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Special education reforms in Ireland: changing systems, changing schools

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ABSTRACT

Ireland has a distinct and complex history regarding the education of persons with special educational needs (SEN) and in its approach to inclusion. Special and general education largely developed in parallel and separately. As recently as the 1990s, legal actions by parents seeking educational rights for children with severe disabilities prompted appropriate provision for these students and a shift towards inclusive schools. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act set out important changes – although not all implemented – followed by a series of changes in resource allocation, culminating in the removal of the requirement for students to be diagnosed in order to access supports. International evidence suggests that resource allocation based on learners' profile and SEN diagnosis have been linked to the overidentification of SEN students. Ability to pay for private assessments has also been shown to exacerbate inequality in Ireland and beyond. We examine how Ireland's policy changes are impacting on schools and students, drawing on emerging evidence. We consider concerns over the adequacy of teacher professional development, the intended and potentially unintended consequences from a process of 'domestication' at the school level and ultimately whether the changes are accompanied by sufficient and appropriate accountability measures.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion; SEN resourcing; accountability; school autonomy

Introduction

This paper examines a series of recent reforms in Ireland's provision for students with special educational needs (SEN) and the key debates emerging. Ireland is a particularly interesting case, as substantial recent reforms in SEN resourcing and provision are taking place alongside broader reforms in the nature of curriculum and assessment, particularly at lower secondary level. The changes in SEN resourcing provide a greater level of autonomy[1] for schools in how to manage and deploy special education teaching support

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within their school. However, the new provisions are being introduced to an education system characterised by a highly prescriptive national curriculum where standardised assessment of student performance on key stages is audited and used to profile schools (Department of Education and Skills 2017). Like many countries, policy in Ireland has been seeking to shift provision for students with special educational needs from segregated to mainstream provision. Ireland is considered to have a 'multi-track' approach to the provision for students with special educational needs, including a multiplicity of approaches and a variety of services between the mainstream and special systems (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2003). Within mainstream schools, students are placed in either a special class designated for a particular disability (or range of disabilities) or they remain in mainstream classes and usually receive supplementary teaching (McCoy et al., 2014b). In common with other countries, the number of children and young people identified with special educational needs has increased dramatically over the past two decades making up over a quarter of the school population today (McCoy, Shevlin, and Rose 2019). The complexities of the Irish system, the nature of recent reforms and changing nature of student needs provide a valuable insight into how one country is striving to enhance inclusion in schools in the midst of broader systemic changes.

In this context this paper is focused on four research questions:

- How have historical policy and legislative reforms shaped provision for students with SEN?
- What are the key challenges of current provision for students with SEN and what have been the impacts of greater school autonomy for both schools and students?
- What do we know about effective systems for special education funding?
- Can any learnings be identified from the Irish system, particularly in terms of the implications of increasing autonomy for schools in how resources are utilised?

Developments in special education provision in Ireland

Ireland has a distinct, and complex, history regarding the education of persons with SEN and in its approach to inclusion. Throughout much of the twentieth century, children with special needs were educated separately in special schools or classes. Over many years, Irish special education and general education, while connected, had developed separately and appeared to run along parallel lines. Special education had little presence in general education decision-making and policy development, and often appeared to be fragmented and lacking coordination (Griffin and Shevlin 2011; McCoy et al. 2016a). The ratification by Ireland of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) in 1992 led to shifts in both policy vision and legislative precedent that introduced a rights-based perspective regarding provision for young people within the Irish education system. Indeed, the publication the following year of the report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC 1993) first introduced the concept of the continuum of provision for these students in special and mainstream settings. For the first time, it was recommended that students with a disability should be integrated in mainstream schools and participate in school activities with other students where possible (Department of Education and

Skills 1993). The fundamental importance of the SERC report, however, was that it foreshadowed a vision to operationalise the rights-based vision proposed with the UNCRC (1989) that would drive wholesale change towards inclusive education provision in Ireland across the following decades. Most recently, a new funding system for SEN has been introduced in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills 2017). Key features of this novel funding approach are presented, following a brief review of a number of key SEN related policy developments which provide an important context in viewing current developments.

