

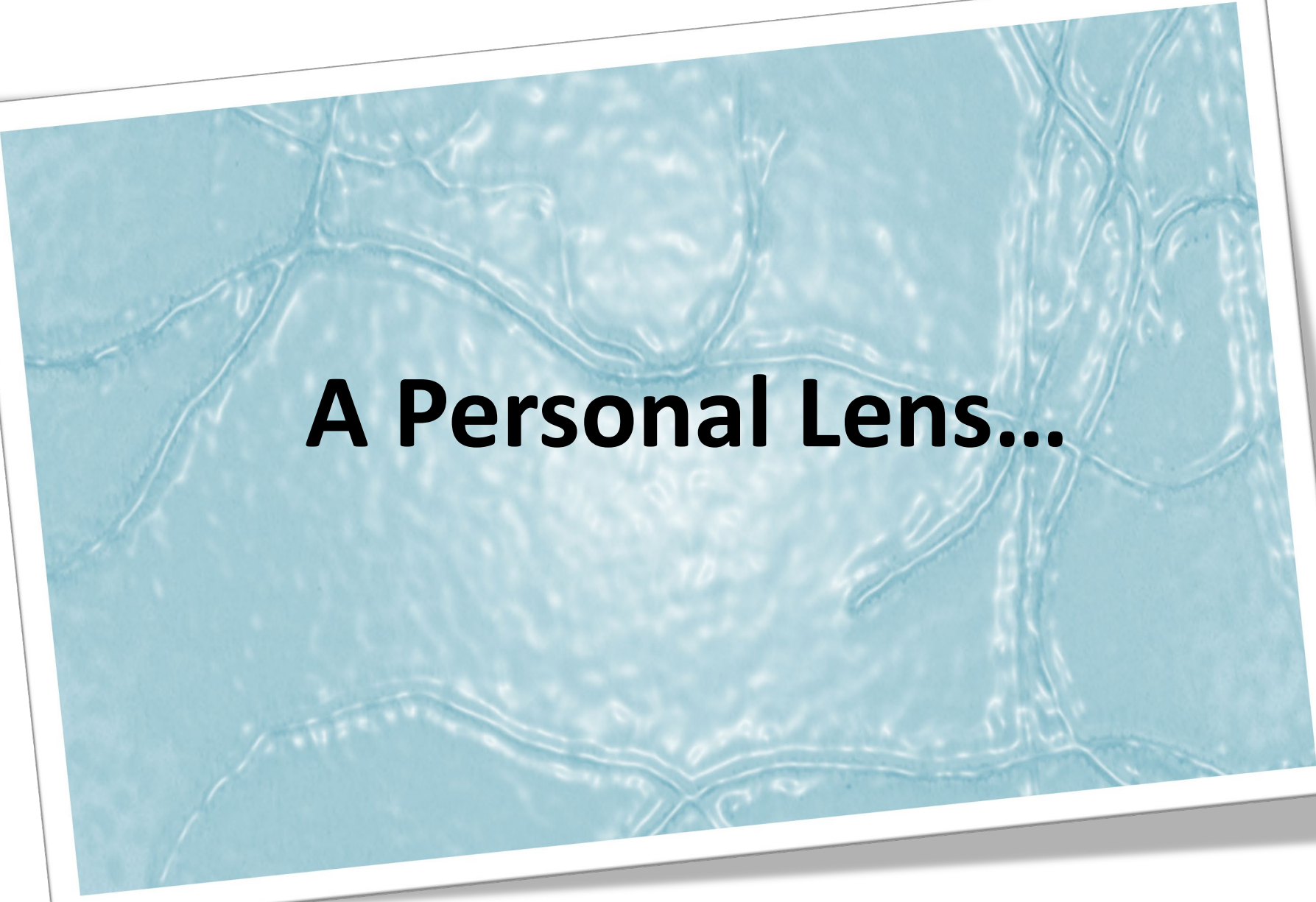
Special Education or Inclusion?

A Journey in a Changing Landscape

*Prof Emer Ring,
Dean of Early Childhood and Teacher Education,
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
INTO Consultative Conference on Education 2025
Saturday 22nd November 2025*

Overview

- **A Personal Lens...**
- **The Language of Travel...**
- **Defining Moments on Our Journey...**
- **Building a Responsive System**
- **Special Education or Inclusion?**
- **The Road Ahead**

A microscopic image of plant cells, showing a network of cell walls and internal structures. The image is tilted and has a white border, giving it the appearance of a photograph. The text "A Personal Lens..." is centered over the image.

A Personal Lens...



An examination of concepts of school readiness among parents and educators in Ireland

JOURNAL OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
2020



Evaluation of Early Years The Demonstration

Authors: Helen Lynch, Emer Ring, Bryan Boyle, Theresa Brophy, Pauline Fitzgerald

RESEARCH REPORT NO. 1



An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Students with Spectrum Disorder in

Patricia Daly, Emer Ring (Principal Investigator), Margaret O'Connell, Claire Griffin, Stella Long, Eithne McCarthy, Mary Imelda Anne O'Keefe, Séamus O'Sullivan, Marie Ryan, & with Ruth Madden and Sarah Callison Research

RESEARCH REPORT NO. 2



Linc
LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSION
IN THE EARLY YEARS
CEANNAIREACHT DO CHUIMSIÓ
SNA LUATHBHILIANA



Interim Evaluation of the Leadership for the Early Years (LINC) Programme

17 June 2019

LINC Consortium (2019) Interim evaluation of the Leadership for INCLUSION in the early years
Ring, Patricia, Boyle, Theresa, McLaughlin, Emma, Griffin, Claire, Callison, Sarah



End-of-year Three Evaluation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

Research and Technical Report

University of Derby: Prof. Deborah Robinson, Dr Sophia Gow, Dr Geraldine Codina, Jane Artess, Dr Marco Antonio Delgado Fuentes, Dr Katherine Mycock, Sarwat Qureshi, Dr Rosemar Shepherd - IFF: Aoife Ni Luanaigh



Stakeholder views on the NCSE – Initial findings from an independent evaluation of the NCSE frontline services



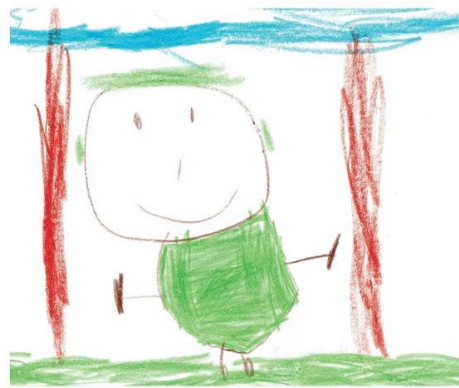


Autism from the Inside Out

A Handbook for Parents, Early Childhood, Primary,
Post-Primary and Special School Settings

Emer Ring, Patricia Daly and Eugene Wall (eds)

Peter Lang



Leading Inclusion from the Inside Out

A Handbook for Parents and Early Childhood Teachers in
Early Learning and Care, Primary and Special School Settings

Emer Ring, Lisha O'Sullivan,
Marie Ryan and Patricia Daly (eds)

