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**Special and Inclusive Education in the Republic of Ireland:  
Reviewing the Literature from 2000 to 2009**

**PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION**

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## **Abstract**

Provision for pupils with special educational needs in Ireland has undergone considerable change and review in the first decade of the twenty first century. In response to international demands for a more equitable education system which recognises diversity and considers how schools might address the needs of pupils who have been previously marginalised, Irish legislation has focused upon the development of inclusive schooling. Researchers during this period have endeavoured to understand how responses to the demand for greater inclusion have impacted upon the perceived need for change. This paper reviews the research literature for this period and identifies four key themes under which research has been conducted. The literature pertaining to these themes is explored and a possible agenda for future researchers identified.

**Key Words:** Policy; Provision; Experience; Outcomes; Inclusion; Ireland

## Introduction

In common with other countries, special education provision in Ireland has undergone considerable change in response to international demands for a more equitable education system which recognises diversity and considers how schools might address the needs of pupils who have been previously marginalised. Within recent decades there were a series of significant government sponsored reports highlighting inadequacies in special education provision (SERC 1993, Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities 1996), parental litigation challenging existing provision (Supreme Court of Ireland 1996, 2001) and ground breaking legislation guaranteeing curricular access for children and young people with special educational needs (Education Act 1998, Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, 2004). Researchers during this period have endeavoured to understand how responses to the demand for greater inclusion have impacted upon the perceived need for change.

Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools)<sup>1</sup> is a three year longitudinal research project investigating the development of special and inclusive education in the Republic of Ireland. During the course of the project data are being collected through a national survey of schools, the use of focus groups and interviews and the generation of school and individual focused case studies. The project aims to address research questions which will

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<sup>1</sup> Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools) is funded by the National Council for Special Education. The Project IRIS website can be visited at [www.projectiris.org](http://www.projectiris.org)

provide an in-depth analysis of the current provision and practice experienced by pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in both mainstream and special schools throughout the country. As is usual with a study of this nature, the development of research instruments and the refining of the broad research questions established at the outset of the project have been informed by a review of the literature related to the area of investigation. This review has been divided into two distinct sections. The first addresses that literature which is specific to the Irish context in which the research is being conducted. The second addresses a wider international literature of inclusion and is being used to place the development of special and inclusive education in Ireland within this broader context. This paper discusses the first of these two reviews, that focused on the Irish context, and discusses both the methodological approach adopted by the research team and the findings related to emerging themes.

Reviews of the literature related to research themes are conducted for a number of purposes and approaches to reviewing have been well documented (Cooper 1989; Girden 1996). In part the nature of any review is dictated by the end user for whom it is intended. The researchers conducting Project Iris were conscious of the fact that their research needed to address the needs and interests of a broad audience, including teachers, other professionals, policy makers and researchers and this inevitably influenced decisions made about how the review might be developed. Kahn *et al* (2008) suggest that the majority of reviews are aimed at other researchers, with little consideration given to the needs of those practitioners who may be the very individuals who can translate research findings into classroom practice. Boote and Beile (2005) see reviews of educational research as “messy and complicated in nature” (p.3) in part because of the necessity to reach a broad audience

which may comprise researchers, teachers and policy makers. They recognise the need to develop an ordered approach to reviewing, which in considering coverage, synthesis and methodology enables the reader to gain insights into the theme under scrutiny. In order to achieve this it is often necessary to provide a broad panorama of the literature available whilst indicating to the reader the emerging themes from within the content of the documents presented. Torrance (2004) is sympathetic to this view and has been critical of systematic reviews such as those endorsed by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI 2009) which in excluding sources is didactic in its approach to readers rather than enabling them to make their own judgements of the substantive literature in a given field.

In the context of the study reported in this paper an initial purpose of the literature review was to place the research within the context of other studies of special and inclusive education in Ireland. Further to this, the review was used to identify gaps in knowledge, and aspects of the implementation and impact of SEN procedures which were lacking in a firm empirical base. This latter purpose was seen as essential in ensuring that the research being undertaken, in addition to replicating earlier studies and thereby seeking to broaden the knowledge base about special and inclusive education in Ireland, provided the research team with questions which might lead to the acquisition of new knowledge.