O'Donoghue v. Minister for Health (1993)

Together with the publication of the 1993 SERC report, it is perhaps telling that a series of legal cases against the state during the 1990s had a profound impact on provision. In 1993, the state refused to educate certain groups of children who they claimed were 'ineducable' within the meaning of Article 42 of the Irish Constitution (Glendenning 1999). *O'Donoghue v. Minister for Health (1993)* involved an eight-year-old boy with severe disabilities and the alleged failure of the State to provide for his education. As the Department of Health was fully responsible for the education of the child, the view was that such education principally consisted of meeting the boy's medical and care needs. His parents pursued a human rights stance, contesting that he had a right to free primary education, according to the Constitution. The ruling found the education system had discriminated against him and the State was obliged to make the necessary modifications to the curriculum and teaching to ensure that children with disabilities could make the best use of their inherent capacities (Stevens and O'Moore 2009). This, and other rulings, had a fundamental impact on education provision, particularly for students with profound disabilities. Just over a decade later, key reforms were initiated in Ireland.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) act

Signed in 2004, the EPSEN act signalled a real shift in thinking from segregated provision and stated that children with special educational needs should be educated, wherever possible, in an inclusive environment with children who do not have special educational needs. The EPSEN act radically changed the education landscape in Ireland, accelerating the changes emanating from the ratification of the UNCRC (1989) 'from one in which the provision of inclusive education was an emerging feature of schooling to a system in which the provision of inclusive education is mandatory, except where this would not be in the best interests of the child or would be inconsistent with the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated' (Meaney, Kiernan, and Monahan 2005, 209). In essence, this Act enshrined in Irish law the right to access education in mainstream school settings, albeit with the caveats regarding assessed appropriate impacts for both the child and their peers in such settings. This was more laterally augmented by the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which was signed in 2007, but not formally ratified until 2018. Ireland is the last of the 27 EU member states to ratify the Convention. The purpose of the Convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their

inherent dignity. It covers civil and political rights to equal treatment and freedom from discrimination, and social and economic rights in a range of areas including education.

It is perhaps illustrative of the challenges faced by policy makers, such as the Department of Education and Skills and National Council for Special Education (NCSE), to implement the radical changes within the Irish Education system that the UNCRPD was only signed into law in 2018, having been 'adopted' in 2006. This delay mirrors the ongoing failure at the time of writing to also implement some aspects of the EPSEN Act despite it being signed into law in 2004. It remains unclear whether current systems for resourcing and supporting inclusion in Irish schools adequately meet the principles of the Convention.

New funding model: special education teaching allocation

The rapid pace of demographic change within the Irish education system placed acute pressure on the resource allocation processes supporting SEN provision in recent decades. Prior to the introduction of the new allocation model in 2017, there were two processes for allocating resources to support SEN provision across schools in the Irish education system. First, the general allocation model (GAM) was used to allocate resources to support students with additional needs based on either the number of mainstream class teachers at primary level, or student numbers combined with set levels of 'high incidence' special educational needs at post-primary level (Department of Education and Skills 2016). Second, was an automatic entitlement intended to support students with 'low-incidence' (typically more severe) special educational needs within mainstream schools that was based on a diagnostic/medical approach. This was based on categories of disability being identified by a formal assessment (by a multidisciplinary team or psychologist, occupational therapist, speech or language therapist) with supports allocated based on category specific recommendations.

According to the NCSE annual reports, between 2011 and 2014 the number of students entitled to receive teaching supports for 'low incidence' special needs in mainstream schools increased from 38,000 to 45,700. Indeed, the total expenditure on special education allocated by the Department of Education and Skills grew from €468 million to €1.5 billion between 2004 and 2016 (Department of Education and Skills 2016), with a rapid increase in the number of applications for additional supports outside of the GAM being a significant factor. For example, applications for additional resource-teaching hours for individual students increased to over 13,000 applications per year (Department of Education and Skills 2016), These changes continued across the decade, with, for example, the number of children with autism in receipt of Special Needs Assistance (SNA) support[2] in mainstream schools increasing by 83% in the five-year period between 2011 and 2016 (Cambell et al. 2017). In all cases, the process underpinning an allocation of resources was dependent on assessment by professionals (i.e. psychologist, occupational therapist or similar), which was then submitted by schools to a Special Educational Needs Organiser for adjudication of entitlements on behalf of the NCSE.

In 2013, the NCSE published a comprehensive, strategic review of special education supports in schools. Previous studies referenced by the report have shown some degree of frustration among parents about the diagnostic requirement for children (Armstrong et al. 2010). These frustrations pertained to the length of time required to receive a

diagnosis as well as how the diagnosis requirement detracts from a more important role that health professionals could be playing. Critics expressed concern that the resource allocation was inequitable and potentially confirmed social advantage for some children and reinforced social disadvantage for others (Department of Education and Skills 2016; NCSE 2014). The requirement for a diagnosis in order to access government supports in the education setting conferred an advantage to children whose parents could afford to pay for a timelier private assessment while other children whose parents could not afford such private access had longer waiting times for publicly available assessment (Department of Education and Skills 2016; NCSE 2014).

