

# Does the New Model for Special Education Teacher Allocation in Ireland Reach the Equity Bar?

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**JOE TRAVERS is Head of the School of Inclusive and Special Education, Dublin City University, Institute of Education, St. Patrick's Campus DCU.**

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The task of devising an equitable, sustainable and effective model of support for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) is one that all educational systems struggle with. In reviewing the new model of special education teacher allocation for Irish schools (DES, 2017) I will focus on three questions: Is this allocation model equitable? Have schools the capacity to deliver on its intentions in relation to inclusive education? Will it better meet the needs of children with SEN?

## IS THE ALLOCATION MODEL EQUITABLE?

There is clear evidence that the existing model of resource allocation was inequitable on a number of fronts and lacked the sophistication to match resources with needs in a fair manner (Travers, 2010, 2010a; NCSE, 2014). The new model has the potential to be more equitable and I welcome that, but many questions still remain. No redistribution of resources between schools is occurring in this iteration as additional resources will be given to some schools with the remainder maintaining resources. To ensure no school loses teachers will require an additional 900 teachers in the system for 2017/2018. Therefore existing inequities are being retained, at least for two years. While individual schools looking through their own lens will be happy that their school will not lose resources, at a system level this is problematic as it means substantial resources are still being deployed in an inequitable manner in terms of access across school. Some rural schools, for example, because of their lower numbers can offer support to children in the average or above average age range on standardised tests in order to make up a full support teacher workload. At the same time there are schools that will struggle to meet all of their identified needs under the new allocation model, particularly in disadvantaged contexts. In that sense we are not there yet in terms of equity of allocation according to need.

The particular contexts of students experiencing disadvantage in DEIS and other schools needs specific monitoring. Where we have larger concentrations of students coming from educationally disadvantaged areas there is a social context and multiplier effect which can affect achievement levels (OECD, 2016). It is not clear if sufficient regard in the weighting formula has been made for this.

## **SCHOOL CAPACITY FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

In a study of the present resource allocation system Kinsella, Murtagh, Senior and Coleman (2014) reported that schools articulated a strong feeling of diminished professional autonomy in the allocation and deployment of resources for pupils with SEN. It could be argued that the new model greatly enhances this autonomy particularly in the deployment front. However, numerous studies question the leadership capacity of schools to deliver on this promise (Rose, Shevlin, Winter and Raw, 2015). Worryingly in this vein was a motion passed at the INTO congress 2017 stating that “the INTO categorically rejects the imposition on principals, of the responsibility of selecting pupils for resource/learning support teaching.” If the leader of learning in a school is reluctant to take on this responsibility it could lead to inequities in deployment across lots of schools.

Allied to the issue of capacity is quality professional development (Travers et al., 2010). A worrying aspect of the model is the absence of joined up thinking with the Teaching Council on the accredited continuing professional development implications and standards required for teachers in the field of inclusive and special education. In terms of qualifications there seems to be a total reliance on initial teacher education in this regard coupled with very limited places available for postgraduate study. In their study of special classes in Ireland, Banks et al found that teacher capacity greatly improved with access to additional professional support or qualifications specific to SEN (Banks et al., 2016,). The new model will do nothing to change the situation where one child could be in a school where the coordinator and teachers all hold postgraduate qualifications in the area and another in a school where there is no such expertise. In post-primary schools Kinsella et al (2014) found that 48% of support teachers give support in subjects other than their own. This raises huge quality assurance issues with implications again for professional development.

The NCSE has called for the Teaching Council to issue standards in relation to the “knowledge, skills, understandings and competencies that teachers require to enable students with complex special educational need, including ASD, to receive

an education appropriate to their needs and abilities in mainstream and special settings and a framework for teacher education to meet these standards” (NCSE, 2016, p.8). This process needs to go hand in hand with the implementation of the new model.

There are many other elements around innovation in pedagogy required, incorporating inclusive pedagogy and assessment, differentiation by choice and universal design for learning. The absence of certainty around the role of individual education planning in the system is unhelpful in the context of the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004).

### **WILL IT BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS?**

The break in the link between a formal diagnosis and access to resources is to be welcomed as is the reduction in the need for labelling of children. However, we know that children with SEN could be doing a lot better academically and socially in the system and it is not clear how the new model will contribute to a raising of standards in this regard (Cosgrove et al., 2014). The importance attached to the principle of those with the greatest level of need receiving the greatest level of support is very welcome. In other systems there is pressure to reduce support to such children in favour of those who are perceived to have more of a capacity to benefit and score higher on standardised tests.

A key issue will be consistency in implementation across schools. If large variabilities emerge in implementation it may increase and not reduce existing inequities. While the needs of all children are unique and the model encourages tailored responses to students’ strengths, interests, concerns and areas for development we do not want a situation emerging where students with roughly similar needs receive very different responses in quality and quantity.

### **QUESTIONS ARISING**

As the model is implemented it will generate many new questions including: How will schools use the increased autonomy around identification and selection of students and allocation of resources? How will progress be evaluated and recorded? How will implementation of the model interact with special classes and special schools? What influence will private assessments have on allocation of

resources within schools? Are there any perverse incentives within the model? If resources are misallocated what are the repercussions? What level of access will schools have to support services in aiding implementation? Will the model lead to a reduction in practices that can act as barriers to inclusive education?

In conclusion the model will require careful monitoring and be subject to quality assurance measures to ensure confidence in all stakeholders. It aims to lead to a more equitable system but many questions remain before we know if this promise will be realised.

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