

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT**

Millstreet Community School

Millstreet, County Cork

Roll number: 91390F

Date of inspection: 25 February 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 Millstreet Community School, Millstreet, Co. Cork. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in the provision for special educational needs (SEN) and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of students with special educational needs in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers 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 and co-ordinator for special educational needs. 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

A whole-school evaluation report was published in 2006 in which favourable reference was made to the quality of provision for special educational needs. Under the leadership of school management, the school has continued to develop practices that promote inclusive learning and advance overall school improvement. The school recognises the importance of adopting a whole-school approach to meeting the needs of all its students with the mainstream teacher having a key role in determining the quality of the learning experience in the classroom.

The school has a total additional allocation of 3.27 whole-teacher equivalents. The diversity of needs among the students enrolled is met by a range of student-focused interventions. 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. It was noted that a considerably disproportionate number of male students required additional support in the areas of literacy and numeracy. A small number of students with English as an additional language (EAL) are also enrolled in the school and their needs are met within the general allocation of resources provided to the school. Interventions to support students usually focus on specific language and mathematical needs, while a suitable balance is struck between learning interventions targeted at the needs of individual students and access to the broader curriculum. Provision is ably co-ordinated, on a voluntary basis, by an appointed staff member who has accessed considerable qualifications in special education. The commitment and dedication of this staff member combined with the leadership shown by senior management's actions is duly acknowledged in this report. As a consequence, the recommendations outlined in this report are well within the remit of the school.

The co-ordinator works closely with colleagues to deliver support for learning in a variety of ways. Class groups are formed on the basis of mixed-ability in first year with concurrent timetabling in the other year groups for English, Gaelige and Mathematics. Senior cycle classes follow a similar pattern of good practice which facilitates students' pursuing levels of study commensurate with their ability. All students have access to all subjects with only a small number of students exempt from Gaelige. The small number of exemptions reflects well upon the school and upon the school's view that all students can and should learn in their school. The school offers additional support in the form of individual and small group withdrawal, but is conscious that such practice may not suit all students all of the time. As recommended in the whole-school evaluation of 2006, the school is encouraged to give serious consideration to other modes of delivering support such as team-teaching which will provide additional support without restricting students' range of subject choices. In light of the palpable collegial and collaborative spirit among teachers in the school this mode of support could be easily introduced but will require appropriate timetabling in advance. The school's existing concurrent timetabling will make such a task all the easier.

The school has two appointed special needs assistants and their non-teaching work is appreciated and valued by both students and teachers. The good work being undertaken by these special needs assistants is also duly acknowledged in this report. Special needs assistants are aware of the need to promote student independence wherever possible, both within and outside the classroom.

A designated room is well furnished and provides opportunities for additional support to be accessed by students in an atmosphere conducive to learning. A detailed inventory of resources is updated regularly. Senior management is supportive in accessing additional resources when requested and further investment in information and communication technology (ICT) software is encouraged. Additional material relating to teaching and learning is also available for staff in the main staffroom which further promotes the central role of the mainstream teacher.

A wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities is available to all students and during the course of the two-day inspection a lot of activities were taking place or being planned which clearly fostered, among students, a sense of belonging to not only the school community but also to the local community. This sense of belonging is also fostered through the admirable peer mentoring programme for first year students, which is facilitated by transition year students under the guidance of school personnel. Such work is deserving of much praise and facilitates students as providers as well as recipients of inclusive practices. The school may wish to examine similar peer-related practices such as paired-reading and paired-mathematics. These programmes may be particularly suited to the aforementioned cohort of male students identified as requiring additional support. The use of ICT to capture and exhibit school activities is maintained by one of the school's transition year students, with the support of staff. This authentic approach to learning has multiple benefits for the student concerned and, as discussed this medium may offer other students opportunities to display their interests, skills and talents in a manner that simultaneously promotes learning and a sense of belonging.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The school adopts a systematic and timely approach to planning and preparing for all students who enrol in the school. Good teamwork between the co-ordinator, guidance counsellor, chaplain and senior management ensures that considerable preparatory work is done well in advance of students' first day in 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 in meeting identified needs. As well as enabling teachers to work consistently with students, this practice also facilitates 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.

The timetabling of a regular meeting time for key personnel such as those listed above is encouraged. These meetings will support existing informal meetings and will help to sustain and develop lines of communication with colleagues and with relevant personnel from external agencies who may visit the school from time to time.