As diagnostic categorisations started to be viewed as heterogeneous with regards to education support needs (Norwich and Lewis 2005; NCSE 2014), doubts emerged regarding the reliability and validity of disability categories and their use in resource allocation (Desforges and Lindsay 2010; Department of Education and Skills 2016). For example, 70% of young people diagnosed with autism were also diagnosed with at least one comorbid condition, while 41% were diagnosed with two, leading to significant diversity of presentation within the autism diagnosis (Green et al. 2018). A lack of precision in the allocation of resources was seen to compound inequalities and waste within the system (Department of Education and Skills 2016). Kinsella and Senior (2008) had pointed out, however, that any move away from a medicalised diagnostic model for resource allocation to a more equitable model of assessment and allocation would require increased expertise within schools and an integrated service model between educational and clinical professionals.

The new allocation model was intended to support a more equitable, rights-based approach towards resourcing provision for students with special education needs without the need for a diagnosis of disability (NCSE 2013). Resources are allocated based on the profile of the school, removing the need for a diagnosis of disability. Research has consistently highlighted the role of school context and composition in shaping the identification of different types of SEN, the adequacy of supports for those students and the experiences of students in different school contexts (McCoy, Banks, and Shevlin 2012; McCoy, Quail, and Smyth 2014a), and these policy measures are also attempting to address these challenges. Under the new allocation model, resources for SEN provision within schools are automatically provided via a 'frontloading' system based on an individual school's profiled need (NCSE 2017). The profiling process considers factors such as whether the school is located within a disadvantaged area, the gender composition of the school, and the outcomes of standardised testing, among a range of other variables associated with additional education support requirements (NCSE 2017). Therefore, schools have the resources available to support inclusive educational practice as assessed by staff within the school itself, without the need to wait for formal diagnostic assessment of a category of disability. In other words, schools are provided with additional autonomy in the process of distributing resources internally based on need. This has been further developed more recently through the proposal that SNA staff be reconceptualised as a whole school resource that can be allocated across multiple sites within the school and may act as a support for multiple students with disparate needs (NCSE 2019). This further moves away from a system whereby diagnoses are guiding provision for students, with schools making allocation decisions regarding SNA staff also. The new model has

been piloted and evaluated prior to its full rollout (Department of Education and Skills 2016).

Finally, the NCSE recently announced the pilot of a new integrated model for supporting inclusive education in mainstream primary and secondary school settings, the School Inclusion Model (SIM: NCSE 2019). This model is described as a research-based package of education and health supports which aims to build schools' capacity to include children with additional needs and to provide other supports for students, a description similar to the approach utilised within the AIM (Access and Inclusion) model, an approach adopted for early years education.[3] This policy direction has been further contextualised by the NCSE in their most recent policy advice report, 'Progress Report – Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes' (NCSE 2019) in which they outline their vision for 'Total Inclusion' for students with additional needs within mainstream school classes. The rationale for a radical model for the inclusion of all children within mainstream class settings was linked to the government's obligations following the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2018.

> The United Nations (UN) Committee that monitors implementation of the Convention has already advised that having a mainstream educational system and a separate special education system is not compatible with its view of inclusion and that parallel systems are not considered inclusive. (NCSE 2019, 3)

Levels of expenditure

When reviewing changing policy and provision to support inclusion in Ireland, the issue of the levels of available resources is an important consideration. Overall, government expenditure to support inclusive education provision in Ireland has seen levels of change that mirror the pace of policy reform (Cambell et al. 2017). In 2017, 13.4% of government expenditure in Ireland was invested in disability and special education support across several domains (education, health, social protection). Total expenditure in this area increased by 16.7% between 2011 and 2017. Special educational needs expenditure increased by 38% between 2011 and 2017, reaching €1683 million in 2017. In part, this has been caused by an increase in the population of children that qualify for special needs assistants. For example, the number of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has increased by 83% between 2011 and 2016 (Cambell et al. 2017). Between 2014 and 2018, the number of SNAs has increased by 74%, from 8521 to 14,877 (Department of Education and Skills 2019c). The funding allocation for SEN has continued to increase following 2017. In the 2020 allocation, a fifth of the education budget (€1.9 billion) is earmarked for special education (Donohoe 2019).

