

# Inclusion - *a continuum of support*

Proceedings of the  
Consultative Conference  
on Special Education 2019

**into**   
Irish National Teachers' Organisation  
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

# into

# Inclusion — a continuum of support

## Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Special Education 2019

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*A nation's greatness depends upon the education of its people*

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# Acknowledgements

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# Foreword

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation has a proud history of supporting inclusion within our education system, both north and south, and it is our firm belief that all schools within the continuum of provision in our current educational system (comprising mainstream schools, special schools and schools with special classes) are inclusive schools. Primary teachers have always been, and continue to be, to the fore in welcoming children with special educational needs in our schools, both in mainstream and in special schools.

Inclusion is current state policy. The INTO supports the policy of inclusion and has consistently demanded the supports and resources that enable an inclusive education system to thrive. Recent years have seen a significant increase in the number of special classes for children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) in particular, and such classes are considered an integral and essential part of the Irish education system. However, we must not forget the need to invest in our special schools and to support children with special educational needs in mainstream classes. Two years since the introduction of the new model for allocating special education teachers to schools to support pupils with special educational needs, the biennial Consultative Conference on Special Education was a timely opportunity for members to engage in discussion, and to share their professional views, experiences and different perspectives on special education. The authentic teacher voice provides a richness to our conference discussions.

We are grateful to our keynote presenters: Finn Ó Murchú, head of post-primary at Mary Immaculate College, who highlighted the centrality of the teacher and the importance of autonomy to make professional, well-informed decisions about practices that best suit the needs of their pupils; and Katherine O'Leary, a home economics teacher, who captivated the audience with her heartfelt, personal experience from a parent's perspective, acknowledging the immense influence of teachers on the lives of children in their care. I would also like to thank members of the working group who planned the conference, the workshop presenters and the Education team in Head Office, under the leadership of Dr Deirbhile Nic Craith, who organised the conference and prepared this report.

As we enter a new policy space regarding inclusion arising from Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and the publication of the NCSE's policy advice on the future of special schools and classes, the INTO will continue its engagement on these matters to ensure our children with special education needs are fully supported in an inclusive education system. This report is a contribution to the ongoing discussions that inform policy and practice in special education and inclusion.



John Boyle  
General Secretary  
July 2021



# Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Special Education 2019

## Opening Addresses

### Introduction

*Joe Killeen, President, Irish National Teachers' Organisation*

I would like to welcome you all. Ba mhaith liom fíorchaoín fáilte a chur roimh chuile dhuine chuig príomhchathair na hÉireann, príomhchathair na hEorpa, príomhchathair an domhain — if you come from Cork you will definitely believe the last piece of that!

I would like to welcome you to the conference. Today, in addition to our delegates, we have representatives from a number of groups – Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI), Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), Educate Together, Gaelscoileanna, Hibernia College, Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE), Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA), Léargas, Mary Immaculate College, National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), National Council for Special Education (NCSE), National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), the Inspectorate, the Teaching Council and the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI). I welcome all these delegates. I also welcome our guest speakers and workshop presenters.

Today, we have approximately 400 delegates in attendance, including members from INTO branches from all over country, both north and south, invited guests and national committee members.

I suppose the fact that so many teachers have travelled here to attend a conference on special education on a Saturday speaks volumes about our professionalism and commitment to Irish primary education and the commitment of Irish primary school teachers. I suppose it is this commitment that makes Irish education and the educational system in Ireland the envy of the world. Maybe that is what makes our graduates so prized in so many countries around the world who continue to try to headhunt our brightest and best and bring them to their countries to try to improve their educational system.

I would like to convey apologies from our General Secretary Sheila Nunan who cannot be with us today but in her place I would like to extend a very warm welcome to General Secretary Designate John Boyle.

The theme of today's conference is 'Inclusion – a continuum of support'. I suppose one of the biggest challenges in primary school classrooms in the last 20 years has been the inclusion of children with special educational needs. To give some context to those younger teachers in the gathering, it is difficult to believe it, but in 1994 there was a grand total of how many special needs resource teachers in the country appointed to support the integration of children with SEN in mainstream primary schools? And the number is – seven. Seven in the country. In 2019, there are 9,000 INTO members working in special education. This means that one in four teachers in primary schools is now working in special education. What a wonderful change.

Despite primary teachers' best efforts, the challenge of inclusion has been difficult to manage in overcrowded classrooms, with limited access to support from qualified professionals. It is two years since the introduction of the new model of allocating additional teaching resources to schools to support children with special educational needs, so it's a good time to reflect on the changes that have been made and to discuss the direction we need to take for the future of special



education. That is what this conference is about.

I am delighted that you have joined us here today. We have been joined by two keynote speakers — Finn Ó Murchú, head of school in the Thurles campus of Mary Immaculate College and Katherine O’Leary, a teacher, parent, columnist and special education activist.

This morning we will be in discussion groups to discuss key areas of interest and concern in special education. These will include teacher CPD, diagnostic testing, team teaching and curriculum developments. You will also have the opportunity to attend two workshops which will look at topics such as teaching strategies for pupils with ASD, co-teaching and SEN, speech and language needs, student support, maths recovery and restrictive practices in special schools.

Thank you for your attendance here today. I hope you derive much personal and professional satisfaction from your participation at this conference.



## **Recent policy developments in supporting pupils with special educational needs**

*Deirbhile Nic Craith, Director of Education and Research*

Good morning delegates. Fáilte go Corcaigh go Comhdháil Chumann Múinteoirí Éireann ar an Oideachas Speisialta – an chéad cheann i gCorcaigh.

Over the next few minutes, I will present a brief outline of current developments in special education, referring to special schools and classes, the new allocation model and supports. My colleague Caroline McCarthy from INTO Northern Committee will then provide a short overview of the context in Northern Ireland.

It is over 25 years since the INTO had a conference on the theme of 'Accommodating Difference', a conference which focused on the integration of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Our event at the time was a response to the policy shift towards inclusion when Ireland signed up to the EU charter in 1990 to promote integration of children with special educational needs in mainstream education. INTO's position was that we support the policy of inclusion, where it is in the best interests of the child and where the necessary resources are provided.

It is also over 25 years since the *Report of the Review Committee on Special Education*<sup>1</sup> was published – commonly referred to as SERC. The recommendations of this report continue to underpin much policy on special education.

Since the publication of SERC, we have had the introduction of the EPSEN ACT 2004<sup>2</sup> (although not yet fully implemented), the establishment of the National Council for Special Education to promote and support policy and practice in special education and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), which has yet to reach full capacity as recommended when it was first established in 1999. We have also had an increase in the number of special classes in Irish schools.

It has always been an important principle for INTO to ensure a continuum of provision from special schools to special classes to inclusion in mainstream classes with support. All of our schools are inclusive.

Our principals in special schools have responsibility for leading and managing large staffs – a fact not yet recognised or reflected in remuneration. The provision of administrative deputy principals in large special schools is a welcome development. We must build on this progress to reduce the point at which administrative deputies are appointed.

One of the key changes since SERC is that many pupils in special schools are of post-primary age. They also have more complex needs. Special schools teach both the primary curriculum and the post-primary curriculum. The revised language curriculum at primary level is designed to be inclusive of all children. Curriculum at junior cycle level includes specific programmes for pupils with special needs and a review of the senior cycle will follow.

Principals in mainstream schools with special classes also need additional administrative support. While the increase in leadership and management [release] days is welcome, it is still far from sufficient.

We have a new model for the allocation of special education teachers to mainstream schools. I am sure schools have been busy clustering over the last two weeks. The question remains as to whether this method of allocation is a better way. Certainly, the principle underpinning the model

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1 Report of the Special Education Review Committee, (1993). Dublin: Government Publications' Office

2 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, (2004) <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2004/act/30/enacted/en/html>



is laudable – allocating support according to need. In practice however, it is not so simple.

The INTO argued the case for a baseline allocation for all schools. A baseline means that all schools will have some allocation.

It is hard to argue against giving additional support to schools that experience disadvantage or that have pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), hence an allocation for social context, based on the census information and Primary Online Database (POD) information.

Research clearly indicates that boys are more likely to have special needs and learning disabilities, and though contested, it remains the dominant discourse in relation to gender and special needs. This results in an allocation of additional support on the basis of gender in favour of boys.

The most controversial element of the new model is the use of standardised test results as part of a school's educational profile. Since the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011*<sup>3</sup>, schools have been returning the results of their standardised tests in reading and mathematics for 2nd, 4th and 6th to the Department of Education and Skills in aggregate form. We now know the reasoning behind this. Standardised tests have been used for a long time at school level to help decide which pupils should receive learning support. Prior to the introduction of the role of learning support teacher in schools (in the 1990s), standardised test results were also used by individual schools to support a case to the Department of Education for access to a remedial teacher. Standardised test results are now used as an indicative illustration of the extent of low achievement in schools. We must explore whether there are alternatives to this model if schools with a large cohort of low achieving pupils are to receive additional resources. We know from our recent research project in collaboration with the Centre for Assessment, Research, Policy and Practice in Education (CARPE), DCU, that linking special education supports to standardised tests results has really exercised teachers and generated a great deal of concern in relation to the potential loss of resources if test scores improve – particularly when such improvement is possible only because the additional supports are in place. Perhaps, more importantly, learning support and special education is about much more than improving achievement in reading and maths.

