# Managing Children with Special Needs in the Irish Education System: A Professional Perspective

**Despite recent government policy in Ireland, there remains considerable debate as to whether or not some pupils with special educational needs fare better in specialist schools, or cope more effectively in mainstream settings. For example, there would appear to be some inconsistencies between policy and practice. But what do frontline staff think and how can the current situation be improved for the benefit of all Irish children with special educational needs?**

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## INTRODUCTION

A key feature of the current Irish education system – and one that has attracted considerable controversy in recent years – is the integration of children with learning difficulties or 'special educational needs' (SEN) into mainstream schools. This process has occurred as a direct result of a number of national and international developments since the 1990s. For example, in September 1991, the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) was set up in Ireland with the aim of reporting on the educational provision for children with special needs (SERC, 1993). The SERC recommendations were highly influential with respect to the development of Irish policy in this area, as illustrated by The White Paper on Education (1995), the Public Service Management Act (1997) and the Education Act (1998).

However, the issue of inclusion or integration remains hotly debated, not least because the Education Act (Ireland, 1998) failed to assign the responsibility of delivering special education to any person or authority and, according to Ó Murchú (1998), did not pay due attention to the principles enshrined in the SERC report. Despite several legal challenges, eg. O'Donoghue v Minister for Education (1997), which concluded that constitutional rights had been denied, the Education Act (1998) did not assign to anyone in particular the responsibility for this constitutional right to be fulfilled. Conversely, the landmark case – Sinnot v Minister for Education (2000) – vindicated the plaintiff's constitutional right to education (Irish Examiner, 2000) and the subsequent public outcry was an important catalyst in the development of the long-awaited *Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill (2003)* (Ireland, 2003). This secured the constitutional rights of children with disabilities and special needs to appropriate and inclusive education by stating that: *"People with disabilities shall have the same right to avail of and benefit from appropriate education as do their peers who do not have disabilities"* (p.5). Despite this, the new bill has had many critics and it is not clear if it has gone far enough in meeting the needs of children with SEN.

Lastly, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, enacted in 2004, provided the statutory framework for, amongst other things, the introduction of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students with SEN in Irish schools (McCausland, 2005).

Additionally, under the Act, a school principal, in consultation with the parents, can arrange for a rapid assessment of a child with SEN, after which an IEP may be prepared, if necessary, and action taken to provide the appropriate services.

Prior to the EPSEN Act 2004, the Centre for Early Curriculum Development and Education (CECDE) (2003) conducted an audit of early childhood care and education throughout Ireland during 1990-2003 and produced a report (CECDE, 2003). A key conclusion of this report was that the Department of Education and Science (DES) was not providing an inclusive, targeted and comprehensive range of interventions for these children. This provided the impetus for our small, but informative study (completed in 2004) aimed at assessing the appropriateness and effectiveness of special education from the perspective of key stakeholders, namely teaching staff, with a view to informing future developments in this area.

**THE RESEARCH**

The principal aim of our research was to assess staff views about the educational provision and needs of children with SEN in a number of mainstream schools in the Dublin area. The specific objectives of this preliminary study were: (1) to assess the nature and perceived adequacy of assessment methods; (2) to examine the perceived effectiveness of mainstream education in meeting the needs of children with SEN; and (3) to explore the impact of each of the above on the children with SEN for whom respondents were responsible (and children with SEN in general). No study to date (to the authors' knowledge) has examined qualitatively the views of teaching staff about special education in mainstream schools in Ireland.

The study was conducted in six mainstream primary schools in the Dublin area, known to the principal researcher(GS), and involved a sample of 30 participants recruited from three categories of teaching staff including class teachers (Ts, n=10), Resource Teachers (RTs, n=6) and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs, n=14). Participants were recruited as far as possible to reflect a diverse mix of views and, therefore, to ensure adequate conceptual generalisations. Resource Teachers worked with the child on an individual basis outside of the classroom while SNAs assisted and supported the child within the classroom. Each participant was interviewed individually using one of three semi-structured interview schedules, all of which were devised by the principal researcher following extensive preliminary discussions with teaching staff in other schools. All interviews were recorded and used in combination with the interviewer's detailed notes. All of the data were then examined with a view to identifying key themes and sub-themes around each of the three aims indicated above. The most common categories of disability in the six schools were General Learning Disability (28%) and Specific Learning Disability (22%) – including pupils with a degree of learning disability specific to basic skills in reading, writing or mathematics and general emotional and behavioural disturbances (12%); other categories included Physical Disability (10%) and Speech and Language Difficulties (10%).

