

Is Ireland at a Crossroads of Inclusive Education?

This paper seeks to critically reflect on inclusive education in Ireland 2020 exploring whether Ireland is at a crossroads of inclusive education. Matters regarding legislation, policy and classroom practices are outlined and critically discussed. A host of changes in the field of Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision are detailed, including the move from a medical to a biopsychosocial model of SEN and the use of person-first language. Furthermore, the recent advancements in Ireland from integration to inclusion and towards a capacity-building model are discussed, in light of the new model for special education teacher allocation (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a). While these present as significant advancements, there are also many challenges to inclusive education in Ireland that still need to be considered. Such challenges relate to the role of special schools and special classes in our system and the dichotomy between differentiation and a Universal Design for Learning framework within classrooms. Moving forwards, suggestions are outlined related to using formative assessment in the classroom, a more flexible model for educational placement and a greater focus on capacity-building within school settings.

Keywords: inclusive education, inclusion, special educational needs (SEN), capacity-building, new model of special education teacher allocation

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LEGISLATION: FROM INTEGRATION TO INCLUSION?

Ireland has travelled a significant journey towards inclusive education in recent years. Nonetheless, MacGiolla Phádraig (2007, p. 289) notes that “in terms of legislation, Ireland [was] a latecomer to inclusion”, whereby in early years, the country adopted an approach of caution and pragmatism towards supporting persons with Special Educational Needs (SEN). International reports such as

the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([UNCRPD], United Nations, 2007) shaped the path for inclusion in Ireland by calling on governments to include children with SEN in all aspects of education, with due regard for their right to full participation in society. The Irish Government responded with several reports, including the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 1993), the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). While the SERC report stated the right of children with SEN to education, it was parental action in a range of court-cases including the O'Donoghue case (1993) and the Sinnott case (2000) which “forced the issue into the political agenda” by ruling the legal obligation to education, including services such as assessment and referral (MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007, p. 292).

Ultimately, it was the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) which formally addressed the issue of inclusion, stating that education should take place in an inclusive environment if it is in the best interest of the child and the other children in the class (Government of Ireland, 2004; MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007). The EPSEN Act also stipulated the range of services needed for inclusive education to occur including systematic assessment, individual education plans (IEPs) and the active role of parents in their child's education (Government of Ireland, 2004). Yet, due to financial constraints, the Act has not been fully implemented into law to date (Smyth et al., 2014).

Notably, a review of the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2006, p.135) found that greater capacity-building in schools was needed to “empower teachers to build inclusive schools”. However, the model of provision at that time, comprising both the General Allocation Model (GAM) and Circular 02/05 (DES, 2005), did not give schools autonomy in organizing teaching resources for SEN (DES, 2017a). The GAM used a diagnosis of SEN to separate teaching support into learning support for pupils with high incidence SEN and resource teaching for pupils with low incidence SEN (DES, 2005). While the GAM was viewed as a positive step towards inclusion by allocating additional teaching support to pupils, it was later criticised by taking a medical approach to SEN due to its emphasis on diagnosing children with SEN to access teaching support (DES, 2016).

Most recently, DES Circular 0013/2017 replaced the GAM and Circular 02/05 and initiated a new model for special education teacher (SET) allocation. In particular,

Circular 0013/2017 sought to answer the call by giving greater capacity to schools to meet the needs of individual students (DES, 2017a). Before the new SET model was rolled out to all schools, a pilot study was conducted in 47 mainstream schools. Evidence from the pilot study indicated that most schools welcomed the new model, whereby 80% of participating schools opted to voluntarily use the new model for the following school year (DES, 2016). A praise of the new model was that children no longer require a diagnosis of SEN to access resources (Byrne, 2017). The new model also recognises a ‘spectrum of disability’ whereby pupils within the same category of SEN are recognised as having different needs (DES, 2017a).

The new model for special education teacher allocation consists of a baseline component and a school educational profile component to support the individual needs of schools, with due regard for factors including disadvantage, gender, standardised testing results and number of pupils with complex needs (DES, 2017a). Furthermore, the roles of the learning support and resource teacher, as per the GAM, have been combined into a Special Education Teacher (SET) to allow greater flexibility for pupil support. Moreover, since Ireland ratified the UNCRPD in 2018, an independent monitoring board will now evaluate schools’ commitment to inclusive education and ensure that progress is being made (United Nations, 2007; Citizens Information Board, 2018). Such changes stand as strong indicators of progress towards inclusive education in Ireland. Therefore, in light of such changes, including the movement in Irish policy towards a rights-based approach to inclusive education and the introduction of the new model for special education teacher allocation (DES, 2017a), this paper seeks to critically reflect on inclusive education in 2020, exploring whether Ireland is at a crossroads of inclusive education.

