

2020 was a turbulent year for special education at primary level in Ireland, not all of it rooted in the Covid-19 pandemic. With special schools threatened with closure, a frontloading model for allocating special needs assistants, and a failure to open enough classes for children with autism, it has been a troubled year for the National Council for Special Education and a troubling year for pupils with additional needs, who could claim to have been forgotten in all of it.

2020 has been a year dominated by one subject, and as much as I love a challenge, writing an entire article about this year without mentioning the Covid-19 pandemic would be impossible. However, if you were somebody involved in special education needs in Ireland, whether as a pupil, teacher, special needs assistant (SNA), or family member, you might be forgiven for wondering whether the education system had forgotten about your existence. Like every good story, we need to go back to a land far, far away, a long, long time ago, specifically 19 November 2019, pre-pandemic times.

The beginning of 2020 was dominated by the aftermath of a research conference run by the National Council of Special Education (NCSE, 2019a), titled Inclusive Education Systems & Teacher Education for Inclusion. There were a host of speakers, including Jody Carr, former Minister of Education in New Brunswick, Canada. Carr outlined a model of education he had introduced in his region, where all students in all schools, whatever their needs, learned in the same classrooms (Carr, 2019).

Ireland's then Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, appeared supportive of this model, stating, 'All of this investment is to try and ensure that children are educated in an inclusive setting as far as practicable. Each child should be educated with their peers in mainstream wherever feasible, and this is very much reflected in what the NCSE has stated in this progress report' (McHugh, 2019a). The conference set the tone for the anticipated direction of special educational needs provision into 2020, with the potential closure of special schools and the prospect of all school leaders facing the task of balancing the rights of families with the 'limited supports' (IPP, 2019) available in schools.

Although these limited supports were not new, and in fact schools were receiving fewer supports, with 88.4% of principals claiming they had more

# Full Inclusion, Frontloading and Forgotten Children

## A Review of Special Education in Primary Level



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SET allocations a decade ago (National Principals' Forum, 2019), these were being put under increasing pressure, with increased demands on the system.

With the full inclusion model in the background, a study by Trinity College Dublin, 'Exclusion in Education: A Study of Short School Days', was launched in February 2020 (TCD, 2020). It was highly critical of schools and their shortening of the school day for pupils with additional needs. Further pressure was imposed on a system already struggling to cope with the rising costs (NCSE, 2019b) of providing an adequate service for pupils with additional needs, and the resources needed to provide these supports (National Principals' Forum, 2019).

On top of this, a pilot project, the School Inclusion Model (NCSE, 2018), was gathering pace. In January, the plan was announced to frontload special needs assistants (DES, 2019), changing the application process to 'an allocation model under which schools are allocated posts under a new set of criteria' (FORSA, 2020). It was not met well by stakeholders, due to concerns that the NCSE would not provide adequate provisions for schools (National Principals' Forum, 2019); and given that the pilot had not concluded, the Irish Primary Principals' Network claimed that the 'rush to implement' the pilot would 'undermine the credibility' of it (IPPN, 2020). Even so, it seemed inevitable that this model would be put in place in time for September 2020.

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However, on 12 March, the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, announced that all schools would close due to Covid-19 (DES, 2020a), ultimately pressing the pause button on any projects or pilots for the rest of the year. As the education community found itself having to think of new ways to educate the children of the country, the pandemic was having a more pronounced effect on pupils with additional needs (Darmody, Smyth, and Russell, 2020). By the end of March, the Department of Education and Skills conceded that the frontloading model could not go ahead, and announced a temporary model that looked very similar.

Schools that believed they did not have enough resources to support their pupils could appeal their allocation. But according to a briefing document by Meet the Kids Behind the Cuts (2020), a campaign set up to highlight the lack of resources offered to children with additional needs, only 3% of appeals were likely to succeed, based on previous research.

With the pandemic continuing and schools remaining shut for the rest of the school year, attention fell on the July Provision scheme, a programme for children in special classes for autism or severe/profound needs. The plan was published less than three weeks before the beginning of July (DES, 2020b), renamed the Summer Education Programme, and expanded to include children with other types of diagnoses, which was welcome.

Attention during the summer focused on the reopening of school buildings for the 2020/21 year. However, this focus was deflected by news in south Dublin that there were not enough places in special classes for children with autism. Despite being raised in the Dáil as early as April 2019, by Jim

O'Callaghan, the shortage of school places was still not resolved by the NCSE by July, despite willingness from many schools to open these classes.

The new government that was formed in the middle of the pandemic announced the first ever Minister with responsibility for Special Education, Josepha Madigan, at the beginning of July (Fine Gael, 2020). However, when the guidelines for reopening schools were published at the end of the month, anyone involved in providing education for children with additional needs would have been disappointed to read the lack of guidelines for their pupils. By the end of September, the NCSE had yet to publish any specific guidance to schools for children with additional needs.

2020 was a turbulent year for special education at primary level in Ireland. With special schools being threatened with closure, an incomplete pilot being used as the basis for huge reforms to SNA allocations, the closing of school buildings where pupils with additional needs suffered more than others, and the failure to open enough classes for children with autism, it has been a troubled year for the NCSE and a troubling year for pupils with additional needs. While the year will probably be remembered for only one thing, children with additional needs appeared to be one thing that was forgotten.

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### **Minister for Special Education and Inclusion**

On 2 July 2020, Josepha Madigan was appointed the first ever Minister with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion

Ms Madigan had previously served as Minister for Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht from 30 November 2017 to 27 June 2020.