

A Critical Interrogation of the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model within the Context of Leadership and Teacher Professional Learning

This paper seeks to critically interrogate the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) within the context of Leadership and Teacher Professional Learning (TPL). Following an analysis of SETAM within this context, a summary of the identified barriers and solutions will be presented. Finally an action plan to support the development of SETAM within the school context will be outlined.

Keywords: inclusion, special educational needs, special education teacher allocation model, leadership, teacher professional learning

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) was communicated to schools in 2017 in circular 0013/2017 (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017) after a pilot of the model had been undertaken in a sample of schools (NCSE, 2016). Under this revised model the DES provides supports to schools based on the educational profiles of each individual school (DES, 2017). The model uses a three-step process to guide the identification of needs, the interventions required and the outcomes of such interventions for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (DES, 2017). A Continuum of Support framework enables schools to identify and respond to student needs and recognises that support needs occur along a continuum and range from mild to severe. This continuum also takes into account that some supports are transient while others may be more long term. The allocation of resources occurs at three levels: (1) whole school and classroom support for all, (2) school support for some and (3) school support plus for a few (DES, 2017).

The influence and consequences of this model still have to be fully explored and further analysis of the model is necessary to appropriately understand its efficacy (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020). Inclusive education should always be concerned with equity, however it is worth considering that the manner in which policy is implemented on the ground very much depends on the management and teachers in any particular school (McCoy, 2016; Avramidis et al., 2019; Webster & Roberts, 2020). The next section will consider the context of SETAM.

CONTEXT

The ratification by Ireland of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), in 1992 resulted in far reaching changes in policy and legislation that spotlighted a rights-based approach to provision for children with SEN in the Republic of Ireland (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020) legal actions by parents seeking educational rights for children with severe disabilities prompted appropriate provision for these students and a shift towards inclusive schools. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN. This was followed a year later by the publication of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (DES, 1993), recommending that students with SEN be educated in mainstream schools with their typically developing peers (DES, 1993). Ireland then adopted the principles of the Salamanca Statement and the Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs (UNESCO, 1994).

Further change was brought about through high-profile legal cases, such as the O'Donoghue Case, taken against the state based on Article 42 of the Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1937), which states that all children have a right to appropriate primary education in Ireland. Subsequently the Education Act 1998 (Oireachtas, 1998), explicitly mentioned the provision of supports for children with SEN, and this was followed and bolstered by the Equal Status Act (Oireachtas, 2000 - 2015) requiring schools to provide reasonable accommodations for students with SEN to enable access to an appropriate education. A pivotal moment in the Irish policy landscape followed with the publication of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, (Oireachtas, 2004). Certain sections of EPSEN were however deferred following the recession in 2008 (Rose and Shevlin, 2020) and remain in-enacted, this is however currently under review (DES, 2022). These shifts in policy largely support the view that educational needs do not lie within the child, rather they lie within the readiness of the school to support the child from an infrastructural, resource and cultural perspective (Rose & Shevlin, 2017).

The manner in which supports for children with SEN can be provided effectively has been a point of debate in Ireland for decades (Travers et al., 2018; Rose and Shevlin, 2020) and has been heavily influenced by international policy and policy borrowing (Banks, 2017). Internationally inclusion is recognised as welcoming learners of all educational abilities backgrounds and ethnicities, who have historically experienced exclusion, and ensuring that they are educated together in an inclusive system (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2001; 15).

The Irish government currently spends 25% of its annual education and training budget on the area of SEN, this represents a 60% increase since 2011 (Oireachtas, 2022). Special Needs Assistants (SNA) have been increased by 81% since 2011 and Special Education Teachers (SET), formerly known as Learning Support (LS) and Resource Teachers (RT), have been increased by 48% within the same timeframe (Oireachtas, 2022). This represents a significant financial investment in SEN resourcing in the Republic of Ireland.

Ireland has developed policy over recent decades to reflect international debate about the importance of inclusive education (Ainscow, 2020). It is apparent that the government of Ireland have shifted their focus from segregated education to inclusion (Florian, 2014; Nes, Demo and Ianes, 2018; Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019; Howe and Griffin, 2020; Leonard and Smyth, 2020) first through the SET allocation model (DES, 2017) and then the School Inclusion Model (SIM), (NCSE, 2019).

In 2012 the DES requested policy advice from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) relating to the provision of supports for students with SEN in schools. In a report published by the NCSE in 2013 the development of a new model of allocation for mainstream schools was recommended. This model would be based on the profiled needs of each school individually and would negate the need for a diagnosis of disability (NCSE, 2013).