### **Literature review methodology**

A key word focused search was conducted using standard data bases (ERIC; BEI; ASSIA; EBSCO; Web of Science; ZETOC; Ingentia; Swetswise.) in order to identify literature addressing issues related to SEN, inclusion, disability and schooling in Ireland. A first read of abstracts enabled the researchers to begin a process of categorisation and sorting of

materials in relation to common themes. The ordering of literature is an essential process which enables the researcher to undertake the task of reading in a logical manner whilst retaining a focus upon specific issues of concern in relation to the overall research questions. In this case for example, by identifying papers and other texts which addressed issues around the provision and management of classroom support, the reviewers were able to extract commonly recurring themes and to familiarise themselves with policy and procedure in a narrowly focused area. Through this inductive process it was possible in a relatively short time to gain a more detailed picture of one aspect of SEN provision and practice in Irish schools.

The production of literature maps has been commonly deployed as a means of identifying related themes and issues from the texts (Fink 2005; Cresswell 2008). The research team utilised a web based mapping system which enabled the production of maps that highlighted the relationship between the issues discussed within a range of papers and the findings of research as presented in the literature. As the review process developed it became possible to formalise this mapping process by developing a thematic pathway which brought together literature in an ordered manner built around key words, issues and themes.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1 demonstrates the means by which emerging themes were identified. In this four staged approach, line 1 records the paper or other source reviewed. These sources, obtained through a systematic search were all read and a written commentary produced. This commentary considered both the issues discussed and the strength of the

methodological approaches adopted in relation to the presentation of findings. In line 2 the main issues arising from each paper are briefly highlighted, this providing the research team with a useful point of reference which has been used both for the planning of research instruments, for example the structuring of interview questions, and for analysis of data by providing opportunities to compare findings from the current study with those of earlier research. In line 3 the key words identified by the reviewer are listed. It should be noted that whilst some journals, such as the *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* provide key words for each paper published, others have not adopted this practice. Whilst the reviewers used these key words, where available, as a starting point, others were assigned which related directly to the project research questions. This approach enabled the researchers through a reductive process to categorise the literature under four main themes which have since been used consistently to inform the development of research instruments.

The approach adopted presented the researchers with a number of specific advantages. The first of these was coherence in presenting key literature in an organised manner which allowed for effective management of a considerable body of texts. Secondly, by identifying a set of emerging themes the researchers have gained insights into a specific Irish context which has enabled them to draw comparisons from a broader international literature. The distinctive local research identity which is evident in this review of Irish literature provides a possible pathway for researchers in other countries at a similar stage of inclusion research to conduct a systematic analysis of literature within their own context.

### **Emergent themes**

The structured approach to the review as outlined above resulted in the emergence of four key themes within which the literature was arranged. These themes enabled a focus



to be determined through which a detailed narrative could be constructed. In order to maintain this level of focus consistently throughout the process it was necessary to provide specific definitions for the four themes (below). These were developed through a consideration of the key words constructed through a reading of each paper which provided a scaffold around which the definition could be determined. Whilst there was inevitably some overlap between the themes, so that for example some of the papers reviewed contained elements of discussion around both provision and experience. It was generally possible to identify a dominant theme. However, several of the papers were categorised within two or more of the theme headings. The four themes were defined according to the evidence which the papers provided as follows:

**Policy:** evidence related to the development and implementation of policy related to special and inclusive education at either a) the macro (national policy) level or b) the micro (local or school policy) level.

**Provision:** evidence related to the resources or places allocated to pupils by government or other agencies and the means by which this is distributed and utilised in school. Consideration of the impact of these resources.

**Experience:** evidence which indicates the experiences of teachers, parents, special needs assistants and pupils, with SEN in school. This to include experiences related to attitudes, relationships, access and learning.

