

New guidelines to tackle 'special classes stigma'

THE National Council for Special Education has published new guidelines in an effort to stop students feeling stigmatised.

Special classes are set up in mainstream schools for students with special educational needs arising from certain disabilities who would benefit from smaller class sizes.

Research carried out by the ESRI and Trinity College Dublin found that some students felt there was a stigma attached to attending special classes. They also said they believed they were not popular with their teachers.

The new guidelines recommend that students with special educational needs should, where possible, be educated in mainstream classes along with their peers and receive additional support

By **Ruth Gahan**

where they need it. The guidelines recommend school policies should pay special attention to the education and inclusion of students with special educational needs to ensure they don't feel stigmatised.

The ESRI study - Special Classes in Irish Schools - was commissioned by the NCSE and looked at 12 schools around the country. It found 0.5% of the primary school population and 1.2% of the post-primary population are being educated in special classes.

Researchers also found some teachers did not feel they had the skills to teach special classes due to the complex and diverse needs of students. Once they had received training, the teachers

felt equipped to teach students with diverse special needs.

NCSE head of research Jennifer Doran said: 'Our research highlighted a number of worrying issues regarding special classes, such as students feeling negative about attending special classes and teachers feeling unprepared to teach in these settings.'

'That is why we developed these guidelines - to provide good practice points to schools to ensure that all students feel valued and welcomed under a whole-school approach to inclusion.'

The aim of the NCSE guidelines is to help schools and teachers create 'supportive and inclusive learning environments' for students who are unable to be in a mainstream class.

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

Our time does not fly in... we let it slip away

I'VE heard the expression 'time is flying' repeatedly in recent weeks. 'We'll soon be at Christmas,' said one person, to which Mrs Dooley shrieked with alarm.

Of course, time does not have wings and thus cannot fly. Time moves at a constant pace, never speeding up or slowing down. Each minute comprises 60 seconds, no more, no less.

The truth is that we are flying at an unprecedented rate. We speed through our days, filling them with distractions from dawn to dusk. And then, as night descends, we collapse exhausted into our beds.

We are addicted to doing - hooked on filling every spare second with endless tasks. Our spare time is no longer used to regenerate or renew our resources. Today, it is used to surf our way through 'Cyberia' in endless pursuit of passing pleasure.

Time is flying because we never stop, slow down or simply sit in silence. When asked what they are doing, people rarely respond that they are doing nothing. How do you do nothing?

Doing nothing is not to give way to laziness or indolence. If anything, it is the most important thing we can do for health and happiness. It is the way to replenish the sap of life. You sit, turn off the phone and watch the world. 'Watchfulness' means being wide awake to the reality that surrounds you. 'Stay awake!' says the Gospel, meaning that we ought to remain fully alive to the beauty, harmony and glory of all that is.

You sit, not in order to do, but to be. It is as though we have become frightened of our own company, of being at one with ourselves and creation. To be means to see, to listen and to learn from life. To sit and simply be is not, therefore, a waste of time. We waste time when we fill it with mind-numbing entertainment. That is what it means to be asleep, to be unconscious of life beyond the screen.

You sit and listen to the leaves as they whisper in the wind. They sing a song of silence, a hymn that sounds from the depths of the soil. It is an ancient anthem that resounds through the ages, and yet it is one to which most of us are deaf.

It is a hymn of peace, tranquility and calm. It is a sound that enters deep into the soul and makes you one with the earth. It is a sound that can compete with the greatest composition, but one the 'plugged-in' generation will sadly never hear.

Listen closely and you will hear the birds of the air and the lilies of the field as they sing and sway in the evening sun.

This is the voice of creation, the hum of life as it soars towards the heavens. We don't hear these sounds as mere noise because this is nothing less than nature's symphony.

Open your eyes and see the swallows soar overhead. There is a formation which requires no training and

yet how perfect the synchrony. We stand in awe when jets seek to emulate what they can do so naturally.

Look at the colours of the trees, the flowers and the fields. Monet tried to immortalise this in art, but all we have to do is stay awake.

The world offers a rich tapestry to delight the soul and it costs nothing but our attention.

Look at the children playing, how they laugh and dance without a care. They are our hope, our redemption from this self-obsessed age.

'Unless you become like little children you shall never enter the kingdom of Heaven.'

Sit and smile at their innocence, their love, their humility and honesty. Be moved by it and seek to make it yours. To simply be with children is to know that Heaven is already here among us.

To be is to see, to hear and to touch reality in all its beautiful abundance. In such moments, it might appear as though we are doing nothing.

In truth, we are never more alive, more active and more engaged with our world.

Why do we seek to numb our senses, to plug and shield them from things that are so sublime? Why do we do this when the result is a state of detachment from everything that is real, enduring and abundant with life? We are on the run from reality and, consequently, we are only half alive.

THERE is no boredom in simply sitting and contemplating the world. It is never monotonous, dull or disappointing. It is rich beyond description, a source of timeless satisfaction that leads only to love.

As you sit and savour this richness, you fall in love with life. You fall in love without expectation or demands. You simply behold what it is and give praise for it.

You come to see that you are part of something extraordinary, something towards which our finest poets have all genuflected.

You are part of creation, part of this miraculous world which serves to connect Heaven and Earth. You belong to something glorious, to a life that never ceases to amaze.

You have taken time simply to be. And in those few minutes you have come to realise what it means to be fully awake. In refusing to rush, you have seen, heard and loved with a joyful heart.

You have looked into life and learned that time does not fly.

It is we who fly and, in so doing, we let time slip by.

As one of my little sons often says: 'We need to be more like the tortoise than the hare, Dad. Slow and steady always wins the race.'

Such wisdom from the mouth of babes. Such wisdom for a world which has forgotten how to be.

Back to school costs really adding up?



*Source: Barnardos 2015. Based on average for 1st year pupil



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