Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

Bishopstown Community School
Bishopstown, Cork
Roll number: 91397T

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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 in Bishopstown Community School, 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The school has a considerable number of students presenting with a diverse range of special educational needs. The school is a caring place of learning that responds to these needs in a manner that promotes inclusive practices and overall school improvement. The recommendations in this report focus on using existing resources to support additional structures that will add to the supportive culture in the school, and add to the quality of learning experienced by all students enrolled in Bishopstown Community School.

The school’s total allocation of 3.33 whole-teacher equivalents for provision for special educational needs is offset against a number of staff who are now in supernumerary positions. Among those with needs identified are students with low-incidence and high-incidence disabilities, students with low achievement in literacy and numeracy and students requiring English language support. At the time of the evaluation a permanent member of staff had gained a place on the Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs (PGDSEN) and it is envisaged that this staff member will co-ordinate provision henceforth. This will be a key aspect in attending to how best to structure support so as to make optimal use of the additional resources provided.

Notwithstanding the difficulties associated with supernumerary posts, an examination of the master timetable indicates that there is a significant difference between the hours allocated to the school and those actually used for supporting learning among students identified with special educational needs. The school is advised that issues relating to the timetabling of additional resources should take priority over all recommendations made in this report. It is recommended that the school devise a register of students entitled to additional support and that this register be used to monitor how these resources are used. This register should also serve to evaluate timetabling arrangements and the ways in which they are seen to support student learning. Once
completed, the register of students can be sensitively shared with teachers and other relevant school staff so as to promote a consistent and whole-school approach to meeting individual needs in the collective setting of the school.

The dominant model of additional support in the school is through the formation of a smaller class and through a withdrawal-based model. Significant numbers of students not studying Irish, and to a lesser extent French, receive additional support in the form of individual and small group withdrawal. An over-reliance on this model is not appropriate. In reviewing other modes of delivery the school should consider the benefits of team teaching, where two teachers work together in the classroom, rather than relying solely on students being withdrawn from lessons. Such a practice is very much in keeping with Department of Education and Skills policy; the Department’s *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines* (2007) may assist in this regard. Class groupings are formed on the basis of ability, though concurrent timetabling does allow for flexibility of student movement across classes. It was noted that some class groups were very small in number and it is suggested that team-teaching arrangements be also considered for some of these classes. Such new arrangements may assist in improving the overall learning dynamic by jointly challenging and supporting students to reach their potential.

There are six fulltime special needs assistants in the school and their good work in fulfilling their non-teaching duties are recognised by students and teachers alike. The school is well resourced and while staff have done good work in accessing additional material that is both age-appropriate and ability-appropriate for their students, it is important that these efforts continue. Extracurricular and co-curricular activities are open to all students and these in turn provide opportunities to make friendships and promote a sense of belonging among the student population. The many displays of students’ photographs as well as displays of the work also add to this sense of place and sense of belonging. As referenced in the school’s *Inclusion Policy*, the promotion of inclusive practices in Bishopstown Community School is dependent upon both adults and students being active agents of inclusion in the school. In light of the school’s recognition of the importance and value of students supporting one another the school may wish to examine the introduction of peer programmes such as paired-reading and paired-mathematics.

The school is involved in a range of initiatives, both national and local, which reflects the school’s understanding that provision for students with special educational needs is a key driver in determining and sustaining school improvement for all students.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Many aspects of planning and preparation are good, but other aspects require attention. The quality of planning and preparation, in meeting the needs of students identified with special educational needs, is enhanced by the school’s engagement with the primary schools in advance of students attending the school. Good lines of communication are established with parents and the school also engages with personnel from the relevant external agencies. To further support this work the school should consider timetabling a formal weekly meeting that will allow the co-ordinator, guidance counsellor and other relevant personnel to meet. This would support the existing and equally necessary informal meetings. Such a formal meeting time could also be used to meet with external personnel such as the local National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist, Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) or members of the Visiting Teachers Service (VTS).
The school has a number of planning documents including a *Special Educational Needs Policy 2008-2010*, a statement of *Policy and Strategies Unit for the Deaf 2009-2010* as well as a draft *Inclusion Policy*. The latter document is concise, and well-constructed with informative content. This overarching policy document correctly takes a broad interpretation of needs and highlights school improvement as involving recognition of what may prevent or promote student learning. In ratifying this progressive draft *Inclusion Policy*, the school should consider incorporating aspects of the other two policy documents mentioned above.

