An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
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Exploring the Factors Behind the Growth in Demand for Special School and Special Class Places

Dr Deirdre MacIntyre, the Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP) and Dr Mary Kelly, Hibernia College

Abstract

This study, conducted by Hibernia College and the Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP) Europe on behalf of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), examines the factors contributing to the growing demand for special class and special school placements in Ireland. It explores these factors alongside the lived experiences of stakeholders across the education and health systems.

Informed by an analysis of national and international policy and emerging trends, the research draws on the perspectives of school leaders, teachers, special education teachers (SETs), special needs assistants (SNAs), parents, students and other key stakeholders across primary, post-primary and special school settings. These perspectives illuminate the realities of increasing demand, including its implications for school communities and the wider systems supporting children and young people with additional needs.

Using a Theory of Change framework, the study conceptualises demand as the outcome of multiple, interconnected influences operating at individual, family, school and wider education and health system levels. It distinguishes between direct drivers, which are more immediately associated with demand for specialist placements, and indirect drivers, which shape the circumstances in which placement decisions are made and experienced.

The research offers a comprehensive understanding of the changing landscape of special education provision in Ireland and identifies the importance of considering these interacting factors when informing future policy, planning and service development.

Dr Deirdre MacIntyre

Dr Deirdre MacIntyre (CPsychol, Ps.S.I.) is a clinical psychologist and co-founder of the Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP) Europe, where she serves as Dean of Research and Academic Affairs. In her work in higher education, Deirdre has played a leading role in developing innovative and accessible online postgraduate programmes in inclusion and special education, working in partnership with Queen's University Belfast, DCU, the University of East London and Hibernia College. She is Programme Director of the MA/PG Diploma in Inclusive and Special Education with Hibernia College, and recently led the development of ICEP Europe's QQI-accredited MSc in Psychology (Conversion) Programme. Her research interests centre on inclusion, special education, trauma-informed practice, gender-based violence, resilience and wellbeing, and nature-based solutions.

Deirdre has contributed to significant research in the field of inclusion, most notably Project IRIS, a longitudinal NCSE-funded study examining special education and inclusion in Irish schools. She has played a key role in numerous large-scale international research initiatives, including GoGreenRoutes, an Irish-led Horizon 2020 project exploring nature-based solutions for health and well-being.

Deirdre has also led many EU-funded projects, including THRIVE, which examined trauma-informed practice across Europe. Deirdre is co-author of the Stay Safe Programme, a nationally implemented, evidence-based child protection programme, and has published and presented her research nationally and internationally.

Dr Mary Kelly

Dr Mary Kelly is President of Hibernia College Group and a member of the College's Executive Management Team. Since joining Hibernia College in 2012, she has played a pivotal role in shaping the institution's strategic direction, driving research excellence, innovation, and academic development.

Previously serving as Academic Dean, Dr Kelly provided academic leadership across the School of Education's programme portfolio, including the Professional Master of Education (PME) in Primary Education, the Professional Master of Education (PME) in Post-primary Education, the Master of Arts in Inclusive and Special Education (MAISE), the Bachelor of Education (Honours) in Early Childhood Education, and the College's Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes. Through these programmes, she championed high-quality teacher education and the development of inclusive educational practices that support diverse learners.

A passionate advocate for inclusive education, Dr Kelly began her career as a primary school teacher, teaching in the area of special education in Ireland and internationally after graduating with a Bachelor of Education from St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. In 2001, she was seconded by the Department of

Education to deliver professional development in Learning Support through the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP), developing expertise in supporting diverse learners and promoting inclusive classroom practice.

She subsequently held several national leadership roles, including Deputy National Coordinator of PCSP, where she led the implementation of literacy and numeracy initiatives under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. She further strengthened her commitment to educational inclusion as a Literacy Consultant with the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI), supporting evidence-based approaches to improving outcomes for children and schools.

Dr Kelly holds a Doctor of Education (EdD) in Education and Leadership from Dublin City University, a Master of Education from University College Dublin, and a Bachelor of Education from St Patrick's College, Drumcondra.

Her research interests include practitioner research, special education, teacher education, and inclusive pedagogy. She is also recognised for her expertise in curriculum development and the innovative use of educational technology to enhance teaching and learning.