Inclusion at a crossroads
Special education in Ireland

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was the first human rights treaty this century. Adopted in 2006, it aimed to change attitudes and approaches to disability, demanding that signatory countries recognise ‘the inherent dignity and worth and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’.

The UNCRPD includes the right to education for all ‘those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which interact with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’. The convention specifically obliges states to ensure that students with additional learning needs and/or disabilities can access an inclusive, quality, and free education at all levels, and on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.

The UNCRPD has therefore widened the evolving and ongoing international debate about how students with disabilities and/or additional learning needs should best be educated, not least what is understood by ‘inclusive education’. Many countries have developed education policies which aim to create more inclusive school environments. However, few would currently comply with the UNCRPD’s definition on segregation given the ongoing education of students with additional learning needs and/or disabilities in special classes or special schools.

Ireland, for example, ratified the UNCRPD in 2018. The country’s existing structure of provision for students with additional learning needs and/or disabilities allows students to be educated in mainstream schools, in special classes within mainstream schools, or in special schools. As the UN has made it clear that parallel systems are not compatible with its view of inclusion, academics and policymakers alike argue that inclusive education in Ireland is at a crossroads.

Respected experts in the field, Dr Joanne Banks and Professor Michael Shevlin of Trinity College, Dublin, believe that Ireland’s ratification of the UNCRPD is the most significant external influence yet exerted on the development of special education policy.

EVALUATION
Special education in Ireland has undergone dramatic changes over the last 30 years. As well as changes to funding models and a rise in the number of special education teaching posts, there have been increases in the number of students with additional learning needs and/or disabilities attending mainstream schools, as well as the number of special classes in mainstream schools. The number of special schools has also grown.

As a result, between 2011 and 2019 government expenditure on special education increased by 46%, and special education as a percentage of the total education budget increased by 13%, with €1.9 billion allocated to special education in 2019. In the same period, the number of additional teaching posts for special education increased by 46% and the provision of special classes by 196%. The number of students enrolled in special classes also increased by 155% classes for students with additional learning needs and/or disabilities in a recent paper published in Education Sciences. They find that, despite significant funding increases, challenges persist in achieving a more inclusive school system compatible with the UNCRPD. A major issue is that there has been rapid expansion of the special class model, but only limited investigation of its efficacy. While recognising that comparing research from different countries is hampered by differences in language definitions, some countries students may be placed in special classes for a short time, as an intervention. Other countries have more permanent settings, but children may attend special classes for just part of the day. One state that has pioneered fully inclusive education is New Brunswick in Canada. Here the province has legislated for – and developed best practice in – the inclusion of all students in mainstream classes, including socially disadvantaged and First Nation pupils, as well as those with additional learning needs and/or disabilities.

Banks and Shevlin find that, despite the fact that special class provision for students with additional learning needs and/or disabilities is the norm in 18 out of 23 countries studied, there is little evidence to suggest that students benefit from such placements. Some argue that students with disabilities in mainstream classes are more likely to achieve better academic results and qualifications than those in special class settings and that they are also more likely to develop the social skills which will be valuable to them in later life. Others argue that students with disabilities in special classes benefit from having small class sizes, specially trained teachers, individual attention, and an emphasis on teaching functional skills.

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Inclusive education and special education have been happening internationally as well as in Ireland, as other countries also struggle to meet the UNCRPD’s definition of inclusion.

International Research
Banks and Shevlin explore Ireland’s continued operation of a parallel system of special schools and special education in mainstream schools. For example, in
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