



EMPOWERING INCLUSIVE TEACHERS  
FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

# EiTTT

## Case Studies

INSTITIÚID OIDEACHAIS  
**MARINO**  
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

An Associated College of  
Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

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## Case study:

### Student-teacher Placement in a Special Education School Context – Developing Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes for Inclusive Practice

Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, Ireland



FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT: [www.mie.ie/eittt](http://www.mie.ie/eittt) OR EMAIL US: [eittt@mie.ie](mailto:eittt@mie.ie)



## Context

Marino Institute of Education (MIE) was privileged to host the EiTTT project team in Dublin for one week from 27<sup>th</sup> November – 1<sup>st</sup> December, 2017. Despite the time of year, delighted project partners from Finland, Cyprus, Latvia and Belgium, quickly dispatched with recommended umbrellas, and in the company of MIE colleagues, spent a week in sparkling sunshine exploring all that the lovely Marino campus and city of Dublin have to offer. As participants remarked, it was a “wonderful week” of very varied and insightful learning activities that included workshops and presentations facilitated by MIE staff and student teachers, as well as visits to a wide range of mainstream and special schools around Dublin during the school placement period for MIE’s student teachers.

## Marino Institute of Education (MIE)



MIE is a Higher Education Institution located on Griffith Avenue in Dublin, approximately 4.5km to the north of the city centre. It is a teaching, learning and research institution and an associated college of Trinity College, the University of Dublin (TCD). MIE’s education programmes are focused on promoting ‘Inclusion and Excellence in Education’. For over

one hundred years MIE has been involved in education, and specifically in initial primary teacher education. During the last decade the vision and scope of the institute’s activities have been re-envisioned and extended to incorporate the full continuum of teacher education (initial, in-service and continuing professional development) as well as the education of specialist practitioners at early years, primary and further education levels. At present there are approximately 1,000 students registered in MIE across the following range of programmes: Bachelor in Education (B.Ed. for Primary Teaching); Bachelor in Science (B.Sc. Education Studies); Bachelor in Science (B.Sc. Early Childhood Education); Professional Master of Education (Primary Teaching); Master in Education Studies (Intercultural Education); Master in Education Studies (Early Childhood Education); Master of Arts (Christian Leadership in Education); Certificate in Spirituality and Human Development; Professional Diploma in Education (Further Education); International Foundation Programme. The institute also offers a range of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses. MIE’s academic programmes are validated, quality assured and accredited by TCD.

## Teacher Education at MIE



Approximately 115 undergraduate students enrol annually on the four-year B.Ed. degree course at MIE. A further 65 (approx.) post-graduate students are enrolled on each year of the two-year Professional Master of Education (PME) degree. The latter course is open to graduates of any discipline who wish to qualify as primary teachers. Course modules undertaken by both cohorts include: The Primary School Curriculum; Foundation Disciplines of Education (Psychology, Sociology, History, Philosophy); Inclusive Education (Special Education, Educational Disadvantage, Development Education & Intercultural Education); ICT (Information and Communication Technology); School Placements (Practicum) in Mainstream and Special Education settings.

All educational activities in MIE are centred on the principle of **'Promoting Inclusion and Excellence in Education'**. Hence Inclusive Education is a key aspect of MIE's undergraduate and post-graduate degree programmes for prospective teachers. Preparation for inclusive practice is integral to all of these courses, and student teachers are required to demonstrate a commitment to such practice during a range of mainstream school placements, including placement in a designated area of educational disadvantage. Second year B.Ed. students and first year PME students undertake a discrete one-year **Inclusive Education module**, with provision structured as follows:

### One year (5 ECTS) Inclusive Education module. Components:

- › **Course Work:**
  - (a) - Special Educational Needs
  - (b) - Educational Disadvantage
  - (c) - Development Education & Intercultural Education
- › **School Placement (Practicum) for Special Education:**

In addition to the course work above, the module incorporates a ten-day placement in a special education setting. Students may choose to undertake this placement in a **special school** or in a **special unit/class** in a mainstream school. During this placement students observe and work alongside the class teacher and SNAs (special needs assistants). The students are required to engage in as much work with pupils (in small groups and on a one-to-one basis) as permitted by their host teacher. While they are not formally assessed on their teaching abilities during this placement, the students are required to document their ongoing learning in a reflective journal. Each student on placement is visited by a member of the academic staff who reports in a formative manner on the student's development and learning during the period of placement. This placement experience is invariably described by most students as one of the most valuable learning opportunities of their teacher education course. They generally find it 'highly informative', 'professionally challenging' and often 'transformative'. Significantly, students report that it also affords them a heightened appreciation of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to work more inclusively with all children in mainstream school settings, and following this placement they appear to be far more committed to, and confident about, doing so. In summary, students' feedback suggests that the experience of this placement in a special education setting can enhance their overall understandings about education and children's learning, and serve to prepare them more comprehensively for future practice in both mainstream classrooms and special education settings. **Student teachers' development and learning arising from this placement experience was the focus of the Learning Activity week in Ireland for project partners.**