The increase in funding allocations for students with SEN is not unique to Ireland. At the European level, while some countries cut the level of expenditure on education following the financial crisis, these cuts often did not affect SEN provision. While Ireland's spending on SEN provision has increased in recent years, it is worth noting that the countries' spending on education is one of the lowest in Europe, as a fraction of GDP. In 2015, Ireland's expenditure on education per primary and secondary student was the 18th highest among the 31 OECD countries (Department of Education and Skills 2018). International comparative figures on funding earmarked for SEN education are not available, but survey data with relevant ministries and agencies offer some meaningful

insights. In a survey conducted with 18 European countries (with England, Scotland, and Wales as separate units of analysis), the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) reveals that 12 out of the 18 countries surveyed increased spending on inclusive education between 2000 and 2014. At the same time, 13 countries noted an increase in the number of learners with SEN (EASNIE 2016).

In conclusion, given recent estimates that up to one in every four students in the Irish education system have some form of SEN (with certain schools educating large cohorts of students with diverse educational needs) the spending on supporting inclusion for students with SEN is not disproportionately large (NCSE 2017).

In the following section, we examine key challenges of current provision for student with SEN and how particular features of the Irish system have been perceived and assessed by commentators and academics.

Key challenges of provision for students with SEN in Ireland

Ireland is not unique in experiencing substantial reform in inclusive education provision in recent decades (Cheng, Ko, and Hoi Lee 2016). While the UNCRC (1989) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) have greatly influenced perspectives regarding approaches to inclusive education, many countries face challenges in relation to their special and inclusive education provisions. These challenges include how to create funding incentives that prevent exclusionary practices, how to promote school-developed approaches to inclusive education, how to ensure innovative and flexible learning environments, and how to create transparent and accountable systems for inclusive education (EASNIE 2018). Some of these challenges are applicable to Ireland, despite remarkable progress and substantial recent reforms. These challenges range from the failure to fully implement the EPSEN act, to evidence of the 'misuse' of SEN resources across schools. In part, these challenges stem from gaps in data collection and accountability practices and the centrality of school autonomy in the Irish system, which can lead to variability between schools in inclusivity and student intake (Ombudsman for Children 2016; Banks, Frawley, and McCoy 2015). What are the key features of SEN provision in Ireland and how is this move towards greater school autonomy impacting on both schools and students?

Integrated systemic reform?

In Ireland, it has been argued that reform of the education system occurs in a dislocated and siloed manner, with funding being allocated within a partnership model with relevant stakeholders *within* isolated systems (Gleeson 2010). However, such changes often occur without consideration of impacts *across* the provision landscape or without planning for wider consequences (Gleeson 2010). While the SEN budget has increased steadily over time, during the austerity years schools noted the implications of reduced provision of occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and SNAs. These cutbacks were seen to directly impact on the breadth of supports offered to students and their education and development (Banks, Frawley, and McCoy 2015). Thus while government spending to support the resourcing of inclusive education was argued to be 'ringfenced', the actual supports within schools were impacted by reduced

resourcing in these non-teaching areas. An integrated system of resourcing the continuum of support framework (NEPS 2007) would require developing links across education and non-education systems relevant to assessed needs for supports within school settings. In this context, it is important to note that one of the goals of the SIM, currently being piloted, is precisely to address the lack of integration in the system. This is further discussed later in the paper.

Teacher training and inclusive practices

Recent research suggests a lack of confidence among pre-service teachers in their knowledge and ability to implement inclusive practices in schools and a desire for more support in this area (NCSE 2017). The Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning (Teaching Council 2016b) requires some form of professional development engagement by teachers, and this is tied to renewal of their Teaching Council registration (Teaching Council 2016a). The Teaching Council is a statutory body who maintain a mandatory register of teachers which is governed by Section 31 of the Teaching Council Acts 2001–2015. The Council registers teachers under the Revised Teaching Council [Registration] Regulations 2016. While inclusion has been identified as one of the priority learning areas in Cosán, it does not overtly recommend any specific standards or competencies in inclusive education and policy changes to mandate engagement have been resisted (McCormack 2019). As a result, teachers working with students with complex special need profiles are not required to engage in any CPD to specifically support inclusive education practice.

