

**Opening Statement by Dr. Anne Ryan on behalf of Marino Institute of Education to the  
Joint Committee on Education and Skills 27/06/17**

Madam Chairman, I would like to thank you and the committee members for the opportunity to discuss the adequacy of training and supports available to providers of special needs education and education in DEIS schools, including suggesting any reforms.

**Marino Institute of Education: Initial Teacher Education**

- We are teacher educators in Marino Institute of Education (MIE), a Higher Education Institution in Dublin and an associated college of TCD. Currently, we have an enrolment of almost 1,000 students across a range of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes in education. However, the focus of our work is the education of future primary teachers; almost 600 of our students are primary student teachers. Practitioner preparation for teaching children with a variety of strengths and needs in mainstream schools, special education contexts and DEIS schools is a central element of our work in these programmes, as it is in our separate degree programme for those working or planning to work in the field of Early Childhood Education. While provision of this nature permeates all of our curricula, we also offer year-long core modules relevant to Inclusive and Special Education, together with a range of school placement experiences in each of the school settings referred to above. Our student teachers demonstrate a keen interest in this provision. They engage tremendously well with the courses and placements, and most elect to undertake their final research dissertations on topics pertinent to Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Educational Disadvantage.

**Inclusive Education is Challenging**

- Nonetheless, as an academic staff, most of whom are also highly experienced classroom practitioners, we can empathise greatly with the very considerable challenges experienced and reported to us by these students as they take on the mantle of beginning teachers in ever more diverse and complex classroom contexts. As has been well documented, the process of transitioning from committed student teacher to effective beginning teacher is a demanding undertaking. Learning to teach well is challenging. In today's school contexts it can be overwhelming. As teacher educators we recognise that we must respond appropriately to this situation, but we also know that teacher education alone is not a sufficient response. We suggest therefore, that school structures be equally addressed if our future teachers are not to resort to 'coping' and 'survival' strategies at the outset of their careers, to the detriment of their powerful potential as inclusive educators.

**EU Funding for Inclusive Education Project in MIE**

- In 2016, MIE was granted significant funding under the EU Erasmus+ programme to lead a five-country study in exploring this issue. In light of European and national policies which promote 'mainstreaming' over more specialised schooling provision,

our three-year remit as a cross-sectoral, international project team of practising teachers and teacher educators, is to identify best practice in Inclusive Education in our institutions and schools, and to recommend specific approaches that could advance such practice. Even at this early stage of the project, after study visits to schools and teacher education institutions in Finland and Belgium, the project team is unanimous about the significant potential of one particular strategy for advancing inclusion in schools – that of ‘Co-teaching’ in both teacher education and school practice.

### **Co-teaching for Inclusion**

- In schools, co-teaching entails two teachers teaching together, sharing responsibility for meeting the learning needs of pupils, and at the same time learning from each other (Murphy et al., 2005). In the co-teaching model we observed in Finland, one of these teachers was an experienced mainstream teacher, while the other was a qualified and experienced special needs teacher. As we observed, with such a co-teaching partnership in a mainstream class, all children in the class will have greater opportunity to not only be present for, but in accordance with current policy, to participate in and benefit from mainstream education. In the teacher education context the student co-teaches with, rather than instead of, the host teacher, and so is likely to be afforded greater opportunity at an early stage of professional development to learn about, and respond appropriately to, pupils’ diverse strengths and needs. In both contexts the strategy entails planning together and sharing review and evaluation of teaching and pupil learning. An emerging body of research literature is pointing to the invaluable potential of such co-teaching approaches for advancing student teacher learning, experienced teacher learning and above all, pupil learning in classroom contexts of considerable diversity.

### **Recommendation: Pilot Project ‘Co-teaching for Inclusion’**

- On the basis of our own extensive experience in primary classrooms and with student and beginning teachers, together with recent learning from our transnational project and emerging research findings, we would suggest that consideration be given to establishing a two-year pilot ‘Co-teaching for Inclusion’ project (one project incorporating practising and student teachers, rather than two separate pilots as suggested in our original submission) at primary level. Such a project would see the introduction to the primary school system of trained co-teachers / co-teacher tutors who would also be in a position to serve as host co-teachers to student teachers undertaking school placement experience. As outlined above, this initiative could have significant potential to advance educational provision for all primary school children in Ireland. Furthermore, our proposal supports a number of government policies and priorities:
  - DES Special Education Teaching Allocation Model (circular 0013/2017)

- New Primary Language Curriculum for English and Irish Medium schools (2015)
- Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-22
- DEIS Plan (2017)
- DES Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011

### **Proposed Structure of Pilot Project:**

#### **Step 1:** Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for Practising Teachers

- Course preparation – ‘Co-teaching’. **The curricular focus would be Language / Literacy to align with recent curriculum developments in Literacy.** (*The co-teaching model envisaged is based on the Finnish model observed during the EiTTT project visit (i.e. a mainstream and special education teacher teaching together in a mainstream class).*)
- Selection of teacher participants. 18 teachers (3 from each of 6 partner schools comprising a resource / special education teacher and two mainstream teachers). (Sept. – Dec. 2017).

#### **Step 2:** Upskilling teachers

- In-house, in-school and online training. (Jan. – June 2018)
- Pilot teachers implement model. (Mar. – June)
- Networks of contact established. (Apr. – June)

#### **Step 3:** Summer Course in MIE for all teachers from pilot schools (July 2018)

- Co-facilitated by MIE staff and original 18 pilot teachers (equipping these teachers to become part of a national tutor initiative)
- Week-long intensive course identical to initial pilot programme

#### **Step 4:** Implementation of Host Co-Teaching in Partner Schools

- All course participants implement initiative in own schools (Sept. 2018 - )
- Modules on co-teaching for student teachers in MIE (Sept. – Nov.)
- Participating schools host student teachers (Nov. and/or Mar)
- Students observed on placement and tracked on subsequent placement (Nov. – Mar.)

#### **Step 5:** Nationwide Roll-out of Initiative (all school contexts – English medium, Irish medium, DEIS schools)

- 18 original participants encouraged to serve as tutors providing courses via Education Centres (**similar to successful ‘Aistear’ tutor initiative**)
- Tutor training offered to other teachers
- Tutor network established (IT Forum)