## Teaching in Ireland

Teaching in Ireland is regulated by the Teaching Council. All qualified, practising teachers must be registered with this body. The manner in which prospective candidates are selected and prepared for teaching at primary and second levels is also governed by the Teaching Council:

**Entry to primary teaching** in Ireland is very competitive with prospective entrants required to demonstrate high academic standards in their final secondary school examination ('Leaving Certificate'). Candidates compete for a limited number of places in one of five Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) - teacher education colleges / universities, based on points awarded in respect of Leaving Certificate examination results. Applicants are required to be competent in both the Irish and English languages as primary school teachers must be able to teach the Irish language and the range of primary school subjects through both English and Irish. Undergraduate applicants (those seeking to enter teacher education with second-level qualifications only) enter a four-year degree [B.Ed.] programme of initial teacher education. This degree represents a Level 8 award on Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications. Entrants with an existing university degree in any discipline (post-graduates) apply to undertake a two-year initial teacher education course at Master's degree level (Professional Master of Education – PME). This is a level 9 award on the Qualification Framework. Places on the PME programme are awarded on the basis of qualifications, an interview and an oral examination in Irish.

**Entry to second-level teaching** is also open to undergraduate and post-graduate applicants. The former apply (via competitive entry based on points awarded at Leaving Certificate examination) to undertake a 'suitable degree'. Such a degree is defined as an award from a state-recognised university or similar third-level college, which enables the holder to teach at least one curricular subject to the highest level within the post-primary school curriculum. This degree is followed by a post-graduate teacher education course (PME). Post-graduate applicants who already hold a 'suitable degree' apply directly to course providers to undertake a two-year PME degree. There are presently 14 universities / colleges / institutes) in Ireland providing second-level teacher education programmes.

## Inclusive and Special Education in Ireland

MIE lecturer and EITTT project coordinator Dr Anne Ryan outlined developments over the last 30 years in Inclusive and Special Education in Ireland:

### **Towards Inclusion:**

- › From the mid- 1980s pressure was mounting for the 'integration' of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) into mainstream schools.
- › Special Education Policy development in the 1990s was influenced by the international Human Rights movement, Government sponsored initiatives and parental litigation.

### **Legislation is put in place:**

- › **1998:** The Education Act saw the first legal definition of disability and special educational needs in Ireland.
- › The Act defines the support services available, and the functions and responsibilities of the Minister for Education, the inspectorate and schools.

It recognises the rights of children with SEN to participate fully in schools and to access educational supports and services, in '**as far as is practicable and having regard to the resources of the State**'.

### **EPSEN Act:**

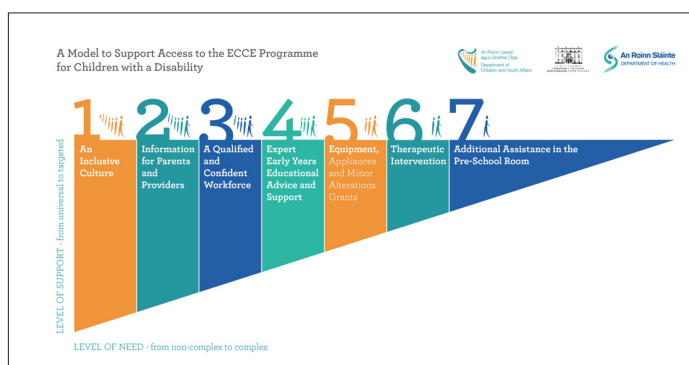
- › **2004:** The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN)
- › Under the Act, children with SEN will be educated 'in an **inclusive environment** with children who do not have SEN'.

## Current Special Educational Needs Policy and Practice

Deirdre Murphy, a lecturer in Inclusive Education in MIE, brought the team up to date with a presentation and workshop on current **Special Educational Needs Policy and Practice in Ireland**. Deirdre's presentation addressed Special Educational Needs Policy and Practice in Ireland's Early Childhood, Primary and Post-Primary education sectors.