The final element of the model is 'complex special educational needs'. For this part of a school's educational profile, we are transitioning from the old model of resource hours to a new model based on the identification of children with complex needs by the Health Service Executive Disability Services. For 2019, schools retain their existing resource hours for pupils still in school, and the new definition applies only to enrolments of junior pupils. This is a narrower definition than what we associate with low incidence. The crucial point is to ensure that all special educational needs are captured in schools' profiles — whether complex needs, low achievement, disadvantage, specific learning disabilities, emotional or behavioural needs. It is also important that we retain our overall resources. The INTO insisted that any adjustments to individual schools' allocation should be graduated.

The success of the educational system for all children depends on how teachers and pupils are supported. Teachers' expertise lies in identifying and responding to children's learning needs. However, children have other needs.

Children struggle to learn if their needs for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, behaviour therapy, or counselling are not met. Regardless of where children live, and whether they attend special schools or mainstream schools, we need a comprehensive, well-functioning therapy service for children. We welcome the pilot project in West Dublin, West Wicklow and Kildare where a model of school-based therapy services is being explored. This does not mean that teachers take on the role of therapists, but rather is a way of investigating how children that need therapies can receive support from therapists in schools.

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3 Department of Education and Skills, (2011). *Literacy and numeracy for learning and for life: The national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people 2011-2020*. Dublin: Stationery Office.



Professional development in special education is essential for all teachers during their careers, whether they are in special schools, special classes, or in mainstream schools. Support provided by visiting teachers for pupils with hearing or visual impairments and by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) advisors should also continue as part of a support service for schools.

I hope today's conference will provide inspiration, ideas, and support in relation to special needs. In addition to discussion groups and our keynote speakers, we have workshops on topics identified by our working group as the most pressing issues for teachers at present:

- Teaching strategies for pupils with ASD
- Maths with children with special needs
- Planning to support pupils with SEN
- Co-teaching and SEN
- Restrictive practices in special schools
- Pupils with speech and language needs

We have come a long way since the early 1990s. Teachers have embraced the principle of inclusion – and strive to educate all our pupils, whether in special schools, special classes or in mainstream schools.

Tá súil agam go mbainfidh sibh taitneamh agus tairbhe as an gcomhdháil.



## **Special education policy developments in Northern Ireland**

*Caroline McCarthy, INTO Northern Committee*

Did you ever have one of those feelings when you said “yes”, but later felt that perhaps you should have thought it through first?

I am a very proud teacher of children with special educational needs. I believe in their education, but I also believe that the people who make the decisions outside the walls of the classroom need to be listening to the teachers inside.

### ***Changing nature of special education***

Our classrooms are changing. Children and young people are presenting with needs that require us as teachers to review how we are teaching, what we are teaching and why we are teaching, on a more individual basis. It is a simple phrase to say that these are ‘21st century issues’ but, simply it is true. Partly, it is because we know more, and medical intervention has improved considerably. Research has opened up our understanding of sensory impairments, ASD, ADHD and rare syndromes. Babies are surviving preterm earlier and earlier and for a significant number of them, this will impact on their physical health and their learning in the classroom. We must meet these children’s educational needs. They are vibrant young people who are valued, but we also must identify where they are at and their specific developmental needs.

In an education system that is focussed on academic achievement, there is a failure to understand the needs of so many children. Consider the simple research that tells that the brain has not formed the part that deals with numeracy before 26 weeks. It will not grow after birth. The child will either be educated with the knowledge that numeracy needs an individual approach or they will have an education that highlights their failure right through. Research into the trauma that preterm babies have experienced in hospitals — the lights, the noises, the pain, and the lack of physical contact to name just a few — has led to the development of specialised units with dimmed rooms, silent machines, specialised therapies, but not yet a specialised education. And then we have the impact of children who lack the parental bonding that parents have with their babies and children. Social interaction of parenting is being replaced by iPads and smartphones, bonds are not being made, emotional resilience is not being formed, relationships are failing, and these children are arriving in our classrooms not ready or able to form the relationships that are so crucial to developing their emotions and education.

Finally, at this point I would like to address the issue of foetal alcohol syndrome. In the South you appear to have the luxury of research and openness about this. In Northern Ireland, we are in significant denial. In England, autism spectrum disorder sits at approximately 2%, and over the last 10 years we have seen a dramatic increase in foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) a combination maybe of better diagnoses, but possibly as a result of increased abuse of alcohol. It is now overtaking ASD diagnosis and sits at 3%. In the North of Ireland, we have no figures for FASD, teachers do not know the children in front of them and the needs that they have.

Our ASD sits at 5% and yet no policy-makers are asking the pressing questions about why these figures are so high, and why do we not have FASD recognised and diagnosed when we know there is valid research in the South and in Great Britain. Ultimately, in our classrooms we are trying to provide purposeful education to the children and young people in front of us without an accurate diagnosis of need, and because of this we fail, and the child fails.

Combine all of these factors and you find some of the most complex children we are teaching in our special schools, and increasingly in our mainstream schools – the child who has the mixed bag of everything. We also have the increased frequency and severity of assaults in schools. These are happening from our nursery schools up — increasingly more and more — and teachers are



trying to cope, (hence why we produced a leaflet last year). Behind your closed door you try and deal with the situation as much as you can, and it is often not until you reach breaking point that you actually seek help and reveal what is happening.

The complex learning difficulties and disabilities research project identified a new group of children whose brain functioning is configured in a different way than that previously understood by educators of children with disabilities, and for that we must create a responsive pedagogy. Mental health is the most pervasive and co-recurring need to compound and complicate the education of children with SEN and disabilities. The children are changing, teaching is changing, but is policy keeping up with it?

### ***SEN policy in Northern Ireland***

I am now going to move on to the second point that I want to talk about, revolving policy in the North of Ireland and the risks and threats that it is posing for us in the classrooms. I am going to lay out the current position by reflecting on the past 40 years.

In 1978, the *Warnock Report*<sup>4</sup> identified that 20% of a school population would have special educational needs and 2% might need support over and above that which could be provided by a mainstream school. Fast-forward to the early 2000s and Warnock revisited this, leading to the *Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Act*<sup>5</sup>. This Act was rolled out in 2016 highlighting Warnock's deep concern at the high numbers of children who were being given statements and too many children were going into a special school system.

So, in 2012, the then minister presented a review of SEN and inclusion to the Education Committee and since then we have seen the rollout of plans, consultations, and policy change by stealth to cram and squeeze the children that we know to fit into the model of the 20% and 2% and it does not fit — not without adequate funding, resourcing and training in the mainstream schools to cope with these children. Crudely, it is cheaper to buy a digital device such as an iPad rather than employ a classroom assistant in the North. Our education budget is at crisis point, falling short of meeting provision with admissions by the Education Authority that this could lead to the reduction of subject options, reduced curriculum, loss of extended schools' project and increased class sizes. Schools have their own budgets and are having to make drastic decisions to try to meet the needs of their pupils, but the finances available are inadequate to meet the special educational need in many schools.

We have a development policy for the future provision for children in early years with special education that is moving from special schools to looking at providing help for children with moderate learning difficulties, physical difficulties, specific learning needs, specific learning disability (SLD), profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD), social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), in mainstream schools. Communication has been abandoned with a one size fits all and a mainstream push.

Our learning support centres (LSCs) which are being published as the way forward focus only on the child with ASD, and children with other needs are being absorbed into mainstream classes without the necessary resourcing and training. At the minute, in Belfast, we have about 800 children and young people between the ages of three and 19 with special educational needs and this number is increasing year on year. Research by the National Children's Bureau shows that these children will be absorbed into classes in the mainstream system and the class sizes are simply too big. The budget is not there, the resourcing is not there, and the teachers are simply not able to cope.

The *SEND Act*, passed in 2016, acknowledged the rights of the child with SEN, the role of the

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4 The Warnock Report (1978). *Special Educational Needs Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People*. London: HMSO.

5 *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016*. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2016/8/contents>



SENCO, the increased responsibility of the board of governors, the appeal rights of the children and their parents, including a mediation process, and a change from a non-statutory individual education plan (IEP) to a statutory personal learning plan (PLP). However, it did not talk about finance. It did not talk about training or professional development for teachers, nor did it talk about the changing landscape and the increasing level of need. New regulations for SEN were delivered for consultation in 2016 and despite the significant concerns raised in responses, teachers' consultations are not weighted. The response of a union representing over 7,000 teachers or a director representing the Health Trust or an education lead in a teaching college counts as one individual and as a result grave educational concerns are being discounted. The regulations have not yet reached final publication.

