

**The SEN Experience of Student Teachers:
Policy and Practice in the North and South of Ireland,
Final Report to SCoTENS
February 11th 2008**

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This paper reports upon the findings of a conference, a survey and a series of targeted meetings of SEN tutors in ITE institutions researching upon their policy and practice in the context of planning the SEN school experiences of student teachers. The research was funded by the Standing Conference of teacher education in the North and South of Ireland. The introductory conference was held at The National Institute For Intellectual Disability, Trinity College Dublin, Floor 4, 3 College Green on Thursday 22nd & Friday 23rd March, 2007. Present at the conference and involved in the ensuing preparation of this report were:

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Conference Aims and Objectives

This was the second phase of the original SENITE research project funded by the Standing Conference on Teacher Education in the North and South of Ireland (SCoTENS). The conference sought to provide an assessment and develop constructive responses to a range of contemporary questions about pre-service teacher experience of pupils with disabilities and in particular;

1. To provide an assessment of ITE student experience and achievement with pupils who have disabilities.
2. To provide answers to the following research questions:
 - a. Does reflection upon practice in special educational settings need to be taught? How might it be acquired?
 - b. Does practical experience of pupils with disabilities need to be organised? How might it be gained?
 - c. What range of SEN experience is currently gained in terms of range of competence, range of provision and of disabilities? Is it appropriate?
 - d. How might college-based taught elements be integrated with actual school-experience of disabilities? What are the partnership arrangements?
 - e. What are the conceptual and strategic issues to be addressed in advancing initial teacher experience of disabilities?

Introduction

Doubts regarding the quantity and quality of preparation for special educational needs (SEN) in initial teacher education (ITE) is now constant and commonplace. In spite of a growing emphasis upon college/school partnerships in training, criticism tends to centre upon college-based rather than school-based elements of training. Discrete or dedicated SEN units are criticised for imparting facts rather than confronting problematic issues, attitudes or values (Hastings et al., 1996). Specialist content is claimed to encourage separate views of special and mainstream education and lack the capacity to provide a collaborative model or ethic (Kemple, et al., 1994, Villa et al., 1996). Generalist programmes infused with SEN content are criticised as insufficiently focused and of variable quality (Mittler, 1992; Davies & Garner, 1997). In their review of the SEN

components of ITE programmes in Ireland, Kearns and Shevlin (2006) draw attention to diverse conceptualizations of SEN content and extensive variability in its application in student placement. Booth (2000) has proposed an end to the medical and clinical-rehabilitative emphasis common in special education courses. Radical transformation of ITE culture is advocated from separate, parallel training inputs towards integrated programmes in which special and mainstream educators collaborate (Muthukrishna, 2000; Blanton et al., 2001). Collaboration among trainers in the planning of ITE programmes and in teaching by students is frequently considered to be essential (Gerber et al., 2000; Hudson et al., 1997; Salend et al, 1995; Tichenor, et al, 1998; Welch, 2000). Numerous studies connect authentic and positive attitudes to inclusion with planned experiences in special educational contexts (Forlin, Tait, Carroll & Jobling, 1999; Hobbs, & Westling, 1998). For Rogoff et al. (1996) teacher education for students with disabilities is a socio-cultural process of transformation through participation in the activities of school communities. Multidisciplinary and inter-professional practices within and between training colleges and practice schools are claimed to be vital systemic developments (Magrab, 2000) but the current role of special schools in training is unclear.

Method of Data collection

In two workshops twelve conference representatives were each invited to prepare a 20-minute presentation in response to 12 questions providing written summary and responding to further questions for clarification. The workshops were designed to enable a shared dissemination of background information on student school experience across Ireland including an assessment of the implications of current teaching practice arrangements for student preparation for students with disabilities.

Participants focused in their presentations upon the following contextual questions and considered the implications of their responses for teacher preparation for special educational needs.