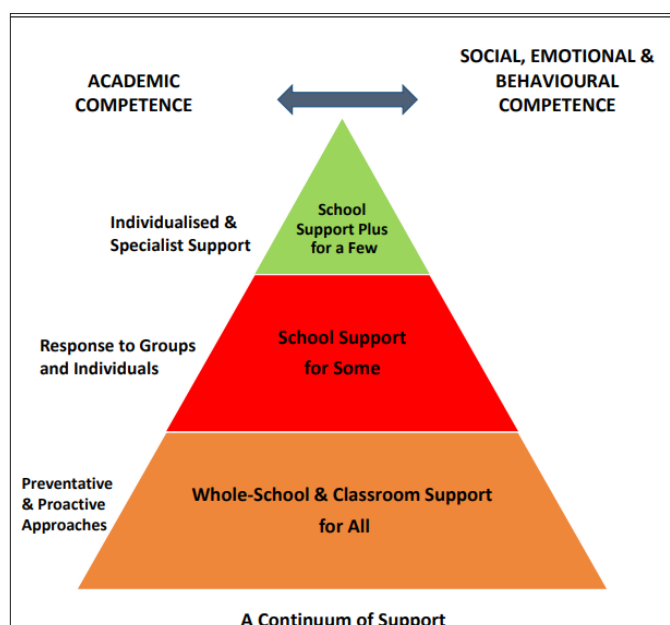
## Recent SEN Developments in Early Childhood sector (Birth - 6 years)

- › The Access and Inclusion (AIM) model aims to ensure all Early Years settings are equipped with adequate resources, personnel and training to be inclusive environments for all children, including those identified as benefitting from additional support with or without a diagnosis.
- › The model has levels of tailored and targeted support to cater for the various levels of need of both the child and their early years setting.



## Recent SEN Developments in Primary Education (4 - 13 years)

- › The Continuum of Support model (2007) enables schools to implement varying levels of support at classroom, whole school and external support levels.



- › The **new model of the Primary Curriculum (2015)** - the curriculum is currently being revised.
- › To date, a new Primary Language Curriculum (2015) has been developed. This includes and supports children with a wide range of abilities ranging from severe and profound needs to those deemed 'gifted and talented'.
- › The revised policy for allocating Special Education Teaching personnel to schools (**Special Education Teacher Allocation model, 2017**). This model represents a significant change as the allocation of resources now takes account of the overall needs profile of the school (i.e. includes socio-economic context of the school as well as pupils' identified learning needs).

## Recent SEN Developments at Post-Primary (12-18 years)

- › **New learning programmes: Level 2 (2014) and Level 1 (2017)** learning programmes enable students with identified Special Educational Needs to access their Junior Certificate year (first State examination in second-level school at approximately 15 years of age).
- › These programmes aim to ensure that students with identified Special Needs, just as those without such needs, have their learning and achievements supported and formally accredited.

## Workshop: Support Materials for Teachers of Children with SEN (Primary) ‘Special Educational Needs Pathways’

Deirdre explained the new curriculum resources that have been developed to support the inclusion of children with Special Needs at primary school level.

- This material is known as the ‘**Special Educational Needs Pathways**’ (2016). Deirdre demonstrated how it can enable the children to access the new Primary Language Curriculum and to have their learning and progress supported and recognised.

Some children with more complex needs may take considerable time to make progress in one progression milestone and/or in one progression step, this is why the SEN pathways are provided.

- The seven levels or ‘pathways’ were outlined. EiTtT partners studied video footage featuring children with Special Needs demonstrating their learning in classrooms. Partners worked in groups to engage with the various ‘pathways’ and identify which level or path was being illustrated in each video exemplar of the child’s learning. They were then invited to ascertain the next appropriate pathway for the child.

