



‘It Takes a Village to Raise a Child’: Exploring School Leaders’ Experiences of Implementing a Systematic and Schoolwide Approach to Inclusive Special Education in Irish Post-primary Schools.

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Abstract

School improvement is linked to a school’s collective capacity to respond to change. In Ireland, recent policy initiatives to embed collaborative processes of school self-evaluation provide a blueprint for school leaders to build communities engaged in collective cycles of evaluation, planning, action, reflection and learning which supports schools to view all learners as unique and develop integrated systems of support which ensure that all learners have access to high quality education. However, previous research led by the author indicates that discrete approaches to provision of additional educational supports for learners with special educational needs persists and is creating unsustainable roles for teachers tasked with the responsibility. Thirty-three post-primary schools across the Education and Training Board (ETB) sector participated in a developmental project called provision mapping to promote schoolwide systematic, data-informed, and collaborative approaches to inclusive special education. The project builds on an earlier, smaller-scale pilot. The author led the design and implementation of the project in partnership with the Education and Training Board of Ireland (ETBI). This paper reports on research following a national-level two-year implementation cycle of the project and captures, through surveys and interviews, the experiences of school leaders involved. As a novel approach to systematic, school-wide leadership for inclusive special education, limited evidence currently exists in Ireland. This research is important to support future development and refinement of the process and to build the evidence base, with the intention to use the provision mapping framework to support inclusive school improvement across the wider post-primary sector in subsequent years.

Keywords: *Inclusive Special Education; Educational Leadership; Provision Mapping*

1. Introduction

Research suggests that a parallel system of inclusive and special education exists in our schools despite schools’ attempts to move towards integrated provision for students with additional needs and disabilities along a flexible continuum of support [1-3]. Discrete delivery of special education can create ‘siloes’ approaches to education for some learners and put increasing pressure on Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCOs)- teachers usually tasked with leading provision in schools- and SEN Teams [4-5]. Furthermore, a move away from a categorical and deficit view of disability, towards a more socially-responsive needs-led approach to school profiling, allocation of additional resourcing and response to provision is underway in Ireland since 2017 [6]. While the move is welcomed, it has expanded the brief of the SENCO and SEN Team to incorporate all learners with identified needs in addition to those with diagnosed needs and disabilities. Notably, the SENCO role is not formally acknowledged in Irish policy, but SENCOs are increasingly fulfilling key leadership roles in their schools [4-5].

Research from an earlier pilot of this initiative [7] suggests that developing collaborative systematic approaches to school self-evaluation through the lens of inclusive and special education will require development and consolidation of systems to share relevant information about student and class profiles with all teachers to inform their planning for learning, teaching and assessment. Systems which allow for shared professional learning in schools, and development of the school as a learning organisation [8-9] will help teachers to cascade their knowledge, skills and understanding across the school, and support in-school, situated capacity building [10]. Creation of dedicated school Inclusion Teams is important to lead a schoolwide approach to inclusive and special education, and support colleagues to implement inclusive strategies in the classroom [7].



Provision Mapping is an ongoing developmental process that aims to support inclusive school improvement [7]. The pilot initiative applied a flexible, strengths-based and solution-focused approach to implementation [11]. Inclusion Coaches were appointed by Directors of Schools in ETB regions and work with schools within their ETB to support further development of schoolwide, systematic, collaborative approaches to inclusive and special education. Specifically, coaches work with senior leadership teams, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and Curriculum/ Subject Coordinators in their own schools and/ or other schools in their ETB to support implementation of a cycle of School Self-Evaluation [12] informed by the *Looking At Our School Quality Framework* [13], to develop a school Provision Map [7], reflecting current provision to support students identified with additional and special education needs across the Continuum of Support, a three-tiered response to a continuum of need [14]. Provision Mapping aims to:

- Affirm and acknowledge existing good practice in relation to inclusive, special/ additional education in schools.
- Support schools to develop school-wide systematic, collaborative, and collective approaches to inclusive, special/ additional education.
- Guide schools in their implementation of school self-evaluation [12-13] to develop a school Provision Map, reflecting current provision for learners with additional/ special educational needs across the Continuum of Support [14].
- Build systematic, collaborative, and situated approaches to professional learning, networked leadership development and capacity building within and between schools.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Questions

This paper reports on the research design for an evaluation of the national pilot following two years of development and implementation and share some preliminary findings from principal surveys. Data collection finished at the time of writing this paper and analysis is underway to capture experiences of participating Directors of Schools, Principals, School Champions, and Inclusion Coaches, and asks the following questions:

1. To what extent did the Inclusion Coach Induction programme prepare Inclusion Coaches for leading the Provision Mapping Initiative with pilot schools in their ETB?
2. What were the benefits of and challenges with participation in the initiative from the perspectives of Directors of Schools, Principals, Inclusion Coaches and School Champions?
3. What were the facilitators to participation in the initiative, and implementation of provision mapping in schools?
4. How could schools, and ETBs be further supported to implement provision mapping?