A number of themes and sub-themes were explored through, and emerged from, the qualitative analysis, each of which is described and illustrated (with selected quotes) below.

(1) **Assessment**

The purpose of assessing children with SEN is to acquire information in order to plan appropriate programmes which maximize learning (DES, 2001). Our study found that the tool employed for assessing children by Educational Psychologists, the *Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children*, was endorsed by both class teachers and RTs in that it gave clear indications as to the child's particular needs and difficulties. However, some RTs and class teachers reported several misgivings with respect to the variable quality of feedback received (see Box 1). More importantly perhaps, all participants reported that the service provided by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) was not sufficiently resourced to cater for the large number of assessments required (see Box 1).

According to *Circular 08/02* (DES, 2002), children with SEN should be identified as early as possible. However, at the time of the study, there was a 12-18 month waiting period for assessment. This appeared to pose major difficulties for both parents and schools to the extent that some parents had to pay for private assessments (as reported by some of the RTs in this study). John Carr, general secretary of the Irish National Teachers Organization (INTO), stated that the 'system' penalizes and marginalises children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are unable to access psychological assessments (INTO, 2004). These findings raise important questions about the appropriate and timely allocation of resources from the DES in supporting children with SEN.


**Box 1: Selection of comments relating to assessment**

*"Some [*assessment*] reports you would rate more highly than others. Some psychologists will simply say they administered the test and give you a general percentile. Others will give you a proper breakdown".* (Teacher – 10 yrs)

*"If we were to depend on NEPS, these children would simply not survive in mainstream".* (RT - 2 yrs – 18yrs exp)

"*The Department's allocation is not consistent with the amount of assessment required as this can change on a yearly basis".* (RT - 4yrs – 23yrs exp)

*"They* ['unassessed' children] *do not get the one-to-one attention they require. They are always part of a class of 25 plus. You can give them 5 minutes here and there, but it is not adequate".* (Teacher – 21 yrs)

"*There is a huge impact* [if not assessed]- *As a teacher, you cannot work with the child effectively until you really know what the specific problems are*". (Teacher – 28yrs)


Delays in assessment, and therefore, the absence of adequate and appropriate support, were considered by all of the participants to have serious repercussions in terms of their negative

impact on children's self-esteem, their work rate and ability to keep up with the remainder of the class. Such delays also contributed to a deterioration in their overall behaviour (e.g. attention seeking behaviour, tantrums and/or withdrawal). All teachers agreed that early intervention was the best solution and that delays in assessment contributed to a further depletion in the child's already low level of self-esteem. This is important because, as Beck and Roblee (1982) indicate, children with learning disabilities are at a greater risk for developing low self-esteem because they tend to be more insecure about their abilities. Disturbingly, one child reported to his SNA (even after resources were allocated to him): *"Sure I'm thick. They all say I'm thick"*.

All teachers agreed that a child with SEN who remains 'un-assessed' may affect the entire class with disruptive behaviour and/or constant interruptions which, in turn, prevent teachers from using time more productively and places them under undue stress (Box 1). Our findings further suggest that when children are eventually assessed and allocated resources, they may still feel labelled and inadequate, despite the conscientious efforts of the schools within the study to accommodate them prior to assessment. Clearly therefore, the manner in which children's needs are managed while awaiting assessment requires careful attention and sensitivity.

The problem of re-assessment was also highlighted. The DES regulations state that each pupil should be assessed once every four years, but there is no mechanism whereby children can be weaned off resources once they have been assessed initially. Teachers and RTs reported that further difficulties may arise across a child's developmental trajectory as well as from the nature of the disability. Additionally, staff from the three schools that were separated into 'junior' and 'senior' sections stated that re-assessment from junior to senior cycle had caused several children to lose the resource hours already allocated to them. The Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001) advocated that further assessment(s) and/or independent second opinions should be available when there are concerns regarding definitive diagnosis, the presence of additional disorders or disagreement amongst the 'primary parties'. Most participants in the study felt that the DES was "*out of touch*" with what was happening 'on the ground' and expressed their frustration at the low number of annual assessments allocated per school. The results suggest that if inclusion is to work for all children with SEN, the issue of re-assessment and ongoing evaluation requires immediate attention. The newly proposed implementation of IEPs is made more important in the light of these findings.