LANGUAGE: FROM INTEGRATION TO INCLUSION?

Firstly, the language of inclusion must be considered, which represents the range of contradictions and issues within the educational domain. For centuries, society sought an aetiology for SEN and counteracted this struggle by depersonalising the child with SEN with such terminology as “idiocy” and “mental deficiency” (Osgood, 2006, p. 137). Fortunately, the language of SEN has now changed and person-first language of ‘a child with SEN’ is now used. Nonetheless, the change in language from integration to inclusion since the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994) is not always reflected in practice (Vislie, 2003). Integration involves assimilating individual students into the education system whereas inclusion

reimagines diversity and shifts from teaching to the “normative centre” to teaching to all students (Vislie, 2003; Florian, 2014, p. 21). Otherwise, the difference between integration and inclusion reflects only a linguistic shift rather than a shift in educational practices (Vislie, 2003). Similarly, Osgood (2006) argues that a change in language only reflects a desire to create changes and cannot be taken to be a product of such changes. In this regard, the new model for special education teacher allocation reflects a reimagination of diversity. Without the need to label children with SEN for teaching support, SEN can be viewed as occurring on a continuum rather than as distinct categories (DES, 2016). A change in thinking from teaching to the bell-curve, to teaching to all, reflects a shift from a medical to a biopsychosocial model of SEN.

FROM A MEDICAL TO A BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL MODEL OF SEN

In considering this distinction between integration and inclusion, Thomas (2009) queries the problem of creating an epistemology for inclusion within the paradox of positivist and post-modernist lenses. A positivist view of SEN is evident in the previous medical model of SEN which focused on individual deficits (McDonnell, 2003). Children were viewed as ‘ineducable’ and frequently, placed in hospital schools or institutions (Swan, 2000). McDonnell (2003) argues that a medical model locates the disability within the child, leading to marginalisation and thereby limiting inclusion. Recently, there has been a move towards a post-modernist approach with a biopsychosocial model to understanding a pupil’s current functioning and needs. The use of a biopsychosocial approach, as forwarded by the National Educational Psychological Service, recognises that humans are complex beings whose functioning is determined by interrelated and interdependent biological, psychological and socio-cultural factors (DES, 2010). This is reflected in the new model for special education teacher allocation under DES Circular 0013/2017, which considers the reasons for fluctuations in standardised test scores including disadvantage and pupils for whom English is an additional language (DES, 2017a). The new model also takes account of gender, as studies strongly show that there is a higher rate of SEN among boys (DES, 2017a). Therefore, schools are not penalised for improving standardised test scores in the new model as it considers the learning needs of all pupils with regard to biological, psychological and social factors (DES, 2017a). This movement is clearly positive and aligns to a biopsychosocial approach to inclusion rather than a medical approach to integration. However, moving forward, the degree to which such changes may transfer to practice must be carefully observed.

CLASSROOM PRACTICES: UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING OR DIFFERENTIATION?

Having reflected on educational policy, it is also necessary to reflect on classroom practices. Circular 0013/2017 recommends differentiation to support students with SEN (DES, 2017a). Differentiation is defined as adapting content, methodologies and resources to meet the individual needs of students (Mitchell, 2018). Yet, it is noteworthy that a differentiation model has been internationally criticised for decades in favour of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Westwood, 2001). The terminology of differentiation and UDL reflects the dichotomy in Irish schools between the medical and social lenses (Rao, Ok and Bryant, 2014; Ryan, 2015). Differentiation aims to make teachers cognisant of children's individual needs but has also led to social comparisons, lower teacher expectations and a 'watering down' of the curriculum (Westwood, 2001). In contrast, the UDL approach focuses on making the curriculum accessible to all rather than changing it for some through offering multiple means of representation, engagement and expression in every lesson (Mitchell, 2018). UNESCO (2017, p. 19) prioritises curricula as the "central means for enacting the principles of inclusion and equity". Ireland is currently updating curricula with the introduction of a new Primary Language Curriculum that promotes flexibility and inclusion of all children (DES, 2015). This development points to a more committed attitude to inclusion and UDL.