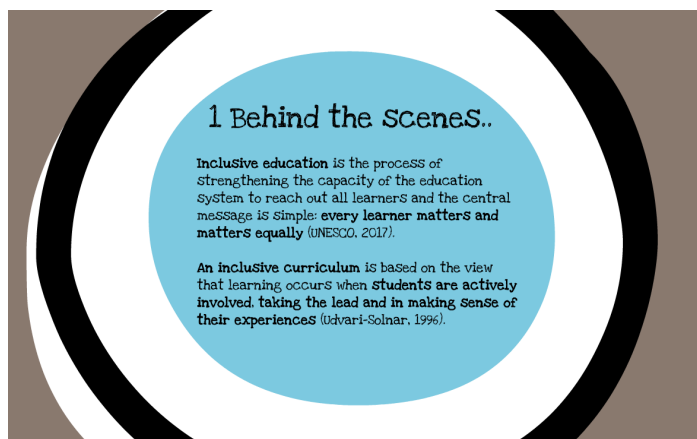
SEN Paths	The child...
Experiencing	is present during a learning activity, s/he is exposed and/or awake and/or exposed to the learning environment. S/he is beginning to acclimatise to the learning environment such as objects, people, sounds and other sensory experiences.
Attending	becomes attentive to and/or engaged with the learning activities presented by changing gesture, posture, vocalisation, eye gaze, movement etc. S/he is acclimatised to the learning environment.
Responding	demonstrates capacity to actively or purposefully take an interest in the learning environment. S/he begins to indicate likes, dislikes or preferences. S/he actively responds to a learning activity with or without support.
Initiating	shows curiosity about the learning environment. S/he actively and independently seeks opportunities to engage with and/ or influence that environment.
Acquiring	demonstrates that knowledge, a concept or a skill is being learned. S/he explores and participates in the learning.
Becoming Fluent	moves towards fluency and accuracy in familiar learning contexts. S/he independently and consistently demonstrates recall mastery of the skill /concept / knowledge learned.
Generalising	transfers and applies learned skills, knowledge or concepts to familiar and unfamiliar contexts.

The workshop concluded with a discussion which was continued in later EITTT group reflection and feedback sessions during the week.

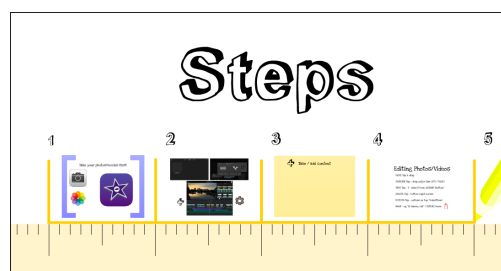
For their first afternoon on the MIE campus the team members gained practical insight into a sample of the course work relevant to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Inclusive Education which is offered to student teachers at Marino Institute of Education. MIE lecturer Dr Anne McMorrough explained as she does for her students, the steps involved in making an ‘imovie’ and / or a podcast.

## Workshop: Movie-making or Podcasting

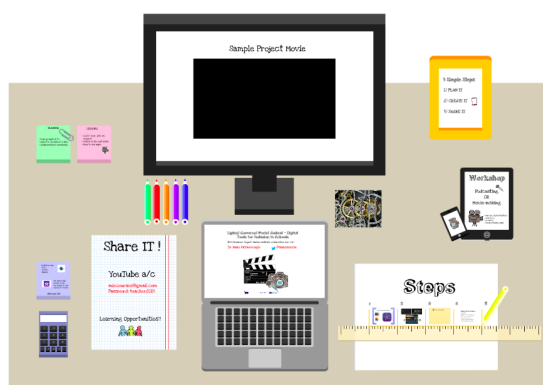
The activity provided for a collaboration of various types of creative skills and different learning styles.



In small groups of 3-4 people, partners then replicated these processes. Their task was to engage with students and staff around the campus and elicit and record (video and audio recordings) understandings and opinions about a topic – in this case - ‘**Inclusion**’. Having edited and embellished (e.g. with music) these recordings to their satisfaction, partners shared their imovies / podcasts with the whole team.



With a range of freely available ‘apps’ to choose from, it was a versatile and easy undertaking which demonstrated for the project partners how student teachers’ introduction to relevant technology can have a key role in supporting a culture of inclusion in schools. As student teachers discover, the activity is an enjoyable and productive means of being inclusive of the varied strengths, talents and interests of all involved.



### **Student Teacher Practicum Placement in Special Schools**

The focus of the learning week was on Initial Teacher Education for Inclusive and Special Education in MIE, and **specifically on student teachers’ potential learning in this regard during their placement in schools and ‘special’ classrooms for children with special educational needs.** An emerging body of research literature is examining the potential of such placement experiences for student teacher learning. It is interesting to note that many of these study findings resonate with the views and recommendations expressed by the project partners and student teachers during the course of this learning week.

### **What the Research Says**

Inclusive education is a central plank of current EU education policy (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [CPRD] 2008; Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training 2010; Draft 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the Implementation of the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training [ET2020]). However, effective inclusive practice in mainstream classrooms is a challenging undertaking even for experienced teachers. It requires that teachers hold appropriate attitudes and values with regard to inclusion in society and in schools, as well as relevant knowledge and skills. High quality teacher education for inclusion is therefore a prerequisite.