Peter Lang

PLAY FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Theory, Research and Practice Perspectives



Lisha O'Sullivan and Emer Ring



Special Education in an Independent Ireland 1922-2022

Insights from a Journey Through the Century
by Professor Emer Ring

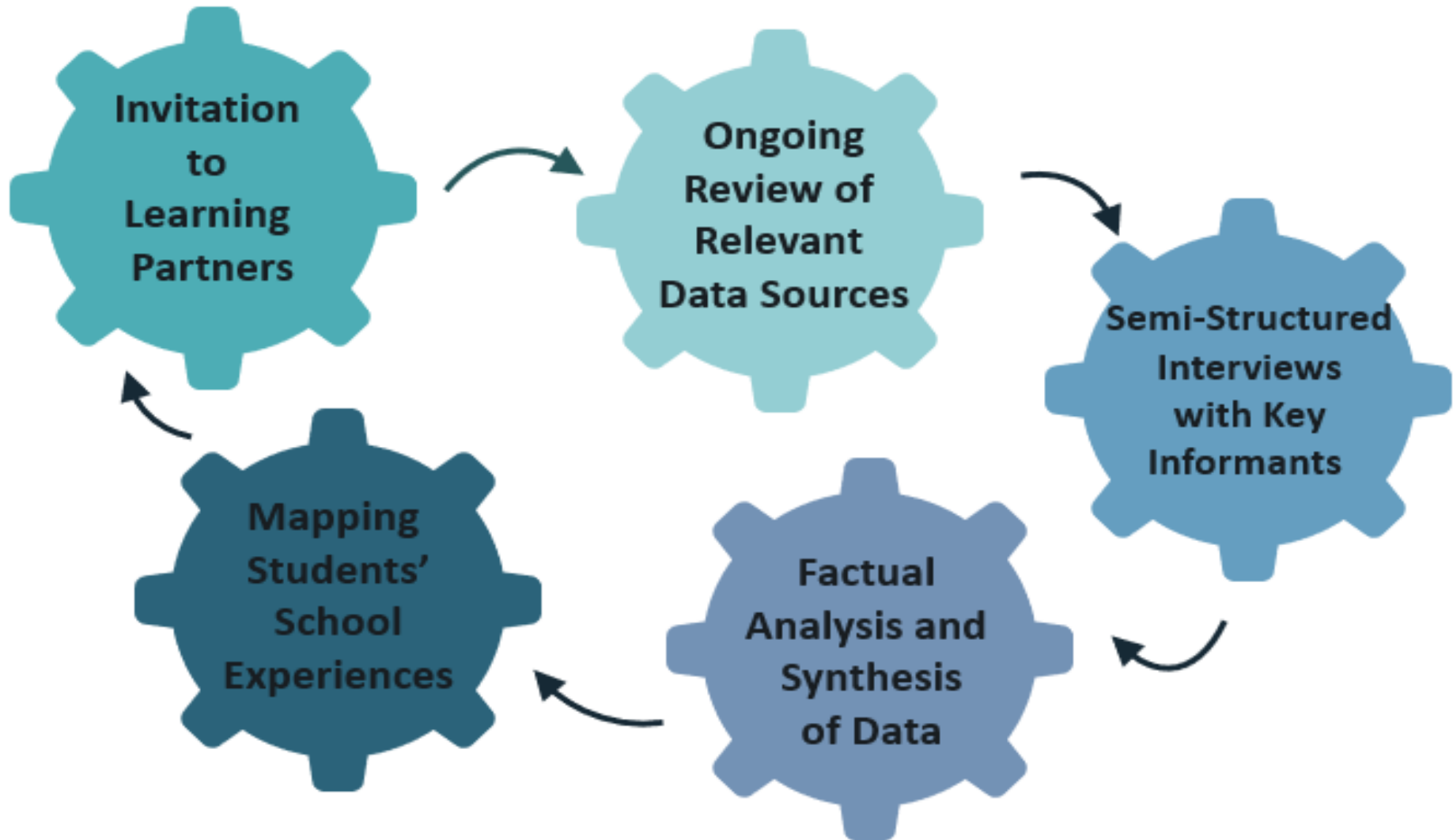
with learning partners, Dr Patrick F. O'Donovan,
Dr Maurice Harman and Dr Lorna O'Sullivan

It was commissioned by the National Council for Special Education



An Ombudsman's Initiative
an Ombudsman's Initiative
National Council
for Special Education

Methodological Approach



Key Informants	Role Relevant to Contribution to the Project
Sydney Blain	Principal of the Church of Ireland College of Education Chair of National Council for Special Education
Angela Briggs	Parent
Damian Murray	Parent
Miriam Jennings	Parent
Denise Brogan	Parent
Ernest Cantillon	Solicitor involved in Key Cases
Pat Curtin	CEO National Council for Special Education
Teresa Griffin	CEO National Council for Special Education
Gabriel Harrison	Assistant Chief Inspector, Department of Education
Don Mahon	Assistant Chief Inspector, Department of Education
Seán Ó Murchú	Divisional Inspector, Department of Education
Liam Hughes	Principal Officer, Department of Education
Prof Seamus Hegarty	Member of Research Committee National Council for Special Education
Prof Michael Shevlin	Prof of Education, Trinity College Dublin
Prof Áine Hyland	Prof Emeritus of Education, University College Cork
Denise Sheridan	Early Years Educator
Bernie McNally	Assistant Secretary General- Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
Liam Twomey	Special School Principal
Caroline Quinn	Primary Principal
Pat Goff	Primary Principal
Mary Dunlea Fitzgerald	Primary Principal
Rachel O'Connor	Post-Primary Principal
Rose Desmond	Post-Primary Principal
Martin Tobin	Young Person with Experience of the System
Ellen Ryan	Young Person with Experience of the System
Anne Tansey	Director, National Educational Psychological Service

Teacher Professional Learning in Finland and Ireland: Findings Report

Fostering inclusive quality education in Finland and Ireland

MINISTRY OF
EDUCATION AND CULTURE
FINLAND



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Implemented by

EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



Funded by
the European Union



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Oige
Department of Education
and Youth

**Academic Review Paper for the Purposes of The Education for
Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004 Review.**

By Professor Emer Ring



With Michael O'Flanagan as Learning Partner



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Oige
Department of Education
and Youth

