

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT**

**St Caimin's Community School
Shannon, County Clare
Roll number: 91447I**

Date of inspection: 23 November 2010



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

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

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Caimin's Community School, Shannon, Co. Clare. 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 and members of the school's special educational needs support team. 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

St Caimin's Community School is a relatively large post-primary school and the diversity of needs presenting reflects that of the community it serves. 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.

To support the school's inclusive efforts an additional 103 teaching hours is allocated. These hours are comprised of 76.25 hours to meet the needs of students identified with a range of low incidence and high incidence needs and 26.4 hours which are allocated to assist students who require support with learning in the area of literacy and numeracy.

The school's commitment to meeting the needs of all its students is reflected in the allocation of assistant principal duties to co-ordinate provision. The co-ordinator is the school's guidance counsellor who works closely and effectively with two qualified and committed teachers to promote an informed whole-school response to the ever-changing needs that present. The responsible flexibility and teamwork among the teachers, and the manner in which they engage with students, and their parents and guardians, is a notable strength of the school.

Good timetabling practices are evident in the school which promote access to, and the development of, an inclusive curriculum. Classes are formed on the basis of mixed ability in first year with all students having access to the full curriculum. Where students have exemptions from Gaelge they receive additional support through small-group withdrawal. These interventions

usually focus on literacy and numeracy, and this arrangement continues into second year with third year witnessing more subject-specific interventions. To ensure that these classes are small enough in number to provide effective interventions, setting of the Gaeilge timetable is introduced when necessary. The numbers accessing exemptions from Gaeilge is below the national average and all students have an opportunity to study a modern language.

Mixed-ability classes continue throughout the junior cycle with concurrent timetabling in second and third year for Gaeilge, English and Mathematics. Such good practice allows ease of movement between subject levels and also facilitates the formation of smaller classes for those students requiring additional support. Similar supportive practices are found in senior cycle and subject choices and levels are decided in consultation with home. Students pursuing the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme are facilitated with their learning through the effective use of team-teaching with particular focus upon Mathematics, Gaeilge and Vocational Preparation.

The school is alert to the needs of students presenting as exceptionally able and gifted. The school adopts a holistic approach to meeting the needs of each individual student in the school. Personalised learning in the collective setting of the classroom is central to the school's engagement with students and this practice is manifested in the school's movement, away from an over reliance on individual withdrawal, towards more in-class supports such as team-teaching. This shift in focus is in keeping with Department policy and guidelines.

The school has a clear understanding of the key roles of the mainstream teacher in promoting inclusive learning. Staff are supported by their colleagues in the special educational needs support team and are facilitated in accessing online modules and courses. The school has accessed whole-staff professional learning opportunities in relation to co-operative learning and transition from primary to post-primary. This report encourages ongoing professional learning opportunities at whole-staff and individual level that are specific to the needs presenting among the student cohort. The good practice of regular engagement between colleagues and the special educational needs support team is central to promoting an effective whole-school response. The extension of team-teaching is also an opportunity to provide context-sensitive professional learning opportunities in real time and in real classrooms. Considerable investment in Information Communication Technology (ICT) is to be found in classrooms and the staff room. The central resource library on the school system offers staff an opportunity to share and access resources, and is a fine example of the use of ICT to track individual student's participation and progress.

The reciprocal role of students as agents of inclusion is witnessed in the range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities made available and in the manner in which students interact with one another in classrooms and throughout the school. Other examples of peer support and the promotion of a sense of belonging and being valued are found in the school's peer mentoring programme. Building on such good practice the school may wish to consider engaging in timetabled cross-age supports between Transition Year students and those in first year. Arrangements could focus on a range of skills associated with literacy and numeracy while also attending to aspects associated with the mentoring programme.

Whole-school support and provision is of a high standard in St Caimin's and is underpinned by a culture of teamwork and constant reflection, which impacts positively upon planning and preparation activities.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Planning and preparation is approached systematically by the school, and while there are some areas that merit attention, the overall quality of planning and preparation is good. Engagement with prospective students and parents take place well in advance of students attending the school. 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. Individual files are constructed and all staff are made aware, in a timely manner, of the needs and strengths of students newly enrolled in the school.

