

Contents

Council News

Membership of the NCSE Council 2007- 2009 2

Working with schools and parents

Assessment of Needs (Under 5s) 2
Appeals System 3
Customer Charter 3

NCSE Research Update

Inaugural Research Seminar 4
Research News 6

Special Education

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 7
Special Education News 8

Parents section

Ruth's story 9

SENO section

ASD Classes in Wicklow South East 11



Chairman thanks outgoing Council

Sydney Blain reflects on work done and looks forward to renewed collaborations

Christmas time marks the end of a three year term of office for the Council of NCSE.¹ I would therefore like to extend a sincere word of thanks to outgoing Council members who, over those years, have devoted considerable time, knowledge and experience to directing and promoting the activities of the National Council for Special Education. Each member made a unique contribution to the work of the Council as it set about ensuring the delivery of appropriate educational supports and improved educational outcomes to children with special educational needs in Ireland.

As we await Ministerial decision on the appointment of a new Council, it is perhaps opportune to reflect on some important aspects of the work of the present Council over its term of office. In 2007, a key task was to bring forward the work on developing the Strategic Plan, on which the previous Council had made considerable progress, and to finalise it for publication. The Strategic Plan in place for the years 2008-2011 provides NCSE with its strategic direction for this period.

The research programme of Council has expanded significantly since 2008 and now includes major commissioned studies such as a three year longitudinal research project, Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools), a national survey of parental experiences and a number of international literature reviews on important aspects of special education. This research programme together with our ongoing experience in allocating services directly to children with special educational

needs and our continued interactions with stakeholders provides a platform from which the next Council can begin to formulate well-grounded policy advice to the Minister for Education and Science.

The inaugural NCSE research seminar held in December 2009 represented a culmination of intensive work and provided a further opportunity for discussion with stakeholders regarding future work and development in the research area. Presentations at the seminar addressed issues relating to the education of children on the autism spectrum; children who are deaf or hard of hearing; children who are blind or visually impaired and the future role of special schools and classes. Abstracts from research reports presented at the seminar are included on page 4 of this newsletter.

Council was disappointed that the Government was unable to proceed with the full implementation of the Education for Persons with Disability Act (2004) by 2010, as anticipated. However, I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the Government's commitment, in the renewed Programme for Government (October 2009), to the implementation of the EPSEN Act and the development, in consultation with stakeholders, of a costed multi-annual plan to implement some priority aspects of the Act. Progress in this area will require continued close collaboration with the Departments of Education and Science and Health and Children and NCSE looks forward to the further development of these partnerships in the future.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to wish all our readers a very Happy Christmas and a peaceful New Year. ■



Articles to be considered for publication and comments about the newsletter may be emailed to: newsletter@ncse.ie.

The views expressed in this newsletter are those of the individual authors and are not necessarily endorsed by the National Council for Special Education.

¹ Membership of the NCSE Council 2007-2009 is given on page 2

Membership of the NCSE Council 2007–2009

Mr Sydney Blain (Chairperson), Principal, Church of Ireland College of Education, Rathmines, Dublin

Mr Christy Lynch, CEO KARE

Dr Seamus Hegarty, Chairman of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Former Director of the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales

Ms Siobhán Barron, Director, National Disability Authority

Mr Rory O Sullivan, Principal, Killester College of Further Education, Dublin

Ms Teresa Griffin, Principal Officer, Special Education Section, Department of Education and Science

Mr Tom O Sullivan, Assistant General Secretary, Irish National Teachers' Organisation. Former Principal of St Senan's Boys National School, Limerick

Professor Patricia Noonan Walsh, (to July 2009) NDA Professor of Disability Studies, UCD. Fellow of International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disability

Maighread Ní Ghallchobhair O.P., Former principal of Benincasa School for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties

Ms Anita Dillon, Special class Co-ordinator in Killina Presentation Secondary School, Tullamore, County Offaly

Ms Caroline O'Brien, Assistant Principal at Holy Child Secondary School, Killiney, County Dublin. Former member of the Board of Directors of the Special Olympics Ireland.