While course work and field placements are integral elements of most teacher education programmes, researchers have increasingly focused on the potentially valuable understandings that student teachers develop during field experience. Donald Schon’s proposal that much important professional knowledge is developed through ‘knowing-in-action’ in the course of practical experience and reflection on that experience (Schon, 1992, 124-5) is of interest in this respect. From such a perspective, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) distinguished between teacher learning as the acquisition of ‘knowledge-for-practice’ and the construction of ‘knowledge-in-practice’. Knowledge-for-practice is described as knowledge about teaching acquired through course attendance, readings, examinations and assignments, which is then applied in the practical field of the school classroom. ‘Knowledge-in-practice’ on the other hand, is seen as constructed knowledge, developed in the course of experience and learning. This knowledge, arrived at during the contextually embedded ‘process of acting and thinking wisely in the immediacy of classroom life’ (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999, 266) is arguably of paramount importance in teaching. Teacher educators may facilitate student teachers’ development

of this knowledge by providing appropriate support during the students’ practicum placements. Students can be afforded ‘opportunities to enhance, make explicit, and articulate the tacit knowledge embedded in experience and in the wise action of very competent professionals’ (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999, 263). The student teacher builds on her/his existing theories, linking this previous knowledge about teaching and learning with new experiences and understandings developed in the field (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999, 258).

The momentum for inclusive education and the appropriate preparation of teachers in this respect, has seen researchers increasingly exploring student teachers’ experience and learning in non-traditional practicum contexts. So far, most research of this nature has addressed prospective learning in terms of appreciation of socio-cultural diversity in multi-cultural school settings. These study findings point to the ‘powerful impact’ (Sleeter, 2001, 97) of such placements on student teachers’ learning, and highlight in particular, the students’ better ability to view all children, whatever their home background circumstances, as capable of learning (Burant and Kirby, 2002). However, the findings are not unequivocal. A question remains as to whether such practicum experiences might also serve to reinforce any existing stereotypical concepts and prejudices held by students, particularly if students are not supported in unpacking and deciphering their experience (Burant and Kirby, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005).

Practicum placement in a separate special education setting in which children have disabilities or special educational needs has predictably been shown to have value for prospective special education teachers. There is relatively little known however, about the learning potential of such an experience for students preparing to teach in mainstream classes. Nonetheless, the research that has been conducted on this student teacher experience to date is, with some reservations as highlighted above (Burant and Kirby, 2002; Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust and Shulman, 2005), very promising as to the potential for appropriate pedagogical learning for inclusive practice.

Walton and Rusznyak (2013, 2014) report the findings of such a study conducted with pre-service teachers enrolled in a four-year Bachelor of Education degree course in a South African university. While the requirement to develop an understanding of ‘inclusion’ is infused in the general course work undertaken by these students, in their third year the students also undertake a discrete module titled ‘Diversity, Inclusion and Pedagogy’.



Having already completed several assessed placements in mainstream classroom settings, students from this cohort who have demonstrated ‘acceptable levels of classroom competence’, are encouraged to undertake a practicum placement in a ‘diverse’ context or in a school with ‘diverse’ students (Walton and Rusznyak (2014, 961).

Fifteen of nineteen students who, at their request, were undertaking such a supervised placement in a ‘special’ school - i.e. a school focused on educational provision for students with disabilities or special educational needs, agreed to participate in the study. The researchers sought to investigate what, if any, pedagogical learning occurred during this placement. They employed a focus group methodology, and sourced additional data from the students’ reflective journals and relevant ‘Facebook’ posts during this practicum. Data was gathered at three intervals – before placement, immediately after it and several months subsequently. Before placement the researchers investigated the students’ expectations of how they felt the experience might compare with their previous practicum experiences and what they might learn from it.

A key finding was that contrary to their expectations, the student teachers found that teaching approaches in special schools did not greatly differ from those with which they were familiar in mainstream settings. Their general belief that teachers in special schools held a type of ‘secret pedagogical knowledge’ was discounted. Rather, they expressed surprise that teaching strategies and resource materials employed in special schools were similar to those in mainstream class settings, and that learning styles were also quite similar. Furthermore, in line with research findings from the service learning sector, these student teachers felt that their experience in this special school/class practicum foregrounded much of what they learn in mainstream classes. It facilitated much keener observation; a ‘stepping back’ and ‘taking notice’, and ultimately a ‘new awareness’ of pedagogical knowledge that had hitherto been implicit or tacit (Gallego, 2001; Walton and Rusznyak, 2013).