**Outcomes:** evidence of the learning outcomes, both social and academic of pupils with SEN within the school system.

## **Discussion of the findings**

### **Policy**

In common with other European countries a number of significant policies focused on inclusion have been implemented in Ireland in recent years (Meijer 2003). Griffin and

Shevlin (2007) identify key developments from the 1990s which set the tone for subsequent educational legislation that has impacted upon special and inclusive education in Ireland. In 1993 the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) adopted a broad definition of SEN and whilst being supportive of moves towards inclusion stated a need to retain some specialist and separate provision. Three years later the Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996) promoted a social model of disability, called for a greater co-ordination of services between education and health and advocated the creation of more inclusive learning environments. The Education Act (Oireachtas 1998) provided a clearer definition of SEN as “the educational needs of students who have a disability and the educational needs of exceptionally able students”. Griffin and Shevlin (2007) emphasise the importance of these documents in paving the way for the subsequent Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Oireachtas 2004) and the Disability Act (2005) both of which have placed an emphasis upon strengthening the rights of pupils with SEN and their parents. Education policy has also been influenced through litigation challenging existing provision for children and young people with special educational needs (Shevlin et al., 2008). In particular, the O’ Donoghue (Supreme Court of Ireland 1996) and Sinnott (Supreme Court of Ireland 2001) cases helped to establish the principle that children and young people with severe intellectual disabilities were entitled to an appropriate education (Whyte, 2002)

The literature related to policy around SEN in Ireland tends to have taken a critical view of both policy content and the perceived struggle for its interpretation and implementation. McDonnell (2003) believes that the introduction of educational legislation which is isolated from the need to address the deep structures which influence other

aspects of equality in Ireland is likely to have minimal impact. He is critical of the perpetuation of a psycho-medical model which emphasises perceived individual deficits in people labelled as disabled or having SEN, rather than taking a more holistic approach to wider societal change. This is a view endorsed by Kinsella and Senior. (2008) who suggest that a cultural shift from a focus upon 'individual pathology' to a critique of existing 'organisational pathology' is required if inclusion is to become a reality within Irish society. These writers advocate the development of a systems theory which seeks to address environmental change rather than forcing individuals to adapt to life within existing structures. This they believe, will demand the construction of an understanding of inclusion which involves a partnership of all concerned parties.

MacGiolla Phádraig (2007) similarly promotes environmental change as a significant factor in moves towards inclusive schooling. In recognising that much of the recent Irish legislation supports this idea, he suggests that a narrow focus upon providing additional resources will not bring about the change in schools that is required. This writer believes that whilst recent legislation has indicated a commitment to further inclusive schooling, the reality is far removed from the intent. Exclusionary practices such as withdrawal of pupils with SEN from class or the formation of small groups who are provided with a curriculum diet significantly different from that of their peers continues, he suggests, to be the norm. Shevlin *et al* (2008) also identify a gap between the spirit of legislation and its implementation. In conducting a study of 20 primary schools, they found that whilst schools espoused a philosophy of inclusion, the reality for parents was that access to mainstream schooling was within the gift of principals and was not always forthcoming. This they argue

is a clear failure to implement policy which emanates in part from a school system which remains unsure about how to address pupil diversity or to embrace inclusive practices.

### **Provision**

Whilst discussions about the principles of inclusive schooling within an Irish context have dominated the literature, those around provision tend to be narrowly focused (MacGiolla Phádraig 2007; Lynch 2007). Discussions which focus on classroom practice have attended to issues of classroom support (Logan 2006; O'Neill and Rose 2008), differentiation (Coffey 2004; Day 2005) or the implementation of programmes for pupils with diagnosed needs (Ware *et al.* 2005; Scott 2009).

Debates around the placement of pupils with SEN, and whether this should be in mainstream or specialist provision replicate those from other administrations (Jenkinson 1998; Norwich 2008). O'Keefe (2004) suggests that a thorough interrogation of the arguments for retention of special schools has been avoided in Ireland, and that whilst successive education policies have advocated greater inclusion, the implementation of change has been slow and lacks conviction. He cites the report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC 1993) with its statement that the government "*holds no entrenched doctrinaire position regarding the integration into the ordinary school system of pupils with disabilities and/or special needs*" as an example of the ambivalence surrounding this issue. Kinsella and Drury (2008) are sympathetic to this view but argue that creating the conditions for the furtherance of inclusion is complex and that Irish schools being at the beginning of a process of change, require support in specific areas of development. In

