

Department of Education and Skills

Brief for the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Public Petitions

19 June 2019

1. Summary

The following note for the information of the Committee includes information on:

- Department policy on inclusive education - in particular the structure of supports for children with Special Educational Needs including Spectrum Disorders
- Initial Teacher Education - specifically as it relates to inclusive education (including Multiculturalism, Disadvantage and Special Education)
- Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers - addressing the standards of professional knowledge, skill, competence and conduct which are expected of registered teachers.
- Supports services available to support the professional development of teachers including:
 - NCSE Support Service; Middletown Centre for Autism; Professional Development Service for Teachers, Junior Cycle Team and the National Induction Programme.

2. Introduction

Providing inclusive education to children with special educational needs, including those with spectrum disorders, is a fundamental principle of our education and training system.

This principle is put into practice through the policies of the Department; the comprehensive range of supports and resources provided by the National Council for Special Education; the review and accreditation by the Teaching Council of initial teacher programmes and the suite of continuous professional development delivered by the Department's Teacher Education Support Services.

Recent years have seen substantial improvements in 'in-school' supports for pupils and this has been matched by improved provision for teacher education and development including in initial teacher education and in continuous professional development for serving teachers.

Much of this improved provision for teacher education has focussed on support for teachers' knowledge and understanding of the specific needs of children with Special Educational Needs including those with spectrum disorders including Dyspraxia, Sensory Processing Disorders and dyslexia as well as Autism and other Spectrum disorders.

In his response to the Joint Committee on this issue in May, the Secretary General of the Department advised that inclusive education, including the education of children with special educational needs, is already a mandatory part of the standards for Initial Teacher Education.

The Teaching Council's accreditation process for Initial Teacher Education programmes is the mechanism through which the Council satisfies itself that its standards are being met through a given ITE programme.

The Teaching Council's Criteria and Guidelines set out learning outcomes for graduates of programmes of initial teacher education. The first learning outcome identified for graduates concerns ethical standards and professional behaviour and refers, amongst other things, to the teacher's unique role as a professional in providing for the holistic development of students.

The graduate teacher is also required to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the factors that promote and hinder learning, the impact of pupils' backgrounds and identities on learning and the need to provide for the holistic development of the learner, particularly through differentiated approaches.

The Secretary General also noted that, at present, there is no mandatory professional learning required of teachers, after they have completed initial teacher education and induction. In this context, Section 33 of the Teaching Council Act provides that the Teaching Council may make renewal of registration subject to having completed an accredited programme of CPD. Section 33 has yet to be commenced.

To inform and support the development of 'Cosán', which is the national framework for teachers' learning, the Teaching Council implemented a comprehensive, multi-layered consultation process in 2014 and 2015. Some 5,000 teachers contributed to the consultation process, and the feedback was very rich and helpful in informing the drafting of the framework.

Findings from this process identified that teachers are extremely interested in opportunities to engage in high-quality, professional learning activities, that are relevant to their needs and those of their pupils, and that enhance teaching and learning in their classrooms. Allied with this deep interest in professional learning is a strong interest in personal development, and in the types of collaborative learning and professional conversations that take place in schools on a formal and informal basis. These findings are confirmed by the strong demand for professional learning opportunities provided by the Department funded professional Development services including the PDST; JCT; NIPT and of course NCSE along with other professional learning opportunities¹.

In considering the question of mandatory CPD, it would be important to consider any evidence to indicate that a mandatory approach to CPD would enhance teachers' practice, and ensure that teachers are taking account of the diversity and complexity of learners' needs, particularly in a special education context.

The evidence gathered by the Teaching Council has led it to the conclusion that ongoing learning by teachers should be both encouraged and incentivised so as to ensure authentic engagement, in a way that is sustainable and impactful. Through the Cosán Development Process, the Council is exploring with the profession how this can be done.

¹ Professional Development Service for Teachers, Junior Cycle Team, National Induction Programme and National Council for Special Education

The Department will be guided by advices, supported by appropriate evidence, when considering the broader question of linking teacher registration to the completion of accredited courses.

3. Department policy on Inclusive Education

Section 2 of the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004* provides that a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with—

- (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or
- (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.