The school has crafted a clear and detailed special educational needs policy which was ratified in 2004 and contains a broad, yet succinct, interpretation of special educational needs. Other related policies and statements, some in draft form, are devoted to inclusion, exceptionalities, equity and diversity. When next reviewing its special educational needs policy, the school may wish to adopt an overarching inclusion policy which would incorporate, as subsets, the above mentioned topics and others. Such an approach may also be of benefit in that the school can then stress-test other policies for their inclusiveness. Any future review of policy would be served well by reiterating the key role of the mainstream teacher in promoting effective inclusive practices. The well-constructed staff handbook may also prove useful in keeping this and other pertinent points to the fore. The aforementioned document could also be used to convey agreed understandings on the roles and responsibilities of the teaching staff and the instructional practices that promote inclusive learning. In a similar fashion the non-teaching duties of the special needs assistant, whose good work is appreciated by teachers and acknowledged in this report, could also be documented in the staff handbook.

Tracking of the allocation of additional resources, and how it is used to support learning, forms part of the school's planning and preparation. It is recommended that the school devise a register of those students in receipt of hours for low-incidence and high-incidence needs. Much good work has already been done in this regard. The recommendation will sit easily with the school's existing good practices, including its use of ICT, to monitor not only inputs but also student attainment and achievements. Similarly it is recommended that the school clearly identify the allocation of 26.4 hours for students with literacy and numeracy needs. This identification will also facilitate the school in calculating cumulative benefits from existing good practices that merge resource allocations in the best interests of the students.

It is important that learning support be provided to students in first year who are not in receipt of individual resources and who may not have an exemption from Gaelge. Once again, the extension of team-teaching may assist in this regard, especially given the school's very good timetabling practices and co-operative culture. All known additional resources are included at the time of the construction of the master timetable. This practice facilitates maximum learning benefits for students as teachers are matched with student's individual learning needs in a consistent and purposeful manner. The school is alert to the dangers of support being too fragmented and is also aware of the need to strike a balance between attending to individual learning needs while also ensuring access to the broader curriculum.

Good practices, in the form of term plans, are established in over-seeing and co-ordinating the interventions students receive. Efforts to extend this practice by framing individualised educational plans (IEP) merit consideration. It may be prudent to begin such a process by selecting a number of students identified with low-incidence needs. Individualised plans aimed at

academic, social and emotional development can then be constructed, implemented, evaluated and reviewed. The mechanisms used by the school and the overall planning process can also be reviewed and adjusted where necessary.

Overall planning and preparation undertaken by the school is systematic and effective. Practices are both learner-centred and learning-centred with subject department planning also attending to students with special educational needs. Individual teacher planning and preparation, as witnessed during the inspection, was of a high quality and impacted very positively on the quality of teaching and learning observed. The recommendations with regard to planning and preparation are well within the remit of the school and will assist in continuing to promote the quality of the learning and teaching experience for students and teachers in St Caimin's.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A total of thirteen lessons across junior and senior cycle were observed during the two-day inspection. Mainstream classes were visited as were classes formed on the basis of individual and small-group withdrawal. The subject areas covered in these lessons included Guidance, English, Home Economics, Metalwork, Mathematics and Science. The overall quality of learning and teaching observed was good.

should also be considered. Cross-age peer support can also be achieved where older students can show their knowledge of subject matter by designing workbooks, posters and other learning artefacts that can be used by younger students. This practice can be particularly applicable to classes formed to support learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy.

Classrooms visited reflected the positive atmosphere of this well-maintained school. Relations between students and teachers were respectful, cordial and used by the teachers to create purposeful learning environments. A noticeable feature of many of the lessons was the natural way in which students assisted one another in answering questions or completing tasks. Conduct on the corridors was orderly and this visitor certainly appreciated the help of students who were willing to hold doors open and assist with finding classrooms.

Many teachers made formal use of teamwork among their students by creating group activities to consolidate learning or to introduce new learning. In forming groups the teacher was then able to differentiate the learning by interacting with each group and each group member. Such practices are commended and ongoing examination of how best to maximise these activities is encouraged. Teachers may wish to examine the levels of individual accountability when groups are formed and how levels can be maintained to the highest possible standard. The use of co-operative learning and how it may merge with other effective and research-based practices, such as the use of graphic organisers, also merits consideration.

Teacher questioning was used effectively in a variety of ways to monitor not only learning but also the pace of the lesson and the diverse needs presenting. Knowledge of both content and student were combined to advance learning and the learner's sense of belonging and achievement. In the larger classes, skills associated with framing and distributing questions were particularly important to ensure all students had an opportunity to participate. Here teachers often asked lower-order questions by naming students in advance, safe in the knowledge that they would be reasonably expected to answer such questions. Judicious use of wait time was availed of in all cases and especially when higher-order questions were opened up to the class. Of note was the awareness among some teachers, of the need to tease out answers of a higher order where it was

deemed the question had not been completely answered. The practical dimension of some subjects saw teachers model or request students to model certain skills which in turn gave rise to questions and clarifications in advance of actions. A common feature in all lessons was the use of the whiteboard to progress learning. Key words and key concepts were placed on the board from the start of the lesson and this helped to frame the lesson and scaffold the learning.

