Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

St Enda’s Community School
Kilmallock Road, Limerick
Roll number: 91446G

Date of inspection: 18 January 2011
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 Enda’s Community School, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 deputy principal and members of the school’s special educational needs support team.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Teachers and special needs assistants in St Enda’s are committed to providing a purposeful and positive learning experience for all students enrolled. While acknowledging that the personalised approach to learning and some other inclusive practices adopted by teachers are significant strengths of the school, there are a number of recommendations in this report which require the support of the board of management, senior management and teaching staff. These recommendations ask of all in the school to build on existing collaborative practices, so that agreed actions can be implemented and sustained for the benefit of all learners.

Of the 110 students currently enrolled in St Enda’s Community School a significant number present with a diverse range of special educational needs. These needs are both low-incidence and high-incidence in nature. In addition, the school has a considerable number of students with low achievement in literacy and numeracy. The school is also alert to the possibility of students with English as an additional language (EAL) possessing special educational needs, including being exceptionally able.

The school’s total allocation of 3.81 whole-teacher equivalents for provision for special educational needs is offset against the school’s supernumerary position. In addition, the school is allocated provision for 3.50 whole-time equivalent special needs assistants. Three teachers, one of whom is involved in home school community liaison, have recognised post-graduate qualifications in special education. Other staff members have accessed related professional development opportunities, including those provided by various Department-funded support services. Support is provided to students identified with special educational needs through small-group interventions and, to a lesser extent, through individual student withdrawal from class.
A limited amount of in-class support is provided by subject teachers and it is recommended that the school extend its repertoire of interventions by re-engaging with team-teaching, which was practised in the past by some members of staff. Team-teaching is very much in keeping with Department policy and the possible benefits include: meeting the needs of identified students in the collective setting of the classroom; meeting the needs of more students in the classroom setting; reducing for students the need to leave class or study less subjects; improving the quality of learning continuity for students and intra-school communication among staff. As outlined in the Department’s *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post Primary Guidelines* (2007), team-teaching also offers professional development and learning opportunities for teachers in real time and in a real context; provides time for teachers to observe, monitor and support students’ personal, social and academic development; allows teachers an opportunity to engage in, and learn more about, particular teaching practices. It may prove beneficial for the school to start the process of team-teaching with a small group of interested teachers, with a particular focus on a student or a number of students. The accruing benefits to students can be monitored and shared, as can the challenges and opportunities encountered by participating teachers.

Despite the supernumerary status of the school, which restricts to a certain extent the school’s timetabling practices, good work is being done in matching students’ needs with teachers who have the knowledge, skills and attitudes to best support such needs. However, some students are operating timetables which can lead to fragmented, inconsistent and ultimately less effective interventions by their teachers. It is recommended that this matter be given priority when next constructing the master-timetable. The aforementioned team-teaching arrangement may assist in this regard. The use of a student register to track how the resources are being used and how they support learning, particularly for students with low-incidence and high-incidence needs, is also recommended.

The school environment is a credit to all concerned and helps to create and sustain a positive learning environment. Both staff and students are clearly proud of their school and maintain it to a very high standard. The warm and welcoming school atmosphere in classrooms and in the staffroom was a notable feature of the inspection, with the display of students’ work and related activities along the corridors promoting a sense of ownership and a sense of being valued. Students are clearly benefiting from attending St Enda’s and an impressive range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities including peer-supported mentoring programmes is available to students. The use of paired-reading and other peer-supports was discussed with teachers and may assist in future plans associated with peer-support.

The school is well resourced with appropriate learning materials with easy access to information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. The creation of a resource centre where all teachers could access resources, including ICT resources, merits consideration. A regularly updated list of what’s available in this central location could be made available in the staffroom. Similarly, a shared drive should be established on the school’s ICT network where generic resources and internet links, such as those associated with literacy and numeracy, can be uploaded for access by all teachers.

The school engages with a considerable number of external agencies to support students with their learning, their development and their overall well-being. The dedication and the concern of teachers for their students do not always transfer into structures that allow for efficient and effective communication with all external agencies. Facilitating members of some of these agencies to address staff or engage with students has proved useful and this, along with greater forms of coordination between the school and relevant agencies, will help to ensure a collective,
systematic and effective response to students’ needs. Monitoring the impact that short-term external interventions have upon supporting students’ learning and development, both cognitive and affective, is also advised. Such practice would, in turn, allow the school to be alert to unintended outcomes such as fragmentation or diminution of the curriculum and of learning which may be caused by over-exposure to such interventions.

Overall provision and whole-school support requires greater co-ordination. At present, the school does not have a designated co-ordinator for special educational needs. It was reported that the principal and deputy principal undertake this work and liaise with the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO). When next reviewing the school’s posts of responsibility, this matter should be given serious consideration.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school does succeed with certain aspects of planning and preparation for students with special educational needs, but the effects would be far greater were there a co-ordinator assigned. Some efforts are made to engage with primary-school personnel and with parents. However, a more effective and systematic transfer programme is required. Current procedures could, for example, be extended to include obtaining and sharing basic information around individual students’ attendance patterns in primary school. This information would then provide a baseline for determining progress at post-primary.