Nevertheless, a 'one design for all' model of education has been deemed "a utopian vision" (Westwood, 2001, p. 5), that fails to consider the practical needs of children with SEN for increased direct teaching, teacher feedback and more opportunities to apply learning. Mitchell (2014) also cautions that UDL is at a nascent stage of research. To combat the dichotomy between differentiation and UDL, teachers should base classroom practice on formative assessment which involves actively responding to the needs of the children without prematurely devaluing curriculum content (Ryan, 2015; Mitchell, 2018).

Focusing on the new model for special education teacher allocation (DES, 2017a), teachers are encouraged to gather formal and informal data to plan for additional support. Alongside standardised test results and other professional reports, the new model values the role of formative assessment to monitor progress to meet the individual needs of the pupil. Therefore, ongoing assessment offers a continuum of support for students (DES, 2017a). As the new model is developed, it is important that all stakeholders consider the potential role of formative assessment to increase educational opportunities for all.

IS A MORE FLEXIBLE MODEL FOR PLACEMENT REQUIRED?

Beyond the differentiation versus UDL debate, it is also necessary to consider educational placement for children with SEN. The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) stated that a continuum of provision for SEN must be provided for all students (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2014a). A continuum of provision stipulates a range of SEN provision from full time enrolment in mainstream schools to full time enrolment in special schools, with options such as dual-placement and special classes in between (Parkinson, 2015). The continuum allows a broad vision of SEN with a baseline component of classroom support *for all* that recognises that all children have support needs but some more than others (NCSE, 2014a). A continuum also aligns with responsible inclusion, particularly in cases where mainstream schooling is not always in the best interest of the child (Parkinson, 2015). However, there are practical issues in implementing the continuum of support including access to resources based on locality (NCSE, 2013). Research also shows that movement along the continuum is rare, “potentially trapping people at a particular point” (NCSE, 2013, p. 27). Ironically, this is the exact danger a continuum philosophy hopes to avoid.

Furthermore, there is a lack of research on the effectiveness of special classes in Ireland (NCSE, 2014b). Notably, when effective inclusion does not take place, research shows that special classes can become “an island outside the mainstream” (McMaster, 2014, p. 100). This phenomenon is also referred to as macroexclusion (Cologon, 2013), whereby children are in the mainstream school but are not fully included in the mainstream class.

Considering such issues, Ireland may need a more flexible model for educational placement. Researchers in Australia reported success in terms of behaviour, attendance and interpersonal skills using a flexible integration model to transition a student from a special school to a mainstream class (Cumming and Strnadová, 2017). In this case study, the student enrolled in the mainstream school for subjects of interest while learning the necessary social and behavioural skills in the special school. There was then a gradual increase in the amount of time spent in the mainstream class. Such a methodology could be adopted in Ireland with special schools and special classes to support pupils transitioning to the mainstream class. Nonetheless, the pilot study for the new model for special education teacher allocation (DES, 2016) found that while schools had an increased awareness of a continuum of support, little had changed in practice in some schools. Therefore, further research and guidance on best practice is needed to support pupils’ movement along the continuum, not alone in the transition from special to

mainstream schools but so too, from special classes to mainstream classes within the same school setting.

DO WE HAVE SUFFICIENT RESOURCES TO IMPLEMENT THE NEW MODEL OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER ALLOCATION?

Reflecting on the new model for special education teacher allocation, it is clear that mainstream primary and post-primary schools are now afforded greater levels of autonomy in supporting inclusive education than before. In particular, mainstream schools can now identify and support individual pupils' needs within a spectrum of disability, without the need for a formal diagnosis or 'label' (DES, 2017a). This flexibility supports early intervention. Research has given policy-makers greater awareness of the critical window of opportunity in one's early years for the life-long development of children with SEN (Curtin, Bater, Staines and Perry, 2014). The pilot study on the new model reported success in terms of early intervention (DES, 2016; 2017b). The baseline component of SEN resources and the absence of a lengthy wait for diagnosis allows for earlier implementation of a continuum of support.

The greater autonomy given to schools also encourages team-teaching including in-class support. In-class support is important, as Egan (2013) notes that withdrawal to the learning support or resource teacher can lead to poor self-esteem for children. The self-fulfilling prophecy and the Pygmalion effect note the influence teacher expectations have on student outcomes, both positively and negatively (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). Low self-esteem can breed learned helplessness, which can be further magnified by withdrawal (Woolfolk, Hughes and Walkup, 2013). The pilot for the new model also reported success in adopting innovative ways to support children through a combination of in-class support, team-teaching and small-group withdrawal (DES, 2016).