An information pack is provided to teachers and this facilitates discussion on how best individual student needs can be met in the collective setting of the mainstream classroom. This pack informs subject planning discussions and further assists ongoing collaboration between the co-ordinator and subject teachers. In progressing whole-staff professional learning, the school is encouraged to continue to examine how in-house expertise can be best shared. In planning for particular special educational needs, engagement with the Special Education Support Service (www.sess.ie) through whole-staff presentations may prove useful.

The school's enrolment policy is written in a welcoming spirit as is the schools special educational needs policy. The latter policy would benefit from being reviewed and it is suggested that any further action would be informed by the Department of Education and Science publication *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines* (2007). Such a review could outline particular roles and responsibilities, the modes of support available to students and other aspects of education pertinent to promoting inclusive practices. Indeed, there may be merit in documenting clear and agreed understandings among staff on such concepts as 'inclusion', 'whole-school approach', 'literacy' and 'numeracy'. Once agreed, these concepts could inform further subject planning which already make reference to planning for students with identified needs. An overall inclusion policy may also prove beneficial to the school context, where existing and desired practices could be captured and shared. As a consequence such an inclusion policy could in turn be used by the school to self-evaluate other actions, so as to determine how they in turn promote the principles and practices of inclusion.

Once documented, these agreed understandings, as well as outlined roles and responsibilities, could form part of a school handbook that could also include many of the procedures, pedagogical-related practices and documentation that was witnessed during the course of the inspection.

The school has engaged in individual education planning and recently, some staff members attended a one-day seminar. Continued examination of best practice is encouraged and the use of ICT to support planning for individual students may prove useful. A register of all students in receipt of additional support will also assist in this regard and will ensure that optimum use is made of the resources provided and the impact such resources have upon student learning and development.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching in the lessons inspected was very good with teachers' knowledge of both topic and of learner being used to good effect. In total, seven lessons were inspected across junior and senior cycle programmes, and these lessons ranged from whole-class groups to group withdrawal and individual withdrawal. In all cases the atmosphere in the classrooms visited was welcoming and conducive to learning. Lessons concentrated on a range of appropriate skills including the development of literacy and numeracy skills, as well as skills associated with ICT and specific subjects such as Mathematics, English, Engineering and Physical Education. Lessons which focused on needs specific to individual students were also inspected. Good teacher-student rapport was evident throughout and positive discipline ensured that every effort was made to catch the student behaving and performing well. Students responded well to such encouragement and praise, and seemed appreciative of the additional support being given.

Where applicable, paired and small group work were seen to very good effect and merged content learning with the development of social and critical thinking skills. Assistive technology was used to advance learning in a number of cases and the impact of such technology was maximised by the good teamwork between teachers and special-needs assistants. Good use of ICT and other visual stimuli and the quality of teachers' planning and questioning ensured that all lessons were of interest to students. Lessons were well paced and students clearly benefited from their interaction with teachers and with one another. Appropriate time was given to students to respond to questions and where difficulties occurred, other students were respectfully requested to assist. Regular and appropriate praise for students' contribution and effort was also effectively used by teachers as was the judicious use of humour.

Considerable learning took place in a mathematics lesson that focused on aspects of trigonometry. Students were encouraged to succeed by being provided with a range of strategies to respond to questions. Homework was appropriately checked and then skilfully used to make certain that all in the class had a clear understanding of the topic under discussion. This in turn laid the platform for advancing new learning and the teacher ensured optimal participation among all students in the class with a range of suitable questioning techniques and a regular request to students 'to talk me through it'.

Lessons associated with literacy and English ranged from individual withdrawal to small group withdrawal to whole-class teaching. The individual lesson correctly focused on promoting comprehension skills and the student was clearly benefiting from the guidance provided by the teacher. The small group of students that met for additional support with their literacy skills engaged in a range of activities that were appropriate to their needs and the lesson was conducted in a manner that supported learning and students' sense of self. Oral and reading work was interwoven, and knowledge of students' interests was again used to good effect. In the larger class, the lesson was devoted to advertising. Good use of ICT kept the aim of the lesson to the fore, and students were comfortable in asking as well as answering questions on the topic. Problem solving was encouraged with higher-order questioning and this kept students motivated and on task. All present were affirmed for their efforts and included in the lesson.

