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 an Chroí Naofa, Carraig na bhFear, Co. Cork. 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

Coláiste an Chroí Naofa has good provision and whole school support for students with special educational needs. This is due, in no small way, to the diligence and commitment of the school’s co-ordinator who holds recognised qualifications in special education, but does not hold a post of responsibility, and conducts much of the work outside of the allocated teaching hours. The dedication and leadership shown by the co-ordinator is a significant strength in the school. Open lines of communication between the co-ordinator and senior management further assist in advancing inclusive practices which benefit all students in the school. Similarly, the co-ordinator is facilitated to work with fellow colleagues and others to promote whole-school practices that support inclusive learning in the school.

The school has a weekly allocation of 72.4 additional teaching hours to make provision for special educational needs. This allocation consists of 15.4 teaching hours for students requiring support with learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy. The remaining 57 hours are allocated to students with low-incidence and high-incidence disabilities. A special needs assistant is allocated to the school for 10 hours per week. The school provides an appropriately flexible and student-focused continuum of support, which is usually provided in the form of individual student withdrawal or small group withdrawal. Interventions to support students usually focus on specific language and mathematical needs, and a suitable balance is struck between providing for individual student’s prioritised learning needs and access to the broader curriculum.
All subjects are made available to all students and very good practices are evident in the area of timetabling and in the formation of mixed-ability classes. A varied range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities are on offer which also help to promote, among students, a shared sense of belonging and of being valued. As well as having good structures in place, the school is mindful of the interplay between students’ academic progress and their social and emotional development. The care and attention which individual students receive from members of the school’s support team is a noticeable feature of the quality of provision and support provided to students. To further support the good work being undertaken, it is recommended that the co-ordinator, guidance counsellor and other relevant personnel be facilitated to meet on a weekly basis to plan and monitor provision and whole-school support. Such meetings will also facilitate engagement with personnel from external agencies.

There are good material resources available in the school including a designated support room which houses relevant and suitable materials, and which offers access to information and communication technology (ICT). Further developments in the area of ICT will assist in creating universal folders for teachers to access additional materials specific to their students’ needs and their subject areas. Such developments will also assist with future actions that promote a whole-school approach in planning and in responding to students’ identified needs.

The overall quality of provision and whole school support in Coláiste an Chroí Naofa is good. The efficient and effective work of the co-ordinator is important to this provision but future planning and preparation will have to take account of how a whole-school approach can be further promoted by senior management highlighting the pivotal role of the mainstream teacher. This, and other related issues, will be discussed in the next section.

**Planning and Preparation**

Early communication with primary schools and ongoing engagement with parents facilitates good collaborative planning and preparation with some exemplary practices being undertaken in supporting students’ transfer. There is evidence that subject department, and some individual teacher planning, take cognisance of students’ educational needs. Awareness among staff is supported by senior management who facilitate a range of impressive and appropriate internal and external professional development opportunities for teachers. Teachers’ planning for the lessons observed was very good. Subject department planning takes cognisance of the subject discipline being personalised and made available to all students. Ongoing engagement with generic aspects of effective teaching, learning, classroom management and assessment practices is evident and assists in extending the evolving diversity of teacher responses that are required to meet the diversity of needs presenting.

At the beginning of the school year the co-ordinator outlines to staff, in general terms, the needs presenting among newly enrolled students and the implications such needs have for learning and teaching. Other presentations by fellow teachers in relation to aspects of teaching and learning are encouraged and these have the added bonus of being context-sensitive and of facilitating ongoing conversations subsequent to the event. In promoting inclusive practices and overall school improvement, the role of the mainstream teacher is central to the success of the school. Therefore, the school should continue to examine how best to facilitate mainstream teachers in meeting the needs of all their students in all their classes. At the time of the inspection a staff member was pursuing post-graduate qualifications in the area of special education. It is important that such teacher-led initiatives, including accessing external expertise and on-line training, are optimised
so as to build capacity among the mainstream teachers to meet the diversity of needs in their classrooms.

The school is planning to produce a staff handbook and this offers opportunities for disseminating good practice in relation to effective generic teaching strategies. Existing documentation combined with a further audit of teaching and learning practices in the school’s classrooms merits inclusion in this publication. The school’s exemplary ‘Teachers’ Guide to SEN’ and aspects of the school’s special educational needs policy could also form part of the content of the handbook as could clear understandings on roles and responsibilities of teachers, special needs assistants and representatives of external agencies. The key role of the mainstream teacher could be highlighted as could the role of students as agents of inclusion. Agreed definitions and actions on concepts such as ‘inclusion’, ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’ also merit consideration as they in turn can be used to determine the quality of other related school policies. The aforementioned weekly meeting should afford opportunities, with the support of senior management, to help promote these and other desired developments that emerge from the school’s own self-evaluation processes. The use of graphic organisers, as witnessed in some lessons, to convey many of the above suggestions may prove useful in reducing the size of the handbook while enhancing the quality of the messages.

