

History of Special Education and St Vincent's School

Half a century ago, in the nineteen fifties the importance of education to persons with general learning disabilities gained widespread recognition in Ireland. Voluntary organisations and Religious Orders took the initiative in establishing school for students with learning disabilities. These schools were subsequently officially recognised by the Department of Education.

St Vincent's School, Lisnagry, under the auspices of the Daughters of Charity, opened its doors to the first students in September 1966. It was one of the first schools in the South of Ireland for the education of students with Moderate learning disability and it had the full recognition of the Department of Education.

Twenty years later ('86), a pilot class was set up for 12 students with severe learning disability.

Another landmark in '93 was Judge O'Hanlon's judgement in the High Court re. Paul O'Donoghue. His ruling now meant that it was the legitimate right of all persons with severe/profound learning disability to be educated, and from that date, many more classes were set up. In our school, we have 4 classes for students with severe/profound learning disability.

A separate Canteen building beside the school gives the pupils a hot dinner each day and allows them to become as independent as possible in the social skill of eating.

In September 1999, our school set up a Resource Room in St Vincent's School, to meet the more profound and urgent needs of our students.

An Occupational Therapy Room was developed within the School Canteen in 2002 where individual sessions for students take place.

The OPW replaced 25 year old pre-fabs in 2003.

September 2004 a Junior and Senior Autistic Spectrum Disorder class was set up by the DES.

Our new Playground 'Leprechaun land' was opened in November 2005 and a 'Tranquillity Room' was also set up.

SERC REPORT

Another very influential factor was the Report of the Special Education Review Committee published in 1993. This was of great importance to the further development of Special Education in Ireland (factor for). The Review Committee favoured Integration of students with special needs into main stream and I quote it said "as much integration as is appropriate and is feasible".

Two years later the White Paper on Education "Charting our Education Future" affirmed that its objective would be quote, "to ensure a continuum of provision for special educational needs ranging from occasional help within the ordinary school to full time education in a special school or unit". In '98 Michael Martin (our previous Minister for Education and Science) announced a number of special initiatives in support of integration of students with special education needs – Resource Teachers in mainstream and full-time and part-time Special Needs Assistants, Psychological Services were also established. The Education Act has now given practical effect to these recommendations

Classes

Special schools like ours have students from 4 – 18 years. Our student population is very varied in level of functioning and potential. Pre-School for pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (A.S.D.) was set up in September 2012. This caters for pupils from their third birthday and is a regional service run by the Department of Education & Skills.

Types of Disability

In the early years many of the syndromes had not been diagnosed or named. But thankfully, today, we do know more about them and we are better informed in devising programmes to suit the student's individual needs.

Curriculum

The Primary Curriculum was introduced in 1971, by the Department of Education, and, Curriculum Guidelines for pupils with moderate learning disabilities began to be introduced in 1978. An important principle in these guidelines was, quote, "children have needs as children - that have to be satisfied at school, as well as their needs as future adults".

These are the guidelines our present curriculum is based on, but we then only received guidelines for 4 subject areas, credit for the expansion and update of the Curriculum since then must be given to the experience and expertise of teaching staff.

The following are the Curricular Areas that we cover in St Vincent's School and it would be similar to most schools in Special Education.

1. Communication & Language.
2. Social, Personal & Health Education (S.P.H.E.)
3. Mathematic.
4. Arts Education – Visual Arts – Music – Drama.
5. Physical Education.
6. Religious Education.
7. Social, Environmental & Scientific Education (S.E.S.E.).
8. Home Economics.

Communication & Language

This involves Oral Language and Literacy (Reading and Writing). Communication skills range from making eye contact and using gesture, signs and symbols to listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Social, Personal & Health Education (S.P.H.E.):

These skills range from toilet training, personal hygiene and self-help skills, mobility, feeding and dressing, awareness of feelings and body to social interaction with others which is very important. Home Economics is a very important subject.

Mathematics

These are the skills to develop sensory awareness, perception of colour, pattern shape and position, sorting, grouping and classifying through to a variety of simple mathematical skills and social mathematics including money and time. (Dinner time - shopping - money)

Arts Education

Visual Arts, Music and Drama. (Students enjoy Art & Music but can be very limited in imagination and any form of Drama).

Physical Education:

These skills range from basic mobility, physical activation to participation in games - hockey, basketball, soccer, gymnastics, swimming and athletics. Many participate in Special Olympics.

Religious Education

We follow the Alive O Programme for Primary Schools. We have preparation for the Sacraments. We have assemblies and masses. We are awaiting the new programme being developed for Special Schools, which currently is in draft form.

Social, Environmental & Scientific Education (S.E.S.E.)

This is presented under three headings: History, Geography and Science. S.E.S.E. contributes to the development of the child's awareness and

appreciation of the natural, human, social, cultural and historical dimensions of life.

The implementation of the Revised Pr. Curriculum and on going work at Post Primary Level will also have an impact on the curriculum update for special needs students. Presently, the N.C.C.A. comprising - teachers, parents and representatives from the Department of Education & Science have drafted Curriculum Guidelines for all students with Special Education needs. Copies of these have been forwarded to all Special Schools. These are now being implemented in the school

Important factor to keep in mind is that the Curriculum Objective and Aim is the holistic development of each student, because of the diversity and complexity of needs within schools and classes of Special Education, any curriculum development has to be in the form of Guidelines.

Students with special educational needs, in whatever setting, are very, very slow learners and teachers do not experience academic successes or achievements as they would in mainstream. But each tiny bit of progress or development is hugely appreciated.

Finally, tribute must be paid to those religious and lay people who pioneered education for students with Moderate and Severe learning disabilities.

These students are very fine people and they deserve the very best.