

# Exemptions from Irish: An Inclusion Dilemma

While exemptions from Irish are periodically reported in the media, they have attracted little academic commentary. Learners with certain special educational needs (SEN) qualify for an exemption from Irish when clear criteria are met (DES<sup>1</sup>, 1994; DES, 1996), but there appears to be a gap between policy and practice. This paper presents findings on the educational profile of learners with Williams syndrome, a rare neurodevelopmental condition that results in an intellectual disability (ID) but an aptitude for language learning. Most of the teacher participants in the study acknowledged the language-learning capacity of the learners but some portrayed professional dilemmas of working within the parameters of an exemption from Irish. While this paper primarily aims to open the debate on exemptions from Irish, it also proposes a framework for the teaching of Irish to learners with SEN.

**Key words:** *Williams syndrome, Irish exemption, language learning, inclusion, special education.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Conceptualising educational inclusion is both complex and controversial (Brantlinger, 1997), and gaps remain between inclusive education policy and actual school practices (Mulholland and O'Connor, 2016; Rayner, 2017). The principles of the *Primary School Curriculum*, which span mainstream, special-classes in primary schools and special-school settings, include the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum which facilitates individual difference (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 1999). Similar to mainstream primary schools, special schools were established under *Rules for National Schools*

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<sup>1</sup> DES: Department of Education and Science (until 2009), Department of Education and Skills (from 2010).

(Department of Education, 1965). Consequently, the curriculum in special schools is based on the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999), despite catering for students to age eighteen. However, there have been significant developments in the curriculum in special schools in the past twenty years, thereby ensuring special schools continue to be valued placements (Ware et al., 2009; Tynan, 2016a, 2016b). The *Guidelines for Students with General Learning Disabilities* (NCCA, 2007) acknowledge the continuum of learning needs in Irish students, thereby providing guidelines for teachers on how all students can access all subjects of the *Primary School Curriculum*. Most special schools emphasise life-skill development (Ware et al., 2009) and introduce such subjects as woodwork and cookery for students of post-primary age. Many also engage in certification, including *Priority Learning Units* (at Level 1 and Level 2), the *Junior Certificate Schools Programme*, as well as State Examinations. In practice, Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O’Raw (2015) found variety in the curriculum offered in special schools, which ranged from subjects based on the national curriculum to those related to pupil interests. While special classes exist within mainstream schools, they are “generally not operating as a fluid and temporary form of provision” (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2016a, p. 92). They have advantages of community-based education, reduced pupil-teacher ratios, flexible curriculum organisation and delivery, and can facilitate mainstream inclusion (Ware et al., 2009).

While exemptions from Irish are periodically reported in the print media (see, for example, Walsh, 2014, O’Brien, 2016): they usually concern post-primary students and have attracted little academic commentary. Learners with certain special educational needs (SEN) qualify for an exemption from Irish when clear criteria are met (DES 1994; DES, 1996). If one views the whole-school evaluation reports on special schools and special classes within mainstream primary schools on the website of the Department of Education and Skills, they show most of these settings do not offer Irish as part of the curriculum. There appears to be a gap between policy and practice. This raises issues central to the inclusion debate: there is an assumption of homogeneity in certain disability groups, there are low expectations of students with SEN to learn another language and there is an insinuation that students with SEN neither need nor would benefit from the learning of Irish.

The regulation of exemptions from Irish is clarified in DES Circular 12/96 for primary schools and Circular M10/94 for post-primary schools. According to the website of the Department of Education and Skills (n.d) “Irish is a compulsory subject in schools recognised by the Department however there are certain limited circumstances whereby an exemption may be granted. The authority to grant

an exemption has been delegated to school management”. However, there is no mention of special schools in either circular and it is unclear if the inclusion of special schools should be inferred from the primary-school circular considering special schools were set up under the National School system. According to an email to the author from an official in the Department of Education and Skills in November 2016, no child gets an ‘automatic exemption’, even in a special school. While this may be Department policy, there appears to be variation in practice as many special schools and classes quite simply do not offer Irish as part of the curriculum.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Despite continuing trends towards inclusive education, special placements (special schools and special classes) continue to educate pupils with SEN in Ireland. Inclusion is now frequently defined in terms of educational outcomes rather than placement (Goodall, 2015; Tynan, 2016b). Yet conceptualising and defining inclusion remains problematic. Despite the national policy of many countries supporting the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools, local practice may differ (Douglas et al., 2012). Inclusion requires teachers to ensure “all children can learn and feel they belong” (Florian and Rouse, 2010, p.186).

