



Inclusivity through exclusivity: An evaluation of the provision of a special education needs (SEN) placement within second level art & design teacher education in the Republic of Ireland



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Students immersed with persons with SEN has led to positive attitude formation.
- The pre-service period of a teacher's life offers potential to influence attitudes.
- The host organisations value the placement highly.
- The placement is achieving the outcomes specified by the NCAD.
- This paper captures the narrative of the placements from the student perspective.

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ABSTRACT

It is a feature of Irish second-level teaching that teachers will encounter pupils with special educational needs (SENs). To prepare them, the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) has designated SEN placements as part of the ITE programme, whereby students are immersed in SEN settings. These placements have been acknowledged as good practice by Merriman & Rickard, on behalf of the National Parents and Siblings Alliance (2013). Over the ten-year duration of this specific SEN placement, this immersion has led to positive outcomes for both the student teachers and the centres in which they have been placed.

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1. Introduction

This research evaluated the effectiveness of a specific teaching placement opportunity provided by the National College of Art & Design (NCAD), Dublin, Ireland. Its findings have a reach outside the Irish context, with implications for Initial Teacher Education (ITE), for art and design and for education policy and practice in relation to inclusion. The evaluation was based on the qualitative reflections of student teachers in two cohorts, 2014 and 2015 ($n = 25$), and of their hosts, with a view to ascertaining if a placement such as this

was “successful” in promoting positive attitudes regarding inclusion, and in addressing the art and design elements of self-expression and creativity, while working collaboratively. The findings reaffirm the importance of positive engagement with individuals with disability, in order to effect attitudinal change and overcome fear and prejudice. The placement of student teachers within a variety of exclusively special educational needs (SEN) settings, and the subsequent sharing of experiences, has been shown to change attitudes and enhance awareness among the student teachers. The placement also displayed the significance of art and design processes in empowering SEN students and the positive potential of collaboration between undergraduate and postgraduate NCAD students working with pupils and adults with a variety of SENs. The structure of the placement and the immersion of student teachers in exclusively special needs environments may appear counterintuitive, when the aim is to promote inclusion. The explicit objective of this initiative, however, was to promote

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attitudinal change and positive dispositions among the student teachers towards working with SEN learners. Intensive and dedicated immersion was consciously adopted as the platform for such attitudinal development and the exposure produced evidence of positive attitudinal change and improved perception towards the idea of inclusion. This is similar to an intervention with student teachers in Arkansas reported by [La Porte \(2015\)](#). [Corbett's \(1999\)](#) idea that special schools can be “centres of expertise” (p. 68) is true of the partner placement centres. Pre-placement anxieties diminished and confidence increased among the student teachers. The collaborative art work produced was of a high quality and gave voice to the pupils and service users. The teacher education programme in NCAD prepares students for teaching in the visual arts at second level and part of this remit is preparing to meet real-world challenges, including pupils with SEN. The human rights mandate of inclusion is current Irish government policy and teachers need to be equipped for this. However, this is not occurring in all Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) involved in ITE. Indeed, the NCAD treatment of SEN has been commended and singled out as good practice by Merriman & Rickard on behalf of The National Parents and Siblings Alliance (2013).

Before reporting on this research, it is important to state its boundaries and limitations. It is not attempting to address the philosophical arguments of “abled” versus “disabled”. The stance of the researcher looks past the medical model of “disability” and more to the human rights model: beyond inclusion to integration. Nor is the research attempting to limit art and design solely to this context by discussing its potential and usefulness for individuals with SENs. Art and design is a disciplinary domain that has its own integrity and role in all education settings. Its potential impact in SEN settings is but one feature of its educational repertoire.

2. SEN and Irish policy and provision

The term “special educational needs” is defined in Ireland by the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004) as:

a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition ... ([Government of Ireland, 2004](#), section 1).

Within the Irish context, the Government of Ireland Education Act (1998), the Education (Welfare) Act (2000), the Equal Status Acts (2000) and (2004) and the EPSEN Act (2004) provide a legislative framework for the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. The EPSEN Act (2004) establishes that: “People with special educational needs shall have the same right to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have such needs” (p.5) and details a statutory framework for assessment and individual education plans for pupils with SENs. So, the policy of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) ([Ireland, n.d., 2007](#)) is to provide special needs education in mainstream settings as far as possible. The EPSEN Act (2004) provides that, depending on the best interests of the individuals, children are to be educated either in an inclusive setting or in mainstream education.

These Irish policy positions stem from an evolving international awareness, from a human rights viewpoint, of the importance of inclusion. For example, Article 24 of the *International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (December 2006), states:

with a view to realising the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, states shall ensure an inclusive, education system at all levels and lifelong learning. Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all ([UNESCO, 2006](#); section 2).

Europe followed suit and a strong political consensus has emerged across the European Union, on the importance of inclusive education ([European Commission, 2013](#); [Meijer, 2010](#); [Peters, 2007](#)). As a result, there has been a notable increase in recent years in the enrolment of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland ([Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2010](#)). This has led to it being a normal feature of the teaching career in Ireland that all second-level teachers will encounter pupils with SEN.

While the DES' policy is to ensure the maximum possible integration of children with special needs into ordinary mainstream schools, pupils who have been assessed as having special educational needs have access to a range of special support services ([DES, 2007](#)). In integrated settings, or in special classes/units attached the school, they receive assistance from learning support and resource teachers and care support from special needs assistants (SNAs). There are also over 140 special schools dedicated to particular disability groups. Among them are: special schools for pupils who have a general learning disability at a mild or moderate level; schools for visually impaired and hearing impaired students; a few schools for pupils with physical disabilities and a small number of special schools for pupils who are emotionally disturbed ([Citizens information, 2015](#)). All of these settings offer potential areas of employment for art teachers and a selection of them are regularly used by the NCAD as partner organisations for the SEN placement module for students in ITE.

There are international recommendations from UNESCO to include content on inclusion as part of teacher training programmes (1994). The [Teaching Council of Ireland \[Registration\] Regulations \(2009\)](#) provide that the course of initial professional preparation shall include three major areas: Studies in the Foundation Disciplines of Education, Professional Studies and a Practical Teaching Programme. One of these foundation disciplines is identified as “Inclusion and Diversity” to include: Meeting Diverse Needs such as Children with Special Educational Needs, Disadvantaged pupils and Intercultural Education.

3. Value of art and design education for pupils with SEN

There is a danger in associating the value of art and design with people with SENs of diminishing the subject and the individuals. However, this cannot prevent the articulation of the benefits of the subject for those with SENs. Art is not just a subject in itself, but “visual intelligence” is a means of engaging with all knowledge and interpreting the world ([Gardner, 2006](#)). While pupils with SEN may have difficulty with kinaesthetic, mathematical and linguistic forms of expression, their artistic intelligence may not only be accessible but highly developed. As early as 1982, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation suggested that the arts can provide an “all embracing” experience that includes developing the aesthetic, creative, moral, psychological and social functioning of school children ([Karkou & Glasman, 2004](#)). Individuals with SEN are firstly “individuals” and are also privy to this “all embracing” experience. Each individual's SEN is unique and art as a subject can facilitate individual expression in an unlimited variety of ways. Art has been long recognised

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