



## Understanding special educational provision in the Republic of Ireland: Implications for support and teaching strategies

Michael Shevlin<sup>1</sup>, Richard Rose<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Trinity College Dublin, <sup>2</sup>University of Northampton  
[mshevlin@tcd.ie](mailto:mshevlin@tcd.ie), [richard.rose@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:richard.rose@northampton.ac.uk)

### Abstract

*This research describes a longitudinal study of special and inclusive education in Ireland. Data were collected from a national survey and field visits to primary, post-primary and special schools across the country. Illustrative case studies were developed in order to provide a picture of the influences of policy and provision on the experiences and outcomes for pupils with a diverse range of needs and abilities. This paper focuses, in particular, on quality of supports available in school and teacher confidence in responding to the learning needs of children and young people with special educational needs. The research suggests that there is a commitment to supporting the development of inclusive education provision in schools. Examples were seen of innovative teaching and the development of support systems that enable pupils to access both academic and social learning. Teacher confidence in addressing a range of SEN is variable and expertise in this area often resides with specialist teachers rather than across a whole teaching staff. The implications of this research for developing appropriate supports and pedagogical strategies will be discussed.*

### 1. Introduction

Internationally, the importance of addressing the rights of children to equitable access to education has gradually assumed prominence and more recently this commitment has expanded to include children and young people with special educational needs [1]. In some countries (USA, UK, Canada, Austria for example) this process has been gradual expanding on existing policies and programmes while other countries, including Ireland have experienced a period of rapid change. Comprehensive policies addressing the needs of children have been initiated and a government department with specific responsibilities for the welfare of children has been established. In addition, a significant increase in resources has been allocated to establish more inclusive learning environments. The current study Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools) comprises a longitudinal research study (three years) examining how special education is provided within a range of Irish primary, post-primary and special schools. This paper focuses on how support is provided and the implications for classroom teaching in primary schools.

### 2. Background

Compulsory schooling in Ireland spans 6 to 16 years comprising primary and junior level post-primary education. Though, in practice, the vast majority of children are enrolled in primary schools by 5 years of age and the majority of students complete the senior cycle of post primary schooling usually by 18 years of age. Primary education comprises an eight year cycle including junior and senior infants and first to sixth class, with pupils usually transferring to post-primary schools at age twelve. Educational provision for children and young people with special educational needs is generally available across a continuum of provision including special schools (4-18 years), special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, and in mainstream classes with support. Additional teaching support in mainstream primary and post-primary schools is generally provided by learning support and resource teachers. Over the past twenty years there has been a significant increase in additional teaching resources allocated to support pupils with special educational needs.

Policy and enabling legislation have been developed by the Department of Education and Skills to support children and young people who have special educational needs within the education system. However, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act [2] represented a milestone in developing an infrastructure to support the education of children and young people with special educational needs [3]. Inclusion is a core principle informing this legislation and it is clearly the intention that inclusive education should be designed to facilitate full participation in adult life.



### 3. Review

Both internationally and nationally the challenges of implementing inclusive education policies in practice have been highlighted, for example, Vayrynen, [4] claims that: *“Despite adopted policies on inclusive education, all countries struggle with the management and implementation of an education system that truly caters for diversity.”* Ensuring that children and young people with special educational needs are fully included in mainstream classrooms is dependent on a number of inter-related factors including but not confined to the establishment of effective supports and developing knowledgeable and skilled teachers in the area of special educational needs [5]. However, there are concerns about the lack of preparation for teaching in inclusive classrooms [6]. Jordan, Schwartz and McGhie-Richmond [7] in their international meta-analysis research contend that teacher beliefs are not typically addressed in pre-service and in-service programmes, yet they are critical to developing effective inclusive practices. Lack of training for teaching pupils with diverse needs continues to inhibit current practice, a finding that has resonance across countries [8] including New Zealand [9] and Canada [10] who both concluded that teachers are generally supportive of inclusion in principle but overwhelmed by the scope of the change that inclusion requires when they consider the organizational and pedagogical issues involved. Differentiated instruction is critical to ensuring that pupils with SEN can become active participants in the learning processes within heterogeneous mainstream classrooms [11].