In 2018, we started to see a strong trend forming in the delivery of SEN without finalised regulations and no indication of a new code of practice. A PLP — a personal learning plan — is purely a data-driven exercise and it is being drip fed out. It is not child or parent friendly and therefore not fit for purpose. The new phrase of 'primary need' has become part of our vocabulary so much so that people are starting to fall into it. As teachers, we are told to 'identify the primary need', again to fit this data-driven process. I would love if someone could tell me the primary need of a 15-year-old young student with Down's syndrome, a severe learning difficulty, autism, ADHD, visual impairment, anxiety, and mental health issues, whose father has just passed away. When this student comes into school, my role as teacher is to help her to find a purpose, and often that purpose can be to help her find some happiness amid the confusion. The statementing process is changing as it was felt it was too dependent upon, but if we are to move away from this approach, we must have a system that is equipped to meet the needs of children without a statement. Otherwise, the statements will need to remain.

Mental health is becoming an increasingly prevalent issue in all our schools, including special schools, not only for our pupils but also for our staff as they struggle in a system that is not fit to meet their needs. 75% of children with ASD will develop mental health issues in their teenage years. As educators we need to have the necessary support and resources to deal with this. Our teachers and non-teaching staff are shouting out and letting us know that these changes are not benefitting any children in school. The chief inspector of the Education Training Inspectorate in a most recent report highlighted the increasing numbers of nursery children being suspended and no-one is asking why. I could probably describe to you the needs of that child.

A recent survey by an education trade union group highlighted the significant and worrying details of assaults happening in our schools from nursery level onwards, yet this essential data is not being collected and analysed by the education authorities or the department. Inclusion is an incredibly powerful word, but it can be a divisive word and a word that I believe that is being misunderstood, misused, and misguided by our education authority in their current plans for special education. Inclusion is not wearing the same jumper; it is not going through the same front door and then behind doors that may need to be locked because some pupils may abscond. Inclusion is about being a valued and expressive member of your school community, where everyone learns to their full potential.

### ***The way forward***

So, what is the way forward? Well, within the North, as a union we need to challenge a consultation process that ignores professional judgements. We need to demand that research be central to decisions in special education provision. Our judicial system is full of young people who had failed education because education failed them. Undiagnosed, and therefore not tackled difficulties have played a key role in this. Research by the Red Cross has shown that with increased speech and language input, 68% of children who had been failing caught up with their peers, yet speech and language units are being replaced by units for children with ASD. These units need to go alongside – they need to be 'as well as'. There needs to be an urgent review of the prevalence of complex



needs, and a visible and clear campaign to reduce the incidence of FASD — the one preventable disability. The message needs to be communicated clearly that drinking in pregnancy can cause severe damage and therefore reduce the number of children who are cursed through their life.

I started today by saying that we are in interesting times (I didn't – I skipped that paragraph, so go back and take it that I said, "interesting times"!). We are actually in a perfect storm where budgets are limited and children are presenting with increased needs, mental health is at crisis point, health trust involvement is being cut because of budgets, research is being ignored, the data-driven departments are concentrating on data rather than an effective purposeful education system. The victims of this storm are the children in our schools, their teachers and school staff who are facing increased assaults, the sense of failure and paperwork pressure. The school system is failing its most vulnerable children. As teachers we must use the structures that are in place to ensure needs are met and create the data that has an actual purpose.

Education will change because it will have to, so why should we and a generation of children have to wait for the 21st century classroom to meet the 21st century needs?

Thank you.





## Keynote Presentations

### **Inclusion – a continuum of support and a continuum of endless possibilities**

*Finn Ó Murchú, Mary Immaculate College*

Thank you very much, lovely to be here. The first thing I have to say is that I am not a primary teacher, is that okay? The second thing is that I'm from Cork. I am a very proud Cork man agus táim an-bhuíoch as an gcuireadh a bheith anseo. Genuinely, I am. You usually have to say 'I'm very honoured to be here' even if you're not sure what you are going to say, never mind if it is a great honour, but on this occasion, while I am not sure what I am going to say I am certainly very honoured to be here. And, we do know the difference between a primary teacher and a post-primary teacher, don't we? Are you going to say it? We are on camera! Comment from Joe Killeen: "The smart ones are in primary! It goes something like that!"

As I am at home and my mother is living about a mile away and she may be watching the live stream of this event, I had better be careful with what I say! First things first, I did not get enough points (in Leaving Certificate examination) to get into Mary Immaculate when I was 18 years of age so on that logic Joe (Killeen) is correct (about the smart teachers at primary level) — if you believe in the concept of a fixed mindset over a growth mindset. But you have to be careful about the 'growth' as well because then you end up as head of school of Mary Immaculate post-primary. Anyway, the Lord works in mysterious ways!

It is a great honour to be here and I am going to share some of my insights with you. You do not necessarily have to agree with what I have to say but I would be delighted that if you didn't, we have a private conversation afterwards rather than getting a bit feisty in here! I think special education is something that we are very passionate about and that is why you have 400 delegates on a beautiful Saturday morning sitting down here. So, hats off to you on that one!

Can I ask you to do one thing first? I would ask you if you do not know the name of the person next to you would you say hello, as it is about inclusion. Okay, you can share phone numbers later on, I just wanted to say hello! ... Let's keep going.



I am going to weave a little humour into the presentation but at no point do I want you to misunderstand the seriousness of the topic, not the seriousness of the speaker, but the topic. I have been involved in special education nearly all my life, if you think about it, maybe all of us in the room have. My phrase at the moment that I can live with is 'students at risk of not learning'. I think with the mental chewing gum about integration, inclusion, special education etc., sometimes we miss out on the actual work that we are doing. The work we are doing is about learning and it is about increasing the learning and life chances of each student that we meet. And therefore, from



that point of view I see it as endless possibilities. I think the days of working on your own to achieve those endless possibilities are probably limited as well and I think the collaborative piece and the spirit of the room today is part of the future and where we are going.

My brief was to give a perspective, so I am giving you one (see picture on page 14). If you find this funny, you are not from Cork. So, my perspective may not be your perspective! I will share some opinions with you, and it is up to you to decide whether you agree or whether you want to consider further. I am particularly interested in the centrality of the teacher which sometimes gets missed when we talk about resources. It is not just about resources; it is about what you do with the resources. How do we treat each other? What about the well-being of the teacher? Is there something in there about looking after the well-being of the student but also looking after the well-being of the teacher who is working with that student?

How many of us have gone home with a pebble in our shoe on a Friday and it is a boulder by Sunday night, and you are not too sure what you are doing on Monday anyway. I think there is a lot of uncertainty around special education and I think we can be the best support to each other — 'we' in the context of teachers can be the best support to each other. I think we need to capture successes more frequently. I think we need to acknowledge that some of the successes are not written in policy documents. I think we need to recognise that policy actually is informed by practice. It is something that I discovered when I joined the Inspectorate, rather than the other way round.

Just a brief summary of me — the picture (above) was drawn of me by a student in a special school that I visited. I was in his company for 15 minutes. Think back to the student that Caroline described in her presentation, this was a similar type of student and his teacher and himself came



to me at lunchtime to present me with that picture. Let us agree not to limit the expectations of our students and let us agree not to limit the expectations of ourselves as we work with our students.

I was a post-primary teacher. Primary teachers love their students, post-primary teachers love their subjects and third level love themselves, we know how it goes! Then I became a cigire for post-primary special education. The curious thing is that I was the first inspector ever for special education at post-primary. So, we talk about Joe's (Killeen) statistics, there are other statistics as well. This concept of special education and inclusion at one level is very new, but at another level it is very old because when I am stuck, good teaching is good teaching — it is not about inclusion, it is not about special education, it is about teaching every single child that you see in front of you. When I was a teacher, I didn't know our school enrolment policy, I didn't read circulars, but I just knew that I had a responsibility for everybody in front of me.

Now I am not saying I did a good job; I just knew that I had the responsibility. Let us be humble up here (if we can, when we're from Cork!). So, the cigire for special educational needs was a wonderful opportunity for me to learn. From a primary perspective, one of the highlights of my career was first of all being on induction (faoi oiliúint) with Emer Ring, who is here. Emer is now dean of education in Mary Immaculate and I'm still 'faoi oiliúint'! I did work closely with Emer. She tried to get rid of me 20 odd years ago but I'm still in her life! I remember working with NAMBSE with Breda (Corr) and learning about the special schools and learning what a special school was, and, in the process, worked very closely around the junior cycle reform. The curious thing is that



the INTO were the first organisation to adopt junior cycle reform and we worked with the special schools for level 1, level 2, and level 3 accreditations. We worked with the NCCA who did trojan work making it happen. But we have to work very closely with some organisations to let them know that we have students who will not fit into a level 3 understanding, to let them know that 50% of special schools are populated by young people of post-primary age, to let them know that level 1 needs to be thought of and not just to congratulate ourselves with level 2.