1. Is your programme undergraduate or post graduate? What is its duration and how is teaching practice distributed throughout the programme?
2. Are mainstream schools allocated to students or do students find their own schools?
3. How are mainstream teachers/mentors involved in student preparation for SEN?
4. How are special schools/units involved in student preparation for SEN?
5. What proportion of students gain access to special school experience?
6. Is student competence or reflection in mainstream SEN settings assessed? How?
7. Is student competence or reflection in special school settings assessed? How?
8. What do you see as the strengths of current strategy for preparing students for SEN?
9. What do you see as our current needs in preparing students for SEN?
10. What ideas for improvement would you advance? Are any ideas being considered?
11. What opportunities or resources could be exploited to improve student preparation?
12. Are there any obstacles or threats to the quality of student preparation for SEN?

Subsequent to the conference participants forwarded additional information and responded via telephone and email to questions for further clarification.

Results

The organisation of teaching practice in Ireland

Responses indicate wide variation in the duration of school-based teaching practice in Ireland with the greater variation in the South of Ireland. In Northern Ireland all undergraduate BEd students spend approximately eight weeks per year upon teaching practice in each of the four years of the degree programme while PGCE students spend fifteen weeks in a programme lasting ten months. Teaching practice tends to be organised in blocks when there are no other college-based programmes running. In contrast teaching practice in the one-year PGDE for post-primary teachers in ROI has tended to be

continuous with students teaching in local schools for defined periods each week throughout the year. Organisational arrangements for teaching practice vary between the different ROI colleges with students spending between two and four days in placement schools, usually teaching approximately five to six hours to satisfy core professional course requirements. In one college, both continuous and block teaching practice placements operate for separate cohorts of students. Block teaching practice facilitates students living at a distance from the college and involves three placements (total of eight weeks). Students teach approximately fourteen to sixteen hours per week block placements. Another college operates a continuous placement system supported by a three week block placement in the mid-year. Generally these teaching practice placements occur in a single school setting whether organised on a sequential or block basis. In general, students find their own schools for teaching practice placement though a pilot programme in one college involves student placement in three subject areas.

The regulation of teaching practice in schools.

In the South of Ireland the duration and organisation of teaching blocks is a matter for individual institutions and generally less obviously regulated than in the North, where a formal school/HEI partnership agreement has pertained since September 1998 when the Northern Ireland Teacher Education Committee (NITEC) launched its Teacher Education Partnership Handbook (NITEC & CEPD, 1998) setting out a comprehensive, integrated, partnership-based approach to teacher education, which also embraced arrangements to induction and early professional development. Since then the Northern Ireland the Education and Training Inspectorate of the Department of Education has overseen and inspected the ITE provided by HEIs and schools using a competence based framework. Consequently the potential for developing a common training policy whereby student time in designated practice situations (e.g. practice with a focus upon SEN) varies significantly across the two jurisdictions North and South.

Regarding the distribution of teaching practice blocks throughout the year there remains wide variation in the North within and across programmes ranging from a single block to three separate blocks per annum, with more experienced students tending to complete their practice in blocks of longer duration and in a chosen phase with less experienced students completing practice in several blocks ranging across several phases and interspersed with periods of guided preparation and shared reflections upon practice. The distribution of teaching practice blocks throughout the year is rarely used to ensure student diversity of experience in a range of schools or classes that reflect the range of abilities or disabilities. Continuous weekly experience in different schools throughout the year is rare in Ireland. Continuous weekly experience is only practiced in the South of Ireland to accommodate continuous contact with the one practice school. In both jurisdictions, the distribution of time among learners of different ability/disabilities therefore tends to be unplanned except where students are explicitly allocated or directed to schools and classes completing specific academic programmes or where they are able to choose to teach in special schools and units. The option to do so varies widely. In different institutions and training programmes the option is made available and denied to students for reasons of both principle and the availability of suitable supervisory staff. There would appear to be little support in ITE institutions North or South for the organised distribution or regulation of student practice such that all students spend dedicated time in contexts of disadvantage or special educational need. Teaching practice assignments and teaching logs relating to SEN are known to occur and on very few occasions, to be obligatory but with few exceptions, there appears to be little support for general regulation in this regard or for special SEN certification during ITE.

