Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

St Colman’s College
Fermoy, County Cork
Roll number: 62260C

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

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection St. Colman’s College, Fermoy, County Cork. 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. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision and whole-school support for students identified with special educational needs is of a high standard in St. Colman’s. Clear understandings by senior management of change wisdom, and the underlying interplay between school improvement and the principles of inclusion, combine effectively with the school’s dedicated and committed co-ordinator for special educational needs to promote a whole-school approach. The positive findings in this report are considerable, and the recommendations outlined are well within the remit of St. Colman’s which adopts a reflective and proactive approach in striving to meet the academic, personal and social needs of all its students.

The school’s allocation of 107 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. The school is alert to the needs of students presenting as exceptionally able and gifted. The school adopts a holistic approach to each individual student, irrespective of whether the student is deemed to be identified with a special educational need or not. This practice is manifested in the classroom engagement witnessed between teachers and students. The co-ordinator for special educational needs holds recognised post-graduate qualifications in this area of education and, with the support of the senior management, ensures that the diverse needs are met by a range of suitably diverse interventions. These interventions usually focus on specific language and mathematical needs, striking a suitable balance between providing for individual prioritised learning needs and access to the broader curriculum. Support is provided in a flexible and student-focused manner and includes individual student withdrawal and small group withdrawal. It is recommended that the school now give consideration to in-class
supports such as team-teaching, where two teachers work together with students in one classroom. Such an intervention is very much in keeping with Department policy as described in the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines (2007).

Classes are of mixed ability in first year with students having access to the full curriculum. Second and third year classes are also of mixed ability except for English, Gaeilge and Mathematics. Support is also provided at senior cycle. Where students are withdrawn from class, decisions are only made following consultation with students, their parents and their teachers. Every effort is made to ensure that such decisions are made in the best interest of the student and that they don’t diminish students’ perceptions of themselves as learners, nor diminish the quality of their learning experience and future career choices. At the time of the inspection, the number of students not pursuing either Gaeilge or a modern language was small.

The school has a clear understanding of the key roles of both the mainstream teacher, and fellow students, in promoting inclusive learning. Teachers are supported in accessing online modules and courses, and the school has provided whole-staff professional learning opportunities on dyslexia, gifted learners, challenging behaviour, and the use of information and communication technology (ICT). To further promote and support this collective response, the school is encouraged to examine the possibility of another staff member gaining additional expertise by accessing a recognised postgraduate course in the area of special education

Good working relations between the school and external agencies also ensure high quality provision and whole-school support. The inclusive culture of the school extends to the adults working in the building and is reflected in the positive views of newer staff members regarding the manner in which they have been supported and inducted into the ways of the school. Emerging peer-supports among students also offer possibilities for students to extend their roles as agents of inclusion in structured practices such as paired-reading and cross-age tutoring.

The school is also mindful that learning is a social activity, both within and outside the classroom. In conversation with the students, it is clear that the range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities on offer is appreciated by the students. The juxtaposition of the old and the new in the school is captured in the range of photographs and images on view. While clearly proud of its past achievements, the school also shows to the present students that it is equally proud of their achievements, and that it is their school. There are good material resources available in the school including designated support rooms which house relevant and suitable materials for learning. Considerable investment in ICT has been made, and was seen to be used to good effect by the teachers. Many classrooms displayed students’ own work and, in so doing, engendered a sense of belonging and pride that no doubt also provided an authentic audience that positively motivated students to try their best. Such practices could be extended, with the use of ICT, to include student productions across a range of genres and media including intranet platforms such as ‘moodle’. In a similar vein, greater opportunities for students to show their learning through the use of ICT resources in the classroom also merit consideration.

There is very good provision and support for students with special educational needs in St. Colman’s. The effective use of allocated resources is in part due to the quality of the planning and preparation undertaken by teachers, both individually and collectively.
**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

In order to support the inclusion of all students, an effective and systematic approach is adopted by the school. Early and ongoing communication with primary schools, and with parents, facilitates good collaborative planning and preparation in advance of students’ admission to the school. All available additional teaching hours are factored into the master timetable at the time of its construction and this supports the school’s efforts to provide a cohesive and structured approach. It results in appropriate interventions being arranged, which allow the deployment of staff in a purposeful and focused manner, with teachers’ qualifications, skills, knowledge and interests aligning with students’ identified strengths, interests and special educational needs. Sophisticated and effective communication strategies between relevant teachers are well established and are supported by many informal links. The co-ordinator is appropriately timetabled to teach mainstream classes and engage in other activities. Such a suitable and balanced deployment signals that the promotion of inclusive practices is each and every staff members responsibility and not that of a just a few.