particular they focus on the need to examine the availability of expertise, the development and sustainability of structures and the integration of processes across services if progress towards a more equitable education system is to be achieved. Each of these factors they see as currently inadequately defined in order to address the needs of the Irish education system. They perceive a conflict between the macro management of education systems which control significant factors such as teacher training and could have a positive influence upon inclusion, and the micro actions of schools where teachers are often left confused by the lack of clarity provided by policy makers. Such an approach, they argue promotes 'seperatism' with SEN provision being seen as an add-on rather than an integral part of the schooling system. This argument is further developed by Drudy and Kinsella (2009) who whilst recognising that significant investment in resources, such as the increase in numbers of special needs assistants, has provided an impetus for inclusion, believe that there is likely to be limited progress until a more holistic view of the limiting factors influencing change are confronted. They recognise that inclusion has in the past been largely regarded as a SEN issue, but a rapidly changing demographic within Ireland in terms of ethnicity and religion, partly emanating from increased immigration bringing children from unfamiliar cultures and with new languages to the country demands a reappraisal of the ability of schools to meet a widening range of needs.

Kinsella and Drudy's analysis of the need for increased expertise is echoed in studies reporting on teacher training in Ireland. Gash (2006) reports positively on recent developments of training for new teachers and its impact upon attitudes and understanding of SEN issues. He suggests that the introduction of initiatives within teacher training around differentiated learning and curriculum management and delivery are likely to reap rewards

in terms of the classroom management skills of new teachers. O’Gorman (2007) similarly views the restructuring of teacher training as a critical factor in advancing inclusion within Ireland. Her research indicates that there has been a shift within initial teacher education which has increased opportunities for exploring SEN issues and placing these within a mainstream classroom context. However, she is less confident with regards to the structures currently available around the induction of new teachers and suggests that whilst there has been an increase in continuing professional development opportunities these remain inconsistent and are not readily available to all teachers. O’Gorman sees a move away from the expert model in which knowledge resides with a well trained individual who provides advice and support to colleagues, to a more holistic development of a community expertise in which all teachers achieve a level of understanding of SEN issues. She is optimistic with regards to the changes which are occurring in this area, but believes that a more reflective approach is demanded through which teachers and teaching students learn to interrogate their own understanding of the most effective approaches to teaching for diverse pupil needs.

Kearns and Shevlin (2006) scrutinised models of training in the Republic of Ireland and those in Northern Ireland through an analysis of course documentation and an electronic survey and focus groups conducted with providers. These researchers reported that opportunities for student teachers to gain face to face teaching experiences with pupils with SEN were variable. In proposing that courses need to address issues of developing positive attitudes and perceptions of pupils with disabilities and SEN as well as concentrating upon the acquisition of teaching skills, they suggest that contact should be an essential element of training for all potential teachers. In offering a rationale for the training

of teachers Kearns and Shevlin explore the idea that shaping student teachers' values and disposition towards a positive interpretation of SEN is an area worthy of further debate. Whilst their research focused upon input to training for early career development, O'Gorman and her colleagues (2009) conducted a survey of established post primary teachers across both the Republic of Ireland and the North. Their findings suggest a direct correlation between the acquisition of skills and knowledge gained through accredited professional development courses and teacher efficiency. In particular these researchers identified increased teacher confidence in their ability to fulfil their roles in relation to pupils with a range of SEN. However, the research also reveals that teachers within the Republic of Ireland believe that the role of specialist teachers for pupils with SEN remains ill-defined and that the benefits of training could be further increased if this issue were addressed.

