

Setting Standards for Teacher Education in Special Educational Needs in Ireland

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the continuing enhancement of professional development courses for teachers in the area of special educational needs in Ireland. It is set in the context of the changing discourse on disability and evolving legislation and policy. The central focus is on the in-career provision for specialist teachers working in the area special needs in second level mainstream schools in Ireland.

Revision of construct of disability

During the last century the concepts of disability and special education have been radically reviewed. Initially, a medical model of disability prevailed. This viewed disability as a deficit within the individual, highlighting the person’s inability to function within the established structures and systems of society. In the education system this led to the establishment of segregated special schools and classes and a focus on strategies of remediation – identifying an individual’s ‘problems’ and developing specialised programmes to enable the person to adapt to society.

A re-visioning of the concept of disability resulted in an adoption of the social model of disability. Using this perspective the problem the construct of disability was seen to be construed by society’s inflexibility in accommodating the differing needs of individuals – recognition that humankind consists of a diversity of individuals, all with unique characteristics. This concept of a social model of disability is also underpinned by the human rights movement which demands equal rights and access to opportunities for all people irrespective of differences such as race, gender, disability and class. The inclusion movement in education, rooted in this rights discourse on disability, gave rise to an inclusive approach to education wherein students with disabilities are educated alongside their peers, within the

local community. In this social model of disability mainstream schools and are required to adapt to accommodate a diverse group of students with a variety of needs.

Policy changes

Originating in USA, the rhetoric of inclusion is increasingly influential in determining provision for students with disabilities. Within the European Union and internationally, legislation and policy promotes increased participation in mainstream education for children with special needs (Key Principles for Special Needs Education 2003, EU Resolution of the Council of Ministers 1990, UN Standard Rules of Equalisation of Opportunity for persons with Disability 1993, Salamanca Statement UNESCO 1994 Equally, recent changes in legislation in Ireland [(Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs 2004; Equal Status Act 2000, Education (Welfare) Act 2002, Education Act 1998) and the Department of Education and Science policy changes with regard to special educational needs in Ireland (Department of Education and Science circulars 20-90 to Sp Ed 02-05), supports a move towards inclusive education for children with special educational needs.

Teacher Education

To date a major focus among supporters of the inclusive movement in education has been lobbying for changes in policy to legislate for inclusion, promoting organizational changes at regional and school level enable inclusion and research on appropriate curricular content and strategies to accommodate students with SEN in mainstream schools. There is also much research on the outcomes of inclusive education for students

with special educational needs. These outcomes are predicated on the expertise and proficiency of the students' teachers. The importance of a highly skilled teaching profession is noted by the EU commission and has resulted in the draft formulation of ten common European principles for teacher competences and qualifications. The Joint Interim Report by the Education Council and the European Commission on progress towards *Education and Training 2010* laid the foundation for the origin of these standards and competencies of all teachers. Teachers skills and abilities are developed through apposite teacher preparation programmes. It is the quality and strength of these programmes that ultimately determines the reality of classroom practice. The importance of high quality teacher education programmes to ensure optimum quality learning experiences for students with special needs cannot be overstated. The content, methodologies and assessment of teacher education programmes must be rigorously evaluated and continually improved.

Thus, research on the preparation of SEN teachers is of paramount importance in ensuring that students have access to the best possible education for their needs. However, such research has been sporadic. If we are to enhance the quality of learning for students with special needs, we must continuously upgrade the quality of teacher education through systematic research.

Teacher education programmes in SEN generally encompass knowledge and skills relating to special educational needs, relevant experience in working with students and assessment of both those areas. They also often include a broad range of the core foundation disciplines as part of teacher preparation. The rationale being that without an adequate philosophical, psychological, and sociological base there is a danger that teachers' school practices only pay lip service to the concept of inclusion. Tetler (2005) found that special educational needs teachers realized the necessity of challenging the assumptions underlying their educational practices. While they concurred that confronting their attitudes and beliefs to special needs was uncomfortable, the resultant reformulations of their personal construct of disability and their own roles as teachers made the process worthwhile.

It is interesting to speculate on the origin of the content, delivery and assessment aspects of a professional development programme in special educational needs and the guiding principles underlying the selection of the various elements. How, and by whom, are these components, which are instrumental in determining the outcomes and efficacy of the course, determined? Do they vary from institution to institution? How similar or dissimilar are such teacher education programmes in Ireland?

Education for Students with SEN in Ireland

Ireland has only recently adopted an inclusive approach to the education of children with special needs. At primary level their right to be educated alongside their peers has met with more success than at second level where the exam oriented syllabus has militated against ease of inclusion.