Special Classes for Autistic Pupils in Primary Schools

Towards a coherent, inclusive system



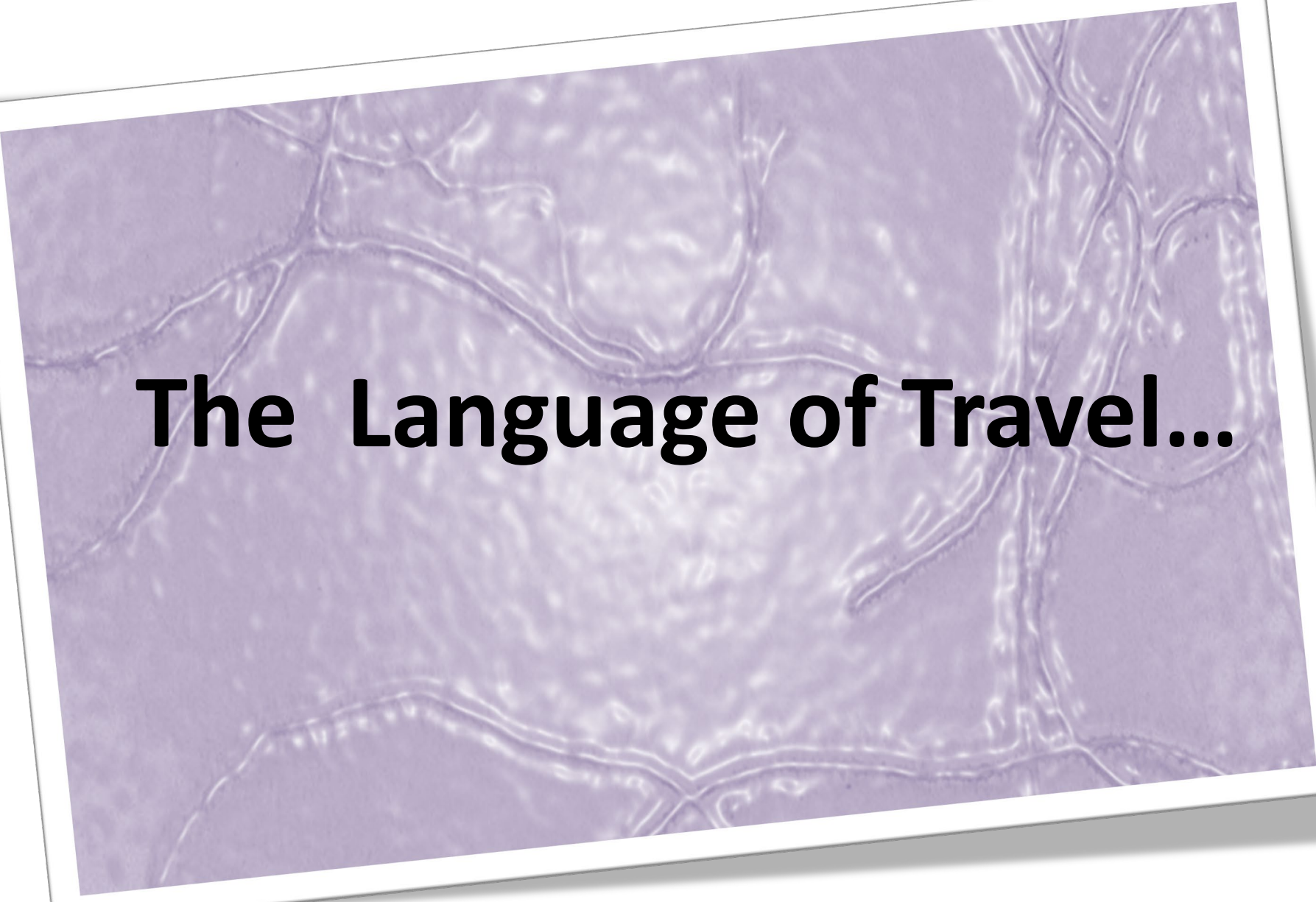
The Inspectorate
November 2025
www.gov.ie/DEInspectorate



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Oige
Department of
Education and Youth

Inspectorate Report (2024) and Thematic Review



A purple-tinted photograph of a road winding through a hilly landscape, framed by a white border. The road is a light color, possibly gravel or dirt, and curves through the terrain. The hills are covered in vegetation, and the overall scene is captured in a vintage, slightly grainy style.

The Language of Travel...

Our use of language remains a powerful tool in changing attitudes through its role in cultivating and deepening shared understandings of how we view difference. Throughout history, a language of deficit has been employed to refer to children who have been perceived as not being capable of accessing the broader education system.

Table 1. Current and Proposed Nomenclature of Mental Subnormality: WHO, 1954

Recommended terms	Current usage				Intelligence level according to the Manual*	
Degree of mental subnormality	British	American	French	German	IQ (children)	Mental age in years (adults)
Mild subnormality	Feeble-minded	Moron	Débile	Debil	50-69	8-12
Moderate subnormality	Imbecile	Imbecile	Imbécile	Imbezill Schwachsinnig	20-49	3-7
Severe subnormality	Idiot	Idiot	Idiot	Idiot Blödsinnig	0-19	0-2
All grades of mental subnormality	Mentally defective Ament	Feeble-minded Mentally deficient Mentally retarded	Arrière Oligophrène	Gelstesschwach Oligophreniker	0-69	0-12

* World Health Organisation (1948) *Manual of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases, Injuries, and Causes of Death*, Geneva, vol. 1 p. 114.

5456



AN ROINN SLÁINTE

THE PROBLEM OF THE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED.



DUBLIN.
PUBLISHED BY THE STATIONERY OFFICE.
To be purchased from the
GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS SALE OFFICE,
G.P.O. ARCADE, DUBLIN.
or through any bookseller.

(Pr.5456)

Price : One Shilling and Sixpence

Mental
Retardation
Handicapped
Disabled
Impaired
Disordered
Special

***Language shapes our
attitudes and attitudes
change the world***

Difference

Diversity

Neurodiversity

Neurodivergent

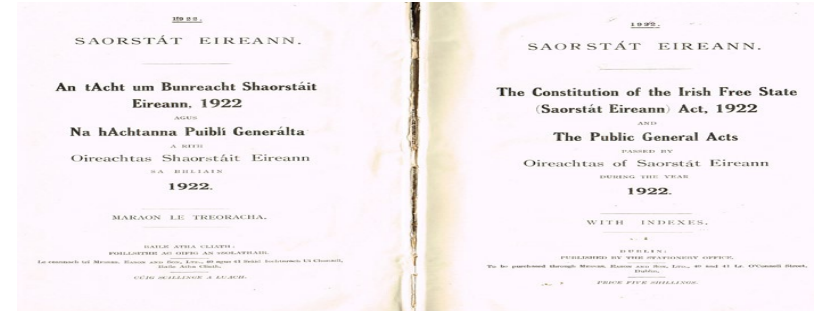


Neuro-affirmative Practice



**Defining Moments on Our
Journey...**

Post-Independence

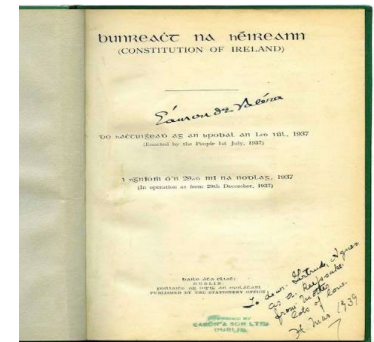


1922 - Article 10

All citizens of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann) have the right to free elementary education.

1937 - Article 42.4

The State shall provide for free primary education



[Why were 100,000 Irish children missing from school in the 1920s? \(rte.ie\)](http://rte.ie)

No fundamental reappraisal was carried out in the early years of the Irish Free State of the leading characteristics of the school system which it had inherited; many of the assumptions underlying the existing system went unexamined. In January 1923 the Minister for Education, Eoin MacNeill, rejected calls for the setting up of a commission of inquiry into Irish education.