### 4. Methods

Case study visits were carried out in 10 primary schools, 10 post primary schools, and 4 special schools to gain a whole-school perspective of SEN provision, and also to gather information about the experiences of pupils, parents and school staff members. In this paper we will be drawing on the case study data as this provides relevant information about the types of support provided and how curricular access was conceptualised. In particular, we will focus on the primary case study schools data set in order to provide a coherent review of support and curricular access at this level. Within each of the 10 primary case study schools a sample of pupils with SEN was identified and followed throughout the duration of the project. Each pupil was provided with a pseudonym in order to maintain anonymity. Evidence from case study schools was compiled using data from two field visits (minimum 2 days) to each. A model for the development of school case studies was developed and used consistently as a framework for data collection during school visits (see Figure 1 below). This model provided for a combination of data from observations, interviews and documentary analysis obtained from both service users and service providers to be obtained. This data was subjected to thematic analysis under the four areas of Policy, Practice, Experience and Outcomes as outlined in the case study model. This model was used for data collection in each school but also allowed for comparison across schools.

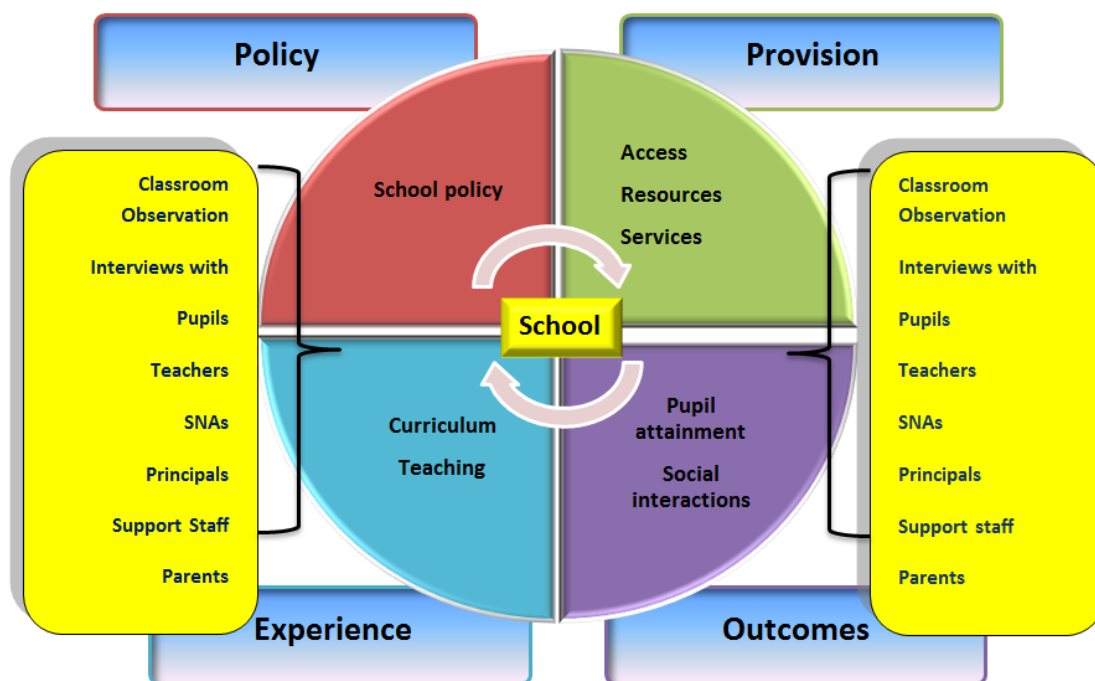


Figure 1: Case Study Model

## 5. Key Findings and Discussion

Professionals in the case study schools agreed that a team approach to meeting pupils' special educational needs was essential. While accepting this principle primary schools organised their SEN provision in a variety of ways including the development of a dedicated SEN team; whole school approaches; rotation of support and mainstream teachers. Support for pupils with special educational needs in primary case study schools is generally co-ordinated by an individual allocated specific responsibility. Resource and learning support teachers observed during the research were well organised and provided most interventions with individual pupils. There is a clear focus on individual pupils with much of the support provided in primary being specifically targeted at individual needs rather than addressing the development of whole class planning and support to ensure recognition of diversity. During research visits it was evident this support was provided through a number of approaches including withdrawal from mainstream class; small group support; and in-class support. Observation in schools and interview data collected during visits indicated that withdrawal from lessons for either individual tuition or work in small groups tended to be a dominant model of support at primary and post primary. Some school staff, having received training and been involved in discussions about the Irish educational commitment to inclusion, had introduced models of in-class support. There was often agreement within schools that this was the correct direction but also that progress may be slow as tradition and practice embedded in schools will need to be changed.

