

## *'AIMing' for the Target: How has Policy on Inclusion Evolved since the 1990's in Ireland*

**Eva Stembridge**

*Bachelor of Early Childhood Care and Education*



Eva Stembridge worked as a Special Needs Assistant for 12 years in a primary school in Ireland, igniting a lifelong interest in the education and care of children in both the early years and primary school sector. Having observed how the Department of Education and Science (DES) supported and included children with additional needs within the formal education system, Eva was interested to learn more about how the children she worked with were supported prior to starting primary school. Since the first year of her degree programme (BA in ECCE), the importance of inclusion has been highlighted through current discourse in ECCE and the government has now recognised this by having a unique inclusion policy for the ECCE sector. Eva wanted to explore how Ireland reached this ground-breaking inclusive policy.

**KEYWORDS:** Early Childhood Education; Policy; Inclusion; Special Education

### **INTRODUCTION**

This article provides an overview of how policy on inclusion for children with additional needs (AN) in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has evolved in Ireland since the 1990's. It is a snapshot of a larger piece of research conducted as part of the researcher's programme of study, ECCE. The motivation for this study was the introduction of a new and unique inclusion policy for ECCE in Ireland, called the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs DCYA 2016). Prior to the introduction of AIM, early years teachers (EYT) had limited support in supporting children with (AN). The AIM is accessible to all pre-school children in Ireland and is paving the way for EYT in partnership with parents in delivering an inclusive early years education experience to children with AN. It is therefore timely, to trace the history of educational inclusion in Ireland.

The primary research question is looking at how policy on inclusion has evolved since the 1990's in Ireland for children with AN's in ECCE. For the purpose of this research, a systematic review/desk based study was deemed suitable as it entailed trawling through literature, policy documents and government legislation to put a timeline in place showing the progression of inclusion in Ireland for the early years sector. This type of study

required a qualitative research method and using a thematic analysis to find themes/ sub themes from the literature review.

## **CONTEXT**

Educational policy development both nationally and internationally have led to more awareness of inclusion for children with AN. As inclusion has been highlighted in recent years in current discourse, Ireland has recognised this and has introduced a unique model of support called the AIM and it is the first attempt by the state to introduce an extensive system of supports for the ECCE sector. The concept of Inclusion has become an integral element of the Irish education system in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the last number of years, inclusion has become a focal point around educational policies. It has shown a clear shift away from segregated education of children with AN's to an education of inclusion for all (Carey 2005; Winter and O'Raw 2010). Swan (2000) outlines, in three phases, the progression of 'special needs' education and policy in Ireland; 'The Phase of Neglect', 'The Special School Phase' and 'The phase of integration/ inclusion'. These stages outline the changes in education for children with AN's.

Literature both nationally and internationally have foregrounded inclusive practice and the inclusion of children with AN's in ECCE (Schwartz 2001; Nutbrown and Clough 2006; Moloney and McCarthy 2010; Odem, Buyesse and Soukakou 2011). International policies such as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), The Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), (1989) and the United Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) have all contributed to the discourse on inclusion.

Nationally, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) was a ground-breaking document with a central purpose ensuring provision for all children in an inclusive environment. With regard to pre-school children, the EPSEN Act, made limited provision for the assessment of children with AN's in early years settings. The AIM represents a first attempt by the state to introduce an all-inclusive system of supports for the early years sector. It is a child-centred model, enabling children with AN's on equal footing to their peers, access to the ECCE scheme. It strives on meeting the needs of children and assisting them in gaining full participation in all services and supports in the Early Years Sector (Interdepartmental Group (IDG) 2015).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The primary research question explored for this research, was how has policy on inclusion evolved in Ireland since the 1990's, for children with AN's in ECCE. For the purpose of this research, a systematic review was undertaken. This involved trawling through literature, policy documents and government legislation to put a timeline in place showing the progression of inclusion in Ireland for the early years sector. This type of study required a qualitative

research method and using a thematic analysis to find themes/ sub themes emerging from the literature. As this study is concerned with a timeline showing how inclusion for the ECCE sector has been recognised in policy to date, a systematic review was suitable to present the data. Analysing and gathering data from these sources is drawn heavily on qualitative research (Moore 2006).