Teachers

The Irish
SCHOOL WEEKLY

Under the Editorial Control of
THE IRISH NATIONAL TEACHERS' ORGANIZATION

CONTENTS

- ★
Change in Congress Venue
- ★
Deputation to Minister
—Org. Jettings
- ★
Deep Waters
—G. Morris N.A.
- ★
The Tongue of Childhood
—Margaret Maguire
- ★
Irish Lessons
- Composition Notes
- Needlework
- Mental Arithmetic



—Irish Times Photo.

A LOT OF IT GOES UNDER THE BRIDGE
A Guinness Barge passing under O'Connell Bridge, Dublin

Vol. Nos. 1 & 2 January 5 & 12, 1917 Price 5PENCE

**A PLAN
FOR
EDUCATION**

Price
One Shilling and Sixpence

Issued by
The Irish National Teachers' Organization

We anticipate the objection that we should have confined ourselves to primary education, but we feel that education should not be thought of as a number of systems but as one integrated system, that its stages are only convenient labels, that it is a single process, one organic growth. We believe, too, that most of the faults of our present system can be traced to the failure to regard it as a single integrated system, and that the view that certain kinds of education are suited to certain grades of society rather than to certain abilities and aptitudes goes directly counter to the ideal of equality of opportunity.

Education at present is mainly through the medium of words, and so does not make proper use of the greatest of teachers-the senses. There are wide differences of verbal ability in pupils, and many of our young people derive little benefit from purely bookish instruction. This type of instruction, moreover, is not a full preparation for life, since less than ten per cent. of the population are in occupations which demand high verbal ability. The curriculum, then, is distorted to cater for this minority. The senses are the great educators, but their relative efficiency differs greatly, and many pupils learn best when they can see, feel, and work with the material. For backward and mentally deficient children the handling of material is almost an essential aid to intellectual development, but, as we have already stated, handwork is not merely a subject for dull pupils but a need of every pupil.

DRAFT

REPORT OF SURVEY OF SPECIAL SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

The following resolution was adopted at Congress 1984
address:-

Congress directs the CEC to :-

publicise the erosion of support from pupils of
special educational needs, their schools and
families;

to negotiate the provision of adequate financial
resources/personnel in relation to
pupils with special needs;

Parents

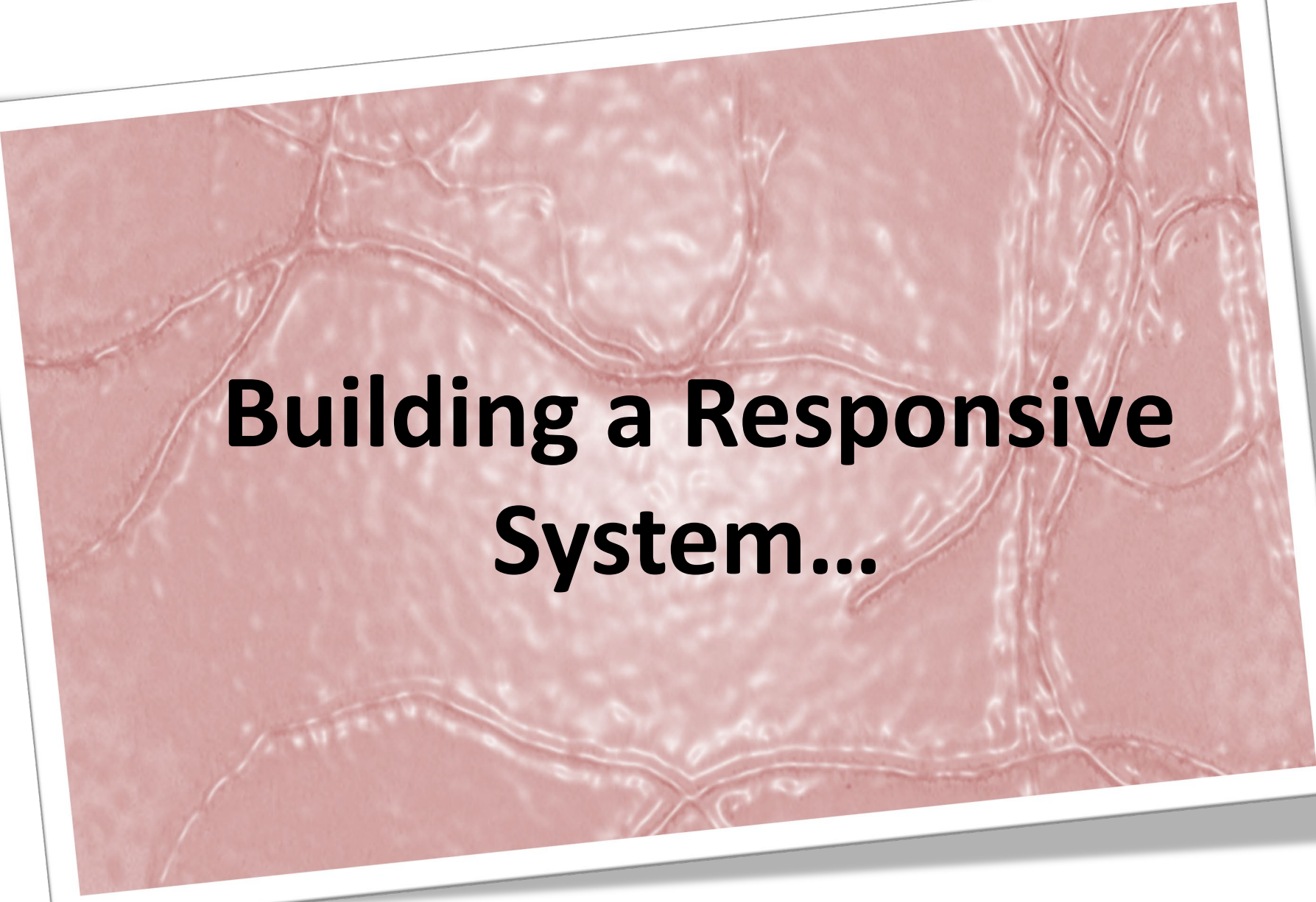
"Association for Parents of Mentally Backward Children. Lady wishing to form above would like to contact anyone interested. Box Z 5061 Children."





A brave woman, by the name of Marie O'Donoghue, consulted me in early 1990s, and told me of the difficulties that she was having in getting education for her son, Paul, who had intellectual disabilities. I had been forming the view for some time that there was a clear breach by the State in its failure to provide for free primary education, in accordance with its obligations to provide for free primary education, as set out in Article 42 of the Constitution. In 1992 we brought proceedings on behalf of Paul O'Donoghue, and this led to the seminal decision of Mr. Justice Rory O'Hanlon in 1993, which established the right of children to education, and education being defined as: "The teaching and training of a child to make the best possible use of his inherent and potential physical, moral, and mental capacities".