'Misuse' of special needs teachers

Recent media reports suggest that the Department of Education is investigating more than 50 cases in which schools are alleged to have used special needs teachers (SET) to teach mainstream classes (O'Brien 2019a). The Irish Times also reported that there had been 88 reports of 'potentially inappropriate use of special education teaching resource' since September 2017, mostly emanating from school inspections. These included the use of special education teachers (SET) to teach mainstream classes to either reduce pupil teacher ratios or to offer additional subjects (O'Brien 2019b). SET resources have also been reported as being 'misused' to cover mainstream staff shortages within schools. SET are reported as being hired to teach mainstream classes using resources allocated for inclusive education under the new funding allocation model, to cover maternity leave of mainstream class teachers, or to cover for a range of other teacher absences. In these cases, students assessed as requiring additional supports did not receive them due to school management decisions (O'Brien 2019c). It might be suggested that such allocation decisions may reflect management understandings of the core mission and role of the school, and the location of inclusion within the hierarchy of importance guiding such decisions. However, the decisions may also simply reflect attempts to meet competing demands in the context of finite resources. Teacher unions and school management bodies have suggested that a lack of resources, gaps in competencies to manage the needs of some students within schools, and a lack of available teachers have impacted the ability of schools to allocate resources appropriately (O'Brien 2019c). It is unclear whether a lack of available teachers can fully explain such decision-making practices.

The inclusion of an increased number of students with a spectrum of needs within schools has indeed placed pressure on schools to expand the range of skills and competencies among the teaching staff (Kinsella and Senior 2008; NCSE 2017).

Reduced timetables

It has also been reported that many students with complex needs are being systematically placed on reduced timetables by schools, sometimes over long periods of time (Brennan and Browne 2019). In some cases, these reduced timetables led to children attending school for as little as 1 hour per day. Until recently, there was no mechanism for monitoring this hidden practice within schools, as there was no requirement for schools to report such interventions (Brennan and Browne 2019). Schools report that they do not have the skills, knowledge or resources to support the attendance of these students for longer periods, highlighting gaps in the required professional development available to teachers (O'Brien 2019a). The resources allocated to support the inclusion of these students remain available to the school during the child's absences, compounding concerns around SEN resources being 'misused' in schools. In September 2019, the Department of Education and Skills proposed guidelines on the use of reduced timetables. As part of the rules, schools will need to inform Tusla's Educational Welfare Service when a reduced timetable is introduced for a student, as well as explaining the reasons behind the decision. Schools will also need to obtain the consent of parents or guardians to use a reduced timetable (Department of Education and Skills 2019d).

Special education classes

McConkey et al. (2016) examined national administrative data between 2003 and 2013, showing a steady increase in children with significant intellectual disabilities attending mainstream classes and a decrease in the proportion attending special schools, along with a much smaller but decreasing proportion in special classes. However, survey data suggests a different story in relation to special class provision more generally, with a significant number of schools operating unofficial special classes, which are not officially sanctioned by authorities and are typically set up by school management through the pooling of resource hours or other resources (McCoy et al. 2014b). This evidence suggests that across many special class settings students stay together for most, if not all, of the school day, and with a considerable proportion remaining together as a group across school years.

Banks and McCoy (2017) found wide divergences in how special classes were being used across Irish schools, illustrating the impacts of individual school cultures on the translation of major inclusive education initiatives. They found that 'although students in special classes are physically located in mainstream schools, the extent to which inclusion is taking place is questionable' (458), suggesting that special classes serve to provide the appearance of inclusion within schools but are potentially side stepping the issue. The enactment of inclusion in schools through special classes often served to protect the 'deep structure' (Thomas 2013) of mainstream teachers' roles of delivering curricular objectives to mainstream students while special education takes place within segregated settings, albeit on campuses including mainstream school settings (Banks and

McCoy 2017). The results stand in contrast to the fluid approach envisaged in policy documents (NCSE 2011).

Overall, various examples outlined in this section illustrate the complex reality of enacting policy change within the Irish education system. Planning for orderly and predicted change can be difficult due to the large numbers of teachers, students and other actors encapsulated within the education system, proliferation of competing influences, interlinking systems that are separately monitored, and a range of other factors. However, the development and delivery of systems for allocating resources depends on accurate prediction within such systems and adequate reporting or accountability for the use of resources (Cheng, Ko, and Hoi Lee 2016). In this context, we turn to our third research question – what can be learned from other systems?

What do we know about effective funding models?