I think on a world stage we have a curriculum now which is based on the concept of universal design for learning. It is only a curriculum. Again it is the centrality of the teacher that will make it happen. You look at junior cycle reform, you look at resource provision, you look at everything, it is structure, structure, structure. And on a bad day I say structure comes without batteries, and the batteries are teachers. Those batteries are the pedagogies that we use, and I think my invitation to you is to consider today how can we get that message back into the conversation, over the conversation around structures, not instead of structures but in tandem with the concept of structures, resources and supports.

So, head of school, Mary Immaculate, new venture, head of post-primary. We have a small campus on what was St Patrick's College Thurles, where we offer a four-year undergraduate programme for post-primary (this is the sales pitch!). We offer Gaeilge, business, accounting, religion and mathematics and combinations of those subjects. We work from the get-go, tá sé fite fuaite, the minute you cross the threshold you are a post-primary teacher of those subjects. We work very closely with the area of inclusion. We don't have differentiation sections in our lesson plans for our students, we say the whole lesson is differentiation. We work closely with the support services here and we also work with the Middletown Centre for Autism who have been very supportive of our work as well. Basically, the reason I took the job is because I am aware of the power of the pedagogy that exists in the primary teacher education programmes and I wanted to bring it into the post primary. So, genuinely, hats off to the primary model.

Speaking of hats off, just to say that our programme has the line 'we support you to be the teacher that you want to be and challenge you to be the teacher that you need to be'. I think that line is impactful, I don't know where it came from, but I don't think it is restricted to initial teacher education.

So, the centrality of the teacher.



This (photograph above) was taken in 1973 when Cork had just won the all-Ireland football final, so every single person in that picture is smiling. My teacher is Mr Daly, his name is Jimmy Daly, but I can't say that. He is alive and well and Mr Daly has been in my life, hit-and-miss, ever since I met him in 1973. I hope each of you have a Mr Daly in your life. I hope you have had one teacher who made a difference but, as I say to my undergraduates and I say to you, the magic is that you can be Mr Daly. Sometimes we don't even know that we have been Mr Daly because sometimes our successes go unseen. So, that is the centrality of the teacher and that is why I am here, I guess.

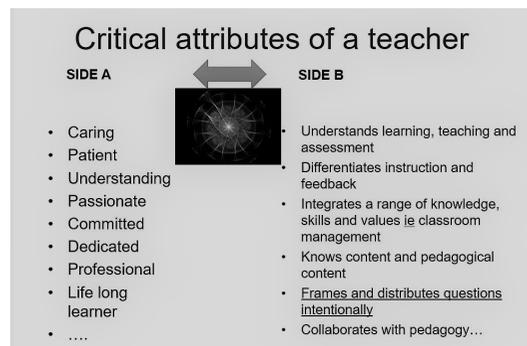


### So, what is a good teacher?

You now know the name of the person sitting next to you, and the next trick is that you should have sat next to someone who is intelligent — you do understand that when you go to conferences! The second thing is, don't move. If you reckon that you need to move, you can move later on but do not do so now. I am going to ask you a question that I'd like you to consider. What are the critical attributes of a good teacher? What makes you different than a nurse? What makes you different to a doctor or a lawyer or a plumber? As it is Saturday, and it is early morning, I am going to share with you some answers I got earlier, and they go along like this. The critical attributes of a teacher are caring, patient, understanding, passionate, committed, dedicated, professional, life-long learner. Would you agree? Yes? Fair enough.

Now, I do not mean to be smart, I have a dog named Rebel — we got him in Kilkenny. Now read the list according to my dog Rebel — caring, patient, understanding, passionate, committed, dedicated, professional (maybe not, but we can work on it), lifelong learner — for a while — but I think we have stopped. So, there must be more that you do than that. Some people say that the other bits and pieces of what we do, the critical attributes are:

- we understand learning, teaching and assessment,
- we differentiate instruction and feedback,
- we integrate a range of knowledge, skills, and values such as classroom management,
- we know content and pedagogical content and the difference between,
- we frame and distribute questions,
- we collaborate intentionally.



Sometimes we do all this explicitly and sometimes we do it inclusively. And before you get cross with me, the trick is that you need both because if you are only on the left-hand side then you are a nice person, but people mightn't be learning an awful lot and if you are only on the right then you are robotic, and nobody has a relationship with you. So, you need the two. This is what you do day after day, but I don't hear you say this enough. I don't hear this commentary enough in the conversations, so this is my invite to you today.

### Inclusive Education: Who are we talking about?

- Students with learning disabilities
- Students from socio-economic disadvantage
- Students with learning difficulties
- Students who are exceptionally able and gifted
- Students with transitory needs
- Students with other issues which impact on their (and others) learning...



So, if that is what a teacher might be, it is not all that you do, then who are we talking about? Caroline and Deirbhile referred to different kinds of students and different percentages of students. In your class that you left yesterday or the day before, who are we talking about when we say a student is at risk of not learning? Learning disabilities is pretty easy, socio-economic disadvantage is fine if you are in a DEIS school, but what if you have a child from a DEIS house not in a DEIS school? Students with learning difficulties? Yes. Students who are exceptionally able and gifted? Maybe we don't think so much about them — they are in the *Education Act*<sup>6</sup>, but not the *EPSEN Act*<sup>7</sup> — they don't attract resources, but maybe they need resources. Students with transitory needs — a broken arm, a broken heart. Students, then, with other issues, students who are the social glue at home, the student who comes to school for a break from what is happening at home, who is anxious about going home, not anxious about coming to school. We talk about students with special educational needs; what about the brothers and sisters of children with special educational needs? They are not on any list either, yet they are the ones who might need your help when you meet them next Monday morning. Some of you work in areas with children who are homeless. Third level does a lot of work on social justice and you hear a lot about social justice, but you are living the social justice. I know that you are feeding children. We know that you are clothing children but not everybody knows that. Maybe we should be sharing those stories and sharing more of those stories. I will talk a little bit in a moment of the conversation we had at a Féilte planning committee meeting that I was lucky enough to be on for the past number of years. I know Éamonn, who is down there, has had the fun and joy of that as well. If you look at our society and look at what is working and what is not working. If I say health, education and housing — education is far superior in the delivery of what we understand education to be, and that is because of you and I'm not trying to ingratiate myself (I tried earlier on and I know it doesn't work!). So please, please understand from my perspective, the power of being a teacher is incredibly powerful, and it is not that it will be, but it is, and has been for quite some time.

So, how might we go about achieving learning in our schools and classrooms? My first principle, my perspective, my understanding of inclusion is that school improvement is closely linked to inclusive learning – they are fite fuaite le chéile — they go hand in glove. The minute you try to address the needs of a child you are improving the quality of learning for all children in that class full stop. School improvement, in itself, is a continuum of actions and is linked to professional experimentation. I was always delighted as a cigire to walk into schools and have experimentation going on — now reasonable experimentation. We have progressed medically through experimentation and we have progressed educationally through experimentation as well. I think we need to keep alive that to be a professional is to experiment and explore, and in that medical model keep an eye on the outcomes of your children — that is the bottom line. Is it making a difference for our young people in our schools?

School improvement depends on work-place learning. I sense a change of wind in the air at the moment around the notion of support services. I would be an advocate for some revisitation and recalibration of what we understand by support services — maybe a revisit to the context in which you work rather than taking you out of the context in which you work to find out about how to work in the context you are no longer in. Maybe there is something that we can do together collaboratively in an experimental space that would cause student learning to be enhanced but indeed our own learning also. I know Ciara (Uí Chonduibh) is going to talk about the context of support teaching in her workshop presentation and I think we need to look more closely at such offerings and opportunities.

How do we measure success? Is it standardised tests? They are standardised for a reason — it is called standardised tests. So how do you measure an individual's progress as set against their own

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6 Education Act. (1998). [www.irishstatuebook.ie](http://www.irishstatuebook.ie)

7 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, (2004) <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2004/act/30/enacted/en/html>



standard? How do you capture achievement? Are we being invited by the new model of resource allocation to also look at a new model of capturing success and honouring what you value as a teacher in the way we assess the students and the way we monitor and identify progress? We also need to keep an eye that not everything needs to be collaborative. You have to be careful about collaboration because I am going to give you an example of collaboration that caught us all out which was bankers and builders. That's collaboration! I used to go into schools that had, for the first time, students with an additional language — a lot of them came from Eastern Europe. I came in and said I was a department inspector. They froze. I asked them questions like how old are you? Where are you from? Where is your mam and dad? What do they do, etc.? I might as well have been KGB; you ask them what collaborator means. So, it is not about the collaboration — it is about the outcome of the collaboration. We keep focusing on the student outcomes and maybe our own professional outcomes as well.