Cantillon (2022)

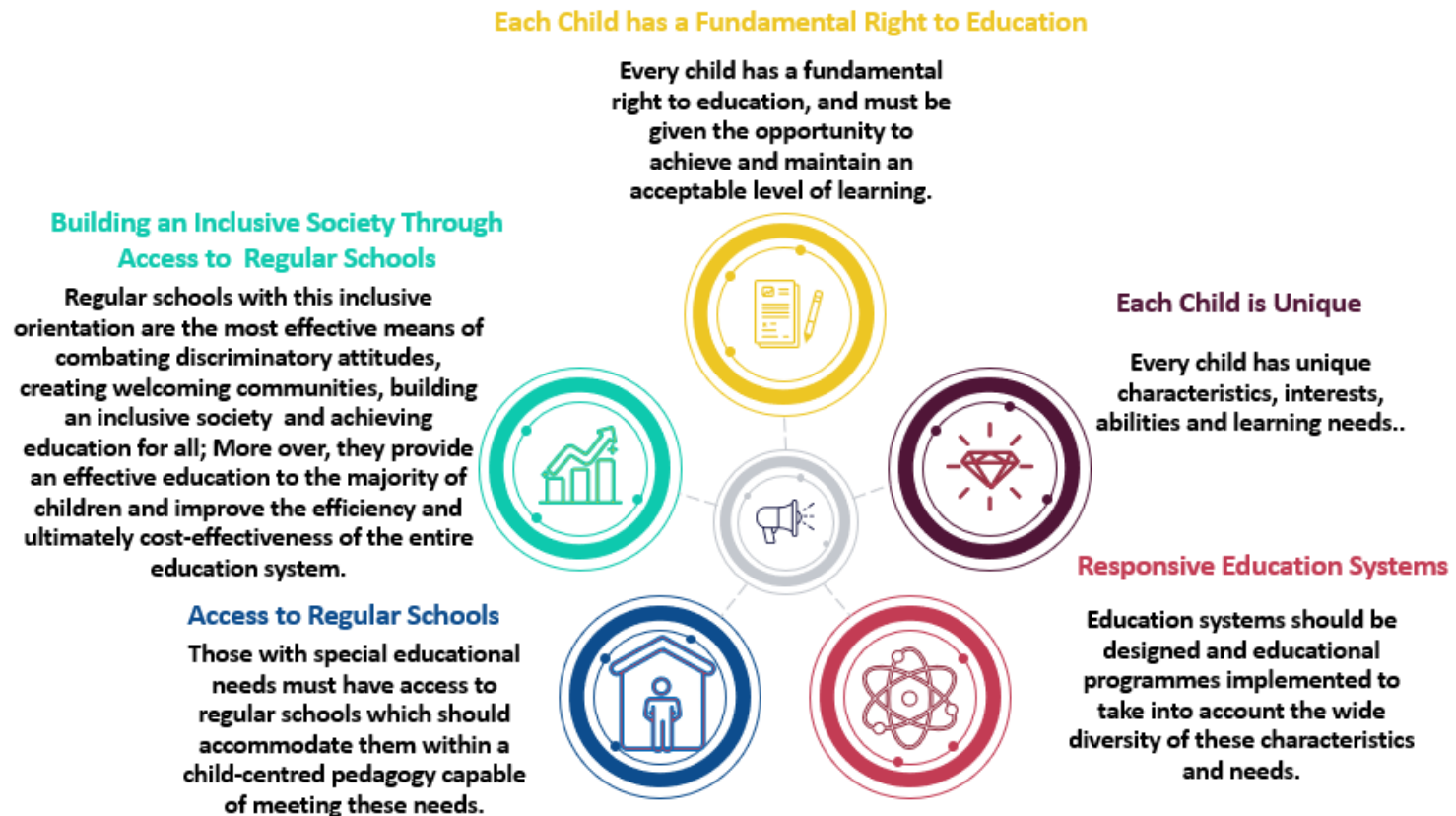
A microscopic image of plant cells, showing a network of cell walls and internal structures. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red color. The text "Building a Responsive System..." is centered over the image in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

Building a Responsive System...

Pragmatic Gradualism



Salamanca Statement 1994



Towards Equal Participation



Preamble

Article 1: Definition of a child

Article 2: Non-discrimination

Article 3: Best interests of the child

Article 4: Realising the child's rights.

Article 5: Family guidance as children Develop

Article 6: Life, survival and development

Article 7: Name and nationality

Article 8: Identity

Article 9: Keeping families together

Article 10: Contact with parents across countries

Article 11: Protection from kidnapping

Article 12: Respect for children's views

Article 13: Sharing thoughts freely

Article 14: Freedom of thought and religion

Article 15: Setting up or joining groups

Article 16: Protection of privacy

Article 17: Access to information

Article 18: Responsibility of parents

Article 19: Protection from violence

Article 20: Children without families

Article 21: Children who are adopted

Article 22: Refugee children

Article 23: Access to information

Article 24: Health, water, food, environment

Article 25: Review of a child's placement

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989

Article 26: Social and economic help

Article 27: Food, clothing, a safe home

Article 28: Access to education

Article 29: Aims of education

Article 30: Minority culture, language and religion

Article 31: Rest, play, culture, arts

Article 32: Protection from harmful work

Article 33: Protection from harmful drugs

Article 34: Protection from sexual abuse

Article 35: Prevention of sale and trafficking

Article 36: Protection from exploitation

Article 37: Children in detention

Article 38: Protection in war

Article 39: Recovery and reintegration

Article 40: Children who break the law

Article 41: Best law for children applies

Article 42: Responsibility of State Parties to disseminate knowledge on children's rights

Article 43: Establishment of Committee on the Rights of the Child

Article 44: Obligation on State Parties to report on implementation

Article 45: Measures for effective implementation

Article 46: Open to signature by all States

Article 47: Ratification process

Article 48: Open for accession by any State

Article 49: Commencement

Article 50: Amendment process

Article 51: Communicating reservations

Article 52: Denunciation by State Parties

Article 53: Role of Secretary-General Of the United Nations.

Article 54: Depositing of Convention

Ratified in September 1992

UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Preamble

Article 1: Purpose

Article 2: Definitions

Article 3: General principles

Article 4: General obligations

Article 5: Equality and non-discrimination

Article 6: Women with disabilities

Article 7: Children with disabilities

Article 8: Awareness-raising

Article 9: Accessibility

Article 10: Right to life

Article 11: Situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies

Article 12: Equal recognition before the law

Article 13: Access to justice

Article 14: Liberty and security of persons

Article 15: Freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

Article 16: Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse

Article 17: Protecting the integrity of the person

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006

Article 18: Liberty of movement and nationality

Article 19: Living independently and being included in the community

Article 20: Personal mobility

Article 21: Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information

Article 22: Respect for privacy

Article 23: Respect for home and the family

Article 24: Education

Article 25: Health

Article 26: Habilitation and rehabilitation

Article 27: Work and employment

Article 28: Adequate standard of living and social protection

Article 29: Participation in political and social life

Article 30: Participation in cultural life, recreation and sport

Article 31: Statistics and data collection

Article 32: International cooperation

Article 33: National implementation and monitoring

Article 34: Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Article 35: Reports by States Parties

Article 36: Consideration of reports

Article 37: Cooperation between States Parties and the Committee

Article 38: Relationship of the Committee with other bodies

Article 39: Report of the Committee

Article 40: Conference of States Parties

Article 41: Depository

Article 42: Signature

Article 43: Consent to be bound

Article 44: Regional integration organizations

Article 45: Entry into force

Article 46: Reservations

Article 47: Amendments

Article 48: Denunciation

Article 49: Accessible format

Article 50: Authentic texts

Ratified in March 2018

Existing Provision

Special Educational Needs

Dáil Éireann Debate, Wednesday - 22 January 2025

- 120 Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs).
- 1,700 classes sanctioned in last five years.
- 11 new special schools.
- 3,336 special classes.