The range of practice schools

In the North of Ireland almost all students tend to be allocated to schools by the institution taking into consideration the agreement of individual schools within the NI Teacher Education Partnership arrangements, the student's domicile/transport particulars, the student's wishes and the student's subject/phase specialisms and training needs. Institutions provide the school with detail of the students training programme and training priorities. In the South of Ireland a significant minority of institutions the responsibility

for finding a placement school is more commonly the student's. Concern is expressed by some participants that students choosing their own schools might be motivated by personal advantage rather than training need or might tend to avoid placements where learning and behavioural difficulties are known to be frequent. These concerns appear to emanate from concerns regarding the ethics of placing students among pupils with severe difficulties, the competence of special schools as trainers and the competence of academic staff in supervising placements. In the North of Ireland the place of special schools in advancing teacher education appears to be clearly established. The role of special schools in staff training, curriculum development and educational innovation would appear to be more accepted among training institutions in the North of Ireland. Schools for pupils with severe learning and behavioural difficulties in the North of Ireland are reported to be unable to meet the placement demands of teacher training institutions. In contrast there would appear to be no general perception in ROI of special schools as centres of expertise in the training of pre-service or mainstream teachers.

The involvement of specialist teachers in student preparation for SEN

Guest speakers with strong backgrounds in SEN are reported to be regularly used in the delivery of ITE programmes in the North of Ireland, particularly among those with regular partnership ties with special schools and special units attached to mainstream schools. Regular student placements in special schools appear to generate guest speakers from these schools. In one special school all teachers have been timetabled to provide teaching sessions to the entire cohort of postgraduate students placed in the school. Both in the South and the North, the level of mainstream teacher involvement in student preparation for SEN is however reported to vary considerably. At one end of the spectrum this type of preparation is almost totally dependent on the type of school, the quality of mentoring provided and, more specifically, the school policy and practice in relation to SEN. At the other end of the continuum, in one college, practising teachers are formally involved with the SEN course input. They help in planning, in student preparation and in the examination of projects and assignments. In addition, as part of their teaching practice and to support their assignments, students are required to make contact with SEN support teachers in schools. They are encouraged to discuss individual

learning difficulties and pupils with special educational needs both with support teachers and with classroom teachers in order to better meet individual needs. In a minority, there is explicit institutional direction to students on teaching practice requiring SEN specialists to be consulted and pupils with disabilities to become a focus of practice, reflection and study with the consent and the supervision of classroom teachers.

Student placement in special schools and units

Placement in special schools or units is recommended for all students in one Northern institution. Such placement is a requirement in the few institutions offering specialist SEN electives in addition to the core SEN programme for all students. The specialist option is generally available in the third or fourth year of the BEd degree. In one institution this involves the entire placement period for that year. In two others, half of the annual placement time is spent in special schools or units. In all Northern institutions, all students have the option to visit special schools and visits tend to be periodically arranged for small student groups. In the main, institutions do not explicitly recommend or require placements even to student completing SEN electives. In one institution the proportion of students opting to complete specialist electives and the special school placement may be as high as 20%.

In the South, special schools, special classes/units are not directly involved in student preparation for SEN and it would be uncommon for a student to be assigned to a special class in a mainstream setting. A number of students are judged to have some experience of teaching in classes where a significant number of pupils have assessed special educational needs and occasionally some students are known to have had teaching experience in a special school prior to course entry. Traditionally however, special schools have not been considered as practice placement for student teachers. This is thought to be partially due to a restrictive segregation of primary and secondary teacher education and a lack of clarity regarding the status and recognition of special schools as falling within either of the dominant binary categories of *primary* or *secondary* school. Under the aegis of the Department of Education and Science in the South, they can be considered as primary schools even though a considerable proportion of pupils are of