With a view to their preparation as future mainstream classroom practitioners, the researchers identified five aspects of pedagogy that were highlighted for the student teachers as a consequence of this practicum:

**1. Pedagogical choices that acknowledge difference:**

As they engaged with a variety of students with different learning needs, the student teachers became less preoccupied with identifying individual disabilities and seeking particular responses to these. Rather they

not only came to realise the prevalence and interaction of multiple disabilities but also the extent and variety of student ability. Hence, they gradually came to a better understanding of difference as a given, and as a starting point for their lesson planning. ‘Problems’ they realised, were not rooted in students but in inappropriate pedagogy. The challenge for the student teacher therefore became one of good pedagogical planning with a view to preventing and reducing learning difficulties and so facilitating learning for all.

- 2. Focusing on the Big Idea(s) of the lesson:** The students learnt the importance of prioritising one or more key concepts in a lesson and thereby ensuring all students were potentially included in key learning.
- 3. Multiple and relevant representations of knowledge:** The need to re-visit concepts to facilitate different learning rates was also an important realisation, as was the value of employing varied methodologies and resource materials in this process to allow for different learning styles.
- 4. Lesson pacing:** Initially taken aback at the ‘slow’ pace of lessons, the student teachers gradually recognised the futility of achieving curriculum coverage at the expense of content mastery, and began to reconsider their pedagogical priorities.
- 5. Behaviour management and social skills:** The students were impressed at the ‘more personal way’ their host teachers calmly managed behaviour in class, and observed with much interest teachers providing explicit and effective instruction in social skills.

In summary, the authors report that all the student teachers in the study considered that the placement had been a valuable learning experience. In terms of difference and disability it provided for better awareness and empathy. In bringing valuable aspects of teaching and learning that were obscured in mainstream settings to the fore, it had ‘potential to advance their pedagogical learning’.

In a subsequent analysis of data from this study the researchers considered if the student teachers’ placement experience in a special education setting could contribute specifically to their learning for inclusive practice (Walton and Rusznyak, 2014). They undertook this investigation with some reservations, citing Lambe and Bones (2008) finding that such placements leave pre-service teachers ‘less hopeful’ about inclusion, given that mainstream class settings may not be able to measure up to the well-supported and resourced environment of the special school.

They also refer to Loreman's (2010) assertion that placements in separate special settings can send 'mixed messages' to future teachers. The researchers applied Loreman's (2010) synthesis of 'essential skills, knowledge and attributes for inclusive teachers' in their analysis. The students' responses were found to meet three of these seven areas of criteria for teacher preparation:

- 1. A respect for diversity and an understanding of inclusion:** It was evident that the student teachers' engagement with young people with a range of disabilities and learning challenges had afforded them valuable insights that had advanced their understanding of what was entailed in being an inclusive practitioner.
- 2. Inclusive instructional planning:** As outlined above, the student teachers felt that their better insights and understandings arrived at as a consequence of the placement, enabled them to plan more effectively for inclusive practice.
- 3. Instructing in ways conducive to inclusion:** The student teachers not only recognised the value of employing a variety of strategies and materials, they reported feeling more confident about doing so, and being more patient and willing with regard to responding to individual needs.

Loreman's other areas of criteria (Engaging in meaningful assessment; Lifelong learning; Fostering a positive social climate; Collaboration with stakeholders) did not feature in these findings.

The researchers had added the further 'dispositional' dimension to their investigative criteria. They did so in acknowledgement of Waitoller and Kozleski's (2010) assertion that the development of 'critical sensibilities' – 'the question of what is being done for the benefit of whom' - is an important element of teacher preparation that can be overlooked in a preoccupation with 'skills and technical content'. As Picower (2011) explains, teachers need to be exposed to experiences that 'awaken their consciousness' and enable them to 'critically recognize injustice'. The student teachers' responses on this dimension were found to vary. Not all were convinced of the benefits of a special school practicum as preparation for inclusive practice. Nonetheless, the issue, as identified by the authors, lay not so much in their experience of this placement but in their interpretation of it. As several researchers have pointed out, irrespective of the type of practicum experienced, all student teachers need support and 'critical guidance' (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005) 'to make

sense of what they have seen and heard' (Banks et al., 2005).

The authors conclude, that 'the potential affordances of the special school practicum are sufficient to continue to encourage these placements'. They underline the importance of 'mediating' the practicum for student teachers with a view to enabling informed consideration of the potential and limitations of both special and inclusive education.

