Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed
Thurles, County Tipperary
Roll number: 72490C

Date of inspection: 29 September 2010
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 Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed, Thurles. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching in 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, 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, deputy principal and members of the school’s special educational needs support team. 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

Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed takes full advantage of its relatively small size and diverse student population to advance inclusive practices that attend to the academic, social and personal development of all enrolled in the school. Provision and whole-school support benefit from the school’s ongoing engagement with practices that promote self-evaluation. The overall findings in this report are of a positive nature and the areas highlighted for attention, while important, are well within the remit of the school.

The school’s total allocation of 78 hours for provision for special educational needs is used for the purposes intended. A full range of diverse needs are identified in the school, including students with low-incidence and high-incidence disabilities, as well as students with low achievement in literacy and numeracy. A significant number of teachers possess recognised postgraduate qualifications in the area of special education with some having secured multiple qualifications. These teachers work closely with one another, senior management and other colleagues to deliver additional support for learning in a variety of effective ways. One of these teachers, as part of a special duties post, co-ordinates the provision of additional supports for students identified with special educational needs. The school is alert to a range of needs, including those associated with being exceptionally able and gifted, and is also mindful of potential needs that may emerge among certain smaller cohorts including those students attending the Gaelcholáiste and students for whom English is an additional language. There are four fulltime special needs assistants appointed to the school and their work, including their responsive engagement in their own ongoing training and development, is duly acknowledged in this report.
Classes in Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed are formed on the basis of mixed ability in first year, with concurrent timetabling in English and Mathematics in second and third year. Students have access to the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). A full range of programmes is also available to students in senior cycle and supports are provided in response to individual needs. Interventions to support students usually focus on specific language and mathematical needs. A suitable balance is struck between learning interventions, targeted at the needs of individual students, and activities that facilitate students in accessing the broader curriculum. This support is provided in a flexible and student-focused manner. The formation of smaller concurrent groups is the dominant model of additional support with some individual support being provided where deemed necessary. The decision to withdraw students from subjects on a permanent basis is only made following consultation with students and their parents. Every effort is made to ensure that such decisions are made in the best interest of the student and that these decisions do not take from the quality of their learning, diminish their perception of themselves as learners, or limit their future career choices. The school is encouraged to continue to examine and review what is best for these students, on an individual basis. The school timetables additional supports for those students who are not studying Gaeilge or French. It was noted in fourth year that many students entitled to an exemption from Gaeilge enjoyed the opportunity to engage with the language.

The additional teaching hours provided are factored into the timetables of the core team of teachers in such a manner as to seek to ensure consistency of interaction across the school week and from year to year. That said, the school is conscious of other modes of delivering additional supports and it is recommended that the school give consideration to the benefits that may accrue from engaging in team-teaching arrangements. The school has done much of late to promote the tracking of all aspects of students’ engagement with the school and, to support such good work, it is recommended that the school devise a register of students in receipt of additional support. Such a register will assist in ensuring optimal use of and benefit from the resources provided, including the tracking of how and when they are allocated to students, and the impact such support has upon the quality of students’ learning. Furthermore, such a register would assist in calculating the cumulative effect of certain delivery models, such as team-teaching, upon the totality of the allocation.

The overall atmosphere in the college is very much conducive to learning with both teachers and students rightfully taking pride in their school. The orderly use of the building during the school day, in conjunction with students enrolled in Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, adds to the mature nature in which the younger students conducted themselves. No doubt, the smartly worn school blazers that form part of the school uniform help to identify students and in turn give students a sense of identity in their school building and beyond. The building’s array of photographic and other records of students’ and teachers’ past and present endeavours also inculcates a sense of place. A notable feature was the use of an information and communication technology (ICT) slideshow in the main area. The presence of ICT facilities was not so visible in the classrooms visited and investment in such in mainstream classrooms is warranted. This action will further support the existing timetabled classes which take place in the designated ICT rooms. Such investment would open up a vista of opportunities for student learning and could also be a catalyst for promoting digital literacy and motivate students to contribute to the displays of student work that were seen in some of the classrooms. The promotion of literacy and numeracy skills through authentic audiences could be further extended through internal ICT facilities such as the slideshow at the school entrance and the use of ICT platforms such as ‘moodle’.
The overall quality of provision and whole school support for students identified with special educational needs is good and this is due in part to the quality of planning and preparation that is undertaken.