Mr Don Mahon, Assistant Chief Inspector, Department of Education and Science

Mr Barry Murphy, Principal Officer, Department of Health and Children

Mr Dermot Ryan (to Dec 2008), Principal Officer, Department of Health and Children. Nominee of Minister for Health and Children

Mr Gearóid Ó Conluain (to Sept 2008) Deputy Chief Inspector, Department of Education and Science ■

Assessment of Needs (Under 5s)

The Disability Act, 2005 is a key element of the National Disability Strategy and is designed to provide for and underpin the participation of people with disabilities in society by supporting the provision of disability specific services and improving access to mainstream public services.

Part 2 of this Act establishes a system for the assessment of individual health service needs and where appropriate, the education services to be provided. In June 2007, Part 2 of the Act was commenced for children under 5 years of age with a disability. Since then, the NCSE has processed over 1,400 requests for assistance for such children, with all such applications submitted by HSE Assessment Officers nationally to the NCSE Head Office in Trim.

Having analysed the profile of applications submitted (in terms of age of the child, nature of the disability) and identified how the Council can respond to such requests, it has been agreed that these requests for assistance can be processed locally where by the Council through the local SENO can process the

request for assistance submitted by the local Assessment Officer. To this end, regional training presentations have been provided jointly by the NCSE, NEPS (who may in certain circumstances assist the SENO) and the HSE and it is intended that requests for assistance will be processed locally throughout the country from January 2010. This should result in a more timely processing of requests and also the development of localised contacts between the NCSE and the HSE in relation to these assessments. It should also assist the NCSE in identifying at an earlier stage, the numbers of children with special educational needs, arising from a disability. ■



Appeals System

Since January 2005, the NCSE has processed approximately 60,000 applications from schools for special educational supports in respect of children with special educational needs arising from a disability. The NCSE is committed to exercising its role in relation to the allocation of additional teaching hours and Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support in a manner that is fair, consistent and transparent to both schools and parents of children with special educational needs. In this regard, the allocation of resources to schools by SENOs, on behalf of the NCSE, is undertaken in accordance with the policy parameters set down by the Department of Education and Science.

In some cases, schools and parents were of the view that the decision arrived at by the local SENO did not fully conform to the above-mentioned policy parameters. However no appeals mechanism was available under which the relevant decision

could be contested. Following discussions with Management Bodies, the NCSE has sought to introduce a structured appeals process whereby schools and as appropriate, parents may seek to appeal the decision of the SENO in relation to the resources allocated to the school. It is intended that the process will be initially piloted in a number of cases where schools and parents have expressed the wish to appeal a decision. This will precede a national roll out of the appeals process.

The proposed process will involve two stages. Firstly, the relevant Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) will provide an outline of the decision and the factors underpinning the decision. The school/parent will then be invited to make an appeal should they feel aggrieved at the decision. Secondly, following the receipt of the appeal, a Senior SENO will then examine the decision and the outcome. The Senior SENO will

then provide written feedback regarding the rationale for the decision to the appellant. The Senior SENO may uphold or alter the original decision.

Once an analysis of the proposed appeals process has been completed, it is anticipated that all schools will be informed of the process and the facility for schools and parents to submit appeals will commence on a nationwide basis by January 2010. The process and relevant appeals forms will also be available on the NCSE website. ■



NCSE Customer Charter

The NCSE Customer Charter describes our role. It briefly sets out the services we provide and the standards that we apply for all our customers. The Charter is published on our website and is also available on request from any of our staff. It is presented as a clear, succinct and accessible statement, which will help our customers to have a better understanding of our role. It will also help us in further developing and improving our services for our customers.

The Charter in particular clarifies:

- what we do;
- who our main customers are;
- how we deliver our local services;
- what these local services are;
- the policy framework governing our services;
- how we can be contacted on a face to face basis by appointment, by post, by e-mail, by phone;
- our assurance of service standards;
- how we work with schools and other agencies;

- our research role;
- our role in policy advice;
- how we will consider customer comments or complaints;
- our role in providing information.