The researcher was limited to using reputable sources for data, as desk-based research does not let the researcher carry out interviews or questionnaires. The time frame of the proposed method of the research limited the researcher to explore a wider range of literature. Thematic analysis was used to find repeated patterns and meanings in the literature review. The researcher used Clarke and Braun (2013) six-step approach to Thematic Analysis, as it is a flexible method used to trawl the data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based upon the analysis of the research data, a series of themes and sub-themes emerged from the literature of this study. The researcher has included an overview of two themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data:

Themes	Sub-themes			
Language of Inclusion	Terminology used	Physical Disabilities Mentally defective children Mental/physical handicap	Segregation Integration Inclusion	Disability Special Needs Special Education
Quality of ECCE	Importance of ECCE	Full participation Access and Benefits	Inclusive environment	Importance of the early years.

Figure 1 Emergent Themes and Subthemes from Policy Analysis

From exploring the literature for this study, it was noted the broad range of language that has been used when talking about inclusion. The terminology used has evolved over the years. Language used such as ‘segregation’ emerged in the literature from many different reports and books.

Mental illness includes a wide variety of types and degrees of disorder and patients vary in age and in the extent to which they are disturbing to others or are unable to care for themselves. Provision for some segregation of patients is, therefore, essential. (Report on the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Illness 1966, p.34)

On the other hand, a review that was written by Winter and O’Raw 2010, presents different views from other authors on ‘inclusion’ and how “we should not accept that difference in learning ability should mean segregation

of so many young people” (p.17). Terminology used in the early twentieth century could be seen as crude described by Swan (2000) such as:

It is in every way undesirable that mentally deficient children, even of the higher grade, should be placed with normal children. Such children are a burden to their teachers, a handicap to other children, and being unable to keep up with their class, their condition tends to become worse. (Commission of Inquiry into Reformatory and Industrial Schools 1936, cited in Swan 2000, p. 1)

In the mid 80’s, the term ‘special needs’ came to the forefront and was seen in reports and policies issued in Ireland. The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) provided a report on the ‘Special Education’ of children from preschool to secondary school. It intended to make recommendations of educational provision for children with AN’s in respect of:

the arrangements which should be put in place in order to provide for the educational requirements of such children through complete or partial integration in ordinary schools, through special classes in ordinary schools or through schools or other special arrangements in accordance with the circumstances of each child. (DES 1993, p. 15)

Swan (2000) describes how the inclusion discourse used when describing a child with AN’s has evolved since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Exclusion to inclusion has been a long and erratic process with different terminology used though the eras. Progression through the 1990’s saw “the concept of integration was superseded by inclusive education, placing an added emphasis on adapting school to the varied needs of individual pupils with learning disabilities” (p.3). Inclusion in ECCE was fully recognised with the development of the AIM. Inclusion discourse was evident in their report, particularly in Level 1 ‘An Inclusive Culture’, which was the critical foundation of the AIM. The IDG also suggested the idea of an “Inclusion Coordinator in each ECCE setting” and to provide training “in inclusion for these early years practitioners” (AIM 2016, p. 7).

When Ireland ratified the UNCRC in 1992, it was the beginning of a range of policies that were aiming for quality services in ECCE. Ireland was committing to quality supports and services, which were evident in *Ready to Learn*- the White Paper on ECCE. It’s rationale for ‘Early Education for Children with Special Needs’ states that:

with quality early childhood educational interventions, the handicaps and difficulties of a child with a disability such as autism, cerebral palsy, hearing impairment or Down’s Syndrome may experience will be reduced and additional problems will be prevented. Early intervention can support families in adjusting to having a child with special needs; moreover, if parents have the assistance of an early childhood teacher,

who is trained and experienced in special needs education, they may be assisted to acquire the skills they need to help their child to develop to his/her full potential (DES 1999, p. 83).