In general, funding schemes are intended to provide incentives that lead to expected behavioural changes. In the case of Ireland, the new funding allocation model may potentially help address some of the challenges in the system described earlier. The effectiveness of various funding schemes for special education is difficult to evaluate for several reasons. First, changes to funding systems tend to be comprehensive and accompanied by additional reforms within the system. For example, changes to the Finnish funding system for special education, which started in 2010, were accompanied by reforms in the provision of special education in the country (Pulkkinen and Jahnukainen 2016). Similarly, in the Irish system, multiple reforms coincided with an increase in funding and changes to the funding allocation model. Second, funding reforms in the sector are often incremental rather than leading to immediate shifts. In the Netherlands, the introduction of a throughput funding system for special education in mainstream settings maintained an input funding system for special education schools (Pijl 2016). In Ireland, the new funding reform has been implemented gradually and the overall resources provided have decreased in only a small number of schools, with 70% of schools seeing no change in allocation (Department of Education and Skills 2019a; 2019b). There is limited data that would allow for policy evaluations on the effects of funding schemes, particularly on student wellbeing and academic progress. Third, there is no consensus on the goals that should be achieved by a given funding model. Often, the metric used to evaluate the effectiveness of different funding models has been the degree to which the model promotes inclusion broadly defined, without specific indicators. The primary justification for the new Irish funding model has also rested on the stated goal to increase inclusion and address potential inequities in the previous funding system (NCSE 2014).

In part due to these constraints, and due to the strong association between prevalence and funding levels, studies that evaluate the effectiveness of various funding models for special education have often focused on the effect they have on SEN identification rates. Evidence from the Netherlands suggests that population decline is not linked to a decrease in the prevalence of SEN, but changes in the funding structures are (Gubbels, Coppens, and de Wolf 2018). As such, the criteria used to allocate funding have gathered a significant amount of attention in the academic literature (Meijer and Watkins 2019). Special education allocations have traditionally been based on student diagnosis or learners' profile. Importantly, however, funding models that allocate money based on learners'

profile and SEN diagnosis have been linked to the overidentification of SEN students (EASNIE 2018; Kwak 2010). Alternative models of funding have used census or external school level data to allocate resources. However, changes to funding models do not necessarily lead to a reduction in the prevalence of SEN. The Netherlands saw no decrease in the identification of SEN students after the introduction of a throughput funding model in 2003 (Pijl 2016). Some funding allocation systems based on whole student population numbers use census information and assume homogenous distribution of need across schools or geographic regions. Such models can lead to the under-identification of SEN students (Mahitivanichcha and Parrish 2005). Evidence from the United States shows that SEN students are not homogenously distributed geographically (Baker and Ramsey 2010). This finding is also supported by data from Ireland, where children from disadvantaged contexts and those attending disadvantaged schools are more likely to be diagnosed with SEN (McCoy, Banks, and Shevlin 2012; 2016b).

The use of student diagnosis in funding models has not only attracted criticism because of its effect on overidentification but also because of the effects that labelling may have on students. Research has shown that stakeholders may have decreased learning expectations of students labelled with SEN (Gold and Richards 2012; EADSNE 2003). This potential side effect of labelling is visible in data collected as part of the longitudinal study Growing Up in Ireland, where lowered parental academic expectations were shown to have an impact on the achievement of SEN students (McCoy et al. 2016a). The use of SEN diagnosis in funding schemes may lead to other forms of exclusion, such as discrimination against students with SEN in gaining access to their school of choice.

Due to its recent implementation, it is too soon for an evaluation of the new Irish funding scheme. However, it should be noted that the new scheme is not intended to address the challenges identified in the previous section. In fact, due to the high allocation of resources towards one component of the education sector, it may in fact incentivise further 'misuses' at the school level, justified by the need to address other gaps in the education system, such as teacher supply difficulties. One way to address potential perverse effects of the new funding allocation model is to increase the accountability measures embedded within the system.

Learnings from the Irish system: how to maximise the potential of greater autonomy for schools

The most recent developments in SEN funding can clearly be seen as both an attempt to move away from a system of resource allocation that depends on a medicalised assessment-based system, and also as a reform to promote greater school autonomy in the allocation and management of resources. However, the move towards greater school autonomy will be enacted within a pre-existing culture of schools being allowed to interpret how diverse policies and initiatives, such as special classes, are enacted in heterogeneous ways, leading to a diversity of approach across the system without clear models for assessing impact (Banks and McCoy 2017; Rose et al. 2015). This was acknowledged to some degree by the NCSE (2018) in the findings of its Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Scheme, which recommended the development of a new SIM to deliver the right supports at the right time for students with additional care needs, involving a number of different elements (NCSE 2018). In other words, any

change to the SNA scheme would require the development of an *integrated* reform of the approach to provision for students with additional needs in schools.