The NCSE Customer Charter also gives some guidelines as to how our customers can work with us and help us to deliver a high quality service:

- give full and relevant information on a timely basis to your school or your SENO;
- contact your local school directly

where it is in a position to deal directly with your query;

- if you have internet access, check our website www.ncse.ie for information you may need;
- e-mail or write to our staff directly using the direct e-mail and contact details we have provided;
- call our staff directly using the direct dial personal phone number contact details we have provided;
- should the person you need to speak to be unavailable, please use our

voicemail and leave your name and number so (s)he may call you back;

- make an appointment with our local staff when you need to meet us;
- if you wish to make a complaint, consult our guidelines and procedures;
- treat our staff courteously, as you would wish to be treated yourself;
- make comments or suggestions about the service you receive. ■

NCSE Research Update

Inaugural Research Seminar

The NCSE's inaugural research seminar took place in Croke Park Conference Centre on 11th December 2009. The seminar featured presentations from the authors of four recently completed reports dealing separately with the issues of the education of children on the autism spectrum, children who are deaf or hard of hearing and children who are blind or visually impaired, and with the future role of special schools and classes.

The seminar also provided the NCSE with the first opportunity to engage directly with key stakeholders in the sector about the value and role of research and the findings of these particular reports. Although capacity at the seminar was limited, the presentations and the research reports are being published and made available for download on the NCSE website, so that the information reaches as wide an audience as possible.



Jennifer Doran,
Head of Research



Seamus Hegarty,
Chairperson of
the Research
Committee



Clare Farrell,
Research officer

The findings from all these reports will be considered in detail by the NCSE and may inform the development of policy advice in the relevant areas to the Minister for Education and Science. Abstracts from the research reports presented at the seminar are carried below:

International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Provision in the Education of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Sarah Parsons, Karen Guldborg, Andrea MacLeod and Glenys Jones (School of Education, University of Birmingham) with Anita Prunty and Tish Balfe (St. Patrick's College, Dublin)

Abstract

Commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in Ireland to inform educational policy and provision, this literature review had two main evidence strands: 'empirical' and 'expert'. The *empirical strand* involved systematic searching of electronic databases featuring peer reviewed empirical studies; from 499 articles identified, 100 articles were retained for review. The *expert strand* included key selected reports or policy guidelines regarding best practice for children and adults on the autism spectrum, from the UK and Ireland only.

Findings highlighted the importance of maintaining a range of educational provision to cater appropriately for a wide diversity of need; one type of approach or intervention is unlikely to be effective for all. Behaviourally based intervention approaches from North America, especially for children under five years, dominated the empirical evidence. The corollary of this was significant gaps in the evidence base, especially with regard to educational provision more widely, as distinct from

a specific type of *intervention or learning approach*; provision for, and experiences of, older children and adults; qualitative exploration of educational contexts and young people's views; Irish-specific evidence; objective, independent evaluation of interventions and effectiveness of multiagency collaboration. There is a need for greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners to establish what 'works best' for children and young people on the autism spectrum in real-world classrooms and education generally.

Evidence of Best Practice Models and Outcomes in the Education of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children: An International Review

Marc Marschark, Ph.D., National Technical Institute for the Deaf – Rochester Institute of Technology (USA), University of Edinburgh and University of Aberdeen (Scotland)

Abstract

Hearing loss in childhood is relatively infrequent, but when it occurs, it typically has real implications for children's development and academic achievement. Many countries have recently instituted newborn hearing screening and early intervention programmes for deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) children. These programmes offer children and their families services that can help to provide a strong foundation for learning in both formal and informal contexts. Yet, educational programming and support services for DHH children frequently proceed on the basis of tradition, intuition, and administrative convenience rather than being based on research evidence. As a result, the true benefits of various educational/developmental programmes and their generality for various subgroups of DHH children are often unclear, and observed outcomes may

be due more to the individual(s) providing or receiving those services than the services themselves.