As discussions around the influence of teacher training on inclusive practice in Ireland has developed, this has been paralleled by other considerations of the developing school workforce. There is some evidence that the concerns expressed by O'Gorman *et al.* (2009) with regards to specialist role definition are receiving some consideration. Travers (2006) surveyed the roles of a convenience sample of learning support teachers and resource teachers in primary schools, two roles which have become well established in the Irish Education system. His findings suggest that whilst both of these roles in schools have been developed in order to promote inclusion of children with SEN, they are insufficiently co-ordinated to achieve the desired outcome. The current emphasis of resource teachers on providing support for individual pupils may be having the opposite effect to that anticipated when the role was established. The use of classroom withdrawal and a focus upon within-child factors may inhibit inclusion through the perpetuation of a deficit model. The literature

surrounding classroom support in Ireland does indicate a number of features which are unique to the country and distinctly different from practices elsewhere. This is especially in evidence when considering the role of the special needs assistant (SNA).

An increase in the development of classroom para-professionals working alongside teachers has been reported internationally (Butt and Lance 2005; Giangreco and Doyle 2007). In many countries the role of non teaching staff working in classrooms has been focused on direct provision for pupils with SEN. Often, as is the case in the UK this includes involvement in pedagogical activity with pupils under the supervision of a teacher (Groom 2006). In Ireland the role of the special needs assistant has been shaped in a distinct manner which is focused upon the care needs of pupils and is in many respects divorced from curriculum intervention or support for teaching (Carrig 2004; Logan 2006). However, parallels can be drawn here with other roles designated to promote inclusion within the Irish education system, such as that of the resource teacher. Just as Travers has suggested that the role of the resource teacher is being shaped by demands for increased inclusion which has led to indecision about the functions which fall within the role remit, so have researchers considering the role of the SNA been confronted with anomalies which suggest that legislation within Ireland is falling behind practice in schools (Carrig 2004; Rose and O'Neill 2009). In a comparative study of classroom support in England and Ireland, Rose and O'Neill (2009) identified a commitment to professional development from both Teaching Assistants in England and Special Needs Assistants in Ireland. However, they suggest that increased opportunities for accreditation and career enhancement for Teaching Assistants within the English situation has proven beneficial to the inclusion agenda, whilst in Ireland the role of the SNA continues to be focused upon the care needs of individuals and is less



dynamic in respect of impact upon whole class interventions which have proved effective in supporting inclusion within the English system.

## **Experience**

The literature on experience of schooling for pupils with SEN in Ireland has attempted to gain insights from a range of perspectives. Respect for the views of parents and pupils characterises some of the research undertaken in this area, with an acknowledgement that these service users can provide unique insights into SEN provision.

From the limited research conducted to date it is clear that parents who succeed in obtaining a place in mainstream school for their child with SEN continue to face substantial challenges. Radahan (2006) reporting a survey of 30 parents of children with a broad spectrum of SEN found a number of obstacles to the achievement of successful inclusion. In particular communication between schools, other professional agencies and parents were often described as inadequate. Discussions which lead to decisions with regards to provision for pupils, particularly at key times, such as transition from primary to post-primary schooling were often seen as exclusive, with parents having inadequate opportunities to make a contribution. Similar parental frustrations were identified in the research reported by Kenny *et al* (2005). Parents described a struggle to have their rights within existing educational legislation recognised and feelings of isolation which surround their efforts to ensure that the needs of their children are addressed. The authors of this research suggest that the experiences of parents in respect of their struggle to receive appropriate schooling mirror their frustrations with wider societal issues in Ireland where ignorance of disability

and low expectations of the abilities of pupils with SEN continue to present as a barrier to inclusion. Parents are understandably seen to desire a positive interpretation of the needs and abilities of their children, but they are reported as facing attitudinal obstacles when they seek mainstream placements. Shevlin *et al.* (2003) emphasise these attitudinal difficulties when describing a small scale study of parents of children with Down syndrome. However, they report that once pupils gained access to mainstream schooling they often found teachers who were willing to make curriculum adjustments and could be creative in enabling access. The pupils within their study made good social progress and many were seen to have enhanced communication skills. These authors propose that often the greatest challenges to inclusion occur before entry to school, with teachers and other professionals demonstrating a more flexible and innovative approach to learning once this entry barrier has been overcome.