The real role of leadership in education... is not and should not be command and control. The real role of leadership is climate control, creating a climate of possibility. (Ken Robinson)

The challenge is well captured by Ken Robinson, it is not command and control, it is climate control. If you step back and look at that in the context of your classroom then we are introducing words like trust, trust in ourselves, trust in our students, trust in our SNA or our teaching partner, as the case may be. But if you push it back to the system, I sense that the system gets this now. I think the Department of Education and Skills is inviting school autonomy, is inviting the notion that contextualised sensitivities have to be recognised and is inviting an understanding through school self-evaluation and *Looking at our Schools*<sup>8</sup> that, yes, there is a framework but within that framework there is an awful lot of individual opportunity at school level and classroom level to create the climate that meets the needs of your students at any particular time.

### Challenge of leading inclusive learning

- We resource in prose we teach in poetry!!!
- Learning needs over diagnosis
- Special classes and ISAs (SNAs)
- School profile as well as individuals (Complex needs)
- Fixed and transitory needs
- Cognitive and socio-emotional

So, as always, we resource in prose, we teach in poetry and let's keep alive the fact that teaching is what it is about. We have challenges over the new model, as Deirbhile rightly pointed out — that shift away from diagnosis towards learning needs, maybe towards shorter understanding of interventions. We have significantly increased our special classes and the number of special classes. I have fought, to an extent successfully, with colleagues and with others, to not call these classes 'units'.

I think we also have to look at our SNAs, which may be reconfigured or renamed anyway if not reconfigured, as inclusion support assistants. What is the role of the SNA? Emer (Ring) and I worked on research in 2011 on what was the role of the SNA and what we actually ended up defining was what was the role of the teacher. That is, again, something for consideration. We do have the issue with complex needs and I really take Caroline's point – well complex needs mean

8 Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate (2016). *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools*. DES: Dublin.



that each need is complex, and which one do you want to prioritise? I think that is a very valid point. School profile needs to continue to be flexible. I was involved in the new resource model allocation, in the conversations — the bit you agree with — I was involved with! What I will say to you is that there is a genuine willingness within the Department (of Education and Skills) to get this right — not to get you. I think there is, sincerely, an effort to get it right. It does not mean they will always get it right, but it is there. I think the spirit and philosophy behind it is sound, but I agree the practicalities may not always play out as we would wish. That is why it is important that the INTO and yourselves continue to meet and contribute to that conversation because all policy stops at the classroom door. When that classroom door clicks shut, you are in charge. That is the piece that we need to know more about if we are going to progress as a society — never mind in the context of education.

We have fixed and transitory needs, we have touched on those. You have the cognitive and socio-emotional. The socio-emotional is a lot harder to assess but I think we need to continue to find ways to do so and we need to avoid fragmentation. Fragmentation that may come from too much withdrawal from class, fragmentation that might come from too many teachers for an individual student and you not having enough time for having conversations. Fragmentations from social services coming in, not coming in, talking to you, not talking to you and so on and so it goes. And yes, the IEP needs to be a working document. The way we teach IEPs in Thurles, by the way, is I say, 'you are going on a holiday and when you come back, I am going to ask you about the plan'. So, let's focus on the outcome of the plan, not the plan itself. I think we need to look at the time being spent on, can I say 'weighing the pig instead of feeding it', the notion of paperwork.

There are eight possibilities.

### 8 possibilities

1. Deeper primary to post-primary transitioning
2. Effective Team teaching
3. Recalibration of access to professional learning
4. Maximising and revisiting roles of ITEs and NQTs
5. Teaching and learning roles for middle leadership
6. Use SSE process and LAOS to account for hours but also account for impact – ownership of outcomes
7. IEPs for teachers? – Professional Learning Plans
8. Have a growth mind set for all in school

#### **1. Deeper primary to post-primary transitioning**

I suggest a deeper primary to post-primary transitioning. There is a lovely article in *Education Matters* by Kathryn Corbett<sup>9</sup> who talks about what I had been talking about, but I never got to say it as eloquently as she did in that article. Can we also talk about how teachers teach and not just about what students have when they cross the threshold from primary to post-primary? Can we open up our classrooms between primary and post-primary? Can we share what we do as teachers as opposed to the individual needs and strengths of our students?

#### **2. Effective team teaching**

I think we are also in a position to look more closely at team teaching. The department and others use the phrase team teaching instead of co-teaching for one very important reason — team includes students. It is not co-piloting, it's co-teaching. I think the distinction between that co- and

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9 [https://issuu.com/educationmattersie/docs/irelands\\_yearbook\\_of\\_education\\_2018\\_3d4de465beaa2a/28](https://issuu.com/educationmattersie/docs/irelands_yearbook_of_education_2018_3d4de465beaa2a/28)



team teaching is important. We are not co-piloting a class. Students learn in a social environment and that environment means their contribution to others' learning and their own contribution to that learning. I think I know a lot more about post-primary than primary — we are in a position in post-primary that we got over fear, trepidation, threat of another teacher in the classroom to the point where we are now asking, 'are we really making the best use of each other in the classroom?' And I think that might be the conversation, so I really welcome Ciara's workshop on that theme, and I hope to get to that one myself.

### ***3. The recalibration of access to professional learning***

That is my invitation to you and the INTO to consider. We would prefer maybe some opportunities at school — if it makes sense to you — at school base to engage in practices that would promote professional learning, that would line up with the real meaning of Cosán, which is you taking ownership and control of your own professional learning as opposed to being told by curricular developments that this is what you should be doing in your class.

### ***4. Maximising and revisiting roles of ITEs and NQTs***

Here is a very selfish angle, a myopic view but we cannot do initial teacher education without you, it is as simple as that. The quality of our school placement determines the quality of our programme. So, we in initial teacher education would really value a revisit of the roles and responsibilities.

### ***5. Teaching and learning roles for middle leadership***

I am suggesting there might even be something in the middle leadership space around how we start maybe revisiting initial teacher education now that we have Droichead and we have Cosán. We have an increased understanding of what it means to be a teacher and a sequenced understanding of what it means to be a teacher. I would welcome opportunities and conversations with anybody who is interested in looking at that space. Middle leadership mightn't necessarily mean a post, but it might mean some nod towards the work you would be doing with regards to initial teacher education and NQTs. What I am saying is possibilities going into the future — that as you continue your conversations around those moratoriums that we can begin to include initial teacher education in that conversation. My apologies if I did not make that point clear.

### ***6. Use SSE process and Looking at our Schools to account for hours but also account for impact — ownership of outcomes***

The ownership of outcomes, I think, is an important point that we look at and take advantage of *Looking at our Schools* and school self-evaluation in that context.

### ***7. IEPs for teachers***

The IEPs for teachers is probably a little bit cheeky of me, but basically I am saying that we need to look at the notion of a planning programme for ourselves as teachers where we have a professional learning class that we can work on and work together with.

### ***8. Have a growth mindset for all in school***

We have a growth mindset for all in the school, and that includes people in the staffroom as well as in the classroom.

So, you can guess I am coming to the end. For what it is worth, I don't think we should be talking about special education and not special education. I think it is as ridiculous as talking about



Cork and not Cork. I prefer to use a line from Hargreaves and Braun, 2012<sup>10</sup> 'what is essential for some might be good for all'.

So, let's talk up the profession. Go and see what you are doing well. Go and have a chat with your colleagues and maybe you would like to apply to Féilte where you can share your teaching, learning and assessment stories.

Two things I will ask you to remember.



Teachers are professionals. You are professionals. Teachers need information about practices that you use to make decisions; you do not need to be told what to do (quote from Thomas Good, 2017).

Maybe, in my last effort to ingratiate myself into the world of primary teachers, you are what is special in education and don't forget it!

Do come and visit and I am hanging around. I would be happy to meet people and have conversations with you and be told all the things I did wrong in my presentation. Remember I am post-primary and not primary!

Before we finish, and with the indulgence of the organisation, I did ask at very short notice if Mr Daly be willing to join us today and he is sitting down there, and I would like you to give him a round of applause please. I would not be here if it were not for him so all complaints to Mr Daly please!

Thank you. Slán libh.

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<sup>10</sup> Hargreaves, A. & Braun, H. (2012). Leading for all: Final report of the review of the development of essential for some, good for all: Toronto, Ontario: Council of Directors of Education



## **Inclusion – a continuum of support: a parent’s perspective**

*Katherine O’Leary, Our Lady of Good Counsel School, Ballincollig, and Cope Foundation*

I know your heads are full of policies and full of everything that you could possibly know about teaching and that scares me.

I have been speaking to different teachers throughout the day; there is a huge sense of frustration here today and there is a constant demand for extra resources, but I do not have to tell you that! We are drowning in policy and regulation but unfortunately it is necessary, and we must accept it, and we do. But the fact that you are here means that you really do care about people who have extra needs. 'Inclusion — a Continuum' is the theme of this conference and the answer to that is it must be — but maybe the statement from the conference could be a continuum of support is necessary for inclusion to be effective. So yes, we keep on the fight for the supports.