Obtaining statistics for precise numbers of students with special needs attending mainstream second level schools in Ireland is difficult due to the difficulty in interpreting the term special educational need. At a European level, it would be virtually impossible to determine the number of students with special needs attending mainstream schools given the range of interpretations and the differing criteria used by various countries. In Ireland, the definition of a special educational need is complicated by the description used in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) '... *an*

enduring physical, sensory mental health or learning disability or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition...' Further complexities arise in Ireland when considering whether to include only those students formally assessed as having a special educational need or add in students who are awaiting assessment or indeed only to include those who have been allocated resources. One indication of the numbers of students with special needs attending mainstream second level schools is the number of applications to the DES for additional resources to support students. This figure increased from 3,000 applications in 2001 to 12,500 applications in 2003 (ILSA 2004). The increased number of students with special needs in mainstream education has outstripped the availability of SEN qualified teachers, at both primary and secondary level. The Department of Education and Science has moved to alter this through a number of initiatives ranging from funding for individual teacher professional development, the establishment of whole school support programmes in SEN and the funding of certificate and postgraduate courses in SEN. With these efforts there are fewer numbers of non-specialist teachers working in the area of SEN but there still exists a demand for additional professional development at both secondary and primary levels.

Range of SEN teacher courses on offer in Ireland

Virtually all of the initial teacher education courses in Ireland contain modules on special educational needs. (Kearns and Shevlin 2005), thus ensuring that future teachers are prepared for the task of teaching a diversity of students. Currently, continuous professional development in the area of special educational needs is offered by a number of course providers ranging from government funded, third level postgraduate degrees to commercial on-line certificates. The courses offered by third level institutions are formally accredited while other courses are subjected to varying degrees of scrutiny and evaluation.

At present, the professional qualification for teachers working in the area of SEN is a one year fulltime postgraduate diploma provided by universities and third level institutions. There is also a separate learning support course which equips teachers to teach students with less severe educational needs. Additional diploma courses in SEN exist, offered on a part time basis by various institutions. There are taught degrees at masters' level and much research at master and doctoral level.

Short non-certified courses in special needs teacher education are provided by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) established by the DES in 2003. Among other activities, this initiative provides assistance to teachers and schools in the form of individual teacher/school in-service and regional in-service, additional. Further assistance, in the area of whole school planning for SEN, is available through the DES primary and secondary School Development Planning initiatives. Additional help is available through curriculum and classroom practice oriented support programmes provided by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) and Primary Support Programme (PSP) both of which are funded by the DES. The teacher unions also provide some courses for teacher in the area of special needs.

Commercially available, Irish produced SEN on-line courses, part funded by the DES, are another source of information on SEN available to teachers. Others access the numerous distance education options available from Universities and Institutes of Education outside Ireland. The DES will fund these courses if deemed appropriate.

Overall, the provision of professional development in the area of SEN is characterized by a diversity of providers and a range of certified and non-certified options.

Professional Development Courses in Special Educational Needs in Ireland

The professional qualification in special education – the one year fulltime postgraduate course for qualified teachers, is provided by five autonomous universities and colleges. Despite some differences regarding proportional content, comparative length of the theoretical and practical elements of the course, the homogeneity of the courses is remarkable. While the contents of the courses have been agreed with the Department of Education and Science (DES), each university or institution independently developed their own courses which were ratified by the academic councils of the accrediting university and annually subjected to the rigours of external examiners. There appears to be a consensus among academics and practitioners in the field as to the appropriate content of professional development courses at this level. However this unity of thought may also be viewed with concern. Are we accepting the tacit assumptions of what the core elements of such courses are without exploring the alternatives?

In 2003 the DES expanded the number of funded places on the graduate diploma courses in SEN. The course providers met at the invitation of the DES to discuss the future directions of the courses. The outcome was the establishment of a focus forum to agree on core elements of a postgraduate course in SEN.

This was deemed necessary as the DES had issued circulars revising the roles of teachers working in the area of SEN and learning support teachers subsequently had additional training needs due to the augmentation of their role to include students with special needs. This corresponded with the Warnock Report's (1978) argument that learning disabilities occur on a continuum from 'remedial' to 'special' and share many common and overlapping characteristics.

The forum of course providers thus became an opportunity for wide-ranging discussion on special educational needs and teacher educator issues. It is of interest and some concern that the focus of the forum thus far has only been the content of the courses. As yet there has been little discussion of the following important aspects: the pedagogy to be employed in the delivery of the courses; the learner outcomes and the modes of assessment to be used to determine these outcomes; the nature of the practice placements. Another concern is that the only contributors to the discussions are the course providers that other relevant personnel, such as teachers, students, parents and other interested parties are not yet involved. These relevant potential contributors and interest groups must not be overlooked in the development of a teacher education course in special needs.