This review was undertaken in order to provide an evidence base to inform policy advice on the education of DHH children. The *Best Practices* report provides a detailed review of what we know and what we do not know about educating DHH children, describing the existing research with regard to various educational practices and their outcomes, it also points out popular beliefs about raising and educating DHH children that lack research support. The presentation focussed on four major issues identified as providing the foundations for educating DHH children: early identification and intervention, language (including cochlear implants), educational models, and teaching-learning.

International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Models and Outcomes in the Education of Blind and Visually Impaired Children

Graeme Douglas, Steve McCall, Mike McLinden and Sue Pavey (Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, School of Education, University of Birmingham) and Jean Ware and Ann Marie Farrell (St. Patrick's College, Dublin)

Abstract

In May 2008 the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) invited tenders to conduct an international review of the literature of evidence of best practice models and outcomes in the education of blind and visually impaired children. A team from the Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (School of Education, University of Birmingham, UK) and St Patrick's College, Dublin responded to this invitation and were awarded the contract. The work was carried out in autumn 2008 and then modified in response to feedback from NCSE in spring 2009.

The approach to the literature review involved: agreeing a

broad topic framework for the literature; stage 1 review (initial review of key visual impairment literature); appraisal of the topic framework based upon findings in stage 1 review; and stage 2 review (broader systematic searches of electronics databases).

The literature review resulted in approximately 325 relevant references associated with nine 'review focus' topics (under the broader headings of 'access to the mainstream curriculum' and 'access to the additional curriculum'). The review focus topics are:

Access to the mainstream curriculum

1. Assessment of learning needs
2. Pedagogy and teaching strategies to access the curriculum
3. Access to public examinations
4. Print literacy
5. Braille literacy

Access to the additional curriculum

6. Mobility and independence
7. Social and emotional inclusion
8. ICT
9. Low vision training

The report presents an analysis of the literature for each of the nine topics. Each of the topics has an associated evidence-based recommendation. A final section of the report considers the review in the Irish educational context and draws upon a wider range of 'review context' literature (including international policy documents and expert views). This section presents six 'Implications for Ireland'.

Review of the Current and Future Role of Special Schools and Special Classes in Ireland

Dr Jean Ware (The College of Education and Lifelong Learning, Bangor University), Tish Balfe, Dr Cathal Butler, Dr Thérèse Day, Maeve Dupont, Catherine Harten, Ann-Marie Farrell, Rory

McDaid, Margaret O'Riordan, Dr Anita Prunty, Dr Joe Travers, (St. Patrick's College, Dublin)

Abstract

In 2005, the Minister for Education and Science announced that a review of special schools and classes would be conducted. The Department of Education and Science (DES) conducted this review in two phases; phase one was completed by researchers on behalf of the DES in early 2007. The DES subsequently requested the NCSE to conduct phase two of the review and provided suggested terms of reference. The review was conducted by the Special Education Department, St Patrick's College, and Council accepted the report in October 2009.

Aim

To review the role of special schools and special classes for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools and to provide a review of international practice in the area of special education with a particular emphasis on the use of special schools and special classes.

Methods

1. Questionnaire survey of special schools and mainstream schools, primary and post primary, with special classes.
2. Literature review of international practice in special education focused on the roles of special schools and special classes.
3. Focus group interviews involving pupils, parents, teachers, principals, special needs assistants.
4. Case studies in three schools.
5. Submissions from relevant organisations, and the public at large addressing the key research questions.

Main Findings

Both special schools and special classes were regarded by the study participants as an important part of the continuum of provision for pupils with special needs.

Two clear roles were envisaged for special schools into the future:

- providing for those pupils with the most complex needs
- supporting and collaborating with mainstream schools.

Special classes were perceived to have advantages in:

- facilitating inclusion within the mainstream setting
- providing a 'safe haven' for some pupils
- a favourable pupil: teacher ratio
- enabling pupils to remain in their local area
- flexibility in the organisation of teaching and curriculum provision.

