St. John's Special School & College

Policy Paper on Pedagogy- Paper 1 Principles

Pedagogy

'Pedagogy is what one needs to know, and the skills one needs to command, in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted.' (Alexander 2004)

Purpose

'When you campaign for education, what has to underpin it is a much deeper sense of human purpose and of human possibility.' (Robinson 2014)

The school's principle purpose is to provide pupils with the required skills, knowledge and understanding in preparation for their effective inclusion into the wider community and ultimately into adult life.

The strength of St. John's lies in the outstanding quality of its multi-professional staff and commitment to team-work in meeting the communication and interaction needs of pupils. Our vision is reflected in the school's mission statement 'achieving together.'

Staff work together to increase pupil self-awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem and self-respect which emerges from the development of communicative competence. Communication by definition develops through interaction with others. Sensitive teaching, resting on a pupil centred approach promotes awareness of and respect for others.

Teaching at St. John's is highly motivating, engaging and interactive in order to ensure pupil presence, participation and progression. The physical, sensory and expressive strands of the curriculum provide the ideal medium through which we teach communication skills. The creative curriculum provides the purpose, the means and the intrinsically human reward of communication.

Curriculum

The curriculum in general terms includes all the opportunities for teaching and learning offered by the school. More specifically the curriculum sets out what the pupils will be taught and the opportunities and support provided to secure their learning of specific skills, knowledge and understanding.

The curriculum in any school should support a framework through which teaching and learning takes place. In many schools however teachers feel pressured to firstly secure coverage of subject content and secondly to teach towards the associated assessments in order to evidence pupil progress and by the same token demonstrate professional accountability. As Rose and Howley (2001) note, curriculum is commonly synonymous with content and with little consideration given to essential underlying learning processes and underpinning pedagogical practices. We at St. John's contend that a competitive climate concerned with measuring effectiveness in terms of narrow academic achievement in a limited number of subjects is non-conducive to good education.

Teaching and learning at St. John's is more than the delivery of a subject based and compartmentalised curriculum. The complex needs of our pupils will not be met through a curriculum that consists of converting National Curriculum descriptors or 'P' scale indicators. Our pupils learn well within a framework constructed of targeted learning objectives based on a personalised individual education plan (IEP) reflecting priority areas of learning (PALS) including Communication, language and literacy (CLL), Problem-solving, reasoning and numeracy (PRN), Personal, social and emotional development (PSED), and Physical development (PD).

The curriculum at St. John's is the framework for functional teaching and learning and serves to assist pupils to see themselves as effective learners. At the centre of the curriculum is the process of enabling pupils to interact with others in order to communicate.

Curriculum design and delivery promotes learning under three broad headings:

- Well-being
- Work skills
- World knowledge

Well-being relates to personal care and the development of self. Work skills include the development of positive attitude towards learning, problem-solving and team skills. World knowledge provides purpose and relevance to the subjects of the National Curriculum.

We support the position held by Imray and Hinchcliffe (2014),

'… if the curriculum is appropriate and meets pupils' needs, pupil progress should be clear, achievable and quantifiably measurable.'

Progress

Mainstream educators rely on models of both curriculum and assessment designed for pupils who follow a normative pattern of development in terms of intellectual, physical and social/emotional growth. Pupils who present with severe and complex learning difficulties do not follow typical patterns of learning. At St. John's we use assessment that identifies subtle and unique aspects of pupil learning and deliberately defines such as progress.

We perceive pupil progress in three ways:

- Linear- the pupil progresses up the hierarchical levels of learning. Pace may be delayed but the pupil follows the normative route.
- Lateral- the pupil remains at the same level of learning but will demonstrate an earlier acquired skill in a different way or under differing conditions.
- Latent- the pupil with, for example a degenerative physical or damaging psychological condition will maintain or sustain an earlier acquired skill or ability. In this sense progress is a reduced rate of regression.

Assessing pupil progress as described will significantly shape the purpose and practice of teaching. Inherent within this position is the underlying assumption that our pupils generally do not learn incidentally.

Teaching

Teaching is the practice through which we assist pupils to engage with their learning. It is more than simply exposing pupils to an educational activity or experience and hoping for the best.

'Teaching is a continuous process of interaction between the teacher and the pupil in which the teacher provides a dynamic framework which moves the pupil towards an objective.' (Kiernan 1981)

'Teaching is about being effective in the relationship between teacher and student- it is about engaging and motivating the student, making information accessible but also challenging and stretching the student. It is about setting limits and maintaining order. Although relationships are influenced by all the parties involved, in teaching (as in parenting) the onus is on one party (the teacher) to make the relationship work.' (Clements et al 2010)

At St. John's teaching is shaped, contoured and coloured by continuous collaborative reflection and a common commitment to meeting the individual needs of all our pupils. We see teaching at St. John's as a practical art. (Schwab 1978)

Teaching Approaches

A teaching approach is based on a particular theory of how we learn. A teaching approach is concerned with how we teach and not what we teach. Teaching at St. John's is influenced essentially by two major approaches- the behaviourist and the interactionist.

The Behaviourist Approach- key characteristics:

The theoretical basis of the behaviourist approach to teaching lies in behavioural psychology. The behaviourist approach to teaching can help all pupils learn new skills and knowledge and is not restricted to those with learning difficulties.