**(2) Needs of children as perceived by staff**
Much of the debate around integration has centred on the social aspects of schooling to the exclusion, in large part, of educational outcomes. A second key theme in our study revolved around the nature and extent of the educational needs of children with learning difficulties (see Box 2). Here, there were two important sub-themes.

*(a) Classroom support*
Firstly, the participants indicated that the nature and extent of classroom support depended upon the child's specific disability. Thus, a child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may have difficulty in sitting in the same place for long periods of time. According to one teacher, what these children need is "*...acknowledgement on an hourly basis*". A child with

dyslexia, on the other hand, requires *"...acknowledgement for keeping their space tidy"*. While it is not always clear as to whether behaviour problems are a cause of, or a reaction to, the child's learning difficulties, research consistently points to a strong relationship between the two (Levy, Hay, McClaughlin, Wood and Walman, 1996). However, our research indicates that the nature of the curriculum presented challenges for all children irrespective of their disability (see Box 2).

All teachers indicated that they could not have the child in the classroom without the help of the SNA, although some felt that children tended to become too dependent on the SNA and/or treated the SNA with indifference or intolerance (see Box 2). The SNAs reported mixed experiences in their relationships with teachers, but all agreed that the nature of this relationship was pivotal to achieving the maximum benefit for the child.

**Box 2: Selection of comments relating to perceived need**

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*"The children I have, possess a learning ability to that of a 6 to 7-year- old, but they are in a class of 8 to 9-year-olds. The curriculum is too advanced for them. They are falling behind before they even start"*. (Teacher – 2 yrs)

*"Special classes are nearly a more effective way where the core areas of the curriculum are dealt with and the child returns to the mainstream class for other things. The curriculum areas are not necessarily reflecting the skills that they require"*. (Teacher-10yrs)

*"When the child gets resource hours, some parents think- 'Oh great, now you can look after them', but the reality is, we do not have all the expertise that is required. Some parents don't see this and the child gets no additional help"*. (RT - 2 yrs – 18 yrs exp)

*"The child is constantly been taken out for different appointments. She doesn't want to go. She ends up missing out and lags behind. She has to work harder to keep up with what she misses out on"*. (Teacher – 2 yrs)

*"If I didn't have a Special Needs Assistant working with him, this would be a very different interview"*. (Teacher – 4 yrs)

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Related to the issue of teacher/ SNA relations is an apparent need for a genuinely multidisciplinary approach to managing children with SEN. For example, some teachers spoke about working in isolation with no support whilst others indicated that informal conversations or chance meetings with other professionals (e.g. speech therapists) had been most beneficial in helping them to better manage the child within the classroom. Resource teachers also stated that in-house speech and language resources were inadequate to deal with these children's problems and that only some of the children had to attend private Speech and Language classes.

Our findings indicate that many children with SEN would be unable to cope in mainstream classrooms without the support of an SNA to assist them in their daily tasks. However, the role of the SNA places an additional responsibility on teachers to manage other staff within their classroom. Ainscow (2000) reports that the task of managing other adults in the classroom requires time, effort, and expertise in order to derive maximum benefit for the child. Our results suggest that whilst this relationship is generally working in the schools, both parties require substantial support and training. This finding is consistent with Lawlor and Cregan's (2003) study which concluded that the evolving role of the SNA has either the potential to become "*a stifling threat, or a very valuable resource*" (p. 92) and needs to be developed for the benefit of all involved.

*(b) Social and emotional needs*
A second major sub-theme related to the social and emotional development of children with SEN. We found that the nature of the child's disability tends to determine largely his/her ability to integrate within the mainstream setting and consequently, dictates the amount of involvement with the larger group. However, all respondents agreed that the presence of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme in schools was extremely important in helping children to better understand and empathise with children with SEN. The aim of this programme is to encourage all children to respect diversity and accept differences within their communities. Peer acceptance of children with SEN (and their disability) was considered by all participants to be critically important. This is consistent with Cooper's (1993) observation that a child's self image is largely based on the way significant others treat him/her so that these self-images, in a sense, compose one's self-esteem. All of the respondents felt that children are very accepting of other children who may be seen as different and that this acceptance was due, in no small measure, to the quality and delivery of the SPHE programmes within schools.