Issues which emerged for fulfilling these roles:

- expertise and resources
- only 1/4 to 1/3 of teachers working with pupils with special educational needs have undertaken specialist training at diploma level or higher
- not all special schools currently have the resources and/or the expertise to support mainstream schools
- insufficient and inconsistent multidisciplinary support
- informality and unresourced nature of dual placement arrangements
- lack of continuity between special class provision in primary and post primary schools.

Fifteen recommendations were identified by the researchers ■

Diagnosis and Assessment of Special Educational Needs

A research report reviewing issues relating to the diagnosis and assessment of special educational needs is

Dr Martin Desforjes and Professor Geoff Lindsay, authors of the report, making a presentation at a Council meeting



now being finalised and it is envisaged that this report will be published on the NCSE website before the end of 2009.

The report examines evolving policies and practices on the diagnosis and assessment of special educational needs in a number of countries, including Ireland, and reviews the linkages of such policies with the allocation of resources. The report also identifies potential implications and challenges arising from the review for Irish policy and practice into the future. Dr Martin Desforjes and Professor Geoff Lindsay, the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick, UK, carried out the review. ■

Ongoing Work

The programme of research reported in the last issue of NCSE News is progressing well, and a number of reports from empirical research studies currently underway are scheduled for completion and publication in mid 2010.

Among those scheduled for completion by mid 2010 are reports on access to curriculum for younger children with special needs in primary schools, transitions from primary to post-primary for pupils with special needs, a national survey of parental experiences of special educational needs (SEN), and a study of SEN prevalence and data issues in Ireland. ■

Audit of Research in Ireland

The audit of SEN research on the island of Ireland since 2000 should also be completed in 2010. This will be in the form of a user-friendly searchable database of Irish research in this field which will be updated on an ongoing basis. The database will include short entries on each piece of research identified by the audit, summarising issues such as methodology, themes, and categories of SEN referred to. It should prove to be a valuable information resource to the Council and many others working in the area.

Dr Joe Travers and a research team at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, are carrying out the audit. The team has sought information on published materials and dissertations from educational institutions, government departments and statutory and voluntary bodies with an interest in the field. They are also actively seeking out unpublished works. If you or your organisation has a piece of local research or a small study that you think should be included, please let them know. ■

Future Plans

The shape and content of the NCSE research programme for 2010 is being actively considered by the Research Committee and Council. The focus of this programme of activity will be to build strategically on work to date and to grow the evidence base required to inform the ongoing development of inclusive education and the implementation of the EPSEN Act in the future. ■

Thanks to Professor Patricia Noonan Walsh



Patricia Noonan Walsh

Professor Patricia Noonan Walsh, member of the NCSE Council and Research Committee who resigned earlier this year, was an enthusiastic advocate of the value of research and brought considerable expertise to the Council's work. The NCSE would like to thank Patricia for the valuable contribution she made to the work of the Council, and in particular its research function, in the last few years. Patricia will be missed and we would like to wish her very well in her future endeavours.

The Research Committee would like to welcome on board Council member, Don Mahon, who subsequently joined the Research Committee, and indeed has already been very busily involved in its activities. ■

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE) is an independent and self-governing body established by member states of the European Union. Iceland, Norway and Switzerland are also participating countries. The Agency is maintained by annual contributions from member countries and is also supported by the European Union Institutions under the EU Lifelong Learning Programme.

The Agency facilitates the collection, processing and dissemination of information regarding the education of young people with SEN across Europe and also promotes the full participation of young people with SEN in mainstream education and training.

An overview of important projects completed by the Agency over 2009 and an outline of ongoing and future work planned is provided below:

Indicators for Inclusive Education

Representatives from different countries highlighted the need to produce a set of Indicators for Inclusive Education which could assist policy makers to monitor progress in this regard at both National and European level. It was also recognised that such indicators could act as a tool in the collection of data across different European countries. The summary report 'Development of a set of indicators for inclusive education in Europe' is available to download from the Agency's website, www.european-agency.org/agency-projects.

