

Why Change how Additional Teaching Resources are allocated to Schools?: A Post-Primary Teacher Response

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The new model for allocation of resources must be broadly welcomed as it displays a departmental shift in focus from a student's category of disability to their greatest strengths and needs and therefore, is a distinct move away from a medical model to a more needs-based approach. A model that is based on the premise that there exists a spectrum of ability and disability within every category of Special Educational Need (SEN) and that the diagnosis of disability does not necessarily inform the level of need for additional teaching support must be viewed in a positive and progressive light (National Council for Special Education, 2014). It could be argued that many post-primary schools are already highly cognisant of this and strive to be 'student lead' as opposed to 'hours driven' when devising their learning support programmes. The increasing use of team-teaching at second level has helped schools to overcome the constraints of timetabling and ensure that *all* students are more supported, while those with SEN receive at least some of their resource entitlements in a more inclusive setting.

Taking into consideration a school's educational profile and providing the school with the flexibility to allocate the resources accordingly without the need for a disability label, signals a move to an improved and more equitable system overall. These changes will obviously reduce the amount of administration involved in the application for resource hours and allow scope for targeted early intervention. However, SEN departments in schools will, in response to these changes, need to deliver a greater level of co-ordination of resources and they will also need to prioritise the time-consuming monitoring of educational outcomes if they are using more evidence based short-term interventions, as espoused in this new model. Undoubtedly, the onus is on schools to continue to oversee resources equitably and help their most vulnerable students with the greatest level of professionalism, commitment and integrity.

A decreasing need for assessments may result in a situation where it is predominantly students from financially well-off families who will have the luxury of psychoeducational reports. Detailed psychological reports can provide the SEN teacher with an invaluable insight into the learning strengths and needs of a student and therefore, it could be argued that such students may be at an advantage as regards targeting their needs more effectively due to the extra information and the specific recommendations contained in the report. Previously an assessment, in addition to an entitlement to resource hours, could also recommend Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations (RACE). However, with the new RACE Guidelines this year, a diagnosis is not required. School based evidence of a learning difficulty and the school's testing essentially supersedes the testing results contained in a psychological report (State Examinations Commission, 2017). While these changes have the positive effect of opening the scheme up to students with general learning disabilities (GLD) and providing greater certainty with the reactivation of the accommodation for Leaving Certificate exams, there could be concerns regarding the clarity of the asterisk on the statement of results as it is no longer indicative of an assessed learning difficulty. This in turn may be problematic as regards accessing the supports that third level institutions provide for an assessed SEN. Finally, there will be a reduction in the Irish exemptions granted, which can often be contentious especially at second level as some students with SEN find the subject particularly challenging and the exemption can be a huge relief to both parents and students.

Presumably diagnoses for the low incidence categories will continue to be sought by both parents and educators and it is the conditions like mild GLD and specific learning disabilities (SLD) which may increasingly go undiagnosed, particularly in disadvantaged areas. While a diagnosis of a GLD can be difficult for parents to accept especially at the later stage of second level, it can also give parents a renewed understanding of their child, not just as a learner but as a young person negotiating everyday life. A diagnosis of dyslexia can be a huge relief for a teenager who may be highly capable but has struggled throughout their time in school and it can provide them with a new sense of clarity, understanding and confidence. Overall, while a move away from the stigma of labels is a positive development, we need to be mindful of a return to the days where students left school, sometimes early, feeling like underachievers as their dyslexia went undiagnosed until perhaps later in life. Also, as there can be a genetic basis to certain learning disabilities it is important that we equip our young people with a greater level of understanding of their own needs for when they themselves become parents. It is imperative, therefore, that schools still have the support of The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to carry out assessments where the school deems necessary.

In conclusion, if it is increasingly the SEN teachers and not educational psychologists who are responsible for analysing our students' needs, perhaps we need to up-skill our teachers in the area of assessment and ensure they have the knowledge, and time, required to carry out their roles with rigour. As we embark on a more needs based approach, ultimately we need to be sure that we know our students' needs in order to be able to meet them.

REFERENCES

National Council for Special Education (2014) *Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs: A Better and More Equitable Way*, Trim: NCSE.

State Examinations Commission (2017) *Reasonable Accommodations at the 2017 Certificate Examinations: Instructions for Schools*, <http://www.examinations.ie> (accessed 9th July, 2017).

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