However, an important consideration arising from the new model for special education teacher allocation is whether schools have sufficient resources to put this legislation into action. Research conducted by Dempsey (2017) highlighted that parents are sceptical over the findings from the new resource model. This scepticism stemmed from the fact that schools within the pilot model (DES, 2016) received more support from the NCSE support service than is feasible to give to every school in the country. Consistency in implementation is therefore a key issue raised by Travers (2017). For example, Travers (2017) queries whether students with similar needs will be met with different responses across schools,

which could in reality increase inequalities. Travers (2017, p. 104) also queries how the allocation of resources will be monitored and evaluated, to ensure that the “promise will be realised”.

Hence, without professional development, schools may revert to previous models of support, whereby issues such as integration and segregation may take hold in the face of uncertainty. This poses the threat of microexclusion which refers to students who are physically in the mainstream setting but are not fully included in terms of removing barriers to their learning (Cologon, 2013). On this premise, teachers need support for effectively implementing inclusive education.

TOWARDS A CAPACITY-BUILDING MODEL

Ireland is moving towards a capacity-building model whereby schools take “ownership of their own development and improvement” (DES, 2012, p. 8). A capacity-building model could offer a solution to the above issues of inconsistency and self-evaluation. Educational psychologists must be recognised as key personnel within a capacity-building model whereby they can serve to empower schools within a process of mutual reflection and learning, aligning with a bottom-up approach to SEN (Parkinson, 2015; DES, 2018). A capacity-building model also aligns with Kinsella and Senior’s (2008) learning organisation philosophy where practitioners work together to achieve the best outcomes for the child using a variety of perspectives. The paradigm of capacity-building would give schools a greater sense of responsibility for supporting SEN and avoid the trap of continually seeking further funding for SEN, which is deemed by Florian (2014) as only a surface aspect of inclusion.

Moreover, a capacity-building approach also enables a triangulation of assessment from a range of practitioners where educational psychologists work as facilitators (Mitchell, 2014). An example of this philosophy in practice is the development of IEPs. While IEPs were not fully mandated under the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004), they are considered best practice both nationally and internationally (NCSE, 2006; King, Ní Bhroin and Prunty, 2017). However, the usefulness of IEPs depends on the quality of assessment used (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, O’Raw and Zhao, 2012). Mitchell (2018) argues that educators must adopt evidence-based practices within a process of continual innovation, evaluation and renovation. Teachers, school personnel and the child work together to develop a portfolio of the child’s strengths and needs, using a continuum of assessment methodologies. These IEPs can also be used to feed into the flexible integration model of provision for SEN, to share a holistic view of the child between all relevant stakeholders.

Thus, educational psychologists can support teachers in developing quality assessment practices and interpreting results through a biopsychosocial lens. Children develop at different rates, so assessment results should be considered in context (Fischer and Rose, 2001). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory offers a paradigm to situate the developing child in context. Ecological systems theory conceptualises the multifaceted influences exerted on a child from the family and school at a microsystem level to services such as speech and language therapy at a mesosystem level and the wider policy and cultural values like the language of SEN at a macrosystem level (Greene et al., 2010). Each level affects the next, and teachers cannot solely focus on the child's microsystem but need training to consider the child in context. This reflects a capability approach to SEN which recognises impairment can derive from the environment (Norwich, 2013). Therefore, teachers should be empowered with the capacity for holistic assessment of children with SEN; using such data to inform IEPs and the allocation of resources under the new model for special education teacher allocation.

CONCLUSION

Ireland is indeed at a crossroads of inclusive education. Significant progress has been made including a new biopsychosocial approach to inclusive education, opportunities for early intervention, as well as overcoming pupil 'labelling' with the new model of special education teacher allocation (DES, 2017a). Furthermore, a capacity-building philosophy and the revision of primary curricula all serve to support inclusive education. Yet, the questions of special schools and special classes, and the dichotomy between differentiation and a universal design for learning framework still need to be addressed. Undoubtedly, coordination between different levels of the education system and research-informed evidence needs to be adopted to ensure the new model is a success (Mitchell, 2018). Ireland cannot follow history and drag legislation and policy behind international practices. As Swan (2000, para. 23.) conveys, "a lot has been learned from our years of trial and error in breaching the long-impassable frontier of educating the ineducable and including the excluded, in order to realise that every child can learn if they are appropriately helped to do so". When the above issues are addressed, inclusive education may become a reality rather than a vision in all Irish classrooms.

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