post-primary age. This lack of clarity may account in part, though not entirely, for the exclusion of special schools from the training environment of both primary and secondary teachers in the North and the South. Participants report that students with formally identified special educational needs appear to be gaining access to teacher education particularly those with specific learning difficulties (dyslexia) or sensory impairments. In one college over the past five years increasing numbers of students with auditory impairments have qualified as teachers. Their teaching practice placements were arranged in schools for the deaf. Teaching practice supervisors in a variety of subject areas are reported to have gained valuable experience of one type of education for deaf children. There is general but cautious acceptance that similar experiential learning might follow from the use of other special schools as training placements. Subject and age related relevance would appear to be important considerations but there are clearly doubts regarding the quality of the special school as a training environment that are have yet to be clearly articulated by teacher educators.

The assessment of SEN competence in mainstream and special settings

In the North of Ireland, student ability to identify learning difficulty and to plan for and achieve differentiation in mainstream settings is formally identified by accrediting bodies as core competences. These competencies may be assessed by portfolio, public examination or via observation conducted jointly by schools and the institution. A formal and mandatory teacher competence framework, currently under review by the Northern Ireland General Teaching Council, identifies two SEN competences as the responsibility of initial teacher education (Northern Ireland Teacher Education Committee, 1998, pp. 12–15); notably that (the teacher) (a) ‘Demonstrates understanding of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice’ and (b) ‘Shows awareness of potential areas of learning difficulty within the subjects of the curriculum’. Two further competences are indicated as a priority for the post-qualification or induction phase: (The teacher) (a) ‘Is able to recognise pupils’ special needs and provide appropriately for these’ and (b) ‘Identifies and assesses pupils’ special educational needs in accordance with the Code of Practice’. A final competence is indicated as a priority for the second and third year of teaching (the Early Professional Development phase): (The teacher) ‘Demonstrates the

ability to devise, implement, monitor and review individual education plans for each stage of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice' (Northern Ireland Teacher Education Committee, 1998, p. 15). Further to this direction, inspections of SEN provision in Northern Ireland schools provide information of use to teacher educators regarding the strengths and shortcomings of their partner schools in providing pre-service students with models of good practice. In 2005 the competence framework was revised and the specification of SEN competencies integrated within the wording of generic competencies. Beginning teachers are now required to include pupils with special education needs within all competence objectives. For example that they will "Plan and evaluate lessons that enable all pupils, including those with special educational needs, to meet learning objectives, showing high expectations and an awareness of potential areas of difficulty." (GTCNI, 2005) It is now expected that the beginning teachers Career Entry Profile will specify competences that have been achieved and those yet to be improved during the ensuing Induction year when the profile is to be updated under the supervision of a school tutor.

In the South of Ireland a similar competence framework is in the early stages of development. Currently, SEN competence is generally embedded within broad criteria for the assessment of teaching in mainstream schools. In their practice, students are expected to plan for and differentiate pupil work to cater, as appropriate, for all the children in a class. SEN assessment is therefore rarely explicit or discrete but part of an institution-wide assessment rubric for grading students during supervised teaching practice. Maintaining an inclusive culture throughout the teacher education programme is regarded as preferable to micro political management of SEN competence as a discrete dimension of training. In several institutions however, student competence and capacity for reflection upon actual practice is formally assessed through a SEN focused assignment. Third-year BEd students are expected to identify three pupils for close study. One pupil from the high achieving group, one from the average achieving group and one from the low achieving group must be selected. At the end of each lesson, students pay particular attention to the progress of target pupils and write up a short account for each pupil outlining his/her achievement and needs (no more than a page per lesson). This

information is expected to inform the planning of the following week's work when students differentiate their teaching objectives according to priority assessment outcomes and include, where necessary, a mini-lesson targeted at one of the pupils (and/or similar pupils) in a whole class lesson. Postgraduate Diploma students undertake the same case study task assigned to the third year B. Ed. students.