The concept of school autonomy is limited by restrictions in how it has been traditionally understood and explored through research (Cheng, Ko, and Hoi Lee 2016). Research into school autonomy is argued to insufficiently differentiate internal school autonomy. As the impacts of culture within schools are difficult to measure, autonomy was primarily measured as perceived by principals (Cheng, Ko, and Hoi Lee 2016). Most importantly in the context of the current article, links between school autonomy and students' learning outcomes are inconsistent and open to interpretation (Keddie 2015). In this context, the new resource allocation model is being introduced within an education system characterised by a highly prescriptive national curriculum where standardised assessment of student performance in key stages is audited and used to profile schools (Department of Education and Skills 2017). Such measures are often conflated with teacher or school 'effectiveness' (Ball 2003). The use of a range of global measures of pupil and school effectiveness, such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), served to buttress an overarching system of auditing of schools occurring simultaneously with policy initiatives to decentralise control and foster school autonomy (Keddie 2015). Such approaches are not exclusive to the Irish education system and Lingard and Sellar (2012) have suggested that such modes of external surveillance and policing can be seen across a number of countries and can be conceptualised as a top-down attempt to steer schooling policy from a distance while decentralise increased power (and responsibility) to individual schools for the management of provision (Keddie 2015). However, in many countries such governance often entails highly centralised funding allocation systems, with strict rules in terms of accountability (Gunter 2011). Such structures may need to be robustly developed to support greater school autonomy in the allocation of resources, particularly given the influence of other interests within the educational setting (O'Brien 2019a, 2019b; Brennan and Browne 2019).

In essence, it could be argued that school systems have been somewhat slow to move away from traditional roles or modes of operating in order to accommodate the plethora of policy initiatives and reforms following the passing of the EPSEN Act. Research on educational reform has importantly found that the cultures and understanding of roles (and their related expectations) are important influences in how reforms are practically implemented in schools in Ireland (Gleeson et al. 2002; Jeffers 2010). The term 'domestication' was used by Jeffers (2010) to describe a process by which educational reforms are adapted by schools to suit their own understanding of what is most appropriate for their students, and to align with the pre-existing roles or culture within the school system. Jeffers (2010) also noted the importance of leadership and organisation from school principals in supporting change in school practices and acceptance of the reform, with the school community often reported as taking attitudinal cues from school leaders (Evans 1996).

This process of 'domestication' (Jeffers 2010) of initiatives or curricular objectives has also been observed as influencing how the new allocation model (NCSE 2017) is being interpreted and enacted within schools. The autonomy the new model affords to schools to identify areas of educational needs within their student cohort and allocate resources accordingly may facilitate potentially flexible, dynamic and appropriate responses to identified areas of need. However, this process is also open to influence from a range of factors within the individual school community.

The Irish system is at least partially at odds with an emerging policy movement in many countries towards a combination of increased school autonomy and intensified accountability (Neeleman 2019). As is clear from the emerging challenges being discovered within the Irish education system following the introduction of the new resource allocation model (Department of Education and Skills 2017), the role of decision-making at the school level becomes paramount. In addition, the role of school leaders also becomes increasingly important (Jeffers 2010). However, the introduction of the new allocation model has provided a snapshot of how little is currently known regarding how school leaders allocate resources within such an autonomous system (Neeleman 2019). It also foregrounds the importance of data collection to support efficient and nationally coherent resource allocation. International evidence drawing on OECD PISA data suggests that education systems show better student outcomes if schools have greater levels of autonomy across a range of functions, including hiring of teachers and allocation of budgets (Cheng, Ko, and Hoi Lee 2016; OECD 2012). Importantly, however, the evidence for better outcomes from greater school autonomy is only present in systems based on rigorous levels of accountability and data informed allocation of resources (Fuchs and Wößmann 2008). A key question in how school autonomy is enacted relates to how it is interpreted by the school principal, and what stipulations for accountability influence their decision making (Agasisti, Catalano, and Sibiano 2013; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Shirley 2016).