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Online Surveys

Anonymised online surveys, using the Qualtrics platform, were piloted with one representative from each participating group and their design was informed by the research questions, extant literature and an interim evaluation following one-year of implementation of Provision Mapping. Twenty-nine survey items were included and used Likert scales, ranking, multiple choice, closed and open questions to capture experiences of provision mapping, its impact in schools and ETBs, and recommendations for refinement and further development. Surveys were emailed directly to each participant via the Provision Mapping contact database to Directors of Schools ($n=14$); Principals ($n=33$), Inclusion Coaches ($n=46$) and School Champions ($n=39$). The survey items were tailored for each group and the response rate outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey Participants

Participant Cohort	Total # distributed	Response Rate
Directors of Schools	14	9: 64%
School Principals	33	15: 45%
Inclusion Coaches	46	21: 46%
School Champions	33	14: 42%

2.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Online semi-structured interviews, using transcribed and recorded MS Teams functions, were undertaken with representatives from Principals, Directors of Schools, and School Champions, aiming



to qualitatively explore the research questions in more depth. For interviews, all survey participants were invited to participate, and a random selection of Directors of Schools ($n=2$), Principals ($n=2$) and School Champions ($n=1$) were interviewed. A purposive sample of three Inclusion Coaches was interviewed to reflect the variation in Inclusion Coach roles. Nine interviews were undertaken, ranging from 45 minutes to one hour in duration.

Descriptive statistics will be used to analyse quantitative data while qualitative data will be analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) [15].

3. Preliminary Results Principal Surveys

Preliminary results are presented in terms of how they address the research questions. Limitations are acknowledged, in that research Question 1 cannot be answered from the survey, while the remaining research questions allow for limited analysis of principals' experiences of Provision Mapping. Full analysis and triangulation of all data sources will lead to greater insight into the impact of Provision Mapping across the ETB sector.

Principals were asked the extent to which they believed the aims of Provision Mapping were achieved. Figure 1 illustrates the responses, with 13 principals reporting that all the aims of provision mapping were either partially achieved or well underway.

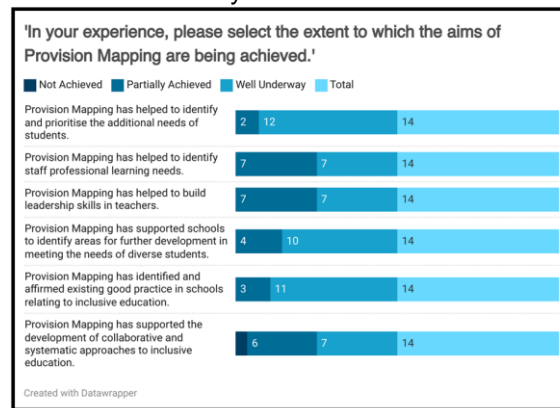


Figure 1. Principals' views on the extent to which the aims of Provision Mapping were achieved.

Principals were asked to rate the impact Provision Mapping is having in their schools on a scale of 1-5; 1= no impact; 5= very positive impact, resulting in a mean score of 4.0.

3.1. What were the benefits of and challenges with participation in the initiative from the perspectives of Directors of Schools, Principals, Inclusion Coaches and School Champions?

When asked what the benefits of participating in the initiative (Figure 2), principals indicated that raising whole-school awareness and understanding of inclusive and special education was the most beneficial aspect of provision mapping. Affirmation and acknowledgement of existing good practice was also identified as an important benefit.

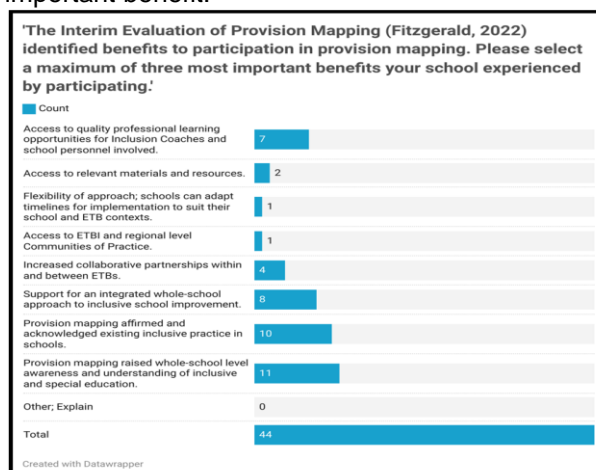


Figure 2. Principals' perspectives on the benefits of participation in Provision Mapping.



When asked to identify the challenges experienced during the two years of implementation of Provision Mapping, principals reported that finding time to engage with the initiative was a challenge, with five indicating that they did not have sufficient time. Motivating and engaging all staff and integrating Provision Mapping with processes of School Self Evaluation were also identified as significant challenges (Figure 3).