In another institution, competence in working with pupils with difficulties in mainstream classes is assessed discretely at one point in the programme. At this point, differentiation for pupils with SEN is expected to be evident in the student teacher's practice, planning and portfolio. The reflective diary contain an analysis of the teaching challenges faced and the students reflective responses to these challenges including guided by reading in the specific area of challenge. In several colleges, assessment of the taught SEN element within the ITE programme is through a project report that must include taught content as applied within school experience. Students are required to collect information about the difficulties experienced by observes pupils, prepare an 'inclusive' lesson, teach the lesson and reflect on the process of planning and teaching the pupils in mainstream settings. In another college, the SEN assignment involves student investigation of school policy and practice in relation to pupils with SEN. The student completes, with the consent of the school, a case study including the analysis of data gained from observation, interview and a range of documentary evidence. The school may be involved in the assessment of the work.

There is also no generally accepted assessment practice where students are completing a specialist SEN placement. In one institution students maintain a diary and reflect on their experiences indicating the strengths and needs of the children in the classroom setting and compare their early and their concluding perceptions and feelings, summarising their learning. These reflections form the basis for structured discussion and feedback on return to college. In the same institution, postgraduate diploma students who elect to find placements in special school settings towards the end of their course are not assessed and the placement is regarding as being entirely informal and experiential. In another institution a special school placement of eight weeks is assessed by portfolio and the

shared observation of teaching by college tutors and the classroom teacher. All college tutors are encouraged to visit special schools and assess student reflective practice in collaboration with teachers. This is seen as an ongoing staff development activity. Fears that students might be unfairly assessed in special school placements or that subject specialist staff might find themselves out of their dept are reported to be unfounded where the main student tutor who holds responsibility for grading students is a SEN specialist and the tutor upon the taught component of the associated SEN elective module.

Perceived strengths of current strategy for preparing students for SEN.

High levels of student interest in SEN issues and practice are reported by all participants in this research. Tutors with specialist experience, qualifications and research interests are identified as important strengths but not the main reason for growing student interest which appears to be based in a strong child-centered attitude on their part, particularly those completing primary teacher preparation programmes. In the majority of cases, the strength of institutional strategy is felt to be based upon theoretical knowledge and upon the ethical debate to which students are exposed during taught sessions. Colleagues identified a number of strengths in current preparation of students in ITE for SEN that centred upon specific topics or offered opportunities for competence development. SEN modules and workshop series focusing upon aspects of literacy and behaviour were most popular particularly where linked to improved and effective practice. The strength of programmes is thought to be greatest among those sharply focussed upon problem solving and curriculum development and those involving the observation, planning, teaching and evaluation of learning in actual classrooms. Team teaching with fellow students and college tutors is thought to be a critical dimension of teacher preparation for SEN. Student feedback has indicated this to be of greatest value in increasing their confidence, suggesting the process can demystify the process of meeting special educational needs. Formal course input closely linked practice over the teaching practice period is thought to be of vital importance. Course content is thought to be best, particularly when it offers strategies and enables continuing shared reporting and discussion about these as the practice proceeds. Video conferencing and web links with

online classrooms are considered important strengths in this context. Opportunities are offered in one college for professional development in SEN for all subject methodology lecturers and teaching practice supervisors. In the broader context of continuing professional development students are reported to be most appreciative when informed regarding professional development programmes being provided elsewhere and in other collaborating ITE institutions. A major perceived strength in several institutions is the input provided by their recently graduated teachers currently completing induction and early professional development programmes. Their experiences of SEN in the early years of teaching and their developing responses to emerging challenges are considered to be valuable opportunities for lifelong learning on the part of student teachers and their tutors alike. Bringing together ITE students and practising teachers completing action and case study research as part of master's degree and doctoral study was considered an important means of developing ITE student plans for lifelong learning and developing links between students and innovative teachers in schools.