**Planning and Preparation**

The strengths of planning and preparation in Coláiste Mhuire Co-Ed are apparent in the recognition by subject departments of their key role in promoting inclusive learning in their subject areas and by the interdependent and impressive range of continuing professional learning opportunities accessed by staff. Senior management’s style of leadership supports effective planning and preparation that influences daily the quality of the learning experience in the classrooms of the school. Good planning and preparation are also facilitated by the administration of standardised tests and by early and ongoing engagement with primary schools, parents and relevant external agencies. Access to key school personnel is readily available and the school’s engagement with Department of Education and Skills initiatives, such as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) facilitates a meeting time for some key personnel. In recognition of the broad interpretation of special educational needs and the wide range of needs presenting, this meeting time should include key personnel who can contribute to the overall planning and preparation process.

The school has a well documented policy in relation to special educational needs. It also has a useful literacy and numeracy plan associated with JCSP targets including an intergenerational programme. Such good practice is further supported by the use of the school handbook which has outlined a draft literacy policy and addressed aspects of school self-evaluation. The latter point being very evident in the school’s own document entitled *Areas of Concern/Recommendations 5th November 2007*. In many respects this document highlights some of the recommendations made in this report such as the use of team-teaching. It also serves to highlight the progress made in the intervening years with regard to more efficient timetabling practices.

To further support the planning and preparation norms in existence in the school, and to share the good teaching witnessed, it is suggested that teachers seek to share among themselves their effective practices in relation to teaching and learning. The aforementioned handbook may offer opportunities to disseminate among colleagues some of the good pedagogical practices witnessed during the course of the inspection. It may also be a useful location to clarify what is meant by a range of concepts associated with the promotion of inclusive practices including, ‘differentiation’, ‘whole-school approach’, ‘inclusion’, ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’. The interaction between literacy and numeracy, with the promotion of critical thinking and social skills, are not lost upon the teaching staff that recognise, for example, the social skills of listening, turn-taking and empathy as integral components of critical thinking. Further planned developments in promoting social skills among certain identified students will best succeed when these skills are incorporated into all lessons. The same integrated approach can also apply to the promotion of literacy and numeracy skills among all students, irrespective of identified educational needs.

More recent developments in promoting inclusive practices indicate that the school may well benefit from adopting an overarching inclusion policy. Such an approach can make reference to existing and desired practices as subsets of the overarching policy. These subsets could then be more easily aligned with one another and could include, among others, the school’s engagement with DEIS planning, student attendance and participation, teaching and learning practices, as well as the above referenced policies and concepts. Devising an overarching inclusive policy will
assist in capturing the good practices being undertaken in a manner that focuses on overall school improvement while also keeping a watchful eye on the quality of the learning experience for individual students.

Fruitful discussion took place during the course of the evaluation in relation to planning for individual student’s learning. While the school has not formally engaged in the creation of individual educational plans (IEP) some very good work has been undertaken by individual teachers in observing, monitoring and tracking individual student’s academic, social and personal progress. The school is strongly encouraged to devise collective educational plans, particularly for those students with low-incidence needs. This can be achieved by reviewing and collating existing good practices. Such collective action would significantly advance the creation of a collective response to the individual needs presenting via a ‘one student one plan’ approach.

While there are areas for development in relation to planning and preparation at a whole school level, it was noted during the course of the inspection, that the quality of individual teacher planning was of a high standard and this contributed to the quality of teaching and learning witnessed in the classrooms visited.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A total of thirteen lessons, involving eight teachers, were observed over the course of the two-day inspection. Lessons concentrated on a range of appropriate learning outcomes including the development of literacy and numeracy skills, as well as outcomes associated with specific subjects, such as English, History, Business Studies, Science, Mathematics, Gaeilge, and French.

