

Why Change how Additional Teaching Resources are allocated to Schools? A Primary Support Teacher's Response

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The 'new model' of resource allocation as presented in the summary by Byrne (2017) was born out of a perceived inequity in the distribution of resources (i.e. teachers) for children with special educational needs (SEN). The 'new model' refers to the 'profiled needs of each school' as the determining factor for the allocation of additional teaching resources. While schools to date have been allocated these resources based on enrolment, gender, socio-economic status and assessed needs it appears only the latter will change – an undoubtedly welcome move of itself whereby students will no longer require a label prior to their receiving additional support. In fact this 'new model' could be described as enlightened if what results is the capacity-building of teachers so that they are permitted to support students according to their needs. The practice of ascribing 'hours' to students based on a label appears to have been dropped in favour of teachers being free to make professional decisions about how to best meet students' needs.

This move towards a more adaptable type of support is not new. Circular 24/03 (DES, 2003) stated resources in schools should be deployed according to the needs of students. Circular 02/05 (DES, 2005) recommended flexibility in how students' needs were to be met and referred to 'enabling' schools. However, circulars that followed (DES, 2011) encouraged practices such as 'clustering', suggesting that the concerns of the DES were primarily monetary rather than improved educational outcomes for students with SEN. Is it not legitimate therefore, that teachers would be sceptical when asked to consider a 'new model'? Regardless of its sound theoretical base, will its implementation be subject to the box-ticking that has been Departmental practice when effecting supports for students with SEN?

Teachers do not design their supports based purely on allocated hours and assessments, private or otherwise. They accepted a long time ago that what evolved following the implementation of the General Allocation Model (DES, 2005) was a failure to recognise individual difference and they acted accordingly. The

suggestion that current practices are not linked directly to improved educational outcomes and that the ‘new model’ will bring these about, underestimates the extent to which teachers have already adopted practices around the development of IEPs so as to ensure targeted and appropriate teaching for students with SEN. The fact that the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) recommended such an approach appears to have been overlooked by this ‘new model’ – the Act being yet another example of the DES falling short of its own position.

The model’s move to reduce the need for formal assessments as part of the application process for additional teaching resources can be welcomed while also raising some concern. The value of a well-informed assessment cannot be underestimated as it provides much needed insights for teachers thus contributing to the design of students’ programmes. The suggestion that outside agencies will be afforded more time to consult with and advise teachers around student needs is welcome. The fact that agencies such as NEPs may have shifted their focus towards producing curricular materials for example raises other questions regarding roles and responsibilities. Questions might also be asked of the manner in which the ‘new model’ appears to bring students for whom English is an additional language into the group identified as having SEN. Its apparent use of the SEN label as a ‘catch all’ term should not militate against students whose needs are more complex and neither should it attribute difficulties to students who are perhaps transitioning between settings.

Teachers have been incredibly creative in how they support students recognising that interventions must be flexible and dynamic to meet changing needs. The fact that support teachers rarely see themselves as exclusively learning support or resource teachers is testimony to this – a position that appears to have been forgotten by the DES. The ‘new model’ provides the DES with an opportunity to reshape education for students with SEN whereby teachers and schools can be flexible and professional in their delivery of supports. Will teachers be allowed to make such decisions around interventions and supports or will they continue to await permission to do so?

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