Assessment in Inclusive Settings

This project aimed to:

- examine how inclusive practice in the area of assessment might inform decisions regarding teaching and learning and

- make recommendations regarding how assessment in inclusive settings could be most effectively practiced.

Twenty three member states participated in the project. Available materials are downloadable from the website and include a project summary, country reports from participating countries, a thematic database, experts' contact details, presentations of examples of assessment practice and other project and reference materials.

Early Childhood Intervention

During 2009, the Agency undertook a short-term project to update its previous Early Childhood Intervention Project which ended in 2004. The aim is to examine progress made by countries since 2004 and to develop a set of key indicators. A first project summary report is due to be presented in January 2010, with the final project outcome available by the end of 2010. The Irish expert nominated for the project was Dr. Thomas Walsh, Inspectorate, Department of Education and Science. Country information provided by the nominated experts will be uploaded on the Agency website when finalized.

Pupils with Special Educational Needs and an Immigrant Background

A summary report is being compiled on the education of pupils with special educational needs and an immigrant background. The main project findings will be based upon information gathered through country reports and an analysis of practices described. The report will be made available in late 2009 and will be downloadable from the website.

Teacher Education for Inclusion

The Agency has embarked on a new project which has been

given high priority by member states and which will span a three year period. This project aims to examine how initial teacher education prepares teachers to teach in inclusive settings and to provide information on best practice in supporting teachers in this regard. Project experts have been nominated by participating countries – the Irish experts appointed to the project are Ms Aine Lawlor, Director, The Teaching Council and Mr. Alan Sayles, Inspector, Department of Education and Science.

Four key themes have been identified for the project on Teacher Education for Inclusion.

- What kind of teachers do we need for an inclusive society in a 21st century school?
- How can the whole training continuum be accounted for?
- What are the essential teacher competences for inclusive education?
- How can a wider brief to training (involving other education professionals) be established?

Key elements of the project will include the compilation of county reports in accordance with an agreed format which will enable comparisons to be made of policy and practice in teacher education in the participating countries. It is also expected that a composite report which will include recommendations for policy makers will be drawn up.

Vocational Education and Training: Policy and Practice in the field of SNE

The main aim of this project is to examine the challenges which face young people with special educational needs in vocational education and training. This project will also last for three

years. Vocational Education is one of the priorities highlighted by the European Council of Ministers within the Lisbon strategy with the objective to increase employment in Europe through high level qualifications obtained in higher and vocational educational settings. Member countries have been requested to confirm their participation and to nominate two experts per country.

Irish Contacts for the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education

- Representative Board Member: Don Mahon, Assistant Chief Inspector, Department of Education and Science
- National Co-ordinator: Mary Byrne, Special Education Adviser, National Council for Special Education. ■

Parental Booklet

NCSE intends to publish an Information Booklet for parents in early 2010 on the education of children and young people with special educational needs. Information is being compiled for children of all ages, 0-5 years, primary and post primary. When published, the booklet will be circulated throughout the country to facilitate the active involvement of parents in their children's education. ■

Establishment of Expert Group

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has set up an Expert Group on the Education of Children with Emotional and Behavioural Disorders to assist its Strategy and Policy Committee in developing initial policy and research proposals for consideration by Council.

The NCSE has already engaged in preliminary work in relation to the education of children with emotional and behavioural disorders through:

1. commissioning an international literature review of evidence of best practice models and outcomes in the education of children with EBD and
2. establishing a previous advisory group which reviewed the education of Excluded Children with Severe EBD and submitted a discussion paper to Council in May 2009.

It is intended that the new Expert Group will build on this existing body of work and draw together additional information concerning the current Irish context with respect to the education of children and young people with EBD. In turn, this will inform the work of the Strategy and Policy Committee in developing draft proposals for consideration by Council.

The Council has invited individuals from a number of key agencies and services to serve on this group to ensure that a wide range of views is reflected in its discussions and recommendations. The group will convene initially for a period of one year (October 2009– October 2010). ■



Ruth's story

FEDELMA O'FARRELL

My daughter Ruth is now 19 years of age and has just completed her second level education. She has been assessed as having moderate learning disability and has fine and gross motor skill problems. She has a wonderful capacity to enjoy life and a fantastic sense of humour.