## EiTTT Visits to Students on Placement in Schools

The EiTTT project Learning Week in MIE had been arranged to coincide with the period of special education school placement for MIE's B.Ed. (year 2) student teachers. At the time, these students were undertaking their second week of this two-week placement. The students had already gained some experience in mainstream class settings. Now in their second year of initial teacher education and with three months of their year-long Inclusive Education module completed, the placement was their first practical experience of full-time special education. Each student had sourced her/his own school for placement. They could choose to spend the placement in a full special school or in a special 'unit' / class within a mainstream school. Schools are invited to accommodate one or more students who spend two weeks in the school both assisting and learning by shadowing a class teacher and working with groups and/or individual children under the supervision of the teacher. At that early stage of their teacher education course, the students are not formally assessed on their teaching in this special setting, but are expected to work with the children as requested and to demonstrate initiative at every opportunity. While students are not required to prepare formal lessons, they must complete an Observation Task on three children, noting each child's learning strengths, challenges and progress, as well as helpful teaching and management strategies and resources for enhancing learning. During the placement each student is visited in their school by a member of the MIE staff (school placement tutor) who engages the student in discussion to ascertain the student's openness to learning there and the quality of her/his engagement with the experience.

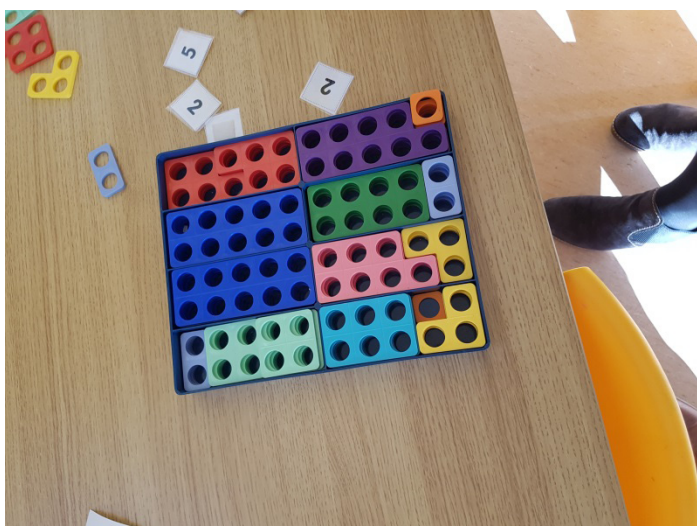
Over the course of two mornings the project team in groups of 3-4 people, each comprising a mix of teachers and teacher educators from different countries, and accompanied by an MIE staff member, visited students in their placement schools. Visits were made to students in six special schools and a further six mainstream schools. The schools were all located in the greater

Dublin area, in both suburban and inner city locations, and catered for children from a range of social class backgrounds. The visits had been pre-arranged, with the consent of the schools and the student teachers involved. Team members were warmly welcomed into the schools. Principals and staff gave generously of their time, meeting with the team and explaining the school's organisation, learning programmes and provision of support for student teacher learning.

The student teachers were aware that the project team visit would be similar to the usual visit they received from an MIE tutor during their placement, i.e. it would be an informal, discursive-type meeting during which the student would be asked to share her/his experience and any new learning arising from this placement. The MIE staff member accompanying the team members would serve as the 'tutor' and initiate discussion with the students. The student teachers willingly engaged in these discussions and shared their learning stories with the team.

### Observations on student teachers' placement in special 'units' / classes in Mainstream Schools:

On their return to MIE in the afternoons, each of the teams provided feedback to the whole group on their views in particular about the value of such placements for student teacher learning. The enthusiasm with which team members shared these accounts was remarkable. It was evident that the variety of schools, school structures and personnel encountered by the whole group had provided for an immensely rich and exciting learning experience for the project team in a short period of time. Notwithstanding the variety of schools visited, there was much consistency in this feedback, as the following themes illustrate:



### **‘The Variety of Special Education Settings’**

- › ‘The schools differ hugely’
- › ‘Such different systems in one school – full inclusion and separate units. Also, pupils can switch from one to the other during the day’
- › ‘Flexible transitions - very good’
- › ‘Teachers can move from teaching in mainstream classes to teaching in special units every few years – very advantageous for teacher learning’

### **‘The Positive, Active Role of the Principal’**

- › ‘The principal’s influence on the school’s atmosphere is very important / significant’
- › ‘The principal of the school knew each child personally and knew everything about the child’s ability’