Current needs of the system of preparing students for SEN

Participants tend to agree that there is need for more time and less competition for time from a widening variety of training needs. The growing demands of new initiatives were competing with continuing demands for SEN input. Better contacts with good practice schools, guest speakers from the practice schools and closer links with SEN agencies are considered priorities. The wealth of student experience of SEN in a range of placement schools is thought to be given insufficient attention and inadequately shared or disseminated. Institutions with different policies for student placement need to confer upon the advantages and disadvantages of different placement policies. Institutions with different policies for integrating student practice within taught programmes also need to confer upon the possibilities for integrating theory and practice. There is a perceived need for teacher educators to develop their programmes as forums for the coming together of diverse individuals and groups adopting contrasting approaches to meeting learning needs in schools and communities.

Teacher educators identified a number of inter-related themes addressing the need for developing coherent approaches to preparing students for SEN. They concluded that changes were required in the mode of course delivery integrating input from various subject specialists and those with diverse school backgrounds and experiences of SEN. There was a common need for more time for discussion and tutorial work, problem solving and the sharing of case studies. It was acknowledged that the greater proportion of programme delivery remains through large lectures. There was an urgent need for high-level collaboration between SEN team and subject specialists to discuss how the learning difficulties in different subjects can/should be addressed across methodologies and in the SEN element of the course. It was also recognised that the student experience of SEN within the school context could be extremely variable depending often on the existing level of school knowledge of and expertise in SEN. In general the lack of involvement of support teachers in schools in any structured way in teaching practice combined with the minimal involvement of special units/classes or schools was a cause for concern.

Proposals for the development of SEN preparation

There is general support for greater emphasis in training upon skills of diagnostic assessment in reading, mathematics and in behavioural difficulties. Student values need to be better developed with a view to redressing commercial, materialist and consumerist pressures in their education and training. Philosophies of inclusion need to be more fully explored and exemplified in the institutions practice schools. A strong view was expressed that the integration of SEN knowledge needed to be addressed within a revision of the whole of the postgraduate programme. Some suggestions included the provision of two or more contrasting teaching practice placements enabling comparative case study and experience. In institutions without SEN electives, the extension of core content to embrace more advanced SEN knowledge was considered to be the over-riding priority. In institutions with an advanced SEN elective, the range of advanced specialist content cannot be covered. Hence additional options that explore the needs of particular SEN settings (specialist reading units, specialist provision for language impairments,

numeracy, behaviour, AS or sensory impairments could be offered). Taught through seminars and tutorials these could be linked to wider and more structured practical experiences in school settings that could involve the direct participation of the entire SEN team. There is now greater emphasis in teaching practice upon working with classroom assistants, developing classroom support, diagnostic assessment, co-operative learning, assessment for learning peer support and the use of ICT in learning, assessment and programme planning. There are now closer links with INSET providers of SEN training in schools. Teacher educators are now commonly invited to take part in or attend teacher INSET training in SEN. These developments needed to be pushed harder.

Areas of continuing concern

The SEN implications of current educational reforms needed to be considered if there was not to be confusion between the old and the new. Current NI proposals to reduce the traditional emphasis upon subject teaching in primary and lower secondary education needed to be assessed from a SEN perspective. How did these likely to impact upon current forms of SEN provision? The extension of the implementation of the enriched curriculum to lower primary schools in NI needed to be considered from the perspective of pupils with learning difficulties. Plans to develop skills pathways across the curriculum, to develop extended schools and to end selection are all seen as important opportunities to advance provision for SEN in ITE but the actual implications for ITE remain unclear. Deconstruction of the SEN concept is seen by some as a continuing threat to existing provision eroding psychological input to the construction and management of SEN. The psychological content of SEN training programmes is considered by many to have been reduced, particularly in the North of Ireland where teacher education as training in “good practice” may have eclipsed teacher education as learning to think and problem solve in a constantly changing school system where new ideas have limited shelf-life. Growing emphasis upon mainstreaming is seen by some to threaten the special schools as a training environment.

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