In planning and preparing for the promotion of inclusive practices, it is recommended that the school examine the benefits associated with implementing team-teaching arrangements. Some 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 Coláiste an Chroí Naofa. Team-teaching is very much in keeping with Department of Education and Skills’ 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 fewer 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.

Timetabling practices are generally good and the school seeks to avoid creating complicated timetables for supporting individual students learning and is also aware of the inherent dangers in withdrawing students from the subjects in which they receive additional support. To prevent such scenarios it would serve the school well to allocate all known additional teaching hours at the time of the construction of the timetable. This will facilitate optimal and consistent use of resources across the week and from year to year. A clear understanding of how best to use the learning support allocation of 15.4 hours is required. Where deemed appropriate, the students benefiting from the learning support allocation should be added to the existing register of students in receipt of additional teaching hours. The aforementioned publication Inclusion of students with special educational needs post primary guidelines (2007) will assist in this regard.
Good work has been undertaken by some teachers to promote collective plans for individual students. More work is required to ensure that the agreed plans form an integral part of daily classroom practice. The role of the mainstream teacher is crucial if plans are to be implemented and the role of the class tutor, or year head, merits consideration when determining how best to monitor these plans. Plans to introduce ICT software to monitor individual students’ interaction with the school will assist future developments.

There is much good work done in the area of planning and preparation and the school is increasingly aware of the interdependence between the promotion of inclusive practices and overall school improvement. The creation of a regular meeting time for those most closely involved will add to the good work undertaken to date. Similarly, further engagement and leadership from senior management, will be required to ensure advances are made in aspects of school planning and preparation which were conveyed at the time of the inspection and identified for development in this report. However, all of the above is ultimately contingent upon the mainstream teacher and the quality of learning and teaching experienced in the mainstream classroom. The next section examines in more detail the quality of teaching and learning as experienced during the course of the two-day inspection.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A total of nine classes, across junior and senior cycle, were visited during the evaluation and they ranged in size from individual and small group withdrawal to whole-class groups. The smaller classes were formed on the basis of providing additional support in the areas of subject-specific content and identified individual learning needs, with particular reference to literacy and numeracy development. The larger whole-class groups attended to specific subject disciplines including English, French, History, Mathematics and Technical Graphics. The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was good with some examples of very good practice observed.

Classrooms are generally teacher-based and the seating arrangements follow a traditional layout. Most classrooms visited saw teachers use the available ICT, though rarely were students seen to use this technology during the lessons visited. Some, but not all classrooms had examples of students’ work, both past and present, on display, and on occasions this material was effectively used to promote students’ learning. The display of students’ work can also influence students in motivating them to produce their best work, safe in the knowledge that it may have a broader and more public audience than simply being seen by the teacher. Teachers with base classrooms are asked to consider how the display of students’ work, be it creative or based on subject-specific concepts, can promote purposeful and inclusive learning environments.

In all lessons teacher-student rapport was conducive to learning. All lessons were well paced and most had a variety of activity for students which engaged them in their learning. Handouts were used effectively to document key words and key concepts. The whiteboard was also used to guide the lesson and students were in most cases eager to contribute. This eagerness was witnessed by the frequency and quality of student-to-teacher generated questions and comments. Such enthusiasm to participate in the lesson was in turn encouraged by the teacher’s own enthusiasm for the subject and by the quality of the teaching which both challenged and supported students in a safe and authentic learning environment. Students usually put up their hand to ask a question of their teacher which facilitated all students with their learning and some teachers took advantage of such questions to review previous teaching and to advance the desired learning outcomes of the...
lesson. Teacher questioning of their students and the use of wait time was good, with all teachers bar one, knowing their students by name.

Many lessons used peer-mediated group work and paired work. This was most successful when students were given clear guidelines on the amount of time that would be spent on task, the connection between the task and the overall learning objectives, and when students had a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Some teachers took advantage of such arrangements to differentiate the learning by giving personalised assistance and instruction to individual students and smaller groups. Differentiation was also witnessed in the smaller groups where students worked on different topics at a different pace. Good practice also saw some teachers incorporate both literacy and numeracy skills into the lesson. The development of social skills was similarly interwoven on occasions, with the promotion of both formal and informal co-operative practices among students.