A weekly scheduled meeting time for those staff members most closely involved in delivering support is factored into the master-timetable each year. This significantly assists with planning and preparation, and supports good lines of communication between staff. This is particularly important, given the range of students’ needs presenting, agencies involved and resources invested in special educational needs. These meetings could fruitfully include attendance of key members of the DEIS planning team and a member of senior management. As well as continuing to respond to identified needs, they could also support DEIS processes of baseline-data gathering, and target and strategy selection; the identification of whole-staff professional development needs; and the evaluation of progress in relation to the identified whole-school targets.

The school has a special educational needs policy which is in draft form and which was first compiled in 2006. This document correctly highlights the importance of student voice and parental engagement in the promotion of inclusive and effective learning, at whole-school level, and in each classroom and learning space. The planned review and ratification of this policy will be informed by the Department’s, *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs, Post-Primary Guidelines* (2007). This publication will be of particular use in stating the roles and responsibilities of all involved, including special needs assistants, and can highlight the key role of the mainstream teacher in promoting inclusive learning in the classroom or as part of a subject-department team. It would also be fruitful at this juncture, for the school to create a staff handbook where relevant aspects of all school policies, along with other stated practices and aims, could be kept to the fore and reviewed regularly. Aspects of the school’s more-recently documented literacy and numeracy policy could also be reviewed and included here, as could the sharing of existing or proposed teaching, learning and assessment practices that can support student learning.

Ongoing participation in a range of relevant professional development opportunities is important for teachers and for special needs assistants. An audit of skills among the staff would be useful in determining, not only the future professional learning needs at whole-school level, but also in
revealing existing skills and talents that staff possess and may wish to share. Sharing skills and knowledge among colleagues has the added advantage of being context-sensitive and readily accessible. As well as provision of professional development at the whole-school level, school management should also give serious consideration to inviting another member of staff to access recognised post-graduate qualifications in the area of special education.

An extension of planning practices to create individual educational plans would further extend the model of ‘one plan one student’ and support the existing culture among teachers and special needs assistants of collectively responding to individual needs. The advantages of ICT, in the formulating, sharing and updating of individual student plans, merit consideration.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all classrooms visited, teachers displayed detailed knowledge of their subject, of subject-pedagogy, and of their students. Personalised learning was the norm and lessons focused on the prioritised learning needs of individual students while also supporting access to the wider curriculum. The classes visited were formed on the basis of whole-class groupings, as well as individual and small group withdrawal. Learning objectives ranged from the development of literacy and numeracy skills, to the acquisition and promotion of subject-based knowledge, skills and attitudes associated with Art, English, French, Mathematics, Metalwork, Science and Woodwork.

In most cases, class size was relatively small and this facilitated a lot of discussion between teachers and students, and to a lesser extent among students themselves. Indeed it was in the larger and more practically-orientated lessons that informal but effective co-operation between students was most commonly witnessed. Co-operative learning activities also afforded opportunities for differentiation of the learning by the teacher and reinforcement of learning by the students. Such practices should form a component part of most lessons, with a gradual increase in the amount of responsibility and accountability being transferred to the students. Co-operative learning is closely linked to the development of oral skills and also supports students in becoming more aware of other important skills such as teamwork, turn-taking and critical thinking. School documentation makes reference to developing students’ emotional literacy. Short periods of time devoted to pair-work and small-group work would assist this worthy goal.

In some lessons observed, teachers made a point of attending to the literacy and numeracy demands of the lesson, and students clearly benefited from keywords being highlighted and put in context at the beginning and throughout the lesson. Good use of formative assessment techniques such as outlining the learning aims at the beginning of the lesson, and on occasion the planned homework that was to follow, served to focus students’ attention and engage them in the lesson. Similar practices at the end of the lesson captured the learning that had taken place and promoted a sense of achievement among students.

In the larger groups, a range of teacher-questioning techniques was observed and many teachers used questioning to ensure the participation and engagement of all students. Questions from students to their teachers were witnessed in some lessons and, where it did occur, teachers used students’ queries and observations to promote learning for the whole group. In all lessons, teachers praised students for their contributions and efforts, with sensitive correction occurring where necessary, and judicious use of humour being availed of regularly. Student journals were used by teachers to communicate with home, including the use of merit-stickers. Good teacher
mobility and knowledge of students’ learning styles resulted in many students gaining the teachers’ attention in a manner that facilitated a quiet question being asked or a clarification being received.

The classes formed by small-group and individual withdrawal allowed students to ask questions more easily and receive attention more quickly. These lessons focused on specific subject-related skills or on more general skills associated with literacy and numeracy. Students were clearly benefiting from these opportunities to receive additional support and encouragement from their teachers. On-going development of practices such as role-play, including the recording of same, were discussed as was the extension of the commendable practice of promoting literacy and numeracy through storyboards in Art. It is recommended that, along with co-operative learning practices, the school give consideration to extending the use of graphic organisers across a number of subject areas. Graphic organisers and their multiple uses can assist in the process of organising thinking in a manner that can be of interest to students, appeal to their learning styles and meet their learning needs. These visual frameworks can also offer opportunities for co-operative practice, self-assessment and self-evaluation.