Other lessons observed included an Engineering lesson where students were revisiting their work via the state examinations marking scheme. This proved an effective strategy and students were then, in turn, allowed to work on their individual pieces informed by a clearer understanding of

the assessment criteria. As discussed, this practice could be extended to support self-assessment and peer-assessment.

A lesson promoting ICT skills with an individual student was visited and the students clearly appreciated the opportunity to work on an authentic piece of work. Further considerations regarding advancing the student's typing skills with appropriate software were discussed as was the use of the aforementioned school website and slideshow as a forum in which to present completed work. A visit was also undertaken to the PE hall where a fine example of inclusive practice was witnessed through the teacher facilitating students to 'play to their strengths' in order for all to participate, have fun and learn.

In conversations with teachers it was clear that, as professionals, they were always seeking ways to improve their practice. As discussed with staff during the evaluation, one such way is through team-teaching where, not only are there more opportunities for individualised engagement with students, but also for teachers to learn from one another in real time during their daily practice. Apart from the skills mentioned above, teachers could also then share their good practices, as witnessed during the course of the inspection.

The overall quality of teaching and learning in the lessons inspected was very good and this is in no small way due to the teachers and special needs assistants' efforts to create an environment that is conducive to learning and to building positive relationships with all students in the school.

ASSESSMENT

The school engages in a comprehensive range of procedures to assess students' learning and to inform teaching. Assessment data assists with, but does not solely determine, the limits of learning and the school has many examples of students surpassing initial expectations. These case studies of student success are communicated to staff at the beginning of each year and the progress made by students is a rightful source of pride for all concerned. Reports of students' engagement and achievements are communicated to home on a regular basis. As well as pre-state examinations, formal examinations take place at Christmas and summer. Parental interaction with the school is ongoing and encouraged. Appropriate standardised and diagnostic tests are used to initially determine learning and inform teaching. Investigations into the most appropriate screening and diagnostic tests to determine ability and attainment levels in literacy and numeracy are ongoing and are carried out in consultation with the school's guidance counsellor. 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.

Building on the good practice already in place it is recommended that the school consider standardised retesting of literacy and numeracy attainment. 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 teacher colleagues. Such findings could in turn feed into the aforementioned student register. In more recent times, members of the special educational needs team have presented to colleagues and it is suggested that such good practice should be extended to facilitate sharing of assessment information, based on entire year groups or individual case studies. This information can in turn support subject department planning where all teachers can identify, for example, the literacy and numeracy demands and developments associated with their own syllabi and programmes and put in place appropriate support programmes for the students.

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. Students of EAL are assessed using the recommended test material and the co-ordinator's professional learning in this area ensures that such assessment is of a high quality and the data gathered is used effectively to inform teaching and learning.

Feedback, by teachers 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 adopts subject-based homework policies and all staff members are encouraged to consider how best to differentiate assessment and homework in a manner similar to the differentiation that occurs with teaching and learning in the classroom. Similarly, peer and self-evaluation associated with assessment practices also allow students to monitor progress and identify further learning goals. In formulating an assessment policy, the school may wish to adopt a broad interpretation of assessment to include how all data associated with special educational needs can be used to continue to affirm and promote high quality teaching and learning in Millstreet Community School.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A whole-school evaluation report was published in 2006 in which favourable reference was made to the quality of provision for special educational needs. Under the leadership of school management the school has continued to develop practices that promote inclusive learning and advance overall school improvement.
- The school recognises the importance of adopting a whole-school approach to meeting the needs of all its students.
- The quality of teaching in the lessons inspected was very good.
- Provision is ably co-ordinated, on a voluntary basis, by an appointed staff member who has accessed considerable qualifications in special education.
- Senior management is supportive in accessing additional resources when requested, and further investment in information and communication technology (ICT) software is encouraged.
- All available additional teaching hours are factored into the master timetable at the time of its construction
- The school engages in a comprehensive range of procedures to assess students' learning and to inform teaching.
- Students are facilitated by the school in becoming familiar with relevant accommodations in advance of sitting state examinations.

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

- As recommended in the whole-school evaluation of 2006, the school is encouraged to give serious consideration to other modes of delivering support such as team-teaching.
- The timetabling of a regular meeting time for key personnel is recommended.
- Continued examination of best practice is encouraged in relation to individualised planning for students.
- The development of an overall inclusion policy and a student register, are recommended.
- It is recommended that the school consider standardised retesting of literacy and numeracy attainment and examine how best this and other data can be shared with and used by colleagues.

Post-evaluation meetings were held 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.