



Inclusive Education: A Key to Better Outcomes for All

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Abstract

Introduction

This paper will consider Irish policy and practice in the provision of education for students with disabilities including reference to the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 and the recent Hunt Report. This will demonstrate the need for a greater level of innovation in the provision of person-centred inclusive education for all. It will show how, appropriate teacher and student supports, can improve learning outcomes for all students.

Specific Models of Provision

The paper will reference a number of models of inclusive education which are currently working well in Ireland and which have the potential to be replicated throughout the country and in other areas of educational provision.

National Learning Network Training Model

National Learning Network delivers a range of rehabilitative and vocational training services for people with disabilities and mental health difficulties. These services are delivered according to the principles of inclusive education and all marginalised groups could benefit from the principles employed. National Learning Network's partnership with University of Wales through the PACTS project will be referenced.

Inclusive Education and Disability Support Services

National Learning Network provides an inclusive education service for students in a number of colleges around Ireland and these represent best practice. It also works in partnership with the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown to deliver disability support services. These services have been recognised by a number of external reports including one recently published by the OECD. A consideration of the strengths of these initiatives and their possible replication will be included.

Summary

In summary, this paper will aim to look at best practice in the provision of inclusive education. In particular, the paper will consider how both teaching and learning styles can contribute to positive outcomes for every student within a classroom.

1 Introduction

The focus of this paper is largely on further and higher education. It documents the journey made by a specialist provider of education and training from segregated provision to mainstream integration in order to present an effective model of inclusion that can be applied in any context. The presentation of this model will be achieved in three sections.

1. A brief summary of the Republic of Ireland (ROI) education structure and making reference to relevant legislation.
2. The person centred approach to training and education taken by the National Learning Network (NLN) which forms an inclusive model.
3. A review of the inclusive model in two mainstream sections over a sustained period of partnership.



1.1 Definition Of Inclusive Education

There are a large number of definitions of Inclusive Education and, naturally, the concept of inclusion extends beyond individuals with disabilities into all components of the spectrum of diversity that constitutes any given society.

This researcher posits that effective educational interventions and methodologies within the disability population such as the one described here which, will incorporate the largest number of supports and the broadest spectra of diversity, are equally effective in any other population.

2 Education Provision In The Republic Of Ireland

Second Level Education in the ROI is largely run by the church. More recently, in primary education, alternatives have been provided by multi-denominational initiatives such as Educate Together which now has 58 national schools nationwide (Educate Together 2011). Historically, Special Education was provided for both primary and secondary pupils with disabilities in one institution which had the status of a primary school. These schools would typically focus on one disability such as visual impairment, deafness, or learning difficulty. The ROI does not have a history of inclusive education provision but is now moving towards one through legislative reform.

2.1 Legislative Change

The Education Act of 1998 (Ireland 1998) includes mention of the rights of individuals with disabilities to an education and provides, for the first time, a definition of disability and a statement of the disabled child's right to education access.. In 2004, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Ireland 2004) states that, wherever possible, students with disabilities should be educated in mainstream classrooms alongside their peers. The structure required to implement this requires:

- An Assessment of Need
- A Statement of Supports allocated
- The appointment of 102 (NCSE 2011) Special Educational Needs Officers (SENOs) to coordinate inclusion nationally
- Collaboration with the Health Services Executive for children under the age of 5 in respect of pre-schooling

Unfortunately the implementation of the Assessment of Needs has not yet taken place, although the SENOs were recruited at the inception of the act. They are each responsible for approximately 30 schools.

2.2 Second Level

In Ireland second level education provides qualifications at Junior Certificate Level (ages 15 to 16) and Leaving Certificate Level (ages 17 to 18) Entrance to Higher Education is dependant on the number of points gained and prestigious courses require the full compliment of 600 points. There is also the Applied Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate neither of which allow the participant to earn 600 points. There are a number of access courses and there is an alternative entry through further education through vocational courses posited to be at the same level as Leaving Certificate but this entry methodology does not apply to all degree programme institutions equally. Consequently, school leavers with disabilities who often do the alternative programmes due to their generally slower progress (but not lesser intellectual capability) wishing to access degree courses may be disadvantaged by the system. Students in separate Special Schools rarely complete a full Leaving Certificate.



2.3. Further Education And Adult Education

As previously stated students with disabilities leaving second level education and wishing to enter further or higher education were typically older than their peers and might not meet entry criteria of higher education institutions as they may have not completed a full-curriculum allowing sufficient points for progression.

Alternative and repeat Leaving Certificate courses are offered through the Vocational Education Committees as well as adult education and literacy initiatives to support further education.

2.4 Higher Education

State Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland consists of 13 Institutes of Technology and 7 Universities (there are also a range of private higher education providers). All these state institutions offer a range of degree and higher programmes as well as a number of access programmes and interventions focussed in increasing participation and completion in general.

2.5 Transition And Progression

In common with many of our European colleagues, there is ample evidence to show that retention, course completion and achievement is a general problem of higher education with many institutions reporting over 20% rates of non-completion.