A recent report by Darmody and Smyth (2015) shows exemptions from Irish for pupils with a learning disability at post-primary level have more than doubled between 2004 and 2015. Ó Laoire (2013) highlights contradictions in the exemption process at post-primary level, whereby students with a diagnosed learning difficulty were granted an exemption from Irish but studied other modern languages such as French. He claims there is a lack of transparency around the issue.

At primary level, issues are also apparent regarding exemptions. Rose et al. (2015) claim, in their national longitudinal study on special education in Ireland, that “there appeared to be little discussion or awareness of the implications of not studying Irish” (p. 4). If inclusion concerns inclusive learning, surely all pupils should be offered Irish in their curriculum regardless of placement. Of course, this poses a significant dilemma considering that nearly 40% of teachers in special schools have restricted recognition (Ware et al., 2009). This is a term used by the DES to describe the recognition of teachers who hold for example a Montessori qualification for teaching in early years’ settings and special schools only. The term is also applied to teachers who are trained overseas who have not reached a specified level of fluency in Irish and, subsequently, are ‘restricted’ to teaching in

special schools and in resource posts. This term is now referred to as ‘registration with conditions’ with the Teaching Council (2015).

The school placements attended by children with Williams syndrome (WS), the focus of this paper, include mainstream, special classes and special schools (Tynan, 2016a). Williams Syndrome is a genetic condition which produces an atypical cognitive, behavioural and neuroanatomical profile (Martens, Wilson and Reutens, 2008), whereby almost all individuals with WS have a mild to moderate general learning disability (GLD). WS is a “condition of contradictions” (Tynan, 2015). The associated educational profile is usually described in terms of “peaks and valleys” (Dykens, Hodapp and Finucane 2000, p.106). The dissociation between language and visuospatial skills is seen as the “hallmark” of WS (Bellugi and St. George, 2001, i) whereby language is deemed a significant strength and visuospatial skills pose significant challenges.

The challenges of the condition, primarily the associated intellectual disability, tend to overshadow the strengths and lead to an exemption from Irish. Other challenges typically relate to gross- and fine-motor skills and anxiety (Semel and Rosner, 2003). In addition, learners with WS are likely to display certain behaviours which impede learning, being four times more likely to have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD] than learners without WS (Power et al., 1997), with high distractibility and low persistence (Levine et al., 2013), and emotional hypersensitivity (Howlin and Udwin, 2006). The relative strengths associated with the WS profile are usually cited as vocabulary, expressive language, facial recognition, musicality, curiosity and sociability (Semel and Rosner, 2013; Tynan, 2016b). The strengths of this profile imply a potential to learn a second language. However, this is not explored in the literature.

There is “a serious lack” of research on bilingualism in children with developmental conditions (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016, p. 12). Those published, however, are encouraging and provide evidence that second language learning is not only possible, but can be achieved to a level of bilingualism in some learners with Down syndrome (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2005) and with autism spectrum disorder (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2012). Both studies emphasize the heterogeneity in both groups of learners regarding their language learning ability.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Studies on individuals with Williams syndrome (WS) have been dominated by a medical model (Dykens et al., 2000) which highlights the limitations common to

the condition (Mertens, 2009). This study was underpinned by the transformative paradigm which rejects the deficit model of special needs' groups (Seelman, 2000) and discounts the homogeneity of group members (Mertens and McLaughlin, 2004).