One of the hardest decisions a parent of a child with special need has to make is where the child should go to school. We really wondered what would be the best environment for Ruth and worried about what school would take her, would she be accepted and then would she cope. When she started play-school 16 years ago there were not that many children with special needs in mainstream schools, there were no special needs assistants.

At the age of 3 years, Ruth went to our local play-school, my priority for her was to have role models for language and behaviour that would be 'typical' to give her the best opportunity and to see how she would cope. When I think back over this, I wonder how the play-school agreed to take her as she had no speech, very poor eye contact, was not toilet trained and could hardly stand up straight. She couldn't walk very well or run or climb and had absolutely no interest in other children.

The staff were amazing in how they worked with her. They encouraged her so much and helped her be part of the group and found all kinds of equipment to help and work with her. They were so open to helping her and encouraged me to leave her and said that if they needed me they would contact me. Their interest and dedication was remarkable.

When Ruth was reaching five years of age, we began to search for her next school. This involved going from school to school, each time bringing Ruth with me and asking the school to take

her. We were lucky and found a wonderful Montessori school, where Ruth stayed until she was 9. She was so lucky to have a teacher who was really interested in bringing her along and pushed out all the boats to include her in all the class/s activities. She saw the child before the disability. Her progress was slow but every step was a major achievement.

At that point, I heard about a special class that was being set up in a local primary school for children with a moderate learning disability. I thought that Ruth might have the best of both worlds here. She would have the environment of a mainstream

school where her role models for language and behaviour would be typical children and have the support of a special class where her individual needs could be met. I was lucky enough to apply for a place for her and got it.

This class worked very well. Again the teacher was totally dedicated and had a huge understanding of disability and looked at each child as an individual and worked to their strengths. They had integration both ways, for some time each day, the children with special needs went to a mainstream class appropriate to their age. At other times of the day, typical

“ All the children played in the playground together, took part in drama and any other sporting activity that they could manage together ”



Ruth's story (continued)

children worked in the class with the children with special needs. All the children played in the playground together, took part in drama and any other sporting activity that they could manage together.

There were eight children in the class and for the first few months the teacher worked with these children with no assistance, then a special needs assistant was appointed and eventually the class was 8 children with 1 teacher and 2 SNAs. The parents of the children became really good friends and were very involved in the school. We got a shock when our children were cut off from 'services' (Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy) because our children were in mainstream education and were now under the Department of Education rather than the Department of Health. However, following a successful court case taken by the parents, the services were restored to the children and provided in the school setting, depending on their individual needs.

We saw how well this special class was working and the benefits for our children and the other typical children. We wanted this experience for our children to go on, we had heard of a class in a post primary school in the Midlands that was working well and yet there was nothing similar available in Dublin, in an integrated setting, at the next stage of their education. The parents decided as a group to approach the Department of Education and request that they duplicate what we had in Primary level, using the school in the Midlands as the model, in a second level environment.

The Department of Education agreed that this was the way forward and gave us their support and agreement. It still took the next four years to have this class set up. While everyone in the Department of Education thought it was a great idea – putting that idea into reality was another story. However, in the end we succeeded, we found a school that was willing to set up

the class and had space to do so. A working group was set up of representatives of the Department of Education (including architects, school buildings, and psychologists), Department of Health, Service Providers, Board of Management of the school and parents of the children.

Finally the class was born. We went from having nowhere for our children in February to having a class, teachers, special needs assistants all up and running in September. This was quite an amazing timeframe but made possible by the willingness and attitude of the school to 'lets do it'!

“ All through her life the most important part of all the different placements has been communication ”

My daughter has now graduated from this school but the class is an enormous success, with eight children, a teacher and three special needs assistants. Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy and Speech therapy are provided as part of the day.