I am going to tell you about myself. I am married to Tim and we have four children. I’m a homemaker. We are dairy farmers. I’m a home economics teacher in Our Lady of Good Counsel special school. I’m a columnist with the Irish Farmers’ Journal. I’m on the board of directors of COPE Foundation. Cope Foundation is very close to this location and we support 2,500 people with intellectual disability. I have been on lots of boards of management, and chairperson of Informing Families in the Cork region. I am involved in training health professionals with Alison Harnett of the Federation of Voluntary Bodies to assist doctors and nurses with breaking difficult news to parents. I have been a member of the steering committee of the HSE for Transforming Lives. I don’t tell you all this for you to say 'Katherine O’Leary — she is a brilliant woman', it is just to say life goes on outside of whatever happens to you, whether it is illness or disability or whatever. Life can continue, and you can stay involved.

### ***Hand on heart***

For a moment, I would like you to put your hand on your heart and close your eyes. Close them tight and while you have your eyes closed, I want you to think of a little baby in your arms. You are holding that baby tight; you can feel the lovely warmth and the little cuddle. You can smell that baby. Is it your son or daughter? Is it a niece or nephew or small brother or sister? Just get yourself back into the zone of holding a baby. And then think of somebody saying to you, 'well this little baby is never going to walk or is never going to talk or is not going to amount to much'. Try and imagine what that feeling is like when the news is delivered to a parent. Now, having that feeling means you have empathy, and it means that you can understand and while you have that empathy and that care, you will teach to the best of your ability. You will communicate to the best of your ability. You do not need policies and all the stuff that we have, you just need that heart inside of you. So, open your eyes and we will continue, but hold onto that.

### ***Mystory***

I am going to take you on a whistle-stop tour of my earlier life. Tim and I got married in 1982. We are dairy farmers. We were really happy and everything was going well. In 1985, we were expecting our first baby. Julie was born when I was only 29 weeks pregnant. I went into sudden labour and as a result Julie has cerebral palsy. This news was broken to us when she was about 18 months, and you know, it is quite devastating when news like that is broken to you. We were young and we hadn’t a clue really. All we knew was that we were going to be the best parents that we could be and we were going to make her walk. I am sure you have met parents like that who are going to make the thing happen when everybody knows it might not happen. Three years later, I am pregnant again. Diarmuid is born, full term, beautiful baby, but alas he has Down's Syndrome and



an awful lot of medical conditions — the worst of which was that he had no bladder.

So there followed years of surgery and lots of times when we were in Crumlin Hospital. Yet, we were extremely happy. I think this is really important to grasp. Families can be really happy in their own situation. You may look from the outside and consider it an awful situation, but it never is. So, Diarmuid was born in 1988 and life was very tough as you can imagine in those first few months as it is difficult to get your head around things. I remember one day the parish priest coming to see us. He came to see me and basically stood at the door and said to me, “Oh God, I am terribly sorry to hear about the two children and it is an awful thing that has happened to you”. I found myself saying it is not that bad, come in and see. And his response was “oh no, I can’t come in and look at him”, but I said, “come in and see him. He is a beautiful baby”, and it was therapy for me to be saying this type of thing. When he left, I have no idea whether I gave him tea or what happened, but when he left my little daughter, who was on a rollator (Julie), looked up to me and said “Mammy, why does everybody hate my little brother?”. I can tell you that was the day that Katherine O’Leary woke up and realised what I was doing to my little daughter with all the crying and carrying on that we had, because everybody thought it was a terrible situation and everybody said so. I think that was the turning point. You have to accept; parents have to accept what has happened and then move on. It is like a bereavement. I remember that day, tears were rolling down my face and I was looking out the window and the sun was shining, and I thought this cannot be the way it is going to be. So, I changed my attitude into a positive outlook, and I have to say that my husband was always positive and always great.

Some months later; I am sitting on the side of the bed and I am not feeling very well, and Tim asks me, “What’s up with you?” “Is there something wrong with you?” and I said, “I think I might be pregnant”. Now, you know the situation and guess what he said — I know there are some people who heard me here already, so you will forgive me — he says, “How could you be pregnant?” So, all the women will appreciate that and while you know it was funny, it was an absolute nightmare. How could I be pregnant? My normal cycle had not returned. I was back into the doctor for my check-up and I am trying to tell him. The doctor is saying “this is terrible, you have two children with disabilities, you are so young and how are you going to cope etc. and eventually he asks me, “How are you?”, and I said, “I think I could be pregnant doctor”. “Oh”, he said; “get up on that bed”, and anyway nine months later I deliver Philip O’Leary and it was the best thing that ever happened to us. I suppose the point I want to get across here (and just while I’m at it, 17 months later Colm O’Leary arrived), but the point I’m trying to get across here is that we tend to judge families. We tend to ask; what are they doing having more children? Or was she not this or that? But, when you are in a situation it is very difficult to plan and you don’t know what’s going to happen. Life goes on and life happens. There is love there and it is worth living. If we had done what doctors had advised and did not have more children we would be in a very different place today. We would have been a family that was completely wrapped up in issues about disability rather than the wonderful vibrant family that we are. So, instead we have a beautiful family of Julie, Diarmuid, Philip and Colm. According to doctors; Diarmuid wasn’t going to live to 24 hours, then to 48, wasn’t going to live for a year and so on went his life for a very long time. He went through end-stage renal failure, well now he has 17% renal function, and he is a great guy.

### ***Back to policy***

Children with disabilities have a right to be heard; a right to be listened to; a right to be asked; a right to dignity; a right to privacy and confidentiality; a right to access health services and a right to an education. And this is where we, who are teachers, come in. We know that government policy is inclusion.



### *Let's think about inclusion*

Inclusion — just think about not being included. It means that you are excluded. Imagine that today when you came into the conference that nobody looked at you, nobody spoke to you and that nobody greeted you. Imagine that you were completely excluded, and you were on your own the whole day. Just imagine how that feels, the emotional reaction, you're self-conscious, you're fearful — all of those things. Physically you might be sweating, shivery, feeling unsteady and all of that. Then if you are a child with an intellectual disability or an adult with an intellectual disability, imagine how that must feel, how that exclusion must feel. And of course, why wouldn't you "fight or flight" in that situation? We must try and imagine how our students feel to understand and to teach them.

I was always a great admirer of Gordon Porter, the Canadian expert in inclusion and I am sure many of you have read him and know of him. His definition of inclusive education was that it is education where students with special needs are educated in local schools, in age-appropriate regular classroom settings with non-disabled peers, with the necessary supports to enable participation with their peers while also meeting their individual needs. I know that is the absolute ideal, but wouldn't it be lovely if it could happen? I have seen it working in Austria, but the thing is, we have all sorts of models here and you know about them and they all work. The two words that are most important in that are the 'necessary supports' to make things work for students.

Teaching pupils with special needs is not easy, there is no time that it is easy, but it is exciting, challenging and hugely rewarding. No matter what the level of disability a pupil has, it does not define what that pupil will achieve, you do not know.

The challenges that face parents of children with special needs every day are many.

The decision will often be determined by the logistics of where the family live, whether you are close to the school or whatever. We knew Julie needed to learn and we knew she would be going to mainstream, and she needed access. At that time, Tim went down to the school, he put up bars in the toilets for her and so on. So, Julie is 34 today and she will not like me saying that either, but we have come so far in that time that imagine what the next 30 years will bring. We are improving all the time. Sometimes when you are in your schools it is hard for you to actually realise that. Anyway, we needed to be lobbyists as well which was quite difficult and that is still the same case today — parents have to be lobbying for supports.

### *Diarmuid's education*

In Diarmuid's case, he needed education, stimulation, social training, and a safe environment so we sent him to a special school. There was a lack of interaction with the community as a result, a lack of interaction with other families because most students come to school by taxi to special schools. There was a lack of services, and the fight was difficult every step of the way, but he had a brilliant education and it still stands to him today. Diarmuid now works on the farm, he can milk a 100 or more cows. He contributes to family life and he cultivates a positive attitude all of the time. I think that is the essence of our family, it has always been positive. He has represented Ireland in the Special Olympics. He is a college graduate (he went to UCC), and he lives a fulfilling life. He wants to be an actor in Hollywood. Not anywhere else, just Hollywood!





### ***Words cannot be taken back!***

Some of you will know what these are (photograph on page 30) — they are flour shakers. I am a home economics teacher and I suppose it is just to hammer home the point about communication — how important our communication is with our students and with families. One particular day we had a student, it is quite a while back, and I will call him John. He loved to do things for me in the Home Economics room — he was non-verbal and he was on the Autistic spectrum, and he came in. I was washing these flour shakers and he indicated that he wanted to wash them. Of course, I let him wash them and we left them to dry. The following day I had a class, and he came in and saw them, they were dry. He indicated that he wanted to fill them for me, and I said “go ahead”, and then while I was teaching my other students, out of the corner of my eye I saw John with the flour shaker under the water tap and he had the water running on it and you can imagine the flour, water and the whole mess. So, I screamed “John, what are you doing?”, and I will never forget the pain on that chap’s face that I witnessed that day, because he was doing his level best to please me, and he was doing what he thought best. Some flour had got on the top of the shaker and what he wanted to do was to wash it off so it would be perfect for me. You learn lessons as you go, that once the words are out of your mouth you can never take them back. Remember that with students and with families.