Departmental Funding

Dáil Éireann Debate, Thursday - 20 February 2025

- From €1.9 billion announced in 2019 to €2.9 billion in 2025.
- 23,000+ Special Needs Assistants.
- 44,000+ dedicated staff to support children with special educational needs.



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Oige
Department of Education
and Youth

Special Classes for Autistic Pupils in Primary Schools

Towards a coherent, inclusive
system



The Inspectorate
November 2025
www.gov.ie/DEinspectorate

- For most pupils, enrolment in a special class appears to be permanent, and some of the children in the special classes in the primary schools inspected also received their pre-school provision in an early intervention class. (p.33)
- The Inspectorate review of admission policies of fifteen primary schools and fifteen post-primary schools, published in May 2025, found that almost all of the admission policies contained clauses that could, if implemented, prevent autistic children and young people with the greatest level of need from accessing a place in a special class. (p. 34)

- the importance of achieving a consensus among all stakeholders, including parents and children and young people, on the definition of inclusion and the characteristics of an inclusive, high quality system;
- the need to consider carefully the function of a special class within an inclusive education system;
- the need for alignment and coherence between policies designed to support inclusive practices;
- the importance of promoting the agency of children and young people and the meaningful involvement of their parents in decisions about children's learning;
- the need to provide school leaders with the necessary supports to lead, develop and implement effective wholeschool approaches to inclusive practices suited to their own contexts. (p. 86)



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Education and Youth

Inspectorate Report (2024) and Thematic Review



Special Education or Inclusion?



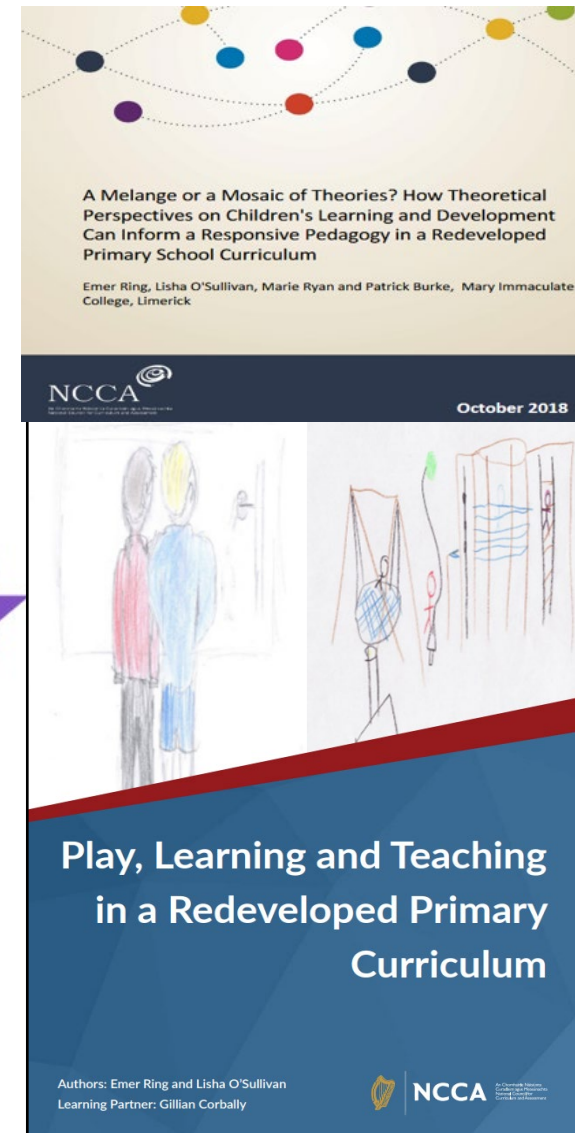
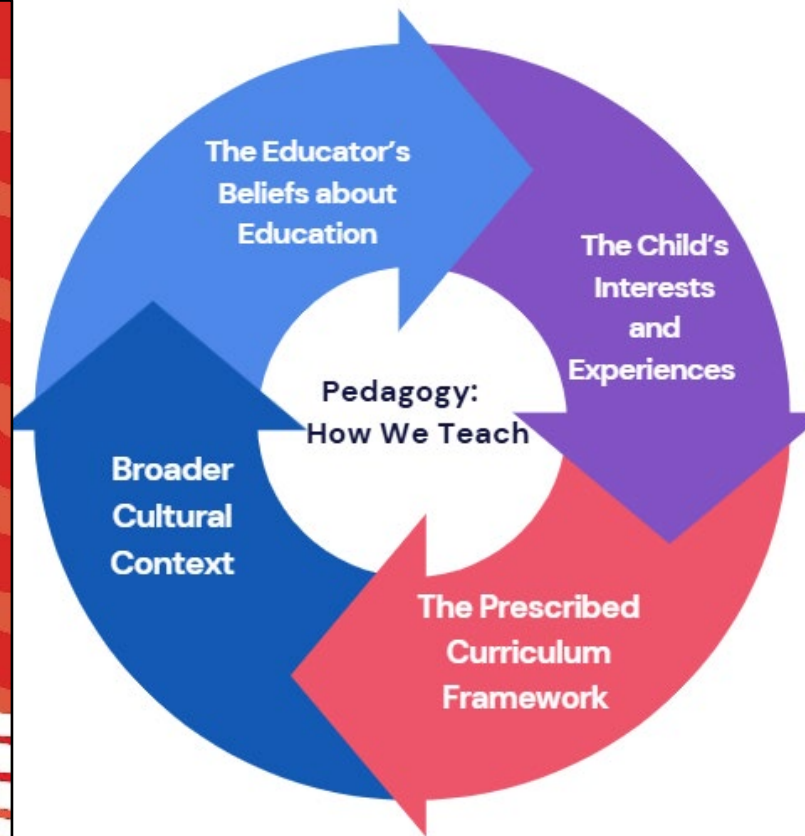
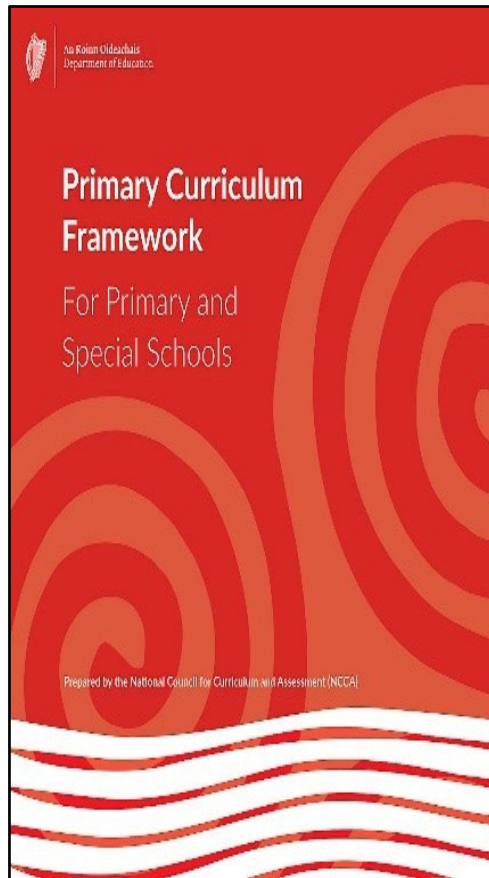
In recent years the term special education has become an increasingly familiar one to teachers and others interested in education in Ireland. Here, as elsewhere, the term has come to signify some form of educational provision adapted to the needs of those children who because of additional mental, physical, sensory and emotional needs are unable to benefit adequately from education in ordinary classes.