The children are totally accepted and part of everything that happens in the school. They circulate around the school at the class breaks in the same way as all the students. They are taught by mainstream teachers. Each child has a buddy and again typical children integrate during the school day in the class and work with the children. Each child in the special class has an individual education plan. In addition to the usual reading, writing and maths, the class is fitted out with kitchen facilities and has a large open space and a garden where the children can cook, garden, dance, and do whatever is best for them on a daily basis. The school, teachers and parents were so happy with the success of the class that a second class was

opened and now there are two classes of eight children in a school of 400 pupils. We also had enormous support from Marie Breen who was the SENO for the school and her support and help to both the parents and the school was exceptional.

Of course the story didn't end there. Ruth started in a Training Centre for 'Young Adults' with a moderate learning disability in September 2009. This is a 3 year programme where the focus is on independent living skills, including independent travel, cooking, shopping etc. It includes sporting activities, such as swimming, yoga, and dancing. In some cases the 'young adults' attend VEC courses and of course there is a big element of community and social integration and understanding your rights. This is really the biggest change for her now, there is a huge element of letting go, encouraging independence and helping her have a sense of 'herself' as a person in her own right.

All through her life the most important part of all the different placements has been **communication**, problems are best sorted out sooner rather than later. Having a communication process (notebook) can save a lot of anxiety and misunderstandings. When dealing with any child with a disability there is a greater need to involve all people in the persons life – teachers, SNAs, therapists, parents all need to talk to get the best outcome for the child and get the bigger picture. ■

ASD Classes in Wicklow South East

BY CAROL CAWLEY, SENO

St. Joseph's N.S Templerainey, Arklow

St. Joseph's National School which currently caters for approximately 620 students, has recently opened a pre-school class for children with autism. This class caters for children from 3 years to school age. There are currently three children in this class which can cater for a maximum of six children. The class is staffed by one full time teacher and one special needs assistant. The allocation of this class was welcomed by the outgoing principal Mr Michael O'Callaghan and the new principal Mr Diarmuid Kavanagh and was made to meet the needs of local pre-school children with Autism Spectrum Disorder who previously had to travel a considerable distance to the pre-school at St. Catherine's, Newcastle.

St. Joseph's National School already has two classes for children with ASD whose needs cannot be met in a whole time mainstream



environment (the junior class which caters for children from junior infant to second class and the senior class which caters for children from third class to sixth class level). Some of the children in these classes receive clinical supports as determined by Beechpark Services criteria.

Parents and teachers of pupils with ASD should be aware that the needs of many of these children can be met within a mainstream school environment. However, for those that cannot, the allocation of these classes provides pupils with an opportunity to attend school in their locality.

C.B.S. Post Primary, Arklow

Arklow C.B.S is a post primary boys' school in Arklow town. School principal, Mr Peter Somers, made an application to the NCSE to set up an ASD post primary class to meet the needs of existing and in-coming pupils with ASD whose needs could not be met in a whole time mainstream environment. The class, which opened in September 2009, currently has four pupils and can cater for a maximum of six children. The class is staffed by 1.5 teaching posts and two full time Special Needs Assistants.

Pupils enrolled in this class attend their core subjects in mainstream classes but use the base class as a resource during withdrawal time, where pupils can receive teaching support on their core subjects or work on issues relating to their diagnosis of autism such as coping with the transition to post primary or social skills training.

The class also offers social support / supervised activities during lunch times and unstructured periods which many

pupils with ASD find difficult to cope with.

Pupils who transferred from the ASD unit in St. Joseph's N.S. Arklow, who were in receipt of clinical supports from Beechpark Services, may continue to receive clinical supports at post primary level. However, this is not a pre requisite for entry into this class.

Parents and teachers of pupils with ASD should be aware that the needs of many of these children can be met within a mainstream school environment. However, for those that cannot, the allocation of ASD classes provides pupils with an opportunity to attend school in their locality and to transfer to post primary with their friends/familiar acquaintances. This may ease the transition from primary to post primary education and support pupils to develop lifelong friendships and social networks which enhance a sense of belonging in their community. This can be an essential element of enhancing the social and emotional development of children on the ASD spectrum. ■