In the context of the new allocation model for students with additional needs in Irish schools, academic focused standardised assessments of outcome such as PISA may not provide appropriate evidence to evaluate impact or outcomes for this cohort of students (NCSE 2017). The education system more widely places a strong emphasis on academic outcomes; the holistic development of each student and soft skills development are arguably under-valued in the measurement of outcomes. A recent evaluation of the Youthreach Programme, a programme for early school leavers in Ireland, highlighted the importance of qualitative outcomes among these young people. These include learner appreciation and engagement with education, improved personal and social skills, increased self-esteem, and developing a sense of belonging and an overall purpose in life (Smyth et al. 2019). In this context, a more holistic perspective regarding the outcomes that might be used to evaluate the impact of the new allocation model for students with assessed additional needs was developed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and Department of Education and Skills Spending Review (2019), which focused on an earlier framework developed by the NCSE (2011). This comprised three broad categories which were;

(1) Inclusion, Attendance and Engagement;
(2) Attainment/Academic Achievement and
(3) Level of Independence.

However, both the scope specified by this wider framework of assessment, and its implied greater degree of external audited surveillance of schools will place greater importance on the skills of school principals to navigate the increasingly complex system within schools (Neeleman 2019). School principals are of central importance in initiating changes in schools (Fullan 2001; Pont, Nusche, and Moorman 2008). The decentralised system of

resource allocation and increasing school autonomy, with accompanying external requirements for accountability, will imply an increase in school leader decision-making responsibility (Glatter 2002; OECD 2016). The provision of responsive support, guidance and CPD to school principals may be vital ingredients in supporting change, perhaps through school patronage structures.[4]

Concluding remarks

Ireland has a unique and complex history in relation to its approach to inclusive education. While special and general education developed in parallel, legal actions by parents in the 1990s prompted authorities to address the education rights of students with SEN. Legislative and policy changes dramatically altered the landscape, in terms of both the resources and nature of provision for students with additional needs. Most recently, as doubts emerged regarding the appropriateness and validity of disability categories and their basis for the allocation of resources, a new allocation model was introduced in 2017. Fundamentally, the reform entailed the allocation of resources to schools based on their profiled need, providing schools with additional autonomy in the process of distributing resources. The SIM and frontloading of SNA supports, currently being piloted in schools, represent a further re-framing of provision for students with diverse needs.

This paper has assessed the implications of these sweeping changes for provision and meeting student needs. Reports over the 'misuse' of resources, the practice of reduced timetables, and variability in how policy is interpreted highlight the complex reality of enacting policy change. Concerns about the availability of, and engagement from teachers with, professional development are very much to the fore, with such CPD being increasingly essential given the impact that the reforms may have on roles played by staff within schools. This is particularly the case for school principals given the implications of the reforms for them, whereby they will hold additional responsibility for interpreting and managing complex systems for allocation, accountability and staff fidelity within whole school inclusion. Teachers' roles may also be significantly impacted by the emphasis on fostering appropriate inclusion within mainstream classrooms of an increasingly diverse cohort of students, with heterodox profiles and needs. Finally, it has been proposed that the role of SNA staff be reconceptualised as a whole school resource rather than being allocated to a particular student, thus significantly changing their role. While the reform goals are ambitious and admirable, ongoing evaluation will be required to ensure their smooth implementation, to examine the intended and potentially unintended consequences from a process of 'domestication' at the school level. Finally, given the additional responsibility for allocation decisions that will flow from the increased school autonomy to support inclusion, existing evidence highlights the centrality of sufficient, and appropriate, accountability measures to ensure resources and provision best meet student need.

Notes

1. Drawing on Agasisti et al., the concept of school autonomy is related to schools' ability to self-determine relevant matters, such as objectives and activities to be conducted. It refers to domains such as governance, personnel, curriculum, instructional methods, disciplinary

policies, budgeting, facilities and student admission (Agasisti, Catalano, and Sibiano 2013). Schools in Ireland traditionally have a high level of autonomy in terms of how they govern themselves. In 2016, the Ombudsman for Children stated 'The autonomy afforded to Irish schools means the Government has been unable to exercise necessary oversight.' (Marcus-Quinn, Hourigan, and McCoy 2019).

2. The SNA acts in a care and support role that is non-teaching in nature and works under the guidance and supervision of the school principal and/or class teacher (www.NCSE.ie).
3. Launched in 2016, AIM is a programme that supports children with disabilities to access Early Childhood Care and Education – a universal 2-year pre-school programme. AIM offers progressive support to children ranging from universal to targeted. It includes training provisions on inclusion for leaders and staff, information dissemination and special need support training. Supports range from leveraging expert advice to providing additional assistance in the pre-school room (Pobal 2018).
4. While the State provides for free primary and secondary education in Ireland, schools are established by a diversity of patron bodies who define the ethos of the school and appoint the board of management to run the school on a day-to-day basis (www.education.ie).

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