

Draft Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education
Response from the National Council for Special Education
March 2011

Introduction

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) welcomes the publication of the draft policy paper on the Continuum of Teacher Education by the Teaching Council and appreciates the opportunity provided to respond to the ideas contained in the paper and to pay an active part in shaping the work of the Teaching Council in the area of teacher education. The NCSE is keen to ensure that the principle of inclusive education and its implications for teacher education are taken into consideration in the development of the continuum of teacher education.

The NCSE welcomes the focus in the document on the:

- Themes of innovation, integration and improvement as underpinning all stages of the continuum.
- Emphasis on ensuring cohesion in teacher education policy and practice across all phases of the teaching career
- View of teachers as life long learners and the concomitant need to develop the capabilities central to teachers' professional practice and personal growth throughout the continuum.
- Need to foster reflective, critical and enquiry-oriented learning.

The NCSE concurs with the importance the document attaches to the State continuing to support high quality teacher education and guaranteeing an adequate supply of highly qualified teachers. The NCSE is of the view that pupils with special educational needs in particular require highly qualified teachers who are in a position to provide continuity in teaching and learning for them. The NCSE has taken steps to inform schools, as early as possible, of the level of teaching support that will be retained by them in the following academic year. This is in place to assist schools to plan for continuity in the deployment and timetabling of teachers working with pupils with special educational needs.

Inclusive Education

At a number of points the document refers to the need for 'an increased emphasis on the key strategic priorities of literacy and numeracy, ICT and inclusion'. While the NCSE welcomes this focus on inclusion in the draft policy, it views inclusion as a fundamental principle underpinning the educational system as well as a stand alone issue to be prioritised. Section 2 of the Education for Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 provides that a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with other children who do not have such needs unless this is inconsistent with the best interest of the child or the effective provision of education for other children.

Following the enactment of the EPSEN Act 2004, the provision of special education has undergone considerable change in recent years with increasing numbers of pupils with special educational needs being educated in mainstream schools and classrooms. These changes have important implications for the preparation, education and continuing professional development of teachers who are now being educated to teach in settings where children with special educational and children with other additional learning needs are included.

The goal of enabling children with special educational needs to participate in and benefit from inclusive education is a challenging one which will require the combined efforts of all concerned. The NCSE is aware that delivery of the EPSEN Act vision, in terms of tangible benefits to children with special educational needs will be effected by schools and teachers on the front line. The NCSE believes that the ways in which schools and teachers are prepared for this task is a key challenge which should be highlighted in the draft policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education. The final agreed policy needs to address explicitly the issue of inclusive education provision for children with special educational needs as set out in the EPSEN Act 2004. The guiding principles set out in the document should recognise the implications of the provisions of the Act for the initial education of all teachers and for their ongoing professional development. Finally the policy must be sufficiently robust to ensure that the principle of inclusive education informs and permeates professional development across the continuum of teacher education.

The concept of inclusion is a key concept in teacher education, both in terms of how it relates to special educational needs and more broadly. The NCSE *Implementation Report: Plan for the Phased Implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004* (NCSE, 2006) identifies teacher education as one of the major investment areas (see page 114). While the implementation of the EPSEN Act has now been deferred, the need for the professional development of teachers in the provision of education in inclusive environments remains as urgent as ever.

In order for pupils to be meaningfully included in schools, teachers' attitudes to inclusion and to pupils with special educational needs are of paramount importance. Pupils need to be supported and challenged to reach their potential ability. The draft continuum states that initial teacher education should be mindful of and challenge as appropriate the attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning which student teachers carry with them and which inform and guide their professional practice. The NCSE would put forward the argument that it is equally important to do this throughout the teacher's career as the cohort of pupils attending schools and their needs change over time.

Finally while literacy, numeracy, ICT and inclusion are identified as key strategic priorities in Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development, there is no provision made for these as priorities in induction. The NCSE suggests that consideration should be given to this having regard to the Teaching Council's principle of integration and the 'view of teacher education as a continuum... to ensure cohesion in teacher education policy and practice across all phases of the teaching career'. It would therefore seem important to have consistency and continuity in priority foci across the continuum of teacher education.

Defining Inclusion

While 'inclusion' is identified as a key strategic priority in the document, there is no definition or explanation of the term provided. On page four, the document refers to the 'inclusion of children with disabilities and/or special educational needs into mainstream schools, the increase in the numbers of students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds etc'. At another point on the same page the document refers to having regard for social inclusion as an increasingly significant issue. It appears that the Teaching Council is referring to the inclusion of pupils in its broadest sense. The term

'inclusion' needs to be clearly defined in the document so that it is clear what meaning is to be ascribed to the use of the term.

In early 2008, the National Council for Special Education formally sought the advice of its Consultative Forum on a definition of inclusive education for children with special educational needs as set out in the EPSEN Act. The Forum met on a number of occasions to consider the matter and a literature review was commissioned to support the Forum's work and set it in a wider international context. The review of the current literature presented confirmed that there is no one agreed definition of inclusion. The review highlighted a number of international definitions which were considered in the formulation of the definition below. It was agreed that the definition put forward by the Consultative Forum should be a combination of the UNESCO (2005) definition and the description included within the DES (2007) Post-Primary Guidelines for Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs.

The following definition of inclusion was proposed by the Consultative Forum in advice given to the National Council for Special Education:

Inclusion is seen as a process of:

- addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and
- removing barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements, to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school.