The overall quality of learning and teaching in the lessons observed was very good. Teacher-student rapport was used to good effect to promote a purposefully positive learning environment in each of the lessons observed. All present in the classroom were respectful towards one another and the majority of students were eager to learn and participate in their own learning. Students were encouraged to support one another in a variety of ways and were, on occasions, gently reminded of the needs of others. Such practice recognised and supported students in their role as agents of inclusion.

A range of teaching styles was witnessed, within and across lessons, including whole-class teaching and more complex differentiated practices. In all cases, teachers were clearly prepared for their lessons. In the mainstream classes, teachers worked from a subject-based plan while keeping to the fore the variety of learning strengths, styles and needs of the students. In the lessons devoted to providing additional assistance with certain subject-based content, teachers followed good practice and regularly communicated with the relevant mainstream teacher to ensure optimal use of the lesson.

Teachers showed an awareness of each of their student’s strengths and learning needs, including students who had only been in the school for a number of weeks. Teacher questioning, and the use of wait time to give students an opportunity to compose individual responses, was frequently witnessed. Teachers usually framed questions in the form of higher-order and lower-order questions. These questions were asked openly to the whole class or individual students were identified to respond. Where teacher questioning was asked openly the practice of ‘hands up’ was adhered to and so provided time for the students to further compose their responses. This also allowed the teacher the opportunity to gauge how best to ensure a distribution of responses and cater for those who, for whatever reason, may not have put up their hand. As discussed with some
teachers, the use of ‘no hand up’ until the teacher is ready to ask a student or the use of paired and grouped responses could raise the level of student accountability in the lesson and assist in promoting and assessing the quality of learning being experienced by all students. The positive atmosphere that prevailed in all lessons also facilitated students in asking questions of their teachers and their teachers welcomed and encouraged such questioning.

Students asking questions and seeking answers from each other was usually instigated by teachers through the use of structured pair-work and group-work. Such co-operative practices were witnessed, to varying degrees, in nearly fifty percent of the lessons observed. In all cases, such practice was undertaken in a manner which indicated that the teachers had a natural but sophisticated understanding of how to maximise the learning opportunities of this strategy. The use of co-operative practices were closely aligned with differentiated teaching and learning where students of different abilities, frequently studying different subject levels, were skilfully facilitated by their teachers. Good preparation and good use of the time allocated, combined with subtle classroom management, were significant factors in ensuring that the purposes of the differentiated activities suited the learning styles and abilities of the students.

Apart from those aspects mentioned above, some of the more notable aspects of teaching and learning that emerged during the course of the inspection included; teachers’ desire to ensure that the students succeeded while at the same time not creating an atmosphere of over-dependence; the use of keywords and the teaching of strategies to support student comprehension; the practice of posing problems to initiate or sustain student engagement in the topic; the promotion of learning through healthy competition among teams of students and the provision of a range of effective strategies for students who had difficulties associated with literacy and numeracy.

In undertaking future activities associated with self-evaluating the quality of teaching and learning, the school may wish to itemise the effective teaching strategies in use in the school. This report will assist with this exercise but time should be given to surveying staff and students in relation to what teaching strategies are effective and when they are effective. Sharing of such practices, discussing and witnessing same would be worthwhile, particularly in light of the expertise and experience to be found among the teaching staff. The witnessing of these practices could also be facilitated quite naturally through the aforementioned team-teaching arrangements. As discussed with senior management, another means by which these practices, such as mind mapping, can be witnessed and validated is by incorporating them as tools in progressing staff and subject department meetings.

**ASSESSMENT**

The school engages in a range of effective procedures to assess students’ learning and to inform teaching. Students’ engagement and achievements are communicated to home on a regular basis. As well as pre-certificate examinations, formal examinations take place at Christmas and summer. Parental interaction with the school is ongoing and encouraged. Standardised tests are used to determine entry-level data and, as referenced by the school itself, it is recommended that diagnostic testing be undertaken to assist with informing teaching and promoting learning. Investigations into the most appropriate standardised and diagnostic tests to determine ability and attainment levels are available on the Department’s website ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)). The support of the school’s guidance counsellor should also be availed of, especially given that no National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) personnel was assigned to the school at the time of the inspection. As well as academic achievements, the school seeks always to promote students’ self-esteem and sense of belonging by acknowledging student engagement and other achievements. The use of student questionnaires to assist the school with its own self-evaluation practice was
discussed and the OECD publication *Student Engagement at School* (2003) may assist further in this regard.