Identifying professional development needs in the area of special education

In the design of a course, expert knowledge of the area is an essential prerequisite. Another important dimension is soliciting the opinions of practitioners indicating their needs for future training and requesting input from other involved parties. Thus, teachers of students with special educational needs, parents and students themselves, other SEN practitioners, such as therapists and psychologists, school principals and support organization representatives should all be included in the deliberations preliminary to designing

courses. A broad spectrum of interest and opinions will add diversity, depth and breadth to a course. For example, elements that are important for parents may not feature as part of the repertoire of teachers' concerns.

There has been some research carried out in Ireland identifying teachers' training requirements in relation to various aspects of special needs (Phibbs 2005, Morgensen 2005) but while these have interesting insights to add to the debate they were on a small scale. It is important to ensure that a funded professional course reflects the whole spectrum of practitioner needs. A large scale research project in ascertaining those needs should be undertaken. This research should be under the aegis of both the Department of Education and Science and the Council for Special Education. Both these bodies have contact with the main target population for the research base. The DES has access to teachers who have undertaken postgraduate funded professional development in the area of SEN and the Council for Special Educational (CSE), an independent body with a duty of care to individuals with special needs, has access to students and their families.

Continuing professional development in SEN at UCD

The Education Department at University College Dublin has a long history in the provision of in-career teacher education relating to students with disabilities and special educational needs.

The first professional qualification in Ireland for teachers working in the area of SEN was the Diploma for Teachers of the Deaf established in UCD in 1956. A later development was the establishment of the Diploma in Compensatory and Remedial Education in 1982 which changed to the Higher Diploma in Remedial and Special Education before its current realization as the Higher Diploma in Special Educational Needs.

The present-day form of the diploma consists of six theoretical modules – psychological development and the aetiology and assessment of special educational needs; foundation studies and professional issues in special needs education; curriculum development and social, environmental, scientific and health education for students with special educational needs; literacy and numeracy for students with special educational needs; expressive and visual arts education for students with special educational needs; therapeutic and technological approaches in special needs education. The theoretical component of the programme is assessed through formal exams. In addition to the theoretical modules teachers undertake two separate placements in educational settings. During this time they attend a series of placement support seminars, develop a teaching portfolio and complete four assignments - a case study with a child with special educational needs resulting in an in-depth Individualised Education Programme (IEP), a whole school plan for special educational needs, a report based on the development of a partnership with parents of students with special needs and a portfolio of a collaborative project with colleagues.

Current developments

The Education Act (1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) underpin the inclusion of a diversity of students in mainstream schools. At primary level, the actual organization of provision for these students has been determined by DES circulars, periodic communications to schools and by the publication of a set of guidelines. However, at second level, despite significant changes in special

education generally, few DES circulars and no guidelines have been issued to indicate how schools should organize the supports they have been allocated for special needs. Second level schools look to their primary counterparts for broad indications on how best to utilize their resources. The result has been the evolution of an array of differing practices of varying quality..

The most recent development in special needs education in Ireland has been the official melding of two separate special education roles, the learning support teacher and the resource teacher at primary level. Previously, each teacher had responsibility for a distinct cohort of pupils who were distinguished mainly by results on standardized tests. The learning support teacher providing help for children scoring between the second and tenth percentile and the resource teacher, who may not have had specialist training, providing support for those students scoring below the second percentile. The situation that exists at the time of writing is that a primary school is allocated ex-quota 'special education teacher' posts dependent on school enrollment, with somewhat lower ratios for disadvantaged and boys schools. Additional teaching hours may be allocated in cases of more severe educational needs. The redesignation of the teaching roles is significant and moves Irish education further along the inclusion trail in that it recognizes that there is a broad spectrum of overlapping special educational needs. It also mirrors the practice at second level where both learning support and resource teacher roles have common responsibilities.

Adaptions to facilitate current demands for teacher preparation

Now that both learning support and resource teachers are to work with students with identified special needs the providers of SEN teacher development programmes have proposed a single in-service course. The impetus to develop this course is timely as third level institutions are concurrently embracing the Bologna Declaration of the EU ministers of education. This declaration promotes the movement of students within the EU through utilizing a credit system as a means of transfer between institutions..

In UCD the model which has been proposed provides for generic modules in core areas combined with optional electives and specialisms. This could facilitate transfer between institutions; offer options for immediate and deferred modes of completion.

The restructured H Dip SEN, will consist of a sixty-credit course, comprising a compulsory core of 9 five-credit modules (4 of which are school based) and 3 optional five-credit modules to be selected from a notional range of 13 alternative specialisms. As previously, the course will be based on a block attendance/block release model, with the first semester requiring attendance at the UCD Belfield Campus, and the second semester consisting of the monitored completion of SEN teaching and other school-based assignments in teachers' own schools supported by advisory school visits, school-based interventions, weekend seminars on campus and on-line consultation.

Module 1, Inclusive Education, theory & practice, consists of Philosophy of SEN; Sociology of SEN; Law and SEN; Professional Issues in SEN.