This small-scale qualitative study focused on all the children with WS between the ages of four and thirteen, registered with the Williams Syndrome Association of Ireland, who were in primary education in the Republic of Ireland and whose parents agreed to partake in the study. This totalled seven children out of a possible nine, two parents did not respond to the invitation to participate. This represents 29-44% of the likely population of children with WS in primary school in Ireland when one considers there are two to three individuals diagnosed with WS each year, not all of them children (Green, 2011) and considering there are eight years to the primary-school system in Ireland.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with parents and teachers formed the main method of data collection. Four of the seven children were enrolled in a mainstream school setting at the time of the research, one was in a special class and two were in special schools. Where a child was in a mainstream school the class teacher and the learning-support/resource teacher were interviewed. Where a child was in a special class the class teacher and the teacher of the corresponding mainstream class into which this child was included with their peers was interviewed, and where a child was in a special school the class teacher was interviewed. The teachers of all but one child agreed to be interviewed. The interviews centred on teacher and parent perceptions of the child's educational profile and the inclusion of the child in education. The themes that emerged from the data on educational profile from both parents and teachers included: aptitudes, perceptual and motor skills, maladaptive behaviours, language, literacy and mathematics. The sub-themes for language differed between parents (musicality, sociability and behaviour) and teachers (vocabulary, socialisation, Irish and foreign language learning). The research was not focused specifically on the child's language profile nor was it about Irish exemptions. However, this was an unexpected emergent theme. The findings described here are primarily based on teacher perceptions.

## **FINDINGS**

Both parents and teachers described a broad language profile of learners with WS with some noted variance in their descriptions. This reminds us of the heterogeneity of any group of learners. The language themes or commonalities that emerged

were social context, vocabulary and Irish/foreign languages. This paper will report primarily on the Irish/foreign languages theme.

People with WS are noted for their relatively good vocabularies with an adeptness and enjoyment of words (Levine et al., 2013). The current study also shows this. According to the teacher of a pupil with WS *'His vocabulary is great. At 'Show and Tell' he brought in a tractor and said 'these are the attachments'. You wouldn't pick him out as different. He's better even [than his peers] at times.* This love of words and language was also evident in the child's interest in other languages. One resource teacher described an incident:

*one week he came in and all his numbers were in German and I said to him 'do you have a German visitor at home?' 'No!' And I said 'God, this is very strange! I said 'where are you getting the numbers from?' Any of the maths we were doing and the answer'd be like 'Fier', 'Drei' and these were right. They were the right answers but in German!*

It emerged the pupil had picked up these words from looking at the Volkswagon website due to a special interest in trucks.

Noting the aptitude for language, mainstream teachers generally involved the children in Irish lessons, despite all but one having an exemption. One teacher describes the dilemma:

*he's got a grasp even of Irish words...I mean...okay maybe the comprehension wouldn't always be there. His ability to absorb actual vocabulary and phrases is really very good (...)Because naturally I grappled with whether to do Irish or not (...) he enjoys the whole experience*

DES Circular 12/96 states clearly that a written application for exemption will be made by a parent or guardian to the principal of the school, specifying the grounds on which the exemption is sought. The ground for exempting a child with WS from Irish is that of a general learning disability (GLD) so all exemptions were consistent with the terms of the DES circular. For parents of children in special schools there was no discussion about an exemption between the school and the parents, as all children in the school had an intellectual disability. A teacher in a special school described the child's ability to use Irish in context, despite Irish not being a subject offered in the school: *"Even Irish, I mean they don't do Irish here and she'd be 'anseo!' 'Conas ata tú?' ['I'm here!'] 'How are you?'] It'll come out of the blue so yes I'd say she's probably thinking in different languages".*

The mother of one girl in a mainstream school described how her daughter did Irish as part of the curriculum for several years. However, with the introduction of reading and writing from second class the focus of the Irish curriculum moved from activity-based learning to textbook-based learning and the child fell behind. The following year this parent was guided to avail of the exemption from the class teacher: “*her teacher said ‘she really doesn’t get it, it’s above her. [So] we have abandoned the Irish’*”. However, she also indicated that there was an expectation that an exemption from Irish would be needed at some point in her daughter’s primary education:

*When she had her psychological assessment it was recommended: an exemption for Irish. So we were always going to go down that route that she would and it was a matter of let her just keep at it until such time as it became a struggle and when it became a struggle then that was it.*

There is evidence here of an ongoing discussion between the school and the child’s parents about *when* the exemption from Irish would be granted. This process was not described by any other parent. However, as the year progressed for this child the class teacher also ‘exempted’ her from history and geography as she deemed the concepts too challenging. This was also indicated by another teacher. This was a practice only described by mainstream class teachers. There is little or no evidence in the literature of the practice of exemptions spreading across different subject areas nor is it described anywhere in Department policy.

