, students' engagement and participation is valued and is given expression in the points system and the many awards that are presented and celebrated by the school.

The school's well constructed student handbook draws attention to homework and study skills for students new to the school and similar guidance is to be found in the school journal. A homework club is also offered to facilitate students. In the students' copies viewed, written work was found to be regularly corrected, on occasions signed with concluding comments to encourage students in their learning. Teachers always sought to organise homework so that it was in keeping with the lesson and to ensure students would succeed in completing the assigned work. Self-correction and

peer-correction were not frequently promoted in the classes inspected and any future development of a homework and/or assessment policy should give due regard to such practice. Team-teaching arrangements visibly provided many opportunities for individual feedback and formative guidance to students.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The quality of learning and teaching observed during the inspection was of a good standard.
- Nenagh Vocational School has a keen understanding of the interconnection between the quality of provision for special educational needs and overall school improvement.
- Provision and whole-school support for students with special educational needs is of a high standard, and is organised in a manner that is systematic and yet flexible and responsive to individual needs.
- The additional hours allocated to the school are used for the purposes intended.
- The school has an appointed co-ordinator for special educational needs and this co-ordinator holds an assistant-principal post of responsibility.
- Many staff members hold formal qualifications in special education and this, in combination with the leadership shown by senior management, contributes significantly to the overall inclusive atmosphere in the school.
- The school correctly uses a range of delivery modes to support learning and has made considerable progress with team-teaching arrangements.
- The school has a *Learning Support and Resource Policy* which is regularly reviewed and was adopted by the board of management in 2008.
- The school engages in a comprehensive range of assessment procedures.

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

- It is recommended that the school's special educational needs policy be reviewed and consideration should be given to relevant aspects being made available in the staff handbook.
- In further promoting communication and co-ordination, the allocation of a regular meeting time for the core team, including special-needs assistants or a representative of, is recommended.
- The school's admission policy requires additional commentary in relation to the admission and participation of students with special educational needs.
- In order to further promote and sustain a collaborative and whole-school response, it is recommended that the findings from retesting, along with other data should be appropriately shared with colleagues.
- The introduction of a student register and individualised planning for students is recommended.
- A review of the commendable use of team-teaching and the possibilities associated with the promotion of co-operative learning is recommended.

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

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