The school’s policy document on special needs is well constructed as is the commendable specific staff handbook devoted to special educational needs. The latter document is separate to the general staff handbook, is rich in detail and focuses on learning and teaching implications associated with certain identified needs. The key role of the classroom subject teacher is recognised in these publications with the roles and responsibilities of other staff members clearly stated. The policy document correctly promotes the view that the promotion of inclusive practices is closely aligned with school improvement. As discussed with senior management and staff, much of the content of these documents could usefully inform the school’s general staff handbook, where roles and responsibilities, as well as procedures and goals, can be shared and alluded to easily. This would also afford an opportunity to clarify, for all, the non-teaching roles and responsibilities of the special needs assistants whose good work is acknowledged by this report. The latter point is particularly pertinent for those special needs assistants who hold teaching qualifications and who are also contracted to teach in the school.

The aforementioned general staff handbook is noteworthy for its focus on school improvement and teaching and learning. More detailed references to the effective teaching and learning practices engaged in by teachers would serve this handbook well. In this regard, it may be worth considering adopting an overarching inclusion policy which would capture the ethos of the school while also identifying various subsets that promote inclusive practices. These subsets could include teaching and learning practices associated with special educational needs, the induction and inclusion of new and returning staff, as well as aspects of related school policies such as attendance, participation and assessment. In fostering and maintaining a whole-school approach, it would be worthwhile for the school to seek to adopt agreed understandings on such concepts as ‘inclusion’, ‘whole school approach’, ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’. Once agreed, such concepts will assist each individual teacher in evaluating daily practice in class as well as in the interdependent reflective activities associated with self-evaluation at subject-department and whole-school level.

The school has made significant progress with regard to both the construction, and more importantly, the implementation of individual education plans (IEPs). In keeping with the school’s reflective practice, examination is underway into the use of ICT to further facilitate collective planning. Similarly, the use of ICT could be extended to devise a register of students in receipt of support. Many of the component parts for such a register are already collated by the good work of the co-ordinator and only some additional information is required. This register will
serve to inform and guide all staff in their engagements with individual students. Furthermore, such a register will assist in tracking the cumulative effect of certain delivery models, including team-teaching, upon the overall additional hours allocated.

As well as collective planning by subject departments, individual teacher planning and preparation was uniformly of a high quality and impacted very positively on the quality of teaching and learning observed.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The overall quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was, in all cases, of a high standard. A total of fourteen lessons involving thirteen teachers was visited over the course of the two-day inspection. These lessons covered a wide subject range across junior and senior cycle programmes which included, Art, Construction Studies, English, French, Geography, Gaeilge, and Mathematics. Classes were formed on the basis of whole-class groups, or small group and individual withdrawal. Individual support was usually given in one of the two resource rooms where multiple occupancy lent itself to creating a small community of learners, maximised access to resources and avoided scenarios where one teacher and one student worked together in isolation. Teachers were very well prepared for their lessons and students were engaged in their learning. Overall achievement by students was in keeping with their ability. An appropriate balance was maintained between the amount of time spent on priority needs and the time spent accessing the wider curriculum.

A noticeable feature of the lessons observed was the amount of productive student-teacher conversation that was created and encouraged by teachers. Building positive relations and student confidence was an implicit goal of all teacher-led interactions. Teachers’ visible desire to do what was best for their students resulted in students feeling secure in themselves to ask questions and seek clarifications where necessary. It was noted that students’ questions and observations were often quite perceptive and used to good effect by teachers to consolidate the learning outcomes from the lesson. Good teacher mobility also assisted in ensuring that the material being studied was clearly understood and ensured that accurate note-taking from the board or text was achieved by the students. Such practice also afforded students an opportunity to ask questions and seek guidance in a more private manner as the teacher passed by.

Lessons were well paced and this was due to a combination of factors including teachers’ knowledge of their subject and of their students, and the extensive and effective use of ICT to guide various dimensions of the lesson. In general terms, students were engaged in the content of the lessons and participated openly with the teacher, and where requested, with one another. Cooperative interaction between students was formally encouraged by teachers in some of the lessons and good time management by teachers with larger groups saw paired-work and group-work also being used to allow teachers engage with students individually. This engagement allowed for the content, process and outcomes of learning to be differentiated and tailored to match individual needs and strengths. Student self-advocacy was supported and encouraged by teachers, especially in the smaller classes, and this in turn promoted students’ motivation to learn and persist with learning.

Teachers are well-informed and alert to the needs of students in their care and, with the support of senior management, are eager to respond sensitively and effectively to such needs. Students clearly benefit from their time in St. Colman’s, are happy in their learning, and many exude a commendable level of confidence in themselves, and pride in their work and in their school. In many lessons, the social skills and other aspects of personnel development were incorporated.
naturally into regular lesson activities. This was particularly the case in lessons that engaged in co-operative learning practices. In certain cases, an examination of the overlap and interplay between co-operative learning and the acquisition of content-knowledge, with the more formal development of social skills such as turn-taking, empathy and teamwork, merits further consideration.