This principle informs and underpins the provision of additional supports to schools to support the care, education and inclusion of children with special educational needs.

To ensure that children with Special Educational Needs are fully and properly supported in schools, the Department supports a substantial programme of professional development for teachers to ensure that they are equipped to develop and implement differentiated learning programmes that are tailored to the specific needs of individual children.

4. Looking at Our School, 2016

Looking at Our School, 2016, which is the quality framework for schools, views schools as dynamic learning organisations, where teachers are enabled to work individually and collectively to build their professional capacity in order to support continuous improvement in teaching and learning

In the area of Teaching and Learning, two of the standards for Individual teacher's practice are central to the principle of inclusive education. These are that the teacher:

- selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning intention and the students' learning needs
- responds to individual learning needs and differentiates teaching and learning activities as necessary

In the area of Management and Leadership, a number of standards refer to school leaders' responsibilities to create an inclusive learning environment for all students. These are set out as follows:

School leaders:

- manage the planning and implementation of the school curriculum
- foster teacher professional development that enriches teachers' and students' learning
- manage the school's human, physical and financial resources so as to create and maintain a learning organisation
- build and maintain relationships with parents, with other schools and with the wider community

5. Guidelines for Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Post-Primary Schools (and an equivalent for primary schools)

To support the introduction of the new model for Special Education Teacher Support in schools introduced in September 2017, the Department published new guidelines for schools to provide guidance on the use, organisation and deployment of additional teaching resources for students with special educational needs.

This situates effective provision for students with special educational needs within an inclusive whole-school framework which emphasises effective teaching and learning for all and good collaboration and engagement between schools, parents and students. The Guidelines provide schools with six principles to inform the deployment of the additional teaching resources they receive and a six-action process designed to assist schools in the allocation of these resources. They also contain a number of useful templates for schools, including a school provision plan template and a self-reflective questionnaire.

In promoting inclusive education schools are expected to use the *Continuum of Support for Primary and Post-Primary*. The continuum is specifically designed to assist teachers in mainstream schools to identify needs and to develop and evaluate interventions to meet those needs. The continuum encompasses a graduated solution-orientated framework of assessment and intervention in schools, comprising three distinct school based processes:

- **Support for all** is a process of prevention, effective mainstream teaching and early identification. These systems are available to **all** students and effectively meet the needs of most students.
- **Support for some** is an assessment and intervention process which is directed to **some** students, or groups of students who require some additional input.
- **Support for a few** is characterised by more intensive and individualised supports. This level of intervention is for students with complex and/or enduring needs and relatively **few** students will need this level of support.

6. Initial Teacher Education

Under Section 38 of the Teaching Council Act, all initial teacher education programmes are subject to review and accreditation by the Teaching Council, for registration purposes. The Teaching Council's Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers (published in 2011 and revised in March 2017) is an important document that must be observed by all providers of initial teacher education in order that their programmes are recognised for the purposes of teacher registration. These Criteria and Guidelines state that inclusive education (including Multiculturalism, Disadvantage and Special Education) is a mandatory area of study for all student teachers who are undertaking programmes of initial teacher education at primary and post primary levels in Ireland.

The Criteria and Guidelines also set out learning outcomes for graduates of programmes of initial teacher education. The graduate teacher is also required to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the factors that promote and hinder learning, the impact of pupils' backgrounds and identities on learning and the need to provide for the holistic development

of the learner, particularly through differentiated approaches. A further learning outcome for the graduate teacher is to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of cross-curricular links and themes including citizenship; creativity; inclusion and diversity; as appropriate to the sector and stage of education, and how these are related to life experiences.

The Teaching Council is currently reviewing the impact of the current programmes of initial teacher education, through a comprehensive consultation process, with a view to amending the Criteria and Guidelines before the next round of accreditation in 2020. The Teaching Council has also commissioned a Working Group to look at all elements of School Placement, as part of Initial Teacher Education.

In 2015, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) commissioned a longitudinal study to review the components of inclusive/special education within Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes and determine if the recent revisions made to programmes prepare newly qualified teachers (NQTs) to be inclusive teachers. The study tracked student teachers in their final year of ITE through to their first two years as NQTs.