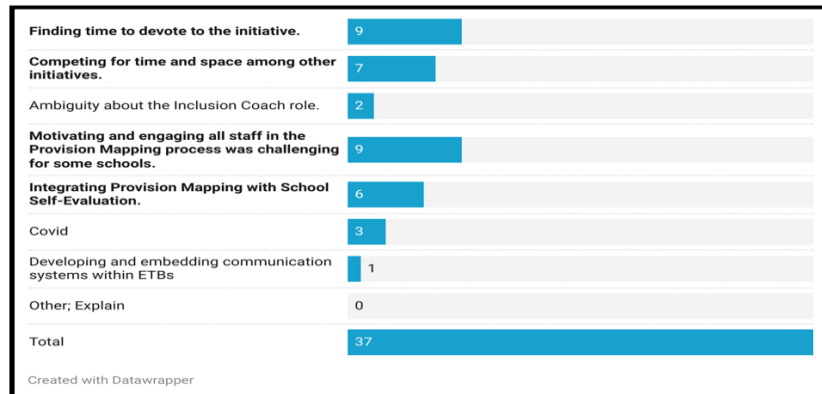


Figure 3. Principals' perspectives on the challenges with participation in Provision Mapping.

3.2 What were the facilitators to participation in the initiative, and implementation of provision mapping in schools?

Principals were asked to rate the extent to which online events and seminars supported them in leading provision mapping in schools on a scale of 1-5; 1= least supportive; 5= most supportive. While only 12 of the 15 principals indicated that they had accessed the online events, a mean score of 3.92 indicates that these events could be viewed as facilitative of the process in schools.

School visits were also identified as a facilitator in leading and implementing Provision Mapping in their schools. All principals indicated that they had received a school visit and when asked to rate the extent to which the visits supported them in leading provision mapping in schools on a scale of 1-5; 1= least supportive; 5= most supportive, a mean score of 4.33 was derived from responses.

Finally, Principals were asked to select from a menu of existing supports in place which they would like to see continued, the community of practice and access to regionalised seminars were the most frequently selected. In the 'Other' category, one principal suggested that 3 days of induction was too much and suggested it be delivered across nine evenings instead. Another suggested that principals and Inclusion coaches should attend induction together (Figure 4).

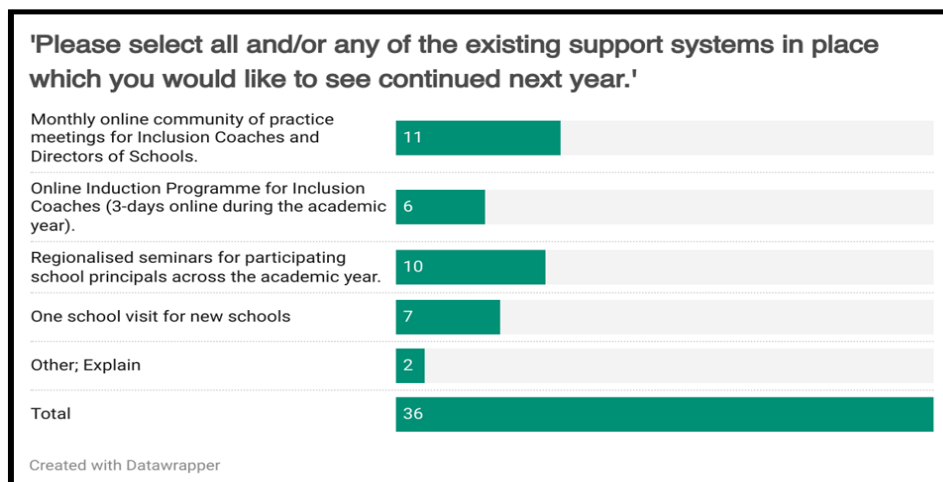


Figure 4. Principals' prioritised support systems.



3.3 How could schools, and ETBs be further supported to implement provision mapping?

Principals were asked, through an open question, for recommendations for developing Provision Mapping in the future. The main suggestions included:

- Providing opportunities for more face-to-face events and shared learning;
- Clearer guidelines in relation to the role of the inclusion Coach;
- More school advisory visits;
- Sustained support for consolidation and integration with schoolwide processes of school self-evaluation;

4. Conclusion

Preliminary survey findings from principals reveal the positive impact of the provision mapping initiative in schools, at an early stage of implementation. The full data-set, once analysed, will provide insights into the ways in which the initiative should develop. Identifying the dynamics at play within and between schools, and isolating what works for schools as they continue to embed Provision Mapping has the potential to build universal collaborative expertise across the post-primary sector, and develop flexibly responsive and reflective inclusive schools.

5. Acknowledgements

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