Teachers’ framing of questions was generally used to very good effect with lower and higher-order questioning used effectively. Knowledge of their students, and of the subject matter, informed teachers in choosing to ask directed or global questions. In all cases, students were encouraged to put up their hands to answer global questions and sufficient wait time was given for students to compose their thoughts before replying. Opportunities for students to give joint, as well as individual, responses were also witnessed in some classes and an extension of these practices to include joint accountability would add to the quality of the learning environment created in the classrooms. Some students may also benefit from the extension of a range of learning and assessment tools, such as comprehension strategies when engaging with text and graphic organisers, to access, retain and reveal learning. Such approaches to teaching and learning offer much to students who may have learning difficulties and an agreed collective response to introducing same among a cohort of students may prove beneficial.

Additional features of good practice witnessed across the fourteen lessons visited included the use of keywords and visual cues to assist learning. The integration of the various skills was achieved in the language classes visited, though this was decidedly more difficult with the large numbers present in one of these lessons. Across many disciplines, a range of inductive and deductive practices encouraged students to think and to become more deeply engaged in their learning. Problem solving in mathematics and other subjects, based on authentic scenarios, was one example of promoting thinking among students which, when combined with co-operative learning practices, created powerful and purposeful learning environments. Independent learning and how best to take notes was also encouraged in a number of the lessons observed, as were reminders to students of strategies for succeeding with their learning. Introduction to lessons often began with an exploration of lesson content and planned learning outcomes, with some lessons concluding by returning to the introductory remarks and showing to all that progress in learning had been made.

As mentioned earlier, team-teaching is not formally arranged and very fruitful discussion took place with senior management and some teachers, at the post-evaluation meeting at the end of the two-day inspection. Given the co-operative practices already engaged in by staff, discussion focused on how certain benefits may accrue from the introduction of team-teaching arrangements in St. Colman’s. Team-teaching is very much in keeping with Department policy and the possible benefits include: meeting the needs of identified students in the collective setting of the classroom; meeting the needs of more students in the classroom setting; reducing for students, the need to leave class or study less subjects; improving the quality of learning continuity for students and intra-school communication among staff. As outlined in the Department’s *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post Primary Guidelines* (2007), team-teaching also offers professional development and learning opportunities for teachers in real time and in a real context; provides time for teachers to observe, monitor and support students’ personal, social and academic development; allows teachers an opportunity to engage in, and learn more about, particular teaching practices. It may prove beneficial for the school to start the process of team-teaching with a small group of interested teachers, with a particular focus on a student or a number of students. The accruing benefits to students can be monitored and shared, as can the challenges and opportunities encountered by participating teachers.
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-state examinations, formal examinations take place at midterm, Christmas, spring and summer. Class-based examinations are administered on a regular basis and results are appropriately monitored, stored and used to track student progress. There is clearly an open-door policy in the school where parents and personnel from external agencies are encouraged to contact, and remain in contact, with the school.

Standardised and diagnostic tests are used and interpreted appropriately. The school is currently reviewing some of the tests it uses and, consultation with relevant personnel from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) will assist in this regard. Some retesting is also undertaken to determine progress in literacy and 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. Retesting could take place at Christmas in second year and again during the pre-examinations in spring of third year. Such findings could in turn feed into the aforementioned student register and individualised plans. Members of the special educational needs team have made presentations 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. The latter may be more appropriate for capturing progress that may not be so easily quantified. Sharing and interpreting assessment data collectively will promote collective responses among teachers and add to the quality of teacher discussions and actions in relation to students.

Questionnaires to assess students’ preferred learning styles are administered by the school and this practice supports efforts to see the individual in the collective that is the classroom. The school may also wish to use questionnaires to determine students’ attitudes towards themselves, their learning and the school in general. The OECD publication *Student Engagement At School* (2003) may assist further in this regard. The use of ‘exit-polls’ among the sixth year cohort may also be fruitful in guiding future school initiatives.

In consultation with the local NEPS psychologist, the school adopts a systematic approach to arranging Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE). In general, 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 state 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.

In addition to the above mentioned aspects of assessment, future policy development would be well served by examining further 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 should be linked to future development of assessment practices. The benefits to student learning that accrue from peer and self-
assessment practices should also form part of future discussions regarding a policy document on assessment.

Feedback to students from teachers was a common feature of most lessons, and students’ written work was found to be regularly corrected, usually signed and 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. Appropriate error tolerance was witnessed in these corrections, as it was in the lessons visited, with students being praised where possible and guided when necessary.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was of a high standard.
- Good leadership is shown by senior management and the school’s co-ordinator in meeting the needs of all students.
- The schools allocation of additional resources is used in a variety of appropriate and effective ways.
- Good working relations between the school and external agencies also ensure high quality provision and whole-school support.
- In order to support the inclusion of all students, an effective and systematic approach is adopted by the school.
- Policy documents are well constructed and well implemented.
- The school engages in a comprehensive range of assessment practices and recognises the interplay between assessment, teaching and learning.

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 now give consideration to in-class supports such as team-teaching.
- Consideration should be given to another staff member accessing a recognised postgraduate course in the area of special education
- The varied means by which teachers can be supported in sharing their classroom practices with each other should be considered.

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.

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