## **DISCUSSION**

Learners with WS generally have a GLD in the mild to moderate range (Dykens et al., 2000) and display many associated challenges including a slower rate of learning and difficulty with generalisation (Westwood, 2015). Indeed the ‘Williams Syndrome Cognitive Profile’ (Mervis et al., 2000) displays marked unevenness across the subtests of most IQ tests. A case study of WS has shown that low IQ scores can disguise specific capacities (Lenhoff et al., 1997). This leads back to the issue of labelling. A diagnosis is an important milestone in acknowledging the profile of a learner and ensuring they can access appropriate supports. However, the inappropriate use of a label, whereby assumptions of inability and disability abound, causes more damage to the individual than good (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Some assumptions are “taken-for-granted beliefs about the world” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 2). The danger is that assumptions can make us unconsciously incompetent (Bassot, 2016).

This was evident in the study whereby exemptions from Irish were assumed to be a support to the learner. Unfortunately, in some cases, this meant a practice of withdrawing curriculum areas when the child experienced difficulties in those subject areas. This means some learners do not benefit from a broad and balanced curriculum. For this purpose, it is essential to deconstruct an ‘exemption’. This is a very clear barrier to inclusion, it denies access to a subject area and denies the student an important part of their identity and culture. According to the NCCA (2016, p. 18) “Languages by their nature are interconnected. Developing skills in one language will help children to develop similar skills in another language, provided they have adequate exposure to the language, and adequate motivation”. Unfortunately, through the arrangements for exemptions, learners with WS are not enabled to learn the Irish language at their own pace despite high levels of motivation. Furthermore, an exemption prevents participation in a range of interactive activities which reduces a sense of belonging and a sense of community (see Sousa and Tomlinson, 2011). For the learner with WS it prevents them from developing a learning strength and also excludes them from activities at which they could succeed. This success in front of peers is important, not just for the learner, but for the peers as it affects their perceptions (Rose and Howley, 2007).

If we consider the approaches used to support learners in other subject areas in which they experience difficulty it makes sense to adopt such an approach to Irish. One solution is differentiation. Differentiation concerns adapting teaching and learning materials to account for individual differences in learning styles and learning abilities (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011, p. 158). There are many ways in which a curriculum or learning experience can be differentiated for a learner or group of learners. According to Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) this can be done through differentiating the content, the process, the product, the affect and/or the learning environment according to the learner’s readiness, interest and learning profile. If this is done for ten subjects of the national curriculum in mainstream and special placements, it begs the question: why do we accept exemptions from Irish as a support mechanism for learners when, according to the NCCA (1999), differentiation is the recommended approach for all other subjects?

## **LIMITATIONS**

This research involved only seven learners with WS and the findings are based on interviews with teachers of six of the pupils. It is not suggested that these claims be generalised to other groups of learners with special educational needs. However, the findings regarding exemptions from Irish show teachers of most of

the children with WS in the study perceived the child had a capacity to learn Irish, which is enough to open the exemption debate for this population of learners.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite a clear interest in language and a capacity to learn language and engage in language-learning activities, children with WS do not have equality of access to the learning of Irish, nor do they have equality of participation in some settings. The findings indicate learners with WS **can** engage in second and additional foreign language learning. The policy on exemptions from Irish should be reviewed, with a view to terminating their use. The assumption should be that every child will and can learn the Irish language. Where this is a difficulty, the language should be differentiated. In cases where learners have significant difficulty with language and communication, incidental exposure to Irish can be provided. To progress the inclusion debate we need to assume a default setting of ability and possibility while remaining realistic and supportive of learners' needs and ensuring they can flourish as full human beings. Otherwise as educators we are culpable of disabling learners.

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