Building on this statement, early intervention is effective when it provides “high quality, intensive and clearly articulated programmes, delivered by highly skilled and carefully trained personnel” (DES 1999, p.84). Features of high-quality inclusion are “a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships and development and learning” (Odem *et al.* 2011, p. 2). Efforts to improve and regulate quality in ECCE are an ongoing process, however there are three distinct features that should be recognised in high quality inclusion; access, participation and supports (Odem *et al.* 2011). Another key feature in the importance of quality in ECCE is the ‘full participation’ of children with AN’s and meeting their needs. Many policy documents in Ireland such as *Síolta*, *Aistear* and the Free Pre-school Year scheme support inclusion of children with AN’s and that they participate fully in ECCE settings. To promote quality and equality for children with AN’s, Standard 4, ‘Consultation’ of *Síolta* ensures that:

inclusive decision-making requires consultation that promotes participation and seeks out, listens to and acts upon the views and opinions of children, parents and staff, and other stakeholders, as appropriate (CECDE 2006, p. 35).

EYT’s that reflect on how they promote quality will benefit the children in an inclusive and accessible setting. An ‘inclusive environment’ is a key component in the LINC programme. It supports EYT’s “to develop their professional knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies with a particular focus on embedding inclusive practice in *Aistear* and *Síolta*” (LINC 2016). A high-quality inclusive environment is one where children see themselves reflected in it, enriches their development and learning and encourages them to explore it (CECDE 2006; NCCAa 2009; Graham 2017). The importance of the early years is highlighted in *Síolta* in its first principle ‘The Value of Early Childhood’. It states that “Early Childhood is a significant time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right” (CECDE 2006, p. 6). It is seen as a critical time in a child’s life to have positive experiences. The SERC report also reiterates this saying:

If the child is exposed to social interaction in a more stimulating environment s/he may well be enabled to make up for ground lost in areas such as social development, play skills and cognitive and linguistic development. (DES 1993, p. 28)

Building on this, if early intervention is made and supported with a multi-disciplinary team, children with AN’s will thrive in mainstream primary education, as highlighted by Moloney and McCarthy (2010), children “must experience quality early intervention within early childhood settings for their enhanced future and well-being” (p.11).

## CONCLUSION

The findings in this study are consistent with previous research (Moloney and McCarthy 2010; Winter and O'Raw 2010) in viewing inclusion as being a process. It has replaced many terms used over the years to describe children with AN's. Ample educational policies and legislation have been written and implemented to support the inclusion of children with AN's and have used varying terms to do so. The language used has progressed from 'mentally handicap', to 'disabled' to 'special needs'. Terminology continues to evolve. The word 'handicap' was used in the early 20th century to describe a person with a AN's. Society nowadays has become more sensitive to the language that is used. Using first person language such as 'Paul who has Down's syndrome' or 'Joe uses a wheelchair'.

In the ECCE sector today, inclusion is more prominent where early years teachers have a better level of awareness and understanding of including children with AN's in their settings. This is due to the introduction of the AIM for the early years sector. This model has paved the way for the early years sector since 2016. In the short space of time it has benefited thousands of children in using AIM supports and the provision for pre-school children with AN's has been revolutionised. It provides seven levels of support including: enhanced CPD; the provision of equipment and appliances; access to therapeutic intervention and increased capitation for pre-school providers for children with very complex needs (DCYA 2018). The AIM has reduced challenges EYT's may have experienced such as time, resources and CPD. Through the 7 levels of support these challenges have been reduced. For example, the support of Level 4- 'Expert Advice, mentoring and support', time management has improved and helps EYT's to better provide for children with AN's. Along with this an Early Years Specialist is available for advice.

It is recommended that an evaluation on the AIM be carried out to map the progress of it so far to assess what facilitates an inclusive pre-school practice. High quality inclusion incorporates seeking ways to include practices that benefit all children (Odem *et al.* 2011). A further recommendation would be for educational institutions such as Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and the National University Institute of Galway to include the LINC modules in their degree programmes, where graduates would be trained as Inclusion Coordinators.

*"Diversity is being invited to the party, Inclusion is being  
asked to dance" Vernā Myers*

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