

Editorial

The publication of the 33rd volume of REACH in 2020 coincides with this time of global and national tumult as the world grapples with the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the publication of the journal has been significantly delayed as a consequence of this disruption and for this we apologise to our readers. In Ireland no less than in other countries, healthcare professionals have been at the vanguard of the response to the pandemic and we are all indebted to them for their heroic and selfless commitment on behalf of all of us. All sectors of society continue to respond rapidly and flexibly to the challenges we are facing with worldwide education systems being very seriously impacted.

In March, at the time when then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced the complete lockdown, few of us could have imagined the huge disruption to education. Inevitably much of the media attention focused on the graduating class of 2020 and the debates about the Leaving Certificate examination. However, throughout the hiatus enforced by school closures, teachers and other education staff found themselves faced with huge challenges in unfamiliar terrain. Those who support vulnerable children and young people with significant needs in mainstream schools and in special schools and classes had to respond rapidly and creatively in pivoting to online teaching and learning. The challenges faced by educators in this new professional context were highlighted at the recent conference of the National Council for Special Education.

Technology for online and blended teaching and learning is not always designed with the needs of learners with disabilities in mind. The relationships that are fundamental to education cannot be replicated through and may be difficult to maintain in online teaching and learning. Few teachers or other education professionals had prior experience of or professional development focused on supporting learners with additional needs in online or blended learning environments (Basham, 2020). At the same time it is encouraging to recognise the potential affordances of online learning in terms of enhancing accessibility and greater potential for personalised learning (Basham, 2020; Rice, 2020) and heartening to see initial teacher education institutions responding rapidly to the need to prepare student teachers to teach in online and blended environments.

In September, the reopening of schools, marked a very significant step forward in Ireland's response to the crisis. The efforts of school leaders and staff in keeping schools open have been widely recognised which perhaps demonstrates a renewed public awareness of the critical place of schools in Irish society and an enhanced appreciation of the work of school staff. The appointment of Ireland's first Minister of Special Education and Inclusion also marks a significant and welcome development.

REACH Volume 33.2 features diverse contributions but all share a unifying focus and purpose on furthering professional knowledge and understanding. Readers who have been seeking to address the challenges of supporting the inclusion of all learners in education in the midst of a global pandemic are likely to find the article on multidisciplinary collaboration in education (Travers, 2020) particularly timely. The author, Michael Travers sadly passed away on January 17th 2018. We are delighted to publish his work posthumously. At a time of crisis, collaboration assumes even greater importance and Michael's comprehensive, scholarly and insightful analysis of the challenges and opportunities for the teaching profession underpinned by his professional experience and huge contribution to special education as a teacher, principal and inspector will be of interest to many.

This issue also features two articles which report research focusing on inclusion in mainstream and in special schools. In the first of these, Colum considers the factors that facilitate and impede the inclusion of learners with moderate general learning disabilities and challenging behaviour in school and class activities in six special schools. Notably, leadership and collaboration are identified as key factors enabling inclusion. Nic Aindriú reports on the experiences of pupils with special educational needs in Irish-medium schools in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Conducted through pupil-led interviews, the study foregrounds the perspectives of children with SEN in immersion education contexts. As a group that has been significantly underrepresented in research, the voices of these young learners can inform practices and policies in immersion education.

The aims of the REACH Journal are to

- disseminate reliable, high quality, peer-reviewed information and act as a resource for teachers of pupils with special needs and for other professionals

- provide an opportunity for those involved and interested in special and inclusive education to publish articles based on their research, practice and experience.
- promote co-operation and understanding between teachers and other professionals across the spectrum of educational settings
- engage parents, service providers, policy makers and people with disabilities themselves in fruitful dialogue.

After careful deliberation and consultation with key stakeholders including the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education which is the founding organisation of the Journal, the Editorial Board has decided to rename the journal as *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*. We are of the view that this will more accurately reflect the national and international research and policy landscape and the scope of the journal.

A vision of REACH has for many years been to broaden and increase the readership base. Therefore we are delighted to announce that from Volume 34 onwards, *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland* will have a full online presence and will be freely available online in open access format. We are confident that this will improve awareness, recognition and circulation of the REACH Journal among teachers and other education professionals across the spectrum of education settings and among all those involved and interested in inclusive education, including parents, service providers, policy makers and people with disabilities. For the latest updates see www.reachjournal.ie and follow @ReachJournal on Twitter.

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