The overall quality of teaching and learning was good with teachers having a knowledge and understanding of both their students and their subject area. Consideration should now be given to how team-teaching can further support student learning by providing individual attention in the collective setting of the classroom. Teachers should also consider how literacy and numeracy skills can be promoted through a collective teacher-based response. Adopting a whole-school approach for a particular year group, or among a particular group of subject teachers, may prove useful. Measuring the impact of such a development could, in part, be informed by plans to retest students’ progress with literacy and numeracy as well as other activities associated with DEIS action-planning. Leadership for such action could stem from the aforementioned weekly meeting.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment takes many forms in the school, all of which are designed to determine learning and inform teaching. Feedback to students was a constant in-class activity in the lessons observed with formative assessment often to the fore. Again, the desire to instil confidence in students was often a key motivating factor on the part of teachers. One-to-one conversations within the classroom setting, as well as more general feedback to the whole-class group, were frequent and used to good effect.

Students’ engagement and achievements are communicated to home on a regular basis. Parents are facilitated, on request, to meet with teachers. Some teachers expressed frustration at not being able to make contact with certain parents. A range of standardised and diagnostic tests is used to determine learning and inform teaching. The school, in conjunction with its local NEPS psychologist should review some of the tests being undertaken so as to avoid unnecessary over-testing, especially at the initial stages of a student’s career in the school. Engagement with the school completion programme should focus on increased communication regarding the transfer process from primary school. As well as accessing information on students’ learning needs, schools could come together to discuss common issues relating to the promotion of literacy, numeracy and assessment.

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. 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.

Re-testing is planned in the areas of literacy and numeracy. This is an important and welcome development and will assist in sustaining a whole-school approach to the promotion of these important skills. Findings and trends from these tests should be shared with colleagues and could also usefully feed into the aforementioned student register. Retesting could occur at Christmas in second year and at spring in third year. Consideration should also be given to similar practices in senior cycle. These findings, along with other more qualitative student gains, can then be shared and interpreted by staff on a whole-school or subject-based level. 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. Such practices will also support the view that literacy and numeracy development has a place in all students’ learning and not just those identified with skill deficiencies in this area of learning.

As well as assessing cognitive domains, the school is also encouraged to consider assessing students’ affective domains, including social and emotional development. Such findings would honour teachers’ commitment to the holistic development of their students and assist in capturing data on how students feel about themselves, their school and their learning. The OECD publication *Student Engagement at School: A Sense of Belonging and Participation*, 2000, may prove of benefit.

The draft homework policy supports independent learning though clearly the level of independent learning is, in part, influenced by the attendant literacy and numeracy demands that may be placed on students. Homework clubs assist in this regard as does the support available from home. Parental insights into homework are documented as an appendix to the school’s draft special educational needs policy and their honest commentary merits consideration in future discussions in relation to homework and feedback.

There are a considerable number of assessment practices attached to a range of interventions being undertaken in the school. It would serve the school well to devise an overarching assessment policy that would promote a systematic, strategic and collective approach, to sharing, interpreting, responding and revisiting both quantitative and qualitative assessment data. The use of case study to capture more nuanced progress, either at individual or class-group level, should also be considered. The use of peer-assessment and self-assessment, as witnessed in some lessons, should also form part of the school’s future assessment practices.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A significant strength of the school is the teachers’ personalised approach to learning and their commitment to meeting all the needs of all their students.
- Compassion and care are equally matched with a desire to encourage and to challenge students to achieve their potential while in school.
- Students are clearly benefiting from their time in St Enda’s, and a good overall standard of teaching and learning was witnessed in the lessons observed.
A range of effective practices is undertaken at individual level by teachers, but more needs to be done regarding systematic planning and preparation at whole-school level.

The warm and welcoming school atmosphere in classrooms and in the staffroom was a notable feature of the inspection, with the display of students’ work and related activities along the corridors promoting a sense of ownership and a sense of being valued.

There are many examples of teachers purposely seeking to capture and publicly celebrate students’ success.

Assessment takes many forms and is designed to inform teaching and promote learning.

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

• The appointment of a co-ordinator for special educational needs should be given serious consideration.

• Key members of the DEIS planning team and a member of senior management should be invited to attend the timetabled meetings of the core teachers of special educational needs. These weekly meetings could then support DEIS processes of baseline-data gathering, and target and strategy selection; the identification of whole-staff professional development needs; and the evaluation of progress in relation to the identified whole-school targets.

• Further collective responses by teachers, which particularly support the development of literacy and numeracy skills among students, are recommended.

• It is recommended that the school give renewed consideration to additional modes of delivering support including team-teaching.

• A student register should be established to track the resources provided, the personnel assigned, and the outcomes for the students.

• Regular retesting of students’ literacy and numeracy skills, and the sharing and interpreting of such assessment data, is recommended.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the members of the school’s special educational needs support team and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation, when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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