

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**  
**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs**  
**REPORT**

**Maria Immaculata Community College**  
**Dunmanway, County Cork**  
**Roll number: 76086P**

**Date of inspection: 8 February 2013**



A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F  
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N  
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S

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

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**INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION**

<b>Dates of inspection</b>	7-8 February 2013
<b>Inspection activities undertaken</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interaction with students</li> <li>• Discussions with special needs assistants</li> <li>• Discussion with school completion personnel</li> <li>• Examination of some students' work</li> <li>• Review of documents and records,</li> <li>• Feedback to principal, deputy principal and teachers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observation of learning and teaching in classrooms</li> <li>• Discussions with principal and deputy principal</li> <li>• Discussions with teachers</li> </ul>	

**MAIN FINDINGS**

- The overall quality of learning and teaching observed was good and in many cases very good.
- The school recognises the interdependence between the ongoing promotion of inclusive practices and that of school improvement.
- Purposeful engagement by some teachers with continuing professional development is positively influencing the learning experiences made available to students in the school.
- The sharing of information assists in personalising the learning for each student and in tracking their progress.
- Allocated resources are utilised for the purposes intended and the extension of the well-designed register to monitor the resources provided, and their impact, will ensure that such allocation is used to the optimal benefit of the students.
- A range of assessment practices are in place at classroom and whole-school level, but attention to initial screening practices of cognitive ability is required.
- Good communication with primary schools and relevant personnel from external agencies supports the quality of learning and the quality of the learning experience in the school.

**MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The school's allocated resources are utilised for the purposes intended but more flexible approaches to the use of these resources need to be addressed, including the use of team-teaching as a mode of delivery.
- Ongoing engagement with individualised planning for students with low-incidence needs is recommended and this work should, in turn, link to the tracking of outcomes via the school's register.
- To make optimal use of the resources allocated to the special class for autism, a review of timetabling and autism-specific practices is recommended.
- Consideration should be given to extending the use of retesting and other assessment tools to establish students' progress at intervals throughout their school years. Initial

testing of cognitive ability should be introduced in consultation with the local National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) representative.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The diversity among its 518 students, including students in three designated special classes, reflects Maria Immaculata Community College's commitment to the provision of an inclusive education for all in the community. In welcoming and responding to such diversity, the school correctly recognises that school improvement and the promotion of inclusive practices are closely intertwined. The evaluation for the provision for students with special educational needs was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. At the time of the inspection an acting principal and acting deputy principal arrangement was in place. There are many positive findings in this report and the recommendations outlined are well within the remit of the school.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

- The overall quality of teaching and learning in the lessons visited was good and in many cases very good. The well appointed school facilities are maintained to a very high standard which, when combined with the courteous manner in which students conducted themselves throughout the building, makes the school safe and accessible to a wide range of abilities and needs.
- A total of thirteen teachers were visited over the course of the inspection. These lessons focused on a variety of learning outcomes and subjects, across a range of junior and senior cycle programmes. Subjects taught included Business Studies, English, Gaeilge, History, Life Skills, Materials Technology (Wood), Mathematics, Music and Physical Education.
- The classes visited, were formed on the basis of whole-class groups, small-group and individual withdrawal. Apart from the special class for autism, there were no team-teaching arrangements in place at the time of the inspection. In keeping with Department policy, examination of the various configurations and benefits that team-teaching affords to students' learning should now be considered.
- Teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge was matched by knowledge of their students, and by a commitment and dedication to promoting purposeful learning opportunities that attended to students' personal, developmental and academic needs.
- Teachers were well prepared for their lessons with some ensuring differentiated and personalised learning through a variety of appropriately paced tasks. All lessons were conducted in a safe, suitably challenging and trusting learning environment.
- Lessons observed were well structured. Where appropriate, lessons began with homework correction, and some teachers also began lessons by outlining the homework that would later be assigned. Students visibly valued the structure to their lessons and the planning undertaken by their teachers. Where witnessed, timely feedback from teachers for students' class contribution and homework also enhanced learning and the motivation to learn.