The *Special Educational Needs Policy 2008-2010* is based on a School Development Planning Initiative template and speaks of issues relating to ‘an inclusive environment’, the promotion of literacy and numeracy skills, as well as nurturing student self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Brief outlines are given of roles and responsibilities of staff, including those associated with the special needs assistants and external personnel. Reference is also made to assessment practices and information is given on low-incidence and high-incidence needs. The school is encouraged to build on this document and examine how a number of key concepts, such as ‘literacy and numeracy’, ‘inclusion’ and, ‘whole-school approach’, are defined in the context of the school. As well as identifying categories of needs, the school should now consider examining the range of responses, both in organisational and pedagogical terms, which may best meet such identified needs. This work will require consultation, dissemination and review. The communication of these activities may be facilitated by not only planning, preparing and implementing policy documents but by keeping such documents alive and evaluated through a staff handbook. Such a handbook may also serve to audit existing staff skills and highlight areas that require continued attention in the form of ongoing professional development. The sharing of in-house expertise, of which there is a considerable amount, should be actively encouraged and facilitated. In turn, external expertise should continue to be pursued wherever deemed appropriate.

The work of the special needs assistants was found to be effective, and their willingness to access specific training to meet individual needs is commendable. In promoting students’ independence and in keeping with good practice, the special needs assistants are, where appropriate, assigned on a rotating basis to students. Their good work is often subtle and preventative in nature. To further support the good work being undertaken by the special needs assistants, the school should discuss at whole-school level, how students’ independence can be further nurtured as they progress through the school. Specific guidelines drawn up by special needs assistants, teachers and, where deemed appropriate, by students may assist in maximising the role of the special needs assistant while also promoting and celebrating students’ diminishing needs. This would be of particular relevance to students who are older and who may wish not to be overly associated with assistance. It may be beneficial to consider, where appropriate, that special needs assistants would adopt a range of supportive actions and remain on call but outside the classroom during particular lessons or that they would, with the support of the teacher, work in the classroom rather than sitting beside a particular student for the duration of the lesson.

Subject department planning is ongoing and given the range of students’ needs presenting, the school should continue to adopt whole-school approaches, such as the use of keywords and the promotion of formative assessment. The appointment of a co-ordinator will further assist in ensuring that the learning encountered by students is planned cohesively and collectively. It would be important that this appointment would be seen to further promote rather than replace the existing spirit of co-operation among teachers and that it would continue to support the central role that the mainstream subject teachers play in allowing students to access, participate in and benefit from the learning experiences provided by the school. A guide to the role and
The responsibilities of the co-ordinator is available in the Department of Education and Science Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines (2007).

Building specific capacity among the staff is not new in Bishopstown Community School. In the past the school has actively sought to meet the needs of students who are deaf or hearing impaired. Two students are enrolled in first year and it is envisaged that more students will be enrolling over the next few years. In order to optimise the learning experience for these students, considerable planning will be required. Staff members have visited similar settings in other schools and have engaged with the relevant visiting teacher. In further promoting a whole-school approach continued interaction and consultation with the visiting teacher service is advised. A review of the planning documentation Policy and Strategies Unit for the Deaf 2009-2010 and the practice witnessed would indicate that the school is well placed to meet the needs presenting. All involved are deserving of praise for their commitment to meeting these specific needs. The use of the base classroom to allow students radiate outwards and into mainstream classrooms is commendable. Given that students will not always have the same strengths, interests or needs individual plans for each student’s engagement with certain subjects will be required. Such planning will also require that the audiological quality of all learning settings, and access to specialist equipment in such settings, are reviewed regularly. In the spirit of the school’s understanding of inclusion the above mentioned policy document is correctly seen as part of the school’s overarching policy of promoting inclusive learning. Further advances in school protocols associated with acoustic accommodations and communication development can form part of this policy. Similarly, the recommendations in this report should be read with the understanding that they apply to all students in the school including those who are deaf and hard of hearing.