The behaviourist approach assumes that behaviour does not occur in isolation. Factors such as setting conditions, antecedents and consequences influence the way we all behave and learn. Through careful observation, analysis and meticulous manipulation of these environmental factors it is possible to plan teaching and learning in a systematic way.

There are essential behavioural teaching strategies such as task-analysis, prompting, modelling, fading, shaping and reinforcement which, used skilfully, can assist pupil learning in one-to-one or small group settings.

Fundamental to behavioural teaching is setting clear targets so all involved know what the pupil should be doing when the pre-determined learning has taken place. Related to this is the need to accurately assess the pupil's current level of competence and to break learning tasks down into achievable steps.

The Behaviourist Approach- advantages:

- Highly effective when teaching new skills at the acquisition stage of learning.

- Particularly suitable for teaching practical and functional skills such as dressing as well as early literacy and numeracy skills.

- Most efficient within individual one-to-one, paired and small group settings.

- Reduces environmental distraction and provides sharp clarity of shared focus within the teaching activity for both pupil and teacher.

- Enhances consistency and coherence of attitude and approach within the class teaching team.

The Interactionist Approach- key characteristics:

The theoretical basis of the interactionist approach to teaching lies in cognitive psychology and is influenced particularly by the work on parent-child interaction during the early years of life. During this period the child is a pro-active participant in the learning process and influences the behaviour of the adult. The child is not a passive recipient of adult instruction and learning is rooted in a social context. Teaching and learning is by definition an activity of social reciprocity.

Interactive teaching attempts to reproduce strategies which are used intuitively in normal parent-child interactions in order to capitalise on the natural way we all learn. This approach to teaching and learning can take place in a variety of settings including individualised one-to-one, thematic-class based activities or within a community context.

The interactionist approach does not rely on systematic teaching strategies or pre-determined pupil learning outcomes. Instead the teacher creates environments which motivate pupils to learn through spontaneous socialising with others and exploration of the classroom. The teacher's role is to encourage pupil engagement with learning by sensitively identifying and reliably responding to pupil cues. This approach can appear to the observer as unstructured however detailed pupil assessment and creative planning is essential in order to produce a classroom climate conducive to effective teaching and learning.

The Interactionist Approach- advantages:

- It is the natural way to learn and is reflected in the home and other community environments. (Farrell 1997)
- Allows for pupil initiated and pupil maintained activity and may lead to unintended but desirable learning outcomes. (Collis & Lacey 1996)

- Helps pupils to transfer their learning to different settings and encourages problem-solving and experimentation to apply knowledge in different ways.
- Pupils learn social communication skills more effectively through interaction with others than through adult initiated and controlled teaching.

Key distinction between the two approaches:

- Behavioural teaching leads to predictable learning outcomes (pupil behaviour). (Farrell 1997)
- Interactive teaching leads to unpredictable learning outcomes (pupil behaviour). (Collis & Lacey 1996)

Teaching Strategies

Teaching strategies are the intended interventions we use to engage pupils directly with the process of learning. Teaching strategies bridge the gap between the pupil and the learning activity.

General teaching strategies:

Throughout each day teachers use a variety of general strategies such as explanation, exploration, demonstration, discussion, imitation, investigation etc. Teachers choose strategies based on factors such as: the nature of the activity; number, age, ability and behaviour of the pupils in the class; and access to human and physical resources and accommodation.

A set of skilfully selected strategies will support a well organised and managed classroom in which all pupils at all times engage with a balanced timetable of motivating activities matched to their individually assessed needs.

At the stage of strategy selection the teacher will:

- Adapt, differentiate and deliver schemes of work to ensure that a group of pupils actively engage with learning.
- Identify and integrate targets from pupils' IEPs into an activity based or subject focussed teaching and learning plan.

- Select and use environments, equipment and resources effectively with due regard to session content and pupil age, ability and interest.
- Involve and deploy staff in support of pupil learning.
- Organise and group pupils in a variety of ways.
- Create opportunities and methods whereby pupil progress and engagement with learning is assessed and recorded in relation to targets within both the IEP and the teaching and learning plan.

Specialist teaching strategies:

Given the diversity and increasing complexity of the special school pupil population (Carpenter et al 2010) teachers at St. John's in addition to general strategies will employ specialist teaching strategies. Specialist teaching strategies and interventions are designed to absorb a particular learning style associated with a discrete disability group, or developed to promote a specific teaching and learning intention. Such strategies are essentially informed by the behavioural and interactive approaches to teaching.

Let us be clear, as Mittler (2000) points out, to recognise the needs of distinct groups of learners, is not at odds with the principles of inclusive practice. Providing equal opportunities is about meeting individual needs and not teaching all pupils in the same way. We are clear in our commitment to securing for our pupils equal opportunity to access good education.

In common with many professions, teaching has developed an extensive and often confusing vocabulary. The language of special education has been influenced much by the intimidating terminology of psychology. It is our intention to demystify teaching by dispensing with unnecessary jargon and introduce a language which simply and effectively describes and explains what we do and how we do it.

In employing a carefully selected set of specialist strategies and interventions we aim to achieve:

- Confidence in that the selected strategies are rooted in evidence and have proven efficacy in the specialist setting.
- Commitment to sharing good practice and refining strategies in collaboration through structured discussion and deliberation.
- Consistency of teaching practice across the school.

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