- Of note in the school was the manner in which teachers moved about their classrooms which allowed learning to be monitored and individual or collective requests to be addressed. Consequently, lessons were conducted in an atmosphere that was respectful and conducive to learning. Judicious use of humour and praise were evident in many lessons and students appeared to sense that the school was a place to which they and others belonged and where it was safe to be themselves.
- Journals were seen to be used by students and checked by teachers who often added encouraging comments. Some of the copies viewed had the homework signed and dated by the teachers, while in other cases it was clear that the work had been corrected by students under the direction of their teacher.
- Student self-advocacy was frequently supported and encouraged by teachers and this in turn promoted students' motivation to learn and persist with learning.
- A renewed focus on the use of comments, verbal or written, by teachers after homework is submitted, and the use of peer assessment before submission, may assist in advancing the quality of learning that can be derived from homework.
- A renewed focus on the instructional practices engaged by teachers, merits attention. The school may wish to act upon the following aspects of pedagogy; graphic organisers, effective group work, framing and responding to both teacher-led and student-led questions, differentiation for all students including exceptionally able and gifted students, as well as determining the most effect ways of providing feedback to, and receiving feedback from students.
- Consideration should be given to the intrinsic motivation that can be derived from facilitating student display or sharing of their work. This can have particular value where individual or small-group teaching takes place. Such displays can further support literacy and numeracy development and be displayed within the classroom or electronically across the school community.
- With regard to the three designated special classes, there is quite a range of ability in each of the classes, and a personalised approach to teaching and learning should be kept to the fore for each student. Continued engagement with individual education plans (IEPs) is correctly recognised by the school as an important means of attending to each student's learning needs and learning goals.
- The school co-ordinator's pioneering work and commitment to all three special classes is deserving of much praise. Through ongoing and new forms of collaborative engagement with equally committed teaching colleagues and special needs assistants, the recommendations below will add to the existing quality of provision being made available to students.
- The lessons in the two multi-disability special classes were structured to attend to both the cognitive and affective domains. A broad curriculum is offered and an atmosphere of care is very evident. Further engagement with the NCCA website to access published guidelines, on teaching students with general learning disabilities, and the new junior cycle framework, will assist with the quality of learning and the quality of the learning experience for all who attend these classes. Capturing progress through dynamic assessment such as work samples, video recording and observation schedules should be included in any future development planning. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) as witnessed in these classes is commended and expansion of such a resource to further enhance learning and to further capture progress will prove useful.

- Reverse inclusion practices were seen to be effective, where students are supported in being agents of inclusion and the school is encouraged to continue to remain alert to opportunities where students in the multi-disciplinary class can engage with their peers in certain settings and for certain subjects.
- The special class to assist with the learning and teaching of students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) has examples of such good practices where some students are facilitated and encouraged to integrate with their peers in mainstream classes. Planning for continued and greater inclusion in mainstream settings would seem a viable option for some of these students also, as they progress through the school. Other students in this class require a more individualised and focused intervention.
- For those requiring a more nuanced and individualised response, the broad curriculum, combined with many transitions, many teachers and other changes across the day merit review. A more tailored programme that is based on evidence-based ASD research is recommended. The current use of the class's allocation of 1.5 whole-teacher equivalents and two special needs assistants needs to be reviewed so as to make optimal use of the resources provided.
- To further support this recommendation, greater and continuous use of observation schedules to record, interpret and then inform instruction is strongly advised. A range of ASD-specific interventions is also required so as to ensure learning and progress. In this regard, the school is encouraged to continue to access the Special Education Support Service and to avail of the support of the Middletown Centre for Autism. Accessing such support will assist in maximising the impact of the current provision and assist in enhancing the quality of living and learning for those students with more complex needs, enrolled in Maria Immaculata Community College.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was good, and inclusive learning is promoted in an atmosphere where due attention is given to the resources provided and to the promotion of a collective response from teaching and non-teaching staff.

#### **SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

- The school is responsive, flexible and thoughtful in its engagement with learners and their learning. The school strives to be inclusive in both its policies and practices. Provision for special educational needs is significant and the dedication and commitment of those involved in its co-ordination and implementation is acknowledged in this report.
- A total of 214.77 additional teaching hours, which equates to 9.76 whole-teacher equivalents, are allocated to the school. The special classes receive 4.5 of this teacher allocation and they utilise 9 of the allocated 12 special needs assistants' posts.
- There are currently a considerable number of teachers involved in delivering these additional resources, but effective timetabling practices assist in avoiding an overly-fragmented or ad hoc programme of support. All involved are commended for such work and should make every effort to continue to ensure a cohesive programme of engagement for students in receipt of additional support.
- Extension of the use of good timetabling practices to facilitate team-teaching should now be considered. The advantages associated with this model of support pertain to both students and teachers. Such a model will reduce the need for students to be withdrawn from class, will make optimal use of the resources provided and will enhance

opportunities for greater teacher collaboration and communication. The very effective cooperation between school completion programme (SCP) personnel and teachers is noteworthy as is the praiseworthy shared learning area that is room twenty-eight.