Rathnageeragh National School



Our Shifting Pedagogical Lens



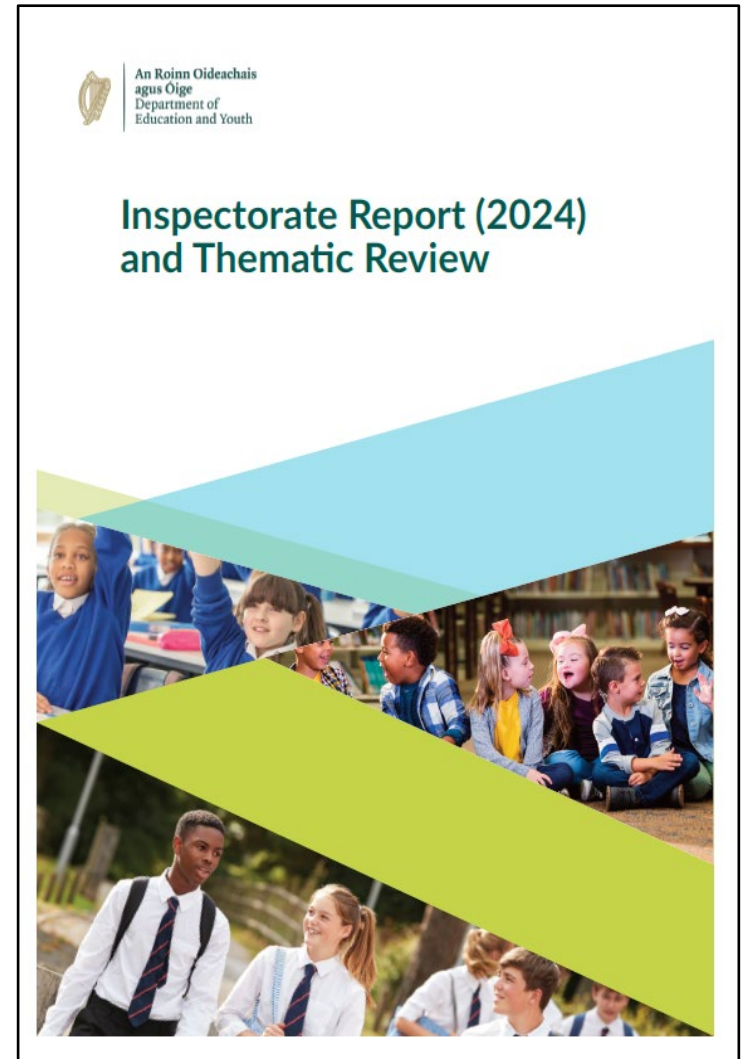
(O'Sullivan and Ring 2026)

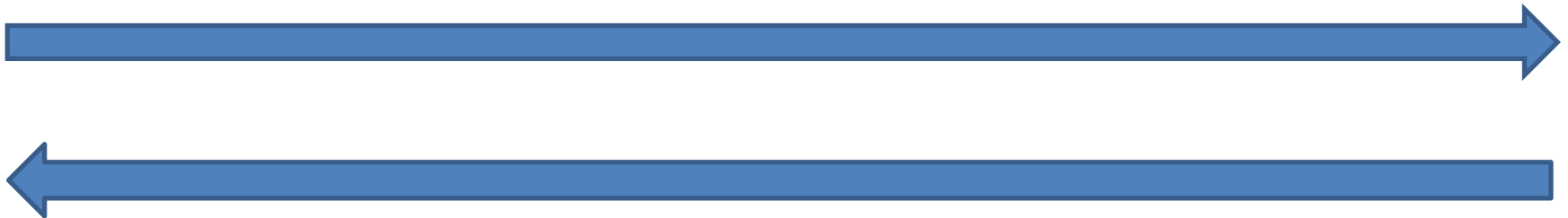
From Sources Across the Web...

Activity- focused learning and teaching	Differentiated Instruction	Reinforcement
Appropriate materials and resources	Direct Instruction	Scaffolding
Assistive Technology	Group-work	Social Skills
Communication and feedback	Independent practice	Structured routine
Collaborative Learning Environment	Multi-sensory learning and teaching	Supportive learning environment
Collaboration with parents	Peer-tutoring	Varied instructional methods

All?

A fundamental principle of an inclusive education system is that **all** children and young people should be enabled to access an education that is appropriate to their interests, strengths and needs. Critically, in an inclusive education system, **all** must mean **all**, and the education must be appropriate for the child or young person. (p. 87)





The Road Ahead



It it lawful to put my five-year-old on a reduced-hours timetable?

Ask Brian: Limiting a child's access to schooling is a failure by the education system

🕒 Tue, Apr 9, 2019, 00:00



Brian Mooney



Dáil sleep-out over lack of school places taking place

Updated / Wednesday, 2 Apr 2025 23:28



The group plans to sleep at the gates of Leinster House tonight as part of their protest



By **Emma O Kelly**
Education Correspondent



Cara Darmody outside Leinster House today. IMAGE: Rollingnews.ie

EXPLAINER

Why is a teenager sleeping outside the Dáil tonight and what's going on with 'assessments of need'?