### ***Communication***

A good teacher understands sensitive communication — please be mindful of jargon. I remember the first day that I heard of the multidisciplinary team — MDT. I was kind of afraid to ask and then I did, I said, “what is MDT”? And they said “you know, the SLT (speech and language therapist), the OT (occupational therapist), the social worker”. I heard “social worker” and I wanted to know why did I need a social worker? So, you have to be really careful. We take for granted all the jargon we use (think about writing down all the jargon you use in a day), and we use it with parents and forget that they are not in that zone. Good teachers will develop good strategies. I remember my mum — my mum was a national school teacher for years and years back in the 50s and 60s — and how she developed strategies. Inclusion was complete at that time as there was nowhere else for people in the parish to go, so you went to your local school. She had pupils with special needs in her class and I can remember her trying to develop strategies at home for them. Sometimes, we get totally bogged down on the amount of support that we actually need, when we possibly have it within us to support the pupil. I will give you an example. I consider myself a good teacher and we all should consider ourselves good teachers. One of the most difficult things for me to teach in the home economics kitchen is measurement. We use cup measures and I just use a full cup, a half cup and a quarter cup and they are colour coded as well. We have a red one, a green one and a yellow one. So, I had two levels of teaching, of differentiating really, for the students, but they still were not getting it. Then one day the idea struck me to have a daddy bear cup, a mammy bear cup, and a baby bear cup with the appropriate colours — then they all get it, and they move on. So, in a class we have three systems going and I can give a hint, it’s a daddy bear cup or it’s a red cup or it’s a full cup, and I think we can all develop our little strategies if we are really thinking about the student. So, individual teachers can drive success stories. Never be afraid to hope and never remove hope. An exceptional teacher preserves the dignity of each individual student.

### ***Partnership with families***

Understand the partnership with families. With special schools and so on, it is difficult because you do not meet the families that much, but it is important to understand that they are in partnership and they will inform you better about a child with special needs than any book will. There can be an exhausting strain on a family’s emotions, you do not know if both partners are on the same page and there can be financial strain. So, if you are telling somebody to get a grip for the pen, or



get a special chair, or a certain book and so on, and you are saying to other teachers in the staff room, "My God, wouldn't you think she would go out and buy the pencil?" or "she didn't even get the grip / book I asked her to get", well maybe she hasn't got the money. Maybe she just cannot do it, or maybe she cannot find the time to get there. Think outside the box about these things. Some parents will never accept that their child has a disability. This is not your fault and you cannot fix this. Some people are just not able to get their heads around it and they will shout off at you, but you just have to be patient. It is difficult, but you just have to understand. Never remove hope. If you are going to talk to parents, maybe to break difficult news such as "I think your child is on the Autistic spectrum", or whatever, on the Informing Families website [www.informingfamilies.ie](http://www.informingfamilies.ie) you will find a safe-cross code which lays out the things that you can do when having to break difficult news. I think it is a very good template and you can download it from the website and put it up in the staffroom. Keep it out of view from parents and use it.

### ***Teach in a way that students will learn***

One of the attributes of a good teacher is the ability to teach in a way that students will learn. Inclusion is facilitated by a good individual education plan — I am a huge believer in the IEP. I believe in empathy and understanding of the individual needs of the pupil, and the ability to see the child first and not the disability. Students come into my class and they say to me, "you know Mark in class so-and-so, what disability has he?". And I don't know. I love that because I don't have to go to any file or anything, I just know Mark, and I know what he needs. We have to get beyond the label and when you have got beyond the label and when you can think of your students in your particular class without their label, that's when you are really there with inclusion. The ability to recognise achievement is huge and we have always done this in the O'Leary household — we celebrate everything, we probably celebrate a bit too much, but I think it is necessary.

### ***Making a difference***

Inclusion is a continuum and progress in the area has been massive, but we have to ask ourselves where are we headed? Who is tracking and planning what special education will look like in 10 years? I try to be as positive as I can be, but the more we force (and I use that guardedly), but the more we force children into mainstream, the more we ghettoise the children with serious and profound behavioural difficulties and behavioural needs. So, will our pure idea of inclusion lead to more vulnerable students being left out and being without role models? I think that is something that we must all keep to the forefront of our mind. Where exactly are we going? Where is the end game? Maybe we are at it, maybe we don't need to go much further, except put in place more appropriate supports. Please believe that you can make a difference.

### ***Be a team player***

It is essential to be a team player and do remember that parents come from a position of unconditional love. Julie's mantra is always that "individuals can make a difference" and Diarmuid's is "I am the best". He is always the best and he always thinks everyone else is the best. So, believe that you can make a difference and that you can be the best. I think we all agree that we need a continuum of support for inclusion.

So, in a nutshell, you are in partnership and try and remember where the parent is coming from. You are all doing a brilliant job and we are getting places. When you are in trouble, talk to a colleague and remember that you have that heart in there to call back on.







# Report from Discussion Groups

## *Introduction*

Delegates to the conference were allocated to discussion groups to reflect on and discuss current issues in special education. Each one of the six discussion groups was given a list of questions to consider. Members of the Special Education Working Group, along with representatives from the Education Committee, Equality Committee and Principals' and Deputy Principals' Committee acted as facilitators and rapporteurs. The collated responses of the participants are outlined thematically below.

## *Transitions*

Teachers agreed that transitions between schools (mainstream to special school, special school setting to mainstream school, children with SEN to secondary school, preschool to primary school) are often haphazard and lack consistency from school to school. There is no standardised procedure for the transfer of information and teachers in the new school often lack the necessary information due to the inconclusive or incomplete nature of information transferred. Delegates concurred that time needs to be allocated for collaboration and consultation with other teachers from the schools involved, with the greatest benefit to be found by including external professionals also. It was felt that NEPS do not have adequate resources to deal with transition properly and many teachers present were not happy with the current level of service being provided by NEPS and their local SENOs.

When children move from one school to another, it was deemed highly ineffective that resources did not automatically follow the child. Schools are allowed a certain number of assessments depending on size but all delegates expressed the opinion that there were never enough assessments.

When discussing transfer from a special school setting to a mainstream setting, it was noted that some mainstream schools are not always accepting of children with special needs and in the case of some children for whom a return to mainstream is recommended, the transition does not occur. Some delegates maintained that this can be attributed to parents who may not be in favour of the move (despite the recommendation), and it was suggested that convenience issues for the parents involved are also factors in decisions.

Delegates who work in the early years complained of the lack of support from the Department of Education and Skills. Pre-schools have no access to resource hours and children transferring into primary school are not assessed until it is too late, which in turn can compromise the school's ability to cope. There was consensus that the NCCA, DES and the Early Years Policy Unit should all have increased inputs into transition from preschool to Junior Infants.

With regard to the positive aspects of transitions, one group noted that the transition from language classes to mainstream classes normally worked very smoothly and successfully and that the transition of children with SEN from primary to secondary school has improved over the last number of years with the advent of better communication and the new Education Passport scheme. DEIS schools are advantaged by virtue of their access to HSCL teachers who can dedicate a block of time to facilitate successful transitions. It was also noted that dual enrolment was a very successful pilot scheme which appears to operate no longer.

Overall, teachers agreed that a more formalised approach to the transitioning of pupils between schools would be of benefit to the children, teachers and parents involved.

## *Learning support and resource teaching*

Delegates in attendance had a variety of experiences and backgrounds. Many models of intervention shared by delegates included: First Steps, Power Hour, Team Teaching, Literacy Lift-



Off, in-class support/station teaching and withdrawal of pupils from their classes.

It was generally felt that children with speech and language difficulties were best supported in small groups, outside of the classroom. Delegates who had been involved in team teaching found it very effective as it entailed the sharing of good practice. The principal of a small school in a multi-class setting said that her school used withdrawal of single class groups which was found to be effective.

Some challenges that were noted during the discussion included staffing in relation to the general allocation model, planning time for in-class/team teaching initiatives and the lack of materials and resources to effectively address difficulties children were experiencing and/or lack of access to resources which were recommended in professional reports. In relation to speech and language therapy and occupational therapy reports, some teachers felt that they were not qualified to carry out some of the recommendations. These recommendations also proved difficult to fulfil due to time constraints.

### *Special class model*

Teachers who were in schools that had set up a special class acknowledged that the setting up of such classes was the hardest part due to the lack of support and the lack of a 'template' for their set up. Training and professional development for new teachers in special classes is often not provided and while knowledge gained through experience is valuable, it is not enough. There was a consensus that prior training and professional development would assist teachers who are embarking on teaching a special class. The lack of training and professional development can also be a barrier in attracting other teachers to undertake the role in an already established class. It was noted that some teachers do not want to be assigned to the special class and some do not want to move out of this setting. It was generally felt that a rotation of teachers in special class settings is helpful and healthy.