- The school recognises and engages with continuing professional development as a means of responding to identified needs and to promoting school improvement. The key role of the mainstream teacher requires ongoing attention being given to building capacity among teachers through formal and informal professional learning opportunities. This point is all the more prevalent given the increase in the diversity of students' needs and abilities.
- Student access to the full curriculum is facilitated by the school's flexible approach. Commendably, some students entitled to exemptions from Irish are found to be studying the language as per their wish and the school remains alert to the possible foreclosure on certain career choices as a result of not having the requisite language accreditation. The practice of students being withdrawn from social personal and health education (SPHE) classes, for additional support, should be discontinued.
- Students' engagement, achievements and attainments are communicated home on a regular basis. Extra and co-curricular activities allow fellow students to support inclusive actions, the school play being a shining example of such good work. Good practices regarding more formal peer support, such as paired-reading and other similar activities are also in place.
- Reasonable accommodation for certificate examinations (RACE) is provided for in both house and state examinations. Cognitive ability tests are currently not being administered and this matter needs to be addressed immediately in order to assist in informing the school of the profile and progress of individual students, including the exceptionally able and gifted.
- The school's focus on literacy and numeracy development will be informed by these and other standardised tests and by the expertise among staff qualified in the area of special education. Retesting of students in second year and the use of case studies and other previously recommended assessment tools will further assist in capturing the progress that students make in the school.
- As discussed with teachers and senior management, there are some areas of assessment that require attention. More nuanced and intermediate assessment practices such as work samples, classroom observation schedules and case studies should be considered as should the manner in which such findings may be disseminated to colleagues so as to inform teaching and improve learning. Such considerations may be best framed in the current school focus on aspects of school self evaluation and school improvement.
- In relation to the work of the special needs assistants, their contribution, and often subtle engagement, in attending to significant care needs is acknowledged by the school and by this report. Improved observation schedules and sharing of daily notes should be considered, particularly where emotional and behavioural needs present.

## PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Planning and preparation at whole-school and individual teacher level is of a high standard and is very much guided by the energy, skills and wisdom of those qualified in the area of special education. It is noted that the school's commitment to inclusive learning is reflected in the assignment of inclusion-related middle management positions of responsibility.
  - Contact is made with the relevant primary schools and this work combined with good relationships with personnel from external agencies adds to the quality of planning and preparation. The Visiting Teachers' Service work well in assisting the school to support their students.
  - Individual files are constructed and teaching staff and special needs assistants are made aware, in a timely manner, of the needs and strengths of students newly enrolled in the school. Good lines of communication are sustained by the resources made available in the staffroom, including the impressive electronically shared filing system and student register.
  - Ongoing engagement with individualised planning for students with low-incidence needs will add further to the quality of this work as will the adaptation of existing practices to extend the student register to track student progress and key outcomes. This register can facilitate the implementation and impact of all additional hours allocated to individuals or in the form of learning support provision. Where it merits attention, student attendance can also be tracked on the register. In the event of a student not pursuing a 28 hour programme of instruction, the school should make contact with the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB).
  - Notwithstanding the good work that has been undertaken to date in coordinating provision, it is important that the school look to the future and engage in succession planning and capacity building in the area of inclusive learning. Consideration should be given to supporting other colleagues' access to additional professional development so as to allow for the rotation of the existing co-ordination duties while retaining a collaborative approach. Those currently coordinating provision can in turn avoid being overly identified with one aspect of their professional work and can continue to develop professionally in a range diverse ways.
  - The high quality and upkeep of the school building and environment is a notable feature of the school and is conducive to the creation of a purposeful learning environment in the school.
  - The role that the special needs assistant can play in informing and supporting individualised planning, including behaviour plans, should be kept to the fore and more opportunities for the co-ordinating team, and where deemed suitable a representative group of the special needs assistants, to meet would further assist such an initiative.
  - The well-constructed staff handbook offers further means of communication for established and new staff, which could usefully identify some key aspects of teaching and learning as outlined above. It could also assist in further highlighting and clarifying the centrality of the role of the mainstream teacher in the promotion of inclusive learning in Maria Immaculata Community College.
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The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation.

The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

*Published June 2013*

# **Appendix**

**School response to the report**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

### **Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report**

The Board welcomed the Report as it reinforces all the outstanding work undertaken by the College in its commitment to the education of all its students.

The Board of Management and the School have at all times been proactive in procuring additional resources for its students, some of whom need one to one support. In that context, they are surprised and disappointed by some of the recommendations in relation to the distribution of the resources granted.

The Board is very aware of all the outstanding and pioneering work carried out by its staff, to ensure that all its students get the highest quality of education, thus reach their full potential.

### **Area 2 Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection**

The School is flexible in its utilisation of resources, has rearranged teacher / class timetables and also re-structured SNA resources to meet the needs of its students

The School has engaged in on-going development of individualised planning for its students

The School is consistently evaluating its practices and updating and developing its programmes

The School has engaged with Middletown Centre for Autism, is working closely and availing of its support.