In primary schools teachers' plans often indicated the need to differentiate work. However, there is inconsistency in the application of differentiated teaching and often this follows a limited set of approaches focused upon differentiation of access and outcomes. Teachers tend to use IEP targets as the basis of planning work for individual pupils. In some instances this results in pupils being given work that is different from that provided to their peers, but not always related. In some lessons there was a lack of differentiation resulting in pupils having minimal participation in activities. In some lessons pupils spend a considerable amount of time off task and are unable to participate in planned activities because of limited differentiation strategies. Differentiation is managed by giving some pupils less or different work (e.g. fewer spellings) however there is often no clear advice given in this area with teachers falling back upon their own initiatives. This inconsistency was recognised in some schools with one primary principal commenting that she believed that differentiation was happening in "most classrooms", but acknowledging that this aspect of planning was difficult to achieve with any consistency. Several teachers in primary schools identified differentiation as an area where they require further training. Differentiation of task was the most common approach seen in primary schools with pupils being given alternative or simplified work during lessons. For some pupils differentiation of



outcome, whereby teachers would accept that whilst some would complete a page of writing others may achieve only two sentences was also seen in several schools. Differentiation by access is also provided in some instances for example adaptation of activities in PE lessons for a pupil with a physical disability which included shortening of distance to be covered in a relay race. In special schools where classes tend to have a wide range of needs and abilities, the range of differentiation strategies was wider and more developed. Teachers in this situation were more focused upon the necessity to plan for individual needs, and had generally established more focused learning targets for the students in their groups.

## 6. Concluding comments

Visits to the case study schools indicated that many class/subject teachers are lacking the skills, knowledge and understanding required to provide effective curricular access for pupils with SEN in their classes. Whilst they are committed to providing for pupils with diverse needs many feel that they lack the specific knowledge required to plan and deliver a well differentiated curriculum suitable for all pupils. This situation is similar to what is reported elsewhere [7] and is significant in respect of developing teacher confidence and influencing the effectiveness of teaching in inclusive classrooms. Withdrawal from class for individual or small group support was the most commonly seen form of intervention by specialist teachers in both primary and post-primary schools, though there is some evidence of increased attention to team teaching that utilises specialist teachers alongside their colleagues in the classroom. The evidence from Project IRIS suggests that the current emphasis of resource teachers on providing support for individual pupils may be having the opposite effect to that anticipated when the role was established. In some instances this has led to an over dependency upon these individuals by other class teachers [12]. There is evidence of differentiation by task and outcome across the phases of education in the case study schools but little indication of wider forms of differentiation that would enable greater access to pupils with SEN. Teachers require support and training in order to gain confidence in differentiating learning and teaching. This study illustrates critical challenges in developing support systems that empower classroom teachers to establish more inclusive learning environments within an Irish context.

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