According to Sharkey (2000), other pupils can be surprisingly understanding and willing to make compromises for, and assist, their classmates with SEN. Similarly, many participants in our study reported that the presence of a child with SEN in the classroom had a positive social impact, with pupils providing assistance and protecting them in the playground from other children who may single them out for bullying and ridicule. Teachers also indicated that when the brighter children in the class finished their work, they would assist the child with SEN. This finding is consistent with other research by Lipsky and Gardner (1995) who concluded that integration resulted in more positive attitudes towards people with disabilities.

However, there was also a general consensus that peer rejection or intolerance tend to become more common as children with SEN get older and that this may present a significant obstacle to their social integration. Similar findings were documented in the *Report of the Task Force on Autism* (DES, 2001). Naturally, the nature of the child's disability may also have a profound effect in this respect. Many teachers also expressed concerns about the difficulties faced by children with SEN when making the transition to post-primary education. Research has highlighted that many early adolescents, particularly the low achievers and the highly anxious, experience great difficulty with this transition (Eccles and Roeser, 1999). It is important,

therefore, that these factors are taken into account when developing and implementing transition policies for pupils with SEN.

**(3) Barriers to inclusion and meeting need**
The final theme related to those factors which appear to act as barriers to inclusion and/or to meeting the needs of staff when managing children with SEN (see Box 3). Firstly, many participants indicated that a reduction in class size would allow them to work with children with SEN more effectively and that perhaps this could be achieved by means of a weighting process, e.g. whereby the child with SEN would be weighted as five pupils rather than one. The amount of time teachers have to spend with the child with SEN is still proportionately greater than the attention afforded other children within the mainstream classroom. Little research has examined the effect of class size on pupils' educational progress and experience (Blatchford and Martin, 1998), but high teacher-pupil ratios within the Irish education primary system may be detrimental to the inclusion process.

The fact that children with SEN are not permitted to miss out on the core curriculum areas also appears to be problematic. Generally, there was a consensus from both teachers and RTs that the allocation of resource hours was insufficient to meet the children's needs. Some RTs had to become creative with their allocation and in some cases, felt compelled to teach a group of children thereby defeating the whole purpose of the one-to-one relationship. This, of course, is also inconsistent with the SERC recommendations. A widely held view amongst participants was that existing resources could be better utilised by employing permanent classroom assistants and/or other professionals who could better integrate within the classroom setting.

An important and recurring issue across all of the interviews was a perceived lack of support and training for teaching and support staff (see Box 3). For example, teachers and especially RTs, felt ill-equipped in the multiple areas of expertise required to deal competently with some of the more challenging forms of learning difficulty. This finding is consistent with the *Report of the Task Force on Autism* (DES, 2001) which concluded that a lack of guidance had caused confusion and considerable variation in the manner in which both mainstream and specialised education was delivered to children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Interestingly, the RTs in our study reported that they undertake courses outside of their school day in order to work effectively within the system, although none was offered formal training by the DES. Previous research has demonstrated that, if teachers do not feel adequately equipped to provide inclusive services to children with SEN, this may impact negatively on their attitudes toward inclusion and associated practices (Hammond and Lawrence, 2003).

The teachers in the current study stated that children with SEN are often absent from class in order to keep appointments related to their disability both within and outside the school. Many felt that this practice challenged the whole concept of inclusion and that a multidisciplinary approach within mainstream schools would be more conducive to full and effective inclusion. For example, there may be considerable merit in the UK and American models proposed by the INTO whereby resource teachers work alongside teachers to provide in-classroom support for the child with special needs.

The attitudes of the participants (particularly teachers) in the present study were found to be generally positive toward children with SEN, with every effort being made to accommodate them in the classroom. However, this was found to be dependent upon, and in some cases constrained by, the allocation of resources. This finding is important in view of existing evidence that indicates that teachers' non-supportive attitudes may negatively influence the success of school-based educational interventions or other aspects of teaching practice (Stanovich and Jordan, 1998; Hammond and Lawrence, 2003).