The views expressed by Shevlin and his colleagues are confirmed by the work of O'Donnell (2003) who considered the experiences of parents and pupils during transition from special to mainstream school placements. O'Donnell created case studies around 28 pupils in Dublin which indicated that the infrastructure to support transfer from special to mainstream schools was often inadequate. In particular she expressed concerns that the views of young people with SEN are often overlooked, resulting in poor provision in schools and difficulties for pupils in establishing positive relationships. O'Donnell suggests that cultural stereotypes are predominant in schools and that these emanate from poor understanding of pupil needs and low expectations of pupil abilities. In part this lack of understanding relates to professionals' lack of experience or knowledge of how to access the resources necessary to promote access and learning for pupils with SEN. This point is

emphasised by Flatman-Watson (2009) who found from a sample of 119 parents that many had been active in funding assessments of their children in order to gain access to appropriate resourcing. There is, she states, evidence to indicate that many schools are reluctant to accept pupils with SEN claiming a lack of capacity to meet the requirements of young people who they perceive to be challenging. This limited capacity was seen to relate to the professional skills of teachers, but also to a lack of availability of non-teaching support from other professional agencies and Flatman-Watson suggests that insufficient co-ordination of services remains as a major obstacle to addressing the inclusion agenda.

Investigating experiences of special and inclusive education demands that an understanding of pupil perceptions is attained. O'Donnell (2003) in the research discussed above found that young people with SEN were well able to articulate their experiences of schooling. In her study the majority of pupils felt that they had been welcomed in mainstream schools, but were conscious of often finding the work in class difficult and of falling behind their peers. When asked about the most important aspects of attending mainstream school the pupils in O'Donnell's sample described having friends and mixing with their able peers as a positive aspect of their experiences. The less positive indicators related to personal and academic pressures and at times feeling different and isolated in school. Similar views were expressed by pupils in the work of Rose and Shevlin (2004) with low expectations of teachers often resulting in a denial of curriculum access or involvement in assessment for accreditation. In their study, these authors suggest that many pupils recognise the apprehensions of teachers who are unsure as to how they should provide appropriate learning experiences for the pupils in their class.

Experiences of pupils with SEN in Ireland are characterised by a lack of understanding of how best to ensure that they gain appropriate access to teaching and learning in schools. The literature indicates that many parents, eager to secure access to mainstream provision find themselves embroiled in a struggle with intransigent enrolment procedures which are in part bolstered by a lack of confidence on the part of principals and teachers. Once pupils do gain mainstream access they often make good social progress but confront obstacles in respect of assuring appropriate academic outcomes as a result of low expectations and a lack of understanding of their needs on the part of teachers. Most pupils report a positive attitude from teachers towards them as individuals, but perceive that this is often not backed up by teaching which is wholly suited to their individual needs.

### **Outcomes**

The literature review reveals that little research has been conducted into the outcomes of SEN interventions or inclusive school provision in Ireland. Where outcomes are reported they are more likely to be discussed in relation to pupils' social performance than their academic attainment. Hardiman *et.al.* (2009) suggest that a lack of empirical studies into the efficacy of inclusion continues to be an obstacle in respect of developing an understanding of impact and thereby shaping future policy. Conducting research to assess the social competence of children aged 4 to 16 with moderate learning difficulties across inclusive and segregated settings through use of a strengths and difficulties questionnaire, they found that the children in both settings exhibited similar levels of social performance. However, these authors do suggest that there is evidence of the need to provide direct interventions in order to facilitate social interactions between pupils with learning difficulties and their peers. This finding equates to those of other studies of social

engagements between pupils with SEN and their peers in schools. McStay *et.al.* (2008) reported from a study of 118 children in 8 rural primary schools that there was no significant difference of attitudes towards peers with a SEN between pupils in classes with a child with a disability and those in classes without such a child. Other researchers (Shevlin and O'Moore 2000; Shevlin *et.al.* 2002; Scanlon and McGilloway 2006) have questioned the extent to which teacher expectations of pupils with special educational needs influence academic learning outcomes. There is a suggestion that whilst teacher attitudes towards pupils with difficulties may often present as positive that these do not always lead to classroom practices which encourage pupil achievement at the levels which might be attained.