In planning for inclusion the school is mindful of attending to the individual needs of students. Formal individual education plans are not formulated and attention is drawn to the need to prepare for when such plans are mandated by legislation. When formulated such plans can dovetail with the aforementioned register and allow staff to track individual progress and celebrate students’ gains in both cognitive and affective domains. In the course of the evaluation examples of collective responses by teachers and non-teaching staff to individual needs were witnessed and this is the essence of individualised planning. Engagement with the Special Educational Needs Support Service (www.sess.ie) will further support such good work, and this service can also provide online learning opportunities, as already accessed by some staff members.

There is evidence that the school engages in a range of effective planning and preparation activities. However, as outlined above, more needs to be done to put additional structures in place. The appointment of a trained permanent member of staff to co-ordinate provision will assist in this regard. However, continued leadership from senior management will be required to put these and other structures in place. Leadership from each staff member will also be required to formulate, implement, sustain and review these structures. The school is well placed to achieve such change and this is particularly so in light of the staff’s palpable desire to do what is best for the students. Such commitment was particularly evident in the lessons inspected during the course of the evaluation.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

Nine lessons of forty minutes duration were inspected during the two-day evaluation. These classes ranged in size, from one-to-one withdrawal to whole-class teaching. The lessons observed focused on literacy and numeracy, on developing specific individual skills while also attending to certain subject disciplines such as Geography, Science, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Music, Materials Technology (Metal), and English. The overall quality of learning and teaching observed was very good and the quality of student learning was seen to be in keeping with students’ ability levels.

A significant feature of all lessons inspected was the good teacher-student relationships and the recognition of the importance of such relationships in promoting learning. Learning was seen to be both content-focused and also learner-focused with every effort being made to create an atmosphere that was conducive to learning. The purposeful and safe learning environment encouraged students to ask questions and seek clarifications where necessary. Judicious use of praise and humour also cultivated a positive learning environment. Lessons were well planned with a range of appropriate resources used to good effect.

Teachers’ thorough knowledge of both their subject and their students assisted in determining the pace of the lesson. Questions were framed, distributed and answered in a variety of different ways. The whiteboard was used to introduce the lesson topic and, in some cases, was in turn availed of at the end of the lesson to show the progress made over the duration of the lesson. The practice of displaying students’ work and activities was witnessed and it was evident that further extension of such practice would be beneficial. Such displays have been found to foster among students a sense of being valued by, and of belonging to, the school community. They also motivate learners by showing students that they have a potential audience for their work and therefore correction and subsequent redrafting or redesigning of initial efforts are relevant, important and the norm for all.

Good use of information and communication technology (ICT) was witnessed in CSPE and English lessons. These lessons often availed of purposeful pair work to advance the lesson aims and objectives. The overlap between academic and social development was not lost on teachers using such co-operative learning methods. A music lesson adroitly combined literacy and numeracy skills with the acquisition of musical skills. The inclusive and meaningful way in which all participated and learned, including students who are deaf or hearing impaired, was a strong indicator of the high quality of this lesson.

Experiential learning was very much to the fore with the students studying Geography and Science. Practical demonstration of the impact of ice and other geographical related phenomena were used to good effect to ensure learning. Students were visibly engaged in the lesson as evidenced by the quality of questions they asked their teacher. A differentiated approach to learning was adopted in the science lesson where the students wrote up their completed practical investigation. Teacher support was given in a manner that promoted independent learning and the skilful use of one student to model the investigation undertaken assisted students’ recall of the content covered.
Students, in the resource room for deaf and hearing impaired, were engaged in pre-teaching and post-teaching activities. Students were clearly benefiting from this support and, apart from the knowledge gained, they also acquired confidence in their ability to avail of learning in the mainstream classroom with their peers. Again good use of ICT and student knowledge was to the fore in this lesson.

