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**Project IRIS: Investigating special and inclusive education in Irish schools and the challenges for converting policy into practice**

Richard Rose<sup>1</sup>, Michael Shevlin<sup>2</sup>, Eileen Winter<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Northampton, Northampton, United Kingdom,* <sup>2</sup>*Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland,*

<sup>3</sup>*Institute of Child Education and Psychology Europe, Dublin, Ireland*

**Background**

Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools) is a three year longitudinal research project which is carrying out the most in-depth study of special and inclusive education ever conducted in Ireland.

The project, jointly managed through The University of Northampton, UK., Trinity College Dublin, and The Institute of Child Education and Psychology Europe is seeking multiple perspectives, including those of students, parents, school-based staff, allied professionals, and disability support groups in order to build a picture of the practices and procedures that support young people with special educational needs in their learning.

The project, which is funded by the National Council for Special Education in Ireland, is exploring a number of issues critical to the development and implementation of effective provision for students with special educational needs. Throughout the course of this project the research team is consulting widely with service users and providers to build a picture of provision across Ireland.

**Research Questions**

The research team is focused upon a range of issues related to policy, provision, experience and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs in both mainstream and special schools. The research questions are built around issues of assessment and placement, access to learning and support, multi-agency working, transition across educational phases and learning outcomes.

**Methods**

A mixed methods approach is being deployed in order to gain data that will afford insights into the experiences of teachers, students, support professionals and policy makers working with pupils with special educational needs. Case studies are being constructed around 24 mainstream and special schools and 60 pupils with special educational needs, including 20 who will be followed through transition from primary to secondary school provision. An electronic survey of all Irish schools is being used to provide a broad overview of provision. Pupils with special educational needs are being encouraged to provide their own insights into schooling by contributing pictures and other visual representations of their experiences of what assists them in learning.

### **Frame**

Qualitative data is being subjected to analysis within four key themes designed to provide insights into policy, provision, experience and outcomes in relation to special and inclusive education. The use of a mixed methods approach is enabling triangulation and will increase trustworthiness of data through internal verification. Quantitative data related to specific pupil populations and the distribution of provision and services will be used to assist in future development of support for pupils with special educational needs across Europe.

### **Research findings**

This project is in its first year of a three year longitudinal study. Initial findings suggest that whilst policy for the promotion of inclusive practice has been well received in Ireland, the translation of policy into practice is presenting challenges for both schools and other professional agencies. This paper will present early findings from focus groups, interviews and school case studies and will discuss both methodological challenges and early findings.