It was noted in all groups where this topic was discussed that children with SEN sometimes have to travel long distances to avail of a place in a special class. Travel can have a negative impact on their quality of life and also on their socialisation in their local community if they are being educated elsewhere. It was acknowledged that there is more decentralisation of special classes, especially special classes for autistic children.

The inclusion of children from special classes in mainstream classes occurs in varying forms and on the whole, it was felt that this integration is of benefit to the children. However, it was noted that children who have received the majority of their education in the mainstream setting can lack independence. There is so much for them to learn, understand and adapt to in the mainstream class. Another issue of concern was the feeling that if there was too much integration, the child may lose their access to SNA support. A management body representative in one group acknowledged that the provision for special classes in primary schools was good in comparison to the same provision in secondary schools, raising the question: where can the students with these needs go when they complete their primary education? There was no continuation.

It was noted that in some European countries there is a preferential weighting system in terms of class size if there are children enrolled in that class with a special need, i.e. the pupil teacher ratio is reduced in line with the number of children with SEN in that class.

### *Therapeutic services*

There was consensus that the DES should provide a consolidated service for the provision of therapeutic services so that schools do not have to 'harass' the HSE and other bodies for services such as speech and language therapy, psychological intervention and occupational therapy. One teacher shared her experience of a speech and language therapist who visits her school for three days a week, working with 70 children in 15 hours. It is a more time efficient and collaborative approach to meet the needs of children with specific requirements. There are significant



challenges regarding parents not bringing their children to appointments. The view was expressed that the HSE was not accountable to schools, therefore services such as speech and language therapy should be provided by the DES.

Earlier intervention is key to addressing issues and it had been found by many teachers that diagnosis was often too late for the children in question. There are also issues surrounding the allocation of resources to children who are two standard deviations or more below the mean. It was felt that a lot more could be done for the children who are borderline if time and resources were allocated.

### ***Inclusion support service (ISS)***

As part of the proposed new model for allocating additional teaching resources to schools to support children with special educational needs, the concept of an inclusion support service has been proposed. The following contributions were noted from the discussion groups that discussed this topic.

There is a necessity for the smooth linking of therapeutic services and to streamlining the current system with the possibility of having one contact number that would link directly with all the applicable services.

Teachers found data collection and access was somewhat haphazard. When implementing a service like the ISS, it could prove an ideal opportunity to provide a central point for data collection. At present, teachers are often required to repeat the same information to every professional involved and it has been found that repeat assessments have been carried out because of lack of collaboration and the non-existence of shared data. Loss of information when students transition between schools has been a problem experienced by schools to date and leads back to the call for a centralised bank of data. However, this call does raise issues regarding data protection and responsibility for data collection.

In relation to the services that will be integrated into the ISS, teachers questioned whether the SENO's role would disappear with the allocation of teachers rather than hours. It was noted that professional development for teachers in line with best practice needs to be provided and the role of the parent should be highlighted when providing services for children with SEN. There were concerns expressed regarding the possible dilution of services once they are amalgamated under the ISS. It was noted that the DES should trust teachers' own experiences and interactions with the children involved when putting a plan of support in place.

### ***Professional development for teachers both in mainstream and special schools***

The general consensus from delegates who discussed this topic was that the professional development that is currently available for teachers is rather haphazard at best. It depends on local provision and, in many cases, on the diligence of those organising courses in local education centres. In many cases, teachers who have upskilled in their own time and at their own expense are moved out of learning support or resource positions. In other cases, teachers who would prefer to remain in the mainstream setting are reassigned into the area of special education. Teachers expressed concern about the loneliness of the shared learning support or resource teaching post and the lack of a network or support system for those in shared teaching positions.

A number of teachers spoke very positively about the experience of using the SESS service (Special Education Support Service), commenting that it is a very worthwhile experience which can include all the partners involved in the education of the pupil with SEN: the parent, the class teacher, the LS/resource teacher, and the SNA. The advice and help they provide is very practical and down to earth. Some schools have used their Croke Park hours to facilitate this experience.

It was also noted that there is valuable training and professional development available from the Middletown Centre for Autism which is a joint cross-border initiative, though not all delegates were familiar with this facility.



Geographical location of schools can also have a negative effect on the accessibility of professional development and training opportunities.

A number of teachers spoke of the unfairness of not being able to access training and professional development for programmes such as Maths Recovery, Reading Recovery and First Steps for which priority was given to DEIS schools, despite the major positive impact that these programmes can have in all schools.

Reference was also made to the work prescribed for SEN children by physiotherapists, speech therapists and occupational therapists which learning support/resource teachers are expected to implement. The view was expressed strongly that teachers are education professionals and that teachers are not qualified in the areas of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy or psychology.

### ***Communication with parents***

Teachers identified a number of challenges regarding communication with parents. Lack of acceptance by parents of the need for learning support was identified by teachers as a significant challenge. Teachers need professional development and training to help them communicate with parents about their child's special needs. Some delegates felt that appropriate training should be provided to whole-school staffs, and that teachers should be rotated into teaching roles in the SEN area. Delegates were of the opinion that the DES should provide examples of best practice for teachers especially regarding communicating with parents who themselves had special needs. There was general agreement that the lack of time to meet with parents, fellow teachers and other professionals was a major challenge for teachers. It was noted in one discussion group that in special classes/special schools a communication diary is frequently used, which passes daily from home to school and has been found to be an excellent aid to the communication process. There were also challenges for parents. The need for coordinated services to support parents with children with SEN was highlighted by many delegates. The use of complicated terminology in reports from NEPS and other services was seen as a major challenge for many parents. Many teachers felt that it fell to them to decode and simplify reports for these parents. HSCL teachers can greatly aid the communication process with parents by explaining the terminology of assessment in the less threatening environment of the pupil's home. One delegate was critical of the lack of inclusion of EAL children as many newcomer families had cultural differences which led to the rejection by them of the idea that their children had ASD. Teachers need support to help overcome this barrier and ensure children with EAL get the help they need.



## **Appendix: List of Workshops**

### **1. *Top Tips to Support Teachers Working with Pupils who have SEN Speech and Language Needs***

*Geraldine Moran*

This workshop provided a range of helpful tips and strategies that could be easily used in the classroom to support the child with SEN and ID to improve their language and communication skills. Recommendations were made on how a teacher can establish a baseline of functioning allowing for the easy identification of appropriate IEP goals. Tools and programmes that could be used or adapted to achieve these goals were identified and some of the programmes were demonstrated through the use of videos as well as samples of favourite materials used by teachers. They included visuals, apps and other resources such as Downsed materials. The learning tools could benefit pupils who have Down Syndrome, Autism etc.

### **2. *A Best Practice and Ethical Approach to Restrictive Practices in Special Schools***

*Mark Quinn*

This workshop provided participants with a best practice and ethically-based framework, to increase awareness of restrictive practices and facilitate effective clinical decision-making in relation to such practices. Participants were encouraged to reflect on issues relevant to their professional practice and wider organisational issues within their schools.

### **3. *Maths Recovery: Overview and Application***

*Dan O'Sullivan and Ciara Fahy*

This workshop offered participants an outline of the Maths Recovery programme and looked at how key features of the programme could be used to support inclusion in the teaching of numbers in mainstream primary schools.

### **4. *Student Support Planning within NEPS Continuum of Support Model***

*Geraldine O'Loughlin*

This workshop provided guidance in the context of the revised model for allocating special education teaching resources. It outlined information that was contained in student support plans and described the six-step process of identifying pupils' needs, monitoring, reviewing and reporting progress. It provided information on setting targets for students with special educational needs and shared information about planning, roles and responsibilities.

### **5. *Co-teaching and SEN: Developing Whole-School Professional Relationships and Learning***

*Ciara Uí Chonduibh*

This workshop explored and examined models of co-teaching. It also focussed on how co-teaching, as a central method for in-class support teaching, can benefit and develop professional relationships while also creating a platform for continuous professional development. It also explored practical ways to foster and utilise co-teaching in class to benefit both the student and teacher learning.

### **6. *Effective Teaching Strategies for Students with ASD***

*Margaret Egan and Christina O'Keefe*

In order to engage in effective teaching to promote successful learning, intervention must be rooted in a knowledge and understanding of the nature and educational implications of ASD for all teaching and learning. Therefore, while this session reminds us that we are all individuals with similar and unique strengths and learning needs, it provides a theoretical understanding



of students with ASD, which underpins the key, evidence-based strategies and pedagogical approaches that are then presented for practical application in schools and classrooms. These approaches were nominated as being effective by experienced teachers, in Irish mainstream/ special schools and ASD classes, participants in a national study for the NCSE: *An Evaluation of Provision for Students with ASD*, conducted by Daly, Ring and colleagues (2016). The approaches are detailed further in a recent publication entitled *Autism from the Inside Out*.



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