Separate Special Education Needs Provision in Early Childhood and School Education

Separate Provision

Early Childhood

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme [1] provides a free year of early childhood care and education for all children of pre-school age. In general, children are eligible for the ECCE scheme if they are aged over 3 years 2 months and less than 4 years 7 months on 1 September of the year that they will be starting. The State pays a capitation fee to participating playschools and daycare services. In return, they provide a pre-school service free of charge to all children within the qualifying age range for a set number of hours over a set period of weeks. In general, children only qualify for ECCE in one school year. However, a child who has been assessed as having a disability may be able to spread their free pre-school year over 2 years.

Children of pre-school age may avail of separate disability pre-school services which are run by a number of disability service providers across the country.

The Department of Education and Skills funds early educational services for children with autism from 2½ years of age. There are 74 early intervention classes for children with autism attached to mainstream schools. These classes are established with a staffing ratio of 1 teacher and a minimum of 2 Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) for every 6 children. Additional SNAs may be allocated to cater for the care needs of pupils enrolled in the class. Start-up grants are provided to the schools to enable special equipment to be purchased. Enhanced capitation is paid in respect of each child and funding may also be provided for assistive technology and specialist equipment as required. In-school provision operates on the basis of the normal school day and school year. These children may also benefit from an additional month’s tuition during July to ensure that any gains made during the school year are not lost over the extended summer break. Funding is also provided through the home tuition programme for children with autism aged from 2 ½ years to 5 years who are unable to access a school placement.

With the exception of the Department of Education and Skills’ targeted interventions, ECCE services in Ireland are delivered by a diverse range of private, community and voluntary interests. Such proliferation of service delivery means that data relating to current provision of pre-school education for children with SEN in Ireland is not readily available.

In 2003, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) conducted an audit of targeted provision for children with special educational needs and found that accurate information on the range and nature of ECCE services targeting children with special needs is difficult to access. The
audit concluded that a significant contributing factor was that data on targeted services is not generally disaggregated from universal datasets.

**School Education (Primary and Post-Primary Separate Provision)**

Where it is deemed to be appropriate, learners with more complex special educational needs may attend special schools. Special schools are designed to cater for learners aged four to eighteen years. A range of special schools exist and are designated for particular categories of special educational need. Currently there are 125 Special Schools for learners with mild/moderate/severe to profound general learning disabilities, schools for learners with ASDs, schools for learners with emotional/behavioural disturbance, schools for learners with specific learning disability, schools for learners with physical disabilities and schools for learners with sensory impairments. These schools have reduced class sizes, SNAs, enhanced levels of funding and the school buildings may have been adapted/structured to meet the particular special educational needs of the learners.

**Definition of the Target Group(s)**

The definition of special educational needs in Section 1 (1) of the EPSEN Act, 2004 which states that ‘special educational needs means in relation to a person, 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 and cognate words shall be construed accordingly’, also applies to learners with special educational needs who attend special schools. As stated previously, Section 52 of the EPSEN Act, amended Section 2 (1) of the Education Act 1998 by substituting the above definition for the definition of disability detailed in the Education Act, 1998.

Learners with special educational needs who enrol in special schools must satisfy the enrolment policy of the school and be assessed as having a special educational need in the category for which the school has been designated.

**Admission Requirements and Choice of School**

In order to enrol in a special school, the learner must be assessed by a relevant professional such as a psychologist/psychiatrist as having a special educational need in the category for which the school has been designated. Provided that the school is deemed to be an appropriate placement for a learner, the parent may choose the school he/she wishes the learner to attend. However transport will only be funded to the nearest appropriate educational placement that can be resourced.

Decisions by schools on applications for enrolment must be made in accordance with the school’s enrolment policy which, in turn, must reflect the principles of relevant legislation including the Education Act, 1998 and the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004. Learners with special educational needs have a statutory entitlement under the Education Act to appeal a decision by either a mainstream or a special school to refuse to enrol him/her. An appeals committee is established by the Department of Education and Skills to hear these appeals.

**Age Levels and Grouping of Pupils**

**Early Childhood**

Children diagnosed with autism are eligible to avail of the Department of Education and Skills funded autism pre-schools and home tuition grants. The 2003 audit of targeted pre-school provision for children with special educational needs found an absence of a nationally agreed set of criteria in the
context of targeted services for children.

**School Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age on 1st Jan 2008</th>
<th>Ordinary classes, national schools</th>
<th>Pupils with special needs in ordinary classes</th>
<th>Pupils in special schools</th>
<th>Pupils in private primary schools</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>208</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>28,004</td>
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<tr>
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<td>62,614</td>
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<td>312</td>
<td>227</td>
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<td>432</td>
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<tr>
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<td>482,593</td>
<td>9,668</td>
<td>6,653</td>
<td>2,479</td>
<td>501,393</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Curriculum, Subjects**

**Early Childhood**

*Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* [3] is a curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years of age in Ireland. The Framework describes the types of learning that are important for children during this period in their lives, and as such sets out broad learning goals for all children. Instead of looking at individual developmental domains such as physical, social etc, Aistear is based on the belief that all learning is connected and that different aspects of children’s learning and development often take place at the same time. It can be used in different types of settings including children’s homes.

**School Education**

Learners in special schools access the same curriculum as learners with special educational needs in mainstream schools. At primary-level, all learners access the primary school curriculum, which is an inclusive, child-centred curriculum designed to meet the needs of all learners and aims to foster each learner’s individual identity in a holistic manner. The primary school curriculum is presented in six areas comprising eleven subjects as detailed in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At post-primary level, learners with special educational needs access a range of subject areas similar to the subject areas of the primary school curriculum. Additionally the school may provide learners with access to other subject areas such as Woodwork and Home Economics.