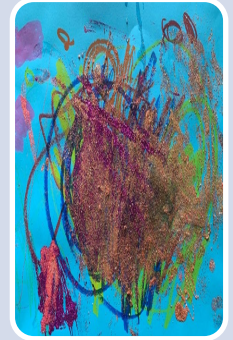
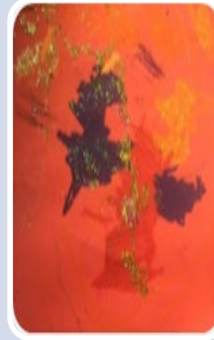
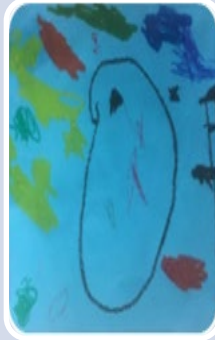
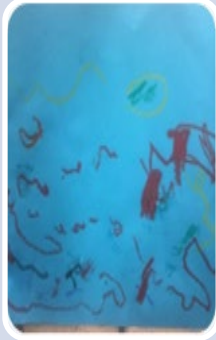


My journey has been very difficult, it's mainly been very hard for me because I'm dyslexic and I only discovered that later in my life. I was hiding it my whole life and I always felt inferior to people. I really had to get over this thing I was carrying around with me about not being an academic. But because of it, I'm more streetwise and savvier. I'm very good with people but I have struggled. I hated primary and secondary school as I never felt I was good enough. I felt pressure to be in the higher class. My teachers at school told me not to go to art school as I wasn't good enough, so I always felt a little lost with my ability. I knew I liked art and it excited me and it was my safe space. I could draw and paint for hours and even it wasn't that good it was my special place.

Margaret O' Connor –

[Shona Meets - Margaret O'Connor - The Shona Project](#)

What We Do Know Is...



**System
Resourcing
and
Effective
Use of
Resources**

**Inter-
Governmental
Collaboration**

**Continuing
Professional
Learning
Framework**

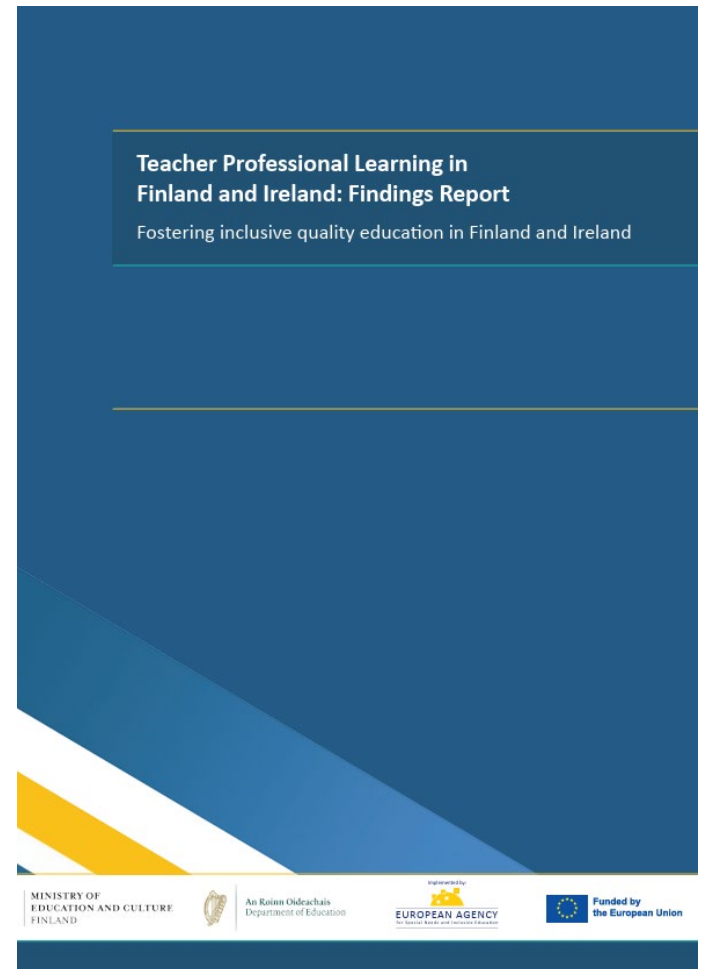
**Supported
School
Contexts**

**Evidence-
Based Practice**

**Responsive
Assessment
Processes-**

**Parent and
Family
Engagement**

Through bad times and good, whether the system moves at a headlong pace, progresses sedately or stalls, the quality of teaching remains, for the child with special educational needs more than for any other child, the pre-eminent influence on the educational outcome.



Teacher Professional Learning in Finland and Ireland: Findings Report

Fostering inclusive quality education in Finland and Ireland

4.3 Concluding comments

Both Finland and Ireland have strong elements within their TPL frameworks, but face common challenges in:

- creating a national TPL framework to standardise quality;
- ensuring uniformity in ITE and school placements;
- providing equal access to CPD, especially in rural areas;
- improving induction and mentoring for beginning teachers;
- managing teacher workload to encourage CPD participation;
- enhancing leadership training to support teacher development.

**THE
CHILD**

Family

Teacher

School Community

**THE WORLD
OF THE CHILD**

Friends/Peers

Curriculum/Activities

Neighbourhood

Community

**THE WORLD
AROUND THE
CHILD**

School
Community

Political Stability

Commitment to
Sustainable
Development
Goals

**THE
WORLD AT
LARGE**

Education
Policy

Children's
Rights
Agenda

Conclusion



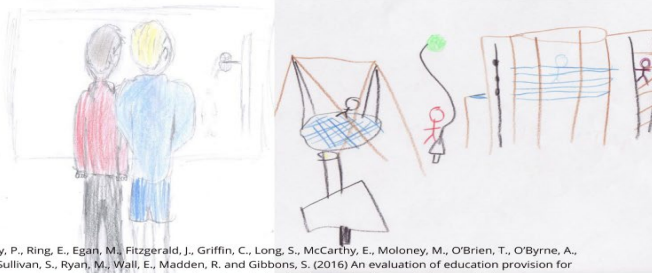
‘A lot has been learned from our years of trial and error in breaching the long impassable frontier of educating the ‘ineducable’ and including the excluded in order to realise that every child can learn if they are appropriately helped to do so’

(Swan 2000)

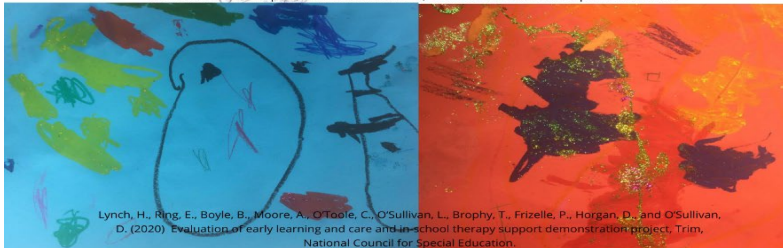
From Exclusion to Inclusion to Inclusion , Frontline 44 pp. 26-28



Ring, E., Mhic Mhathúna, M., Moloney, M., Hayes, N., Breatnach, D., Stafford, P., Carswell, D., Keegan, S., Kelleher, C., McCafferty, D., O'Keefe, A., Leavy, A., Madden, R. and Ozonyia, M. (2016) An examination of concepts of school-readiness among parents and educators in Ireland, Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.



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Lynch, H., Ring, E., Boyle, B., Moore, A., O'Toole, C., O'Sullivan, L., Brophy, T., Frizelle, P., Horgan, D. and O'Sullivan, D. (2020) Evaluation of early learning and care and in-school therapy support demonstration project, Trim, National Council for Special Education.

*Thank
you*

*Míle
Buíochas*

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