Lastly, our results from this study indicate that the creation, implementation, and support of a policy for children with SEN within mainstream schools were largely dependent upon the creative abilities of the school Principal to access available resources. Participants stated consistently that they had received full and unequivocal support from their Principals. According to Sharkey (2000), a school's policy on SEN must be based on a clear statement of belief, which will inform the behaviours, decisions and actions of staff. In fact, all of the staff in our study had access to such guidelines within their respective schools.

**Box 3. Selection of comments relating to barriers to inclusion and meeting need**

*"A lot of these children cannot focus on a teacher giving instructions to 30 other children. There is too much happening. It's hard enough on a one-to-one basis. The child has difficulty remembering; the child gets lost".* (Teacher – 3 yrs)

*"They cannot miss out on curriculum areas. What are you supposed to do for two hours while they are gone? You can't do Irish for two hours!".* (Teacher – 28yrs)

*"We should be keeping them in the classroom, not taking them out constantly".* (Teacher – 3 yrs)

*"If you were to follow the Department of Education and Science ruling, the allocation for children with SEN would not be adequate".* (RT - 3 yrs – 23 yrs exp)

*"Some classes could have two or three children with SEN and they are expected to survive in classes with 30 pupils".* (RT – 7 yrs – 21 yrs exp)

*"When I was in college, Special Needs was an elective module - I didn't take it"* (RT- 2yrs – 18 yrs exp)

*"You got plenty of handouts thrown at you, but they don't equip you for the real world".* (Teacher – 2 yrs)

**CONCLUSION**

According to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (1999), all children have individual needs and there may be a requirement, therefore, to reflect this in a more varied curriculum and teaching approaches. Our findings suggest that the way in which children with SEN are accommodated within the classroom is due, in part, to teachers' creative and adaptive skills, as well as their experience and attitudes. Teachers appeared very willing to adapt their practices provided that they had appropriate support both within the classroom and from the wider school system. Interestingly, a study of professionals carried out by Evans and Lunt (2002) concluded that the *total* inclusion of all children was perceived to be idealistic and unrealistic due to a lack of resources and the absence of a coherent inclusive attitude by policy makers. Whilst all of the participants in this study supported inclusion, some believed that a 'blanket' approach did not represent the way forward. For example, according to one teacher: "*Every child is not suitable for inclusion, but you cannot force parents to send their children to a special school. It's their choice*" (Teacher – 28 yrs).

Whilst it was generally acknowledged that the Sinnott Judgment had helped to make mainstream education more accessible for children with SEN, many participants believed that considerably more work was required to create appropriate and effective services. Whilst the EPSEN Act (2004) and IEPs are an important first step (both of which post-dated this study), our research suggests that there may be continuing inadequacies in the system if the new arrangements are not implemented effectively and sensitively. Some months ago, the INTO welcomed the announcement by the Minister for Education that increased resources would be made available to children with SEN in mainstream schools. After a protracted period of consultation, debate and some on-the-ground difficulties in implementation, these resources have now materialised (September, 2005) through the creation of a number of new posts for special needs teachers in schools. It remains to be seen, though, to what extent these new developments will make a genuine difference to both teaching staff and pupil. Importantly, whilst the INTO supports integration and inclusion, it also acknowledges that many mainstream placements are not in the best interests of every child – something that is also enshrined within the EPSEN Act 2004.

While research has demonstrated positive outcomes for pupils without disabilities within inclusive practices (Staub and Peck, 1994), no research has been undertaken to examine outcomes for children with SEN in the Irish post-primary system and this is all the more relevant in view of the recent and proposed changes. Arguably, not all children are suitable for inclusion, but this cannot be properly established without appropriate evaluation and assessment. Our study also highlighted a significant lack of resources, particularly with regard to assessment and early intervention. This raises important questions about the effectiveness of the new system of assessment and monitoring proposed under the EPSEN Act 2004, especially within an already stretched National Educational Psychological Service.

Thus, further research is required to ascertain the most effective ways in which existing and new resources can be allocated and/or re-configured to best meet the multiple and often complex needs of children with SEN. Furthermore, the needs of professionals when dealing with these

youngsters require careful consideration. Arguably, the very notion of inclusion is challenged by some of the shortcomings highlighted by our, albeit small-scale, study. Therefore, it is important that these are addressed in the short to medium term if inclusive practices are to be promoted and implemented in an effective, timely and appropriate manner within the Irish education system.

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