As stated previously learners at post-primary level may engage with a range of certified programmes in accordance with their needs and abilities. These programmes include the Junior Certificate and the Junior Certificate School Programme following three years at post-primary. Learners with special educational needs may engage with the Leaving Certificate, the LCA, the LCVP and the Further Education and Training Awards in their final two-three years at post-primary level. None of these certified programmes are specifically designed for learners with special educational needs.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [4] has developed Curriculum Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities [5], which are designed to assist primary and post-primary teachers in mediating the curriculum for learners with special educational needs. These guidelines may be used by teachers in special schools in mediating learners' curriculum access.

**Teaching Methods and Materials**

**Early Childhood**

Aistear, the Framework for Early Learning, aims to help bring greater continuity and progression in children’s learning and development as they move from home to various out-of-home settings and on to primary school. The framework includes guidelines on using play to support learning and development and assessing children’s progress and planning for the next steps in their learning and development.

The Department of Education and Skills has put in place a training programme for teachers in autism-specific interventions including Treatment and Education of Autistic Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH), Picture Exchange Communications System (PECS) and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) through the Special Education Support Service.

The Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector is addressing general skills levels rather than any specific qualifications required in working with children with special needs. However, it is expected that improvements in professional qualifications will lead to improved competence and confidence in working with all children, including those with special needs.
In 2010, the Department of Education and Skills provided funding for a national research project entitled: Development of a Framework for Action for the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Early Childhood Education Settings. The aim of this project was develop a Framework for Action which would provide practical strategies and professional tools to support the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream early childhood education settings. For the 2011/2012 academic year, a part time course based on this framework is being offered by one of the teacher training colleges.

School Education

Teaching methods and materials recommended in the curriculum at primary-level, the syllabus at post-primary and the Curriculum Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities [5] are used in providing learning and teaching opportunities for learners with special educational needs. Common pedagogic approaches such as teacher-modelling, guided discovery, activity learning, experiential learning, positive reinforcement, incidental teaching, structured questioning, talk and discussion, prompting systems and direct teaching are variously used by teachers. Evidence-based teaching methods that are effective for learners with particular special educational needs are also used as appropriate such as the use of behavioural approaches, social stories and the Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children for learners with ASDs. Signing/visual systems may be used with learners who have communication needs or are deaf/hard of hearing and braille may be used with learners who have a visual impairment.

Progression of Pupils

Early Childhood

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme [1] and Early Start Programme [6] include a number of provisions to take account of children with special needs. These include an exemption from the upper age limit for qualification under the scheme where a child is developmentally delayed and would benefit from starting primary school at a later age. In addition, children with special needs can apply to have the pre-school year split over two years on a pro-rata basis, for example availing of the scheme for 2 days a week in the first year and for 3 days a week in the second year, thereby facilitating children that attend specialist preschool services to also attend a mainstream service for one, two or three days a week. Under the Early Start Programme, children with special needs can alternatively avail of a full second year of early start prior to joining junior infants.

School Education

Learners with special educational needs progress annually from one class to another and only in exceptional circumstances should learners repeat a year. If a learner repeats a year of schooling, he/she must follow a different education programme than that engaged with in the previous year. Regardless of ability, all learners are expected to be provided with access to the curriculum, which should be differentiated by the teacher in accordance with each learner’s identified needs and abilities. A focus should be maintained on fostering the holistic development of each learner through providing him/her with an enriched range of learning and teaching experiences differentiated with reference to content, process and outcome as required. Individualised planning for learners should be a feature of practice in all schools and regularly monitored and reviewed. Class teachers maintain responsibility for monitoring learners’ progress and where it is deemed that a pupil is not accessing, participating and benefitting from the education being provided in the school setting, the teacher may liaise with relevant professionals such as psychologists, additional support teachers such as learning support or resource teachers, parents and where appropriate the learner himself or herself to explore
more appropriate placement. Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) employed by the NCSE are available to schools and parents in all geographical areas of the country and may also be consulted in this context.

**Certification**

**Early Childhood**

No certification of children occurs at the level of early childhood care and education. However, both Síolta [7] and Aistear [3] emphasise the need for those working with children to engage in cycles of observation, planning, action and evaluation. They focus on the need to support children’s early learning and development through formative assessment. While this is important for all young children, it is vital for children with SEN to ensure that adequate supports and resources are put in place to enable them to reach their potential.

**School Education**

As stated previously, there is no nationwide standardised testing in place to evaluate the progress of learners with special educational needs through education, individual schools engage in their own assessment processes, which may include the use teacher-devised tests and tasks, teacher-observation, norm-referenced tests, criterion-referenced tests and portfolio assessments. At post-primary level students with special educational needs may engage with a range of State certified programmes in accordance with their needs and abilities. These programmes include the Junior Certificate and the Junior Certificate School Programme following three years at post-primary. Learners with special educational needs may access the same programmes as their peers and engage with the Leaving Certificate, the LCA, the LCVP and the Further Education and Training Awards in their final two-three years at post-primary level. None of these certified programmes are specifically designed for learners with special educational needs. However through carefully assessing learners’ strengths and needs and through differentiating learning and teaching, learners can constructively engage with these programmes in a manner that optimises their learning outcomes.

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