

Allocating Resources to Support Learners with Special Educational Needs: Can We Ever Get it Right? Learning from International Research

RICHARD ROSE is Professor of Inclusive Education at the University of Northampton and director of Project IRIS, a longitudinal study into special educational provision in Ireland.

The provision of appropriate support to encourage and enable the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools has been seen as an issue that is both complex and controversial in many jurisdictions around the world (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2012; Webster 2014). Forlin (2001) in a study of 571 primary school teachers working in schools that included pupils with disabilities in Queensland Australia found that a perceived lack of support was a significant source of stress. This is further evidenced by the study conducted by Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo (2015), who indicate that where attempts were made to promote inclusive education in mainstream schools in Italy with inadequate support provision, this led to resentment on the part of teachers and parents, increased exclusion of pupils from schools and an increase in the number of private specialist schools. What these, and other similar studies show is that if policy makers get this wrong the negative consequences can be significant.

Whilst the need to provide additional support to enable access to learning for some pupils with special educational needs has been well established, the process through which this support is allocated has rarely been well defined and continues as a source of frustration for many professionals and parents (Peters 2003; Reback, Rockoff, and Schwartz 2014). Lundqvist, Allodi Westling and Siljehag (2015), suggest that the levels of support required by individual pupils is far from being constant and may change according to the teaching situation and also be influenced by factors related to key times in the pupil's life, such as periods of transition. In their study conducted in Sweden, these researchers indicate that there will be some pupils who have high dependency needs who are likely to always require the assistance of specialist personnel and equipment to enable them to function in an educational situation. It is less easy to make such a blanket assumption about those

who may appear to have lesser needs. A significant number of pupils are likely to need additional support only at specific times or for particular circumstances, though in many cases these will be difficult to define and will require some flexibility in the allocation of such a resource. Lundqvist and her colleagues propose that support provision should be understood as a multidimensional concept and that simplistic models that attempt to allocate resources according to assessments which generalise the needs of individual pupils, are likely to fall short of ensuring adequate provision. In an international review of policy and provision in providing education for pupils with special educational needs, Rix and his colleagues (2013), suggest that a more creative approach is required to ensure that resources are effectively distributed and used to support learning needs. In a similar vein to the proposals made by Lindqvist and her colleagues, Rix and his team recommend that decisions about the use of additional resources may well be most effectively made at the school level, and by those professionals who best know the individuals involved and can make judgements about when to apply additional support to facilitate learning.

What we can conclude from the studies that have been conducted internationally in this area is that attempts to create resource allocation models that are equitable and effective have generally been well intentioned but have seldom been wholly successful. The new NCSE model quite rightly asserts that dependency upon assessment procedures and the over emphasis upon deficit labels has proved to be in many respects discriminatory. Perhaps it is time to recognise that whilst many pupils with special educational needs do require additional support, it is in fact teachers who require a system that enables them to use their professional judgements about how and when it is most appropriate to use resources to support their learners. The allocation of additional support to schools, rather than individuals is certainly a more appropriate means of promoting inclusion. We now need to have the confidence to respect the professionalism of teachers and principals in deciding when and how to utilise these resources to create inclusive classrooms for the benefit of all learners.

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