This definition must be viewed in the context of the statutory remit of the National Council for Special Education as set out in the EPSEN Act 2004.

Continuum of Provision

In Ireland, pupils with special educational needs are served by a continuum of educational provision, the span of which stretches from full-time enrolment in mainstream classes to full-time enrolment in special schools with a range of options in between. A range of placement options is currently available to these children who may be educated in a:

- mainstream class with additional support from:
 - the class teacher through differentiation of the curriculum, co-teaching with other teaching staff, as required and
 - a resource/learning support teacher
- special class in a mainstream school
- special school which has been designated by the DES for a particular category or categories of disability
- special class in a special school.

Pupils are enrolled in special schools, in special classes or in mainstream classes in accordance with the terms of DES circulars, the recommendations contained in professional reports and in accordance with parental wishes. The policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education must take cognisance of the range of educational provision that is in place for children with special educational needs.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) commissioned St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin to undertake a review of special schools and classes. The final research report of this review was submitted to the NCSE in October 2009 (Ware et al, 2009). Council supports the recommendation contained in the report that staff in special schools should have access to continuous professional development which includes opportunities to develop skills appropriate to teaching particular groups of pupils and collaborative working skills for appropriate interaction with colleagues, parents and professionals.

The draft policy document states that the school placement for student teachers should take place in a variety of settings and lists a range of teaching situations and school contexts (p.11). The National Council for Special Education considers that these options should include classes with children with special educational needs and placement of the student teacher in special schools and classes.

Finally it should be noted that the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs can pose particular challenges for teachers in post-primary schools due to the nature of syllabuses taught and the complexity of organisational structures within these schools.

The policy must recognise the implications of these challenges for the provision of education for post primary teachers at all stages of the continuum.

Findings emerging from NCSE Research

A number of key cross-cutting issues in relation to the Continuum of Teacher Education arise from the findings of four international reviews of the literature commissioned by the NCSE:

1. International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Provision in the Education of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. (Parsons, S. et al, 2009).
2. Evidence of Best Practice Models and Outcomes in the Education of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children: An International Review. (Marschark, M., Spencer E., 2009).
3. International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Models and Outcomes in the Education of Blind and Visually Impaired Children. (Douglas, G. et al, 2009).
4. International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Models and Outcomes in the Education of Children with Emotional Disturbance/Behavioural Difficulties (Cooper P. and Jacobs, B., 2010).

These key issues include the following:

- The need for The Teaching Council to develop and establish standards of teaching in relation to the knowledge, skills and competence necessary for teaching pupils with special educational needs across the range of educational settings. This should include standards necessary for working with pupils across different categories of special educational needs, including sensory impairment, emotional and behavioural disturbance, intellectual disability, autism, those with complex and multiple disabilities, speech and language disorders, specific learning disabilities etc. These standards will then provide guidance for the training required by teachers working with pupils with special educational needs.

- Teachers need knowledge and understanding of the specific needs of children and young people with special educational needs which can be different depending on the particular individual.
- Teachers of children and young people with special educational needs must be equipped to work in collaborative relationships with parents, teachers and other professionals.
- Appropriate training pathways must be developed for teachers working with children and young people with special educational needs from initial teacher education, induction and continuing professional development. Accreditation must also be considered.

Engagement in Continuing Professional Development

The draft document asserts that 'a registered teacher should take all reasonable steps to maintain, develop and broaden the professional knowledge, skill and capabilities appropriate to his or her teaching. Provision for discrete time for CPD needs to be included in the normal schedule of a teacher's work, without interfering with the integrity of the school year (p. 16)'. The National Council for Special Education considers that it is the responsibility of all professionals to engage in continuing professional development. It welcomes the declared intention of the Teaching Council to work towards a position where renewal of a teacher's registration will be subject to the receipt of satisfactory evidence in relation to engagement in CPD, thereby effectively making it mandatory for teachers to engage. The Teaching Council will need to stipulate a minimum standard for what it regards as 'satisfactory evidence of engagement' so that levels of engagement are monitored.

A secondary question arises in respect to the manner in which equity of access to CPD will be addressed within the overall policy? It is likely that resources for CPD will always be finite, so how can a school ensure an equitable distribution of CPD amongst all teaching staff? The NCSE acknowledges that schools will require expertise developed in several targeted areas but considers that all teachers should engage in a minimum level of CPD. The Teaching Council will need to indicate to schools how an equitable distribution of CPD can be achieved amongst its teaching staff in situations of competing demands.

Concluding Comments

The National Council for Special Education would like to recognise the significant contribution made by the Teacher Education Section of the Department of Education and Skills over the last number of years in providing professional development opportunities for teachers of children with special educational needs through:

- Expansion of accredited programmes delivered through the Colleges of Education and Universities
- Establishment of the SESS which seeks to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in schools for children with special educational needs.

Council believes that teacher education for children with special educational needs should be provided within an overall framework for initial, induction and continuing professional development and should be both generalist and specialist in nature. Specialist training should follow on from a general teaching qualification and ideally at a later date when the teacher has gained experience in teaching children both with and without special educational needs. Teachers are then more sensitive to and aware of the additional specialist training which they require to more competently undertake the education of children with special educational needs.

Council is conscious of its statutory obligation, under Section 20 (j) of the EPSEN Act, 2004 to advise the Minister in relation to any matter relating to the education of children and others with disabilities. Council therefore attaches considerable importance to engaging with the Teaching Council in developing a policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education, having particular regard to the requirements of teachers of children with special educational needs within the policy.

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