Based on this advice it was recognised that there was potential to improve the system of allocating resources to schools for students with SEN. In 2017, Minister Richard Bruton instituted the Action Plan for Education (DES, 2017). The action plan had a pivotal ambition for Ireland, of providing the best training and education system in Europe. The second goal of the action plan was to improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with SEN (DES, 2017). One of the targets outlined in this goal included a move away from ‘a deficit model of resource allocation to one requiring a social, collective response from schools’

(Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017, p. 453). This led to the inception and development of the SETAM (DES, 2017). Bolstered by the principle of developing ‘truly inclusive schools’ (DES, 2017, p.5), SETAM was introduced in the hope that it would provide a more equitable and rights based approach to the provision of supports for students with SEN without the requirement for a diagnosis (NCSE, 2013). The next section will focus on leadership in relation to SETAM.

LEADERSHIP

The principal of any school has overall responsibility for all of the children enrolled in their school and it is well recognised that the existence of inclusive schools largely depends on the commitment of the principal to inclusion (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010). This includes the education of children with SEN (Special Education Support Service (SESS), 2000). The SETAM identified the principal’s role with regard to its implementation as ‘central’ (DES, 2017, p. 23). The principal has the responsibility for the allocation of teachers and resources to students based on need and must ensure that effective systems are in place for the identification of need and for the monitoring of progress .

Prior to the advent of the SETAM, two types of teaching roles existed in addition to the mainstream teaching role, these were LS and RT roles. The general allocation model (GAM) allowed schools to meet both the needs of those students with high incidence SEN and those students with additional learning needs. Resource hours were allocated based on the assessed SEN of each individual student. Research purports that this model of resource allocation was inequitable in a myriad of ways (Travers et al., 2010; NCSE 2014). Critics noted that it was in many ways unbalanced and inequitable, that it reinforced social disadvantage and possibly further marginalised students who were already facing disadvantage, such as those students whose parents could not afford private assessment or private support from agencies outside of the school setting (NCSE, 2014; DES, 2016). This model of allocation focused heavily on the identification of deficits, with a requirement for a diagnosis placed on pupils in order to access resources and supports (Banks, Frawley & McCoy, 2015; Ní Bhroin & King, 2020).

Research found that, under the old model, schools felt they did not have enough professional autonomy with regard to the allocation of supports and resources for pupils with SEN (Kinsella, et al., 2014). The SETAM provides professional autonomy to principals and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO) to allocate resources appropriately to students based on the needs of the school

(Howe & Griffin, 2020). Some school leaders have however commented that the previous model of LS and RT allocation provided more clarity in relation to the manner in which supports could be disseminated within the school (Raftery & Brennan, 2021). The use of standardised testing, which has been compulsory in Ireland since 2007, also raised concerns for some principals, as they identified that if schools improve their standardised test scores then they face the risk of having their SET allocation reduced (Banks, 2021).

Principals also have the responsibility for facilitating professional development opportunities for staff. This training can be arranged during Croke Park hours or by facilitating staff attendance training seminars provided by the NCSE and other agencies, however this isn't always possible as principals face challenges in relation to procuring substitute cover (O'Doherty & Harford, 2018; Raftery & Brennan, 2021) and this is perhaps further exacerbated by the current substitute teacher crisis.

By placing the responsibility for the allocation of teachers and resources to students based on needs, it is presupposed that all principals across the board have the knowledge and skills to effectively identify those staff best placed to work in SET roles. It also assumes that principals, or those on the in-school management team, to whom responsibilities are delegated, are knowledgeable or have received training in the diverse area of SEN, this is not always the case (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Kendall, 2019; Leonard & Smyth, 2020; McDougal, Riby & Hanley, 2020). Whilst the SET model is underpinned by the principles of equitable provision for all (DES, 2016), it could be argued that given the challenges faced by principals in relation to the procurement of substitute teachers (O'Doherty & Harford, 2018; Raftery & Brennan, 2021), SETs may not be able to attend training seminars to support them in adequately meeting the particular needs of students to whom resources are allocated.

School leadership is notably influential with regard to successful inclusive practice in the school context (Al-Mahdy & Emam, 2018). Robust, informed leadership is needed to facilitate an innovative (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004), inclusive culture and to create a successful holistic, inclusive experience for students with SEN that will allow them to thrive and to be included meaningfully with their peers (Kendall, 2019). This is highlighted by a recent high court case, which found that a school was in breach of the Equal Status Act (2000-2015) for excluding a child with Down Syndrome from her classroom. The principal was held accountable for removing the child from the classroom rather than using the supports available to the school to meet the child's needs, and in doing so the

court stated that the school had diminished the child's access to a meaningful education with her peers (The Irish Examiner, 2022). While some supports are provided for principals they remain insufficient to meet the many needs that exist within any school population (McKeon, 2020). The SETAM also perhaps assumes that in addition to the already complex, evolving and challenging role principals face (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016), space remains for principals to take on further responsibility within the role with regard to the allocation of supports. Principals have a multi-faceted and vastly intricate role and the resounding silence around the lack of support for this role remains. In order to sustain and deliver a commitment to inclusive educational practice it is imperative that principals are provided with adequate, timely, consistent and appropriate supports to allow them to meaningfully implement all facets of the SETAM effectively.