Where academic outcomes are discussed this tends to be on the basis of small scale, often single school studies which present little opportunity for generalisation beyond the research location. Ring and Travers (2005) typify this approach with a single child case study focused upon a pupil with severe learning difficulties in a mainstream primary school. Within this study the researchers were able to map the learning experiences provided to a pupil and to observe the substantial efforts made by teachers to differentiate learning and provide access. The results of their observations indicate a pupil with low socio-metric status who whilst being provided with support to access learning continued to remain apart from many of his peers. Whilst the individual pupil within this study was seen to receive high levels of teacher support, the appropriateness of his academic progress in relation to his needs or the levels of provision made are not defined. Murphy (2008) suggests that in many instances schools are uncertain of the educational diet which they should afford to pupils with SEN. A lack of understanding with regards to what is appropriate or practicable

for pupils within a prescribed curriculum in some instances leads to disaffection and ultimately results in some pupils dropping out of the school system. Murphy further proposes that a schooling system which is narrowly focused upon academic attainment and fails to address the social needs of learners, will inevitably mean underachievement and the break down of relationships between schools and some pupils.

### **Placing the findings within an international context.**

The broad themes which emerged from the literature review presented in this paper have parallels with those reported in studies and reviews from many legislations (Engelbrecht *et. al.* 2006; Koutrouba *et.al.* 2008; Heimdahl Mattson & Malmgren Hansen 2009). Attention to policy development has understandably, as a result of international agreements such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994), provided a major focus in many countries (Armstrong *et. al* 2010). Similarly, discussions centred around provision, which tend to have concentrated attention on the special versus mainstream school debate have been an ever present topic for research internationally (Jenkinson 1998; Norwich 2008). The experiences of young people with special needs in schools has attracted less attention from researchers, though investigations such as those conducted by Quick (2003) and Jans (2004) do indicate that an increased commitment to learning from pupil voices has been a feature of reported research at the beginning of the twenty first century. The international literature suggests that the outcomes of both specialist and inclusive provision have received less attention. Recent studies such as those conducted by Malmgren *et. al.* (2005), Farrell *et.al* (2007), and Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse(2007) in the USA and UK have begun to consider how the learning outcomes for pupils with special educational needs may be determined and similar studies and by Gajendra, *et. al.* (2007) from the USA, Europe and India and from Forlin and

Lian (2008) in The Asia Pacific Region, have attempted to determine the impact of various modes of schooling upon both the academic and social outcomes for pupils.

### **Identifying research questions and setting a research agenda**

The literature on special and inclusive education in Ireland provides an indication of the need for a clear research focus upon specific aspects of an emerging change within educational provision. This review indicates an emphasis by researchers on aspects of the implementation of education policy, and the development of provision. By contrast discussions of the experiences of schooling and the learning outcomes for pupils with SEN have received less attention. The reasons for this imbalance are possibly associated with the considerable challenge which surrounds the definition of appropriate learning outcomes for pupils with SEN. This is not a homogeneous population, but consists rather of pupils who display diverse needs and abilities and as such it is difficult to establish criteria whereby successful learning outcomes can be defined. Whilst there is evidence to suggest that for some pupils with SEN placement in mainstream school has brought social benefits and enabled the development of positive peer relationships, conclusions about academic outcomes are more difficult to measure. However, a new emphasis upon learning outcomes in the literature from other legislation (Black-Hawkins *et. al.* 2007; Farrell *et.al.* 2007) may provide researchers in Ireland with a model for investigation that could support the development of a greater understanding in this area. Researchers working in this area need to devote time to considering how they may provide criteria whereby they can reach conclusions about the efficacy of inclusion based upon a firm empirical base.

Education researchers working in Ireland have demonstrated a commitment to democratic approaches to their work which respects the views of young people and their

parents. By working in this way they have been able to collate qualitative data which has formed the basis for discussion based upon the perceptions of individuals who have experienced the challenges faced within an education system that has given a commitment to inclusion. However, a commitment expressed within policy has little impact until such time as that policy is translated into working practices which enable successful learning outcomes to be achieved. The challenge for policy makers and schools has been clearly defined, it now remains for researchers to provide the evidence upon which they may move forward.

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