The school is now asked to examine how best it can share, among teachers, the good practices witnessed over the course of the inspection. The aforementioned team-teaching arrangements and the use of the proposed staff handbook offer two possibilities. Extending the limited but effective use of graphic organisers could occur by using similar visual organisers at staff meetings and in the aforementioned staff handbook. Collective responses are also suggested in relation to aspects of reading and spelling. Awareness around asking which students to read aloud in class reflected teachers’ knowledge of their students but should not be interpreted as not asking them to read. Rather, agreed strategies relating to pre-teaching keywords or giving advance warning to students should be discussed among staff. Similar whole-school approaches could focus on improving spelling, including the correction of students’ written work, and how such practices can inform teaching and improve learning.

ASSESSMENT
As with other aspects of this report, the quality of practices associated with assessment are good and do much to inform teaching and to support learning. The school engages in a comprehensive range of assessment practices and many teachers recognise the interplay between assessment, teaching and learning. Daily classroom observation and interaction with students combine with more formal assessment practices to inform teaching and learning. Some teachers made good use of questioning while those who promoted pair work and group work used the time wisely to assess individual student’s and small groups’ progress with desired learning outcomes. As well as pre-certificate examinations, formal examinations take place at appropriate times throughout the school year. Class-based examinations are administered on a regular basis and results are appropriately monitored, stored and used to track students’ progress. Progress and achievement are communicated to home on a regular basis and parents are encouraged and facilitated to meet with teachers.

Standardised and diagnostic tests are used and interpreted appropriately. Some retesting is undertaken to determine progress. 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 and analysis of findings cannot be completed by the special educational needs co-ordinator alone and plans in this regard will have to give consideration to the role of subject departments such as English and Maths to support such a recommendation. Sharing and interpreting data, based on entire year groups or individual case studies, will support the school’s own efforts at self-review and can form the basis for collectively examining the range of pedagogical responses required to support ongoing
improvement. Modes of delivery, such as team-teaching, can also be partly reviewed using similar data.

The views of students are clearly valued in the school and extending the use of questionnaires and other instruments to capture students’ views merits consideration. Feedback from, as well as to, students can assist in informing future decision-making and increase student motivation and effort. The OECD publication *Student Engagement at School* (2003) may assist further in this regard. Students’ journals were generally used to good effect and written work was found to be regularly corrected with future learning, on occasions, guided by teachers’ written comments. As with the lessons visited, appropriate error tolerance was witnessed in these corrections, with students being praised where possible and guided where necessary.

In consultation with the local National Educational Psychological Service (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 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 certificate 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.

Future policy development, in conjunction with the above mentioned aspects of assessment, would be well served by examining the interplay between assessment and instruction. Ongoing development of individualised plans for students and the use of the proposed staff handbook to share teaching methodologies and strategies are also linked to the development of assessment practices. The benefits to student learning that accrue from peer and self-assessment practices also merit consideration in the development of any future policy document on assessment.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good provision and support for students with special educational needs in Coláiste an Chroí Naofa with the work of the co-ordinator a significant strength.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was good with some examples of very good practice observed.
- The school is a caring place that seeks to respond to students on an individual basis, promotes individual plans where necessary, and personalises learning wherever possible.
- Good modes of collaboration and lines of communication exist among staff and the co-ordinator engages effectively with colleagues to support collective and consistent teacher-reponses.
- The resources allocated by the Department for special educational needs are used for the purposes for which they were intended, though greater clarity will be achieved by extending the student register to include the learning support provision.
- Overall planning and preparation practices are effective at both whole-school and classroom level.
- The school engages in a comprehensive and effective range of assessment practices which are used to inform teaching and promote learning.
• Student efforts and achievements, both within and outside the school, are regularly celebrated.

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 examine how efforts to achieve school improvement are aligned with the promotion of inclusive practices by mainstream teachers in mainstream classrooms.
• The school should consider the best ways in which the good teaching and learning practices, observed during the inspection, can now be shared among colleagues.
• Further development of in-class supports, such as team-teaching, merit serious consideration.
• To facilitate optimum use of the additional allocations and to provide meeting time for the co-ordinator and others, all known teaching hours should be factored into the timetable at the time of its construction.
• To guide teaching and enhance the learning experience for students, exploration by relevant subject departments and others, on how best to retest, interpret and distribute findings to colleagues is recommended.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with 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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