



Gibson Primary School

Developing a culture of inclusion

Gibson Primary School is located in the town of Omagh, County Tyrone. Over the past five years the enrolment has increased steadily. The school currently has 342 pupils and at the time of the October 2016 inspection, enrolment stood at 311 pupils.

This case study focuses on the culture of inclusion within the school, specifically how the language support centre (LSC) has contributed to its development and how it enriches and benefits all adults and children.

The inspection identified the school as having a high capacity for sustained improvement. All key areas – achievements and standards, provision for learning and leadership and management – were found to be very good.

The provision for pastoral care and the Language Support Centre (LSC), an integral part of the school, was found to be outstanding.

Language Support Centre

The LSC staff are a multidisciplinary team made up of two full-time teachers and two classroom assistants (CAs).

Two speech therapists are also based at the school two days per week.

The LSC supports children from primary one to primary four who have specific speech and language and other complex needs. They are referred to the LSC by the Education Authority and include pupils from Gibson itself plus other schools in the surrounding area.

Pupils attending the LSC avail of the support for up to a period of six terms. Staff work to ensure that all children and their parents are welcomed and fully integrated into the life of Gibson Primary School; this is achieved through regular communication and support for parents.

An integral part of the school

The LSC is part of the school. For the period of time that the children avail of support from the LSC they are fully integrated into all aspects of school life. They use school facilities, have break-times and play-times with the other children and participate in the school choir, assemblies and school performances.

All children have a strong sense of belonging to the school and a number of children who have benefitted from the LSC support have chosen to remain at Gibson after the support received at the LSC.

This integration promotes understanding and empathy; children learn about, support and develop respect for others who are different from them and the school therefore benefits from the culture of inclusion it promotes through its work in the LSC and throughout the school.

Inclusion

The Principal has been a member of staff in the school for seventeen years. Since taking up post as Principal seven years ago, he has worked diligently to build on the work that the school had already begun to further develop a strong ethos and a self-evaluative culture at the school.

At the heart of these developments is the principle of inclusion and the inclusion of the LSC in all the school's self-evaluative strategies has become a natural way of working in the school. There are high expectations and all staff (mainstream and LSC) are involved in both formal and informal continuing professional development (CPD). There is purposeful sharing at both staff meetings and during staff development days (SDDs).

A culture of collaboration

Monitoring and evaluation strategies for sharing and discussing children's achievements and standards are clearly communicated with all staff on agreed weekly foci.

These include shared book scoops and discussions that focus on specific aspects of the curriculum and involves cross-over between staff in the mainstream school and the LSC.

This constant exposure to the experiences of children with complex needs broadens the understanding of all staff regarding the learning process, ultimately enriching teaching and learning strategies in all classes.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The Principal is visible, takes time with staff and is approachable. There is an agreed formal classroom observation timetable and the Principal also conducts weekly observations. The culture is such that staff never feel threatened by classroom observations.

Following the annual school development plan SDP review in 2015, staff requested that informal observation should focus on one specific aspect of learning and teaching.

This was trialled in 2016-17 and when it was reviewed at the end of the year staff concluded that it had been both beneficial and manageable.

This has become a natural way of working at the school and an extension of this, agreed by all staff, is to video individual teachers so that the monitoring and evaluation of learning and teaching strategies can be broadened across year groups and key stages.

Parental engagement

The school's engagement with parents is also a strength of provision at the school.

Parents are fully integrated into the life of the school and have the opportunity to contribute to and participate in all school events such as school fairs, performances and sports days.

They are supported and know how to support their child in their learning. For example, parents of children at Foundation Stage (FS) and in the LSC will be guided to support their child with phonics.

The FS and LSC staff are working closely together to achieve this. An effective outworking of the culture of inclusion, it portrays the seamless nature of the learning process and an awareness of making provision for all learning needs. The school has extended methodologies for supporting parents to include the use of technology. For example, parents of year 4 children will be supported in how to help their child with subtraction through the use of a video which will be shared at a workshop and subsequently on the school website.

The LSC as an integral part of the school has strengthened the culture of inclusion. The school motto 'Strive to succeed' encapsulates the essence of what lies at the core of the school. Policies and procedures are lived out in the school and the culture of inclusion has become embedded in the mind-set of all staff, children and the school community.

The Principal of Gibson Primary School, Keith Sterritt, offers his reflections on the school's efforts to sustain school improvement:

I find it uncomfortable and strange talking about what we do within Gibson Primary School in relation to sharing good practice.

While I am extremely proud of our school and the caring, child centred approach that permeates everything we do, I don't think we have adopted anything special. We have certainly not followed any award scheme, introduced new and innovative approaches to learning (beyond what everyone else is doing) or created a unique approach to staff development.

We do however have a clear understanding among all staff that the school has extremely high expectations of all pupils and that our primary focus always remains on learning and teaching.

From my point of view if this is going to be meaningful and embedded within our culture then it is my responsibility to have a knowledge and understanding of what is happening within every classroom. I also need to know every pupil, be aware of their level of performance and be able to speak to staff and pupils about this. This makes conversations I have with staff more effective as I am already aware of the pupils in their room and their level of performance.

As book scoops, staff development sessions, classroom observations and shared staff meetings focus on the learning taking place as opposed to directly on the teaching, it has helped reduce teachers' anxiety to a level where sharing practice is common place and just something we do.

We are also extremely fortunate to have the Language Units as part of our school. Having pupils with different experiences and challenges enrolling at different points throughout the year helps to reinforce this caring, child centred ethos which is what I believe makes our school special.

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