A report from the first two phases of the research was published in August 2018 and the overall final research report will be completed and published in 2019. For these phases, the research team examined the content of ITE programmes. They also surveyed and spoke with student teachers, their lecturers and/or course leaders about their experiences of ITE programmes, the inclusive teaching components and student placements.

The survey of content of ITE programmes indicated that inclusive teaching content is incorporated in ITE programmes in different ways, such as through standalone, specific modules or by being diffused across general modules. The report has found evidence that the core values of inclusive teaching are present in ITE, including: positive attitudes towards inclusion of students and teacher educators. However, the report also noted that there is room for improvement across a number of areas, in particular:

- Student teachers reported a lack of confidence and support for bringing their learning as regards inclusive teaching into practice on their student placement
- Teacher educators suggested that they need more professional development opportunities to cover inclusive education in sufficient depth in their programmes.

These findings will be considered by the Teaching Council in the course of its work.

7. Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers

In accordance with the Teaching Council Act and to strengthen and underpin teaching in Ireland, the Teaching Council adopted the *Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers* (second edition published in 2012 and updated in 2016). The Code sets out the standards of professional knowledge, skill, competence and conduct which are expected of registered teachers.

The Code states that teachers should “be committed to equality and inclusion and to respecting and accommodating diversity including those differences arising from gender, civil status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race, ethnicity, membership of the Traveller community and socio-economic status”.

Teachers are required to be familiar with the Code, a copy of which was posted to every registered teacher.

8. Supports for Teachers available through the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Support Service

Since March 2017, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), through its newly developed Support Service, has a remit to develop schools' capacity to support students with special educational needs and to promote a continuum of educational provision which is inclusive and responsive.

The NCSE support service brings together the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS); the Special Education Support Service, the Visiting Teacher Service for Children who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Children who are Blind/Visually Impaired (VTHVI) and services already being provided by NCSE's SENOs and administrative staff.

The NCSE Support Service provides:

- Continual Professional Development (CPD) and support for teachers in the area of special educational needs (SEN) to enhance the quality of learning and teaching in relation to SEN provision
- Support and expertise to schools on issues related to behaviour
- Support for the allocation of teaching and care supports to schools.

The role of the NCSE Support Service includes enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in relation to special educational provision. The service co-ordinates, develops and delivers a range of professional development initiatives and support structures for school personnel working with students with special educational needs in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, special schools and special classes.

In this regard, the NCSE Support Service aims to provide a quality service that is inclusive, promotes collaboration and co-operation and provides for equality of access.

9. Teacher Education Support Services.

In addition to the work of the NCSE Support Service, a number of other Department services provide professional development support to teachers. These services include the Professional Development Service for Teachers, National Induction Programme for Teachers and the Junior Cycle for Teachers.

These services are responsible for the design and delivery of courses of professional development and these are delivered across the network of 21 whole-time and 9 part-time education centres as well as in primary and post primary schools across the entire country.

When designing CPD for delivery to teachers all of the support services must take account of the needs of all learners, including students with spectrum disorders and all students with special educational needs.

10. Supports available through the Middletown Centre for Autism

The Middletown Centre for Autism project also provides a comprehensive nationwide training service for parents and educational professionals. The range of courses which the Centre has available can be viewed through its website www.middletownautism.com.

Additional Training for teachers working with pupils with special educational needs funded by the Department

11. Post Graduate Programmes.

In addition to the supports outlined above, the Department of Education and Skills funds the provision of a number of post-graduate programmes that aim to provide substantial theoretical and practical training for teachers working with special needs pupils:

Graduate Certificate in the Education of Pupils on the Autism Spectrum.

The Department of Education and Skills funds eighteen places on a Graduate Certificate in the Education of pupils on the Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) in Dublin City University (DCU). The aim of this programme is to provide substantial theoretical and practical training for teachers working with pupils on the autism spectrum and, thereby, to contribute to the school's overall capacity in this area.

Post-Graduate Diploma Programmes for Teachers involved in Learning Support & Special Education.

In order to assist school and educational services in meeting the needs of students with special educational needs, a Post-Graduate Diploma Programme of Continuing Professional Development for Teachers involved in Learning Support & Special Education is offered to Teachers on an annual basis. There are 295 places available on this programme in six Universities/Colleges of Education throughout the country.