Students’ progress is also assessed on a daily basis by subject teachers and by class-based examinations. Students’ work is monitored, stored and used sensitively to assess and determine progress. Sharing and interpreting data from students is an important feature in promoting whole-school responses to the needs of individuals and groups of students. In order to further promote 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. Such findings could in turn feed into the aforementioned student register and into the school’s own laudable tracking mechanisms. 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 syllabuses and programmes. Such presentations could facilitate the sharing of good practice such as the praiseworthy and effective observation schedules designed and used by some teachers in the lessons observed.

A range of nationally accredited curricular programmes is on offer in the school. The school makes particular use of the flexibility provided by the JCSP to provide national accreditation in a manner that is inclusive and student-centred. Participation and achievement in certificate examinations are rightfully a source of pride for all concerned including those students identified with moderate general learning disabilities. The school adopts a systematic approach to tracking the levels and grades attained by students in certificate examinations. It adopts a similarly systematic approach in arranging reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations (RACE). Students are facilitated by the school in becoming familiar with the relevant accommodation in advance of sitting the examinations.

Feedback to students was provided in a range of ways and students were appreciative of the teachers’ efforts to use the opportunity to encourage and guide future learning. This feedback was given orally and in writing, both privately and at whole class level, but always sensitively and in a manner that affirmed student effort. Journals were seen to be used to good effect with teacher and parent signatures assisting with communication between home and school. The school actively promotes positive discipline practices through a range of activities that seek to capture good behaviour wherever possible, and which clearly add to the quality of the learning environment in which learning and teaching take place.

The school supports homework through its homework club and the school has recently become involved in an interschool initiative which is focusing on homework and associated aspects of assessment and feedback. Those involved deserve much praise and, in engaging in such work, the school is encouraged to document the need to differentiate assessment and homework in a manner similar to the differentiation that occurs with teaching and learning in the classroom. As witnessed, the use of graphic organisers for both classwork and homework is a good example of this overlap. Similarly, peer-assessment and self-evaluation practices also allow students to monitor progress and identify further learning goals for themselves and for each other. In formulating its policy, the school may wish to adopt a broad interpretation of the assessment policy to include how best to use all available data to affirm and promote good teaching and learning in all lessons.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The overall quality of learning and teaching in the lessons observed was very good.
- The school’s allocation of teaching hours for special educational needs is used for the purposes intended.
- A significant number of teachers possess recognised qualifications in the area of special education and are actively engaged in using such learning for the benefit of their students.
- The overall quality of provision and whole-school support for students identified with special educational needs is good.
- The key role of the mainstream teacher in promoting effective and inclusive learning was witnessed in the lessons observed and in the documentation reviewed.
- School improvement and the promotion of inclusive practices are being advanced by the school’s own engagement with school self-evaluation.
- The school engages in a range of effective procedures to assess students’ learning and to inform teaching.

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

- The school should give consideration to the benefits that may accrue from engaging in team-teaching arrangements.
- It is recommended that the school devise a register of students in receipt of additional support.
- It is recommended that diagnostic testing be undertaken and findings from retesting, along with other student gains, should be appropriately shared with colleagues.
- The school is strongly encouraged to devise collective educational plans, particularly for those students with low-incidence needs.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the members of the school’s special educational needs support team and principal at 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**

We would like to compliment the Inspector on his engagement with Senior Management, Special Education team, staff, students, parents and external agencies thus ensuring a very positive and beneficial experience for all involved. His support and experience and the sharing of educational material with the school community is worthy of special mention.

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

1. An in-service for all staff has been arranged on “team teaching” for March 2011.
2. A register of students in receipt of additional support has been produced.
3. A plan has been put in place for diagnostic testing to be undertaken and sharing of results will be disseminated to all staff.
4. The process has begun to look at devising collective educational plans for students with low incidence needs.