In other lessons observed, teachers skilfully helped with students’ personal development. One teacher used the design and manufacturing of a game, to promote students literacy and numeracy skills while also promoting students’ self-worth and sense of belonging. These ‘engineers’ were rightfully very proud of their work and consequently proud of themselves and their new school. Attending to students emotional needs was also witnessed in a lesson among fourth-year students. The awareness that students, as with adults, can be active agents of inclusion or exclusion in a school was not lost on these students who appreciated the opportunity to speak, listen and learn about inclusion and about themselves.

Students were uniformly polite and courteous during all aspects of the evaluation. Their strong handshakes and willingness to talk in a confident and respectful manner reflect well upon the quality of learning provided by the teachers in the school. Ongoing sharing by teachers of the good practices witnessed is the only significant recommendation in relation to teaching and learning. How that may be achieved can take many forms but the use of team teaching should also be seriously considered in this regard, where student learning and teacher learning can occur simultaneously.

**ASSESSMENT**

The school engages in a range of procedures to assess students’ learning and to inform teaching. Students’ engagement and achievements are communicated to home on a regular basis. Attendance is monitored and parents are facilitated, on request, to meet with teachers. Students’ progress is also assessed on a daily basis by subject teachers and by class-based examinations. As well as pre-certificate examinations, formal examinations take place at Christmas and summer. Students’ work is monitored, stored and used sensitively to assess and determine progress.

The school is currently examining new standardised tests which will attend to students’ cognitive abilities. Consultation with the local NEPS psychologist will further assist in this regard. The school should examine the feasibility of testing cognitive and affective domains with a view to also retesting these at a later date. In keeping with the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative and 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. It is important also to track students’ progress, such as the manner in which they engage with their learning and how they view themselves and others. This progress may not be so easily quantifiable but is nonetheless important. The use of class or individual case studies may assist in this regard. As well as acknowledging academic achievements the school seeks to promote students’ self-esteem and sense of belonging by recognising student engagement and other achievements. The OECD publication Student Engagement At School, A Sense of Belonging and Participation (2003) may further assist in this regard.
In consultation with the local 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 accommodation provided.

The student journal is used to monitor assigned work and to communicate with home. The school homework policy is subject-based, user-friendly and recognises the need for homework to be differentiated by content, process and product similar to how teaching is differentiated. Both individual and whole-class feedback was a common feature of all lessons observed and such practice assisted in affirming acquired learning and informing desired learning. Students’ written work was found to be regularly corrected, and on occasion signed, dated and with concluding comments to encourage students in their learning.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school is an inclusive and caring place of learning.
- The overall quality of learning and teaching in the lessons inspected was very good.
- At the time of the evaluation a permanent member of staff had gained a place on the PGDSEN and it is envisaged that this staff member will co-ordinate provision henceforth.
- The learning experiences for deaf and hard of hearing students are positive.
- Extracurricular and co-curricular activities are open to all students and these in turn provides opportunities to make friendships and promote a sense of belonging among the student population.
- A range of policy documents in relation to special educational needs is in place; in particular, the draft *Inclusion Policy* is commended for its content and its quality.
- Continuing professional development is a feature of the school at both individual teacher and whole-staff level.
- The school engages in a range of procedures to assess students’ learning and to inform teaching.

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

- Priority should be given to ensuring that all additional resources for special educational needs are fully timetabled and appropriately deployed.
- It is recommended that the school devise a register of students entitled to additional support and that this register be used to monitor how these resources are used and to evaluate timetabling arrangements and the ways in which they support students’ learning.
- The school should consider the benefits of team-teaching as part of its range of responses to support student learning.
- A formal regular meeting time for the co-ordinator and core team of teachers involved should be provided.
- In progressing ongoing inclusive practices a general staff handbook is recommended as a means of capturing existing practices and outlining agreed definitions, roles and responsibilities.
In order to further promote a collaborative and whole-school response, it is recommended that the findings from retesting, along with other student gains, should be appropriately shared with colleagues.

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.