Module 2, Psychological Development and the Aetiology and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, consists of Psychological Development in Childhood and Adolescence; Aetiology of Major Learning Disabilities; Assessment and Diagnosis of Learning Difficulties. Module 3, Curriculum Development, Literacy and Numeracy for Students with Special

Educational Needs, consists of: Curriculum Development for Students with Special Educational Needs; Language Acquisition and Literacy; Mathematics for Students with SEN. Module 4, Parent –Professional Relationships, Therapeutic and Support Services for SEN, consists of: Models of Parent-Professional Relationships; Counselling and Family Support; Speech and Language Therapy; Occupational Therapy; ICT and Assistive Technology for Students with SEN. Module 5, Research Methods in Special Needs Education, consists of: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches in SEN Research. The elective modules, from which students select three options are: Mild General Learning Disability / Specific Learning Difficulty; Moderate General Learning Difficulty; Severe and Profound General Learning Difficulty; Educational provision for Students with Pervasive/Autistic Spectrum Disorders; Educational Provision for Deaf Students; Educational Provision for Students with Visual Impairment; Educational Provision for Students with Physical Disabilities; Emotional/ Behavioural Disorders: Managing Challenging Behaviour; Social, Environmental, Scientific and Health Education for Students with Special Educational Needs; Expressive and Visual Arts Education for Students with Special Educational Needs; School Development Planning and Whole School Approaches in Special Needs Education; Intercultural Education and Students with Special Educational Needs; Special Education Provision for Gifted Children.

Contrast with the US in teacher professional development

There are several courses in SEN professional development in Ireland which are accredited by university academic councils. Through consultation and discussion, the institutions providing these courses have agreed on common underlying principles. The precise detailed descriptions of course modules and learner outcomes are determined by each institution individually, which takes cognizance of their expertise and autonomy. This contrasts with the situation in the US where the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) must endorse SEN teacher education programmes. The NCATE recently approved performance-based standards for the preparation and licensure of special teachers which were developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). These CEC standards are divided into three parts: 1) Field Experiences and Clinical Practice Standards 2) Assessment System Standards, and 3) Special Education Content Standards. They are extremely detailed in defining what elements must be included in SEN teacher preparation.

The Content Standards are made up of ten domain areas which parallel those of the ten principles established by the Interstate New Teacher and Assessment Consortium (INTASC). The domain areas are Foundations; Development and Characteristics of Learners; Individual Learning Differences; Instructional Strategies; Learning Environments and Social Interactions; Language; Instructional Planning; Assessment; Professional and Ethical Practice; Collaboration.

The content and skills standards are quite similar to those proposed in Ireland but greatly differ in the detail and specifications of each area.

Lessons to be learned from America

Previously in the US, course providers of SEN teacher education programmes supplied evidence that the CEC standards were being adhered through the course syllabus. Now, however, the evidence required is the programme's

assessment of the ten content standards and data on the attainment of those standards. This is to ensure that the standards have been taught and that teachers are proficient in them. Such a move shifts the focus from the content of syllabi to teacher learning outcomes. It is a pointer for a future direction in the course deliberations here in Ireland.

However, the over reliance on such a system of itemized standards in SEN may lead to a perception of teachers as technicians who merely have to fulfill certain functions and tasks. The affective domain is rejected and with it the nurturing and nourishing of the student which is crucial in special needs education. Is teaching to be diminished as a profession and to become no more than the mechanical ticking boxes on a checklist, with little acknowledgement of the myriad of ways in which a teacher contributes to the growth and development of the whole person?

Conclusion

Ireland is a small country with only seven institutions providing SEN teacher professional development courses. Therefore, the possibility of an agreement is very real. It is feasible for the directors of all the teacher education programmes in special education needs to meet, and share experiences and concerns regarding SEN and to act as an informal moderation body. This may lead to a unified expression of best practice. Thus there is no incentive to recourse to detailed itemization of programme content to ensure that high standards are maintained in the preparation of special education needs teachers.

However, if we are to ensure comparability and transferability of qualifications as required by the Bologna declaration in a move to a Europe with greater mobility of students and citizens there may be a need to develop strands of basic competencies in SEN similar to those of the NCATE/ CEC standards. Should there be increased collaboration between EU institutions, it will be necessary to ensure that there is comparability of course content, course credits and modes of accreditation. There will be a need to promote European co-operation in the establishment of a quality assurance mark which will indicate comparable criteria were used in the accreditation process.

Discussions pertaining to developing parity between teacher education programmes in SEN have been taking place in Ireland. It is now opportune to broaden these discussions to introduce a European dimension. The development of EU standards of teacher competencies already underway allows for the instigation of multilateral deliberations on the setting of standards in Teacher Education in Special Educational Needs in the EU.