In the smaller classes devoted to promoting literacy and numeracy skills, students availed of a range of cues and learning aids to assist them respond to the questions and tasks set by the teacher. In these, as in all lessons, students were confident and comfortable in asking questions and in seeking clarifications where necessary. Students were equally challenged in their learning and praised for their efforts. Seating arrangements assisted in promoting co-operation and teamwork and it was encouraging to hear a student in first year enthusiastically ask 'can we work in groups?' Seating arrangements were also used strategically by teachers to differentiate learning and provide students with a meaningful engagement with the material before them.

Teachers displayed a repertoire of skills that facilitated the range of learning styles among their students. When asked, students said they appreciated the variety associated with working alone or in pairs or small groups. They also expressed the overall view that lessons that provided concrete experiential opportunities helped them in retaining what they had learned. Students involved in a team-taught lesson could find no disadvantage in having two teachers work with them in the lesson and they highlighted that the arrangement gave them opportunities to, 'get more covered', 'catch-up if necessary' and not have to wait as long if they wished to raise a question.

The advantages of team-teaching are many and the quality of the team-taught lesson observed was at a sophisticated level, even though the teachers had only begun the arrangement a few months earlier. The school is encouraged to create opportunities for those involved in team-teaching to share their experiences with colleagues and to examine how the resources allocated may be used to extend the practice. As with all lessons the quality of student learning will determine the value and impact of team-teaching, but it is also found that team-teaching can assist teachers with their own professional learning. In this regard the school may wish to examine how assessment for learning, graphic organisers, co-operative learning and other aspects of pedagogy can be advanced through team-teaching arrangements.

ASSESSMENT

The school engages in a comprehensive range of procedures to assess students' learning and to inform teaching. Assessment data assists but does not determine the limits of learning for students in St Caimins and the school has many examples of students surpassing initial expectations. Students' engagement, achievements and attainments are communicated home on a regular basis. As well as pre-certificate examinations, formal examinations take place at Christmas and summer, with examinations also scheduled at each midterm. Parental interaction with the school is ongoing and encouraged. Appropriate standardised and diagnostic tests are used to determine learning and inform teaching.

Appropriate screening and diagnostic tests to determine ability and attainment levels are administered and regular consultation takes place with the local representative of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). 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. A consultative process to determine whether

students should receive interventions is informed by both teacher comment and the results of common assessments. Such findings are further informed by engagement with students and with home.

Standardised retesting of literacy and numeracy attainment is undertaken in the school and those involved are commended for such good work. This retesting is usually undertaken towards the end of third year. In order to 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. Members of the special educational needs team present to colleagues at staff meetings 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.

A range of nationally accredited curricular programmes are on offer in the school. Participation and achievement in certificate examinations are rightfully a source of pride for all concerned. The school adopts a systematic approach to 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 number 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 some parent signatures assisting with communication between home and school. The use of stickers to affirm and praise students was also witnessed in a number of journals perused.

The school has clear guidelines on homework. The incorporation of these guidelines into the drafting of an assessment policy merits consideration. Such a policy would assist in how best to obtain, share and use data that can inform teaching and learning and provide evidence to inform overall school self-evaluation. Such a policy may seek 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. The policy could take cognisance of the comment-only feedback witnessed in some lessons and the use of peer and student self-evaluation practices which was also observed. In formulating its policy the school may wish to adopt a broad interpretation of the assessment policy to include how all data associated with special educational needs can be used 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:

- With the support of senior management, a dedicated and effective team of teachers works closely with colleagues to promote inclusive practices among all teachers in all lessons.
- The overall quality of learning and teaching in the lessons observed was good.

- Students identified with special educational needs benefit considerably from their time in the school.
- Planning and preparation is systematic and effective.
- A continuum of supports and interventions is implemented wisely and reviewed regularly.
- The school has good lines of communication with students, those at home and personnel from external agencies.
- Assessment practices, including re-testing, are of a high standard in the school.

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

- More detailed tracking of the total allocation of resources and their impact upon students is recommended.
- The extension of individualised planning for students with low incidence needs merits consideration.
- Greater use of team-teaching merits consideration as does the exploration of opportunities for staff to share practices that promote inclusive learning.

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.