Within the context of the SETAM the autonomy afforded to schools (DES, 2017) results in different practices being enacted across contexts due to varied interpretation of policy at ground level. This may reflect the skillset of the principals, class teachers and SETs and the commitment of same to the goal of inclusion (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Florian, 2014; Miskolci, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2016). Culture differs from school to school and it is unlikely that the policy is interpreted and enacted identically across all contexts (McKeon, 2020). Principals in some schools may be more experienced or may have trained in the area of SEN (Stephenson et al., 2020; Low, Lee & Ahmad, 2020; Leonard & Smyth, 2020), and therefore may be more proactive in terms of implementing the SET model effectively.

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) is considered important in terms of supporting children with SEN (Leonard & Smyth, 2020). With the advent of the SETAM, the NCSE called upon the Teaching Council (TC) to consider the complex needs of the student populations in mainstream schools and to put in place a framework for teacher education to ensure that teachers had the necessary skills and knowledge to support their students (NCSE, 2016). It is worth noting that under section 38 of the Teaching Council Act it is stated that student teachers in all accredited programmes are required to undertake study in inclusive education, including special education. In *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* (October, 2020) special education is referenced only once under Integration and Application of Knowledge in relation to Planning, Teaching, Learning and Assessment Skills (in Complex and Unpredictable Education Classroom Settings), and indicates that

teachers should collaborate with SETs and refer students for specialised support if required, and they themselves should be involved in the delivery of this support if appropriate. The TC also acknowledge the importance of inclusion within the learning areas in Cosán, Framework for Teachers' Learning (2016).

The DES states that SETs should be knowledgeable in a variety of approaches in relation to supporting students with diverse learning needs and that mainstream class teachers should plan their lessons to meet these needs in their classrooms and make use of strategies and methodologies to promote inclusion (DES, 2017). Assuming that all teachers have received adequate training in the area of SEN to work in an SET role undermines the level of skills needed to appropriately work with and meet the needs of children with SEN, and in doing so may disadvantage children (Kenny, McCoy & Mihut, 2020). It is recognised that classroom teachers do not always have the opportunity to develop expertise in teaching students with SEN in the mainstream setting (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020), yet the SETAM, in many ways presupposes that all teachers are in a position to work effectively with children with SEN. It was identified in the review of the pilot for the SET model that in relation to TPL it would be untenable to provide the necessary levels of support to all schools as the model was rolled out nationally (DES, 2016). This highlighted the inevitable challenges that schools would face, but didn't result in any actions to address them. Any teacher can be placed in an SET role by the principal, but not all schools have teachers with expertise in SEN on their staff (Lyons, Thompson & Timmons, 2016), which perhaps further promotes an inequitable approach as some schools may be disproportionately disadvantaged in this regard.

Training in the area of SEN is specialised and equips teachers with the skills, methodologies and abilities to address the complex needs of the students in their care (Leonard & Smyth, 2020; Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). The recommendations from the pilot of the SET model indicate that further training would be required for class teachers and support teachers to facilitate inclusion. Accessing this training however remains at the discretion of each individual teacher. All student teachers are required to complete study in the area of inclusive and special education during initial teacher training (Teaching Council Act, 2001). The TC also promotes and supports teachers accessing ongoing professional development throughout their careers (Teaching Council, 2015), but there is currently no requirement for teachers to engage in TPL in the area of SEN.

The class-teacher holds the responsibility for the progress and care of all pupils in the classroom, including pupils with SEN (DES, 2016), SETs take a secondary role in this regard which perhaps diminishes the perception of their professional

capacity (Norwich & Lewis, 2007). With the responsibility for all students falling to the class-teacher, it is worth noting that during the Covid-19 pandemic SETs were deemed responsible for coming into schools to work with students with SEN in mainstream settings and not their classroom based colleagues. It may be worth considering a sharing of responsibility between class-teachers and SETs, rather than simply placing the responsibility with the class teacher. The basis of this approach is collaboration and is based on a whole school approach (DES, 2017; Ní Bhroin & King, 2020), making the separation of responsibility between roles contradictory (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018).

By enacting the SETAM the DES signalled that there was a lack of inclusive educational practice and perhaps inadequate provision for children with SEN. The in-enactment of some elements of the EPSEN Act (Oireachtas, 2004) meant that the provision of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for children never became a mandatory practice (Travers et al., 2018), this could be perceived as having weakened Ireland's response and position with regard to inclusion and an adequate and appropriate provision for students with SEN.