For example, a study commissioned by the Institutes of Technology in 2006 (Kinsella and Roe 2006) showed that non-completion figures in 2002-4 were in the region of 25% overall and of in respect of individuals disabilities only 3.2% were accessing undergraduate courses in 2006 (AHEAD 2008) and the issues identified concerned student support measures, students with disabilities and demographic changes.

2.6 Summary Of Section 1

Despite a very clear impetus from government towards inclusion obstacles remain at the following points:

1. Lack of transition services at all levels
2. Education curricula and examinations which are not equally accessible by all
3. Separate rather than the inclusive services to manage diversity in mainstream institutions
4. Lack of training at a range of levels for professionals
5. Retention and completion

3 Person Centred Training And Education

The inclusive model used by a specialist provider allows over 5000 individuals annually to achieve certification and to progress to employment or further education.

NLN provides all students with a needs assessment including relevant external factors such as transport. A learning plan is created and the plan is reviewed monthly. The following contribute to the model:

6. Continuous intake
7. Progression at a pace suited to the learner
8. Learning styles identification
9. Study skills
10. Staff continuous Professional Development

These programmes have better outcomes and progression than the state funded mainstream training centres (FORFÁS 2010, Rehab Group Annual Report 2009).



4 Mainstream Partnership

4.1 Cdvec: Disability Support Service

This Disability Support Service (DSS) is a partnership project between NLN and The City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee (CDVEC) and was initially set up in 1995 in one college using the approach developed by NLN in a CDVEC college. The service is run by two full time DSS Officers, a Co-ordinator and a part-time Accounts Officer and is now available in 8 CDVEC Colleges.

The role of the service is:

1. To offer support to individual students and groups of students
2. To offer support and training to college staff
3. To raise awareness of disability/equality issues among the student body

The service provides support and information to students and staff on a wide variety of disability issues. The Disability Support Officers work closely with college Psychological and Guidance Services.

The supports offered by the DSS include many individual and group approaches and are open to ANY student in the colleges. The DSSO also provides in-service training for staff. Over the past five years the numbers of students accessing the service and the number of successful applications for support funding have increased dramatically. With student numbers more than doubling in the past 5 years (to 286) and funding receipts having grown six fold (to 1.6 million) in the same period (CDVEC/NLN Annual Report 2009/2010 forthcoming).

This service also influences course choices and acts as a transition service both prior to and after course duration as the DSSOs are available year round. As well as publishing the innovative 'Principal's Manual' in 2005 which is available at <http://www.nln.ie/Learning-and-Assessment-Services/Disability-Support-Service/Principals-Manual.aspx> this service has been cited as one of three case studies by the OECD in its recent report and it was recommended by both its efficacy and economical running costs.

4.2 Institute Of Technology, Blanchardstown And Nln: Assessment Service

The National Learning Network Assessment Service is a service with expertise in Specific Learning Difficulties arising out of a collaborative project in 2004-5 with the Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown (ITB) and the Dyscovery Centre, Wales.

Based on the campus, in addition to offering assessments and interventions nationally the service has a unique partnership with ITB which is open to ALL staff and students of ITB. ITB has a student services department (instead of a disability office) whose ethos is that all students may need support. The service operates both a drop-in and appointments service and there is a general awareness across campus as this a being a 'normal' college resource.

As well as providing assessment and interventions for individuals with living and learning difficulties the Assessment Service liaises with feeder schools and local area partnerships in transition initiatives. A recent project 'The Learning Styles Theme' received funding from the Irish government's Strategic Innovation Funding was able to support lecturers in meeting diverse student learning needs through the development of a number of tools (SIF Final Report 2010). One of these tools 'The Study Skills Manual' also partnered CDVEC and is now available at <http://www.nln.ie/Learning-and-Assessment-Services/Disability-Support-Service/Study-Skills-Manual.aspx> for tailored studying responses that match individual preferences. An informal study of this body of work suggests that retention is increased by 5% as a result of a more inclusive approach in terms of both student and lecturer support.



5 Conclusions

Despite many good initiatives there is still a lack of inclusion and inclusive education at all levels of Irish Education. The type of model required goes beyond focus on the individual into course and structure overall and teaching delivery methodology. Creating this type of model requires a partnership based on trust and multi-domain expertise.

It is important that the system utilised by the institution is one that allows any student knowing he or she may need supports (be they initial, ongoing or periodic), to access those supports in the only inclusive way possible. That is, that they are available to anyone who is a student. Our experience to date shows us that ongoing collaborative multidisciplinary partnerships are much far more effective than attempts to up skill existing staff members who already have heavy workloads under their own domain of expertise.

The support and collaboration model developed by the National Learning Network allows the type of shared knowledge and expertise of both partners to be applied for optimal inclusion. Students frequently cite the existence of the services with NLN as one of the reasons for institution selection on their application forms in both partnerships and lecturers and teachers and other staff feel they have a resource to get advice, support and teaching ideas themselves.

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