The SET model requires a plan to be put in place for individual children or groups of children (DES, 2017). The guidelines for primary schools supporting pupils with SEN (DES, 2017) state that this model is intended to build on established good practice positioned within a whole-school framework with an emphasis on effective teaching and strong collaboration (DES, 2017). This includes putting in place the necessary paperwork to support planning, and this should be done collaboratively with the child, the parents, outside agencies, Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), the class teacher and the SET. All parties working together for the good of the child should underlie all practice with regard to the SETAM.

In the next section an action plan to support the development of the SETAM within the school context will be outlined followed by a conclusion.

ACTION PLAN

Taking school leadership and TPL into account the author has theorised an action plan of the types of actions and supports that could be put in place at DES level and at school level to further support and develop the SETAM in an equitable way.

Leadership

School leadership is an increasingly complex role and school leaders are not

provided with adequate support to fulfil the many responsibilities that fall to them on a daily basis. Regular targeted training should be provided for school leaders, in consultation with school leadership teams, in the area of SEN. This training should be made accessible to busy school leaders by providing regional and hybrid models of onsite and online teaching .

Communities of Practice (CoP) could be instituted to provide further support to school principals in the area of the SETAM. These should be scheduled during the working day, with substitute cover provided for teaching principals. This could be provided in local education centres and facilitators could be provided by the NCSE to institute and maintain these important CoPs.

The mentoring of new principals by experienced principals has been established through the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), however a gap exists for mentoring specific to SEN. It is worth considering if mentoring could be provided for a period of time, in relation to the SETAM specifically through the bespoke option available for mentoring through the CSL. Arrangements for this could be at a local level between BOMs and school leaders.

Teacher Professional Learning

A SET role is a specialised role, requiring the SET to complete significant planning and assessment and to work with the child, the class teacher, the SNAs, the parents and outside agencies. Yet despite the weight of this role, historically classroom teachers have been responsible for all of the students in their care. By reviewing circulars 0013/2017 and 0008/2019 and revising these in relation to the responsibility of SETs, responsibility for children could be shared between the class teacher and the SET supporting the child. A provision could also be added to the Education Act (1998) to take into account the responsibility that SETs take for the students they work with. This could be piloted in a representative sample of schools to ascertain the challenges that may be encountered. It is likely that change could be challenging to initiate initially, but this is an important shift to make in terms of recognising the professionalism of SETs.

Further ongoing access to and involvement in TPL should be provided by the DES and the NCSE to all teachers in SET roles. Accreditation could be considered for those accessing these seminars and an increase in blended or online courses could provide further opportunity for teachers who perhaps can't travel to central locations from more geographically isolated areas of Ireland. The TC could also assess and revise Céim and Cosán to more fully capture the diversity of TPL required to appropriately meet the needs of diverse learners.

The impact that ongoing TPL has on teacher efficacy within SET roles should be monitored and evaluated regularly. This could be done by the NCSE in conjunction with national universities. Involvement in this however, would be dependent on a commitment from teachers at the outset of appointment to be involved in training and also to engage with evaluation protocols following the completion of training courses.

CONCLUSION

In Ireland inclusion based policy change is becoming what Ball described as ‘thoroughly embedded in the ‘assumptive worlds’ of many academic educators’ (Ball, 2003, p.215) as the emphasis is placed on problem solving rather than the problem setting (Schön, 1983, p.40). The action plan above attempts to engage in problem solving in relation to the identified challenges presented by SETAM. It is recognised that, although the action plan presented here has theorised a number of different actions, these actions, barriers and strategies are not exhaustive and could be further developed within the context of each individual school.

Leadership as a role is becoming ever more compounded with convoluted processes and procedures. Leaders need clear supports and guidelines and recognition from the DES that this complex role is already overloaded and untenable. By providing leaders with practical resources and solutions within the context of SETAM, this model could be bolstered and further developed. It must however be recognised that by continuing to increase the workload placed on principals without adequate supports, the commitment of equity to all could be diminished.

Teacher professional learning is an area of significant importance in relation to SETAM. The role of the SET is multi-faceted and requires specialist knowledge, skills and approaches in order to be fulfilled appropriately. Ongoing, targeted and reviewed TPL is imperative if the diverse needs of all learners are to be supported meaningfully within the school context. Responsibility for learners should be shared between the SET and the class teacher in order to best meet the needs of each individual student in their care.

Recognising that the development of the role of SETs and inclusion are key areas for development in schools and putting an action plan in place would go some way to supporting the achievement of meaningful inclusive practice. ‘Stretching’ the responsibility across a number of departments and individuals (Diamond and Spillane, 2016), allows for school communities at a variety of levels to be

involved in decision making and knowledge sharing (Miskolci, Armstrong and Spandagou, 2016), which creates a sense of ownership and a shared building of a more inclusive culture (Harding, 2009).

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