### **‘High Level of Teacher Commitment’**

- › ‘Individualised approach very good’
- › ‘Pupil-centred decisions’
- › ‘Pupil-led decisions’
- › ‘Cooperation with parents’
- › ‘Interest in CPD’

### **‘Very Organised Schools’**

- › ‘Very organised learning programmes – targets for every student’
- › ‘All the work is very well planned and organised’

### **‘Children in Special Units are Made to Feel Included’**

- › ‘Super facilities’

- › ‘Environment is very inclusive’
- › ‘The environment is prepared for inclusion’
- *‘Attention paid to each child’s ability and personality’*
- *‘There is no rush in the teaching process’*
- *‘Learning is happening’*



## **Student Teacher Learning**

Team members were of one mind about the potential for student teacher learning during the placement:

- › ‘Absolutely – a very worthwhile placement experience for a student teacher’
- › ‘Really valuable for the students’
- › ‘Student teachers were observing, and working one-to-one with pupils, following the teacher’s lead’
- › ‘They were very enthusiastic’
- › ‘Students are there less than two weeks but they know so much’
- › ‘Student teachers already know what they are to do in the class and what their purpose is there’
- › ‘They know their [children’s] personal development and notice the strengths of each child in the class’
- › ‘They are familiar with the stage of development of each child’
- › ‘They interact well with the children’

- › ‘They have very detailed plans which show that each student is very responsible for what they are doing’ (The student teachers shared with team members their notes for the observation task they were required to undertake.)
- › ‘Yes, a very worthwhile experience for the student teacher – first practical experience of SEN; **opportunity to link observations during this SEN placement with approaches to mainstream teaching – to transfer learning; learning about the many ways of working in SEN classes - that these should be used in mainstream classes also; learning the importance of knowing your pupils; learning the value of positive reinforcement**’
- › ‘The experience is very valuable in order to understand the theory behind special education and teaching in general’
- › ‘Student teachers feel empowered’
- › ‘Maturity of the student teachers’
- › ‘Good to have student teacher exposed to SEN so early’
- › ‘Valuable experience for the student teacher. Learning that not everyone can do that job. ‘You need to get inside yourself. It makes you get inside yourself’

It was suggested also that this placement might ideally be the first of several such placements in ‘diverse’ settings during the students’ initial teacher education course. This theme was reiterated in partner feedback throughout the week:

- › ‘We are conscious that this is still a very early stage of learning [about special education] for the student teacher. Can be quite profound if working with students with severe disabilities. Perhaps the placement in year 2 could be the first of several such placements? – As they progress through their course they could be offered more opportunity to work in special education settings if they express particular interest in doing so – and could gradually be assessed on their teaching there?’

## Observations on student teachers’ placement in Special Schools:

Again, partners were highly impressed at the ‘maturity’ of such young student teachers and at the extent of their apparent learning in just over a week of placement. This was a consistent theme in partners’ observations. It raises the possibility as the student teachers also suggested, that the placement is a maturing experience in itself, as students confront and begin to mull over the ‘big’ questions around education, i.e., ‘equality’, ‘inclusion’, ‘exclusion’, ‘difference’ and ‘disability’:



- › ‘Positive placement for student – we were blown away’
- › ‘Students had such a big experience to share’
- › ‘The maturity of the student teachers and their opinions, observations and attitudes’
- › ‘It is a great opportunity for students to have placements in special schools. They get such diverse experience which helps them to get involved in any teaching process’
- › ‘They already knew a lot about the schools, pupils and environment’
- › ‘Student teachers were observing, working one-to-one, analysing the work in the classroom, discovering new ways to interact with the children’
- › They were learning that ‘to work in special school you have to be prepared for everything, because each day working with children who have autism is totally different; – that all children are so different with different skills; - the importance of one-to-one work; – that positive behaviour and attitudes are so needed in special schools; - that dealing with emotions is very important’

The view that such placements should be offered to student teachers more than once, re-emerged at this stage. Given the variety of school types and the different learning opportunities they afforded future teachers, it was strongly suggested that as students progressed through their teacher education course, they would benefit from further placement opportunities in settings of their choice. The possibility of formally assessing the students' teaching performance in such subsequent placements was also suggested:

- › 'A two-week placement is enough at the beginning when you are assisting. It is enough time to be introduced and to understand what you need to know. We also think they must have other experiences with more time to find their own methods'
- › 'The experience is significant and important. It might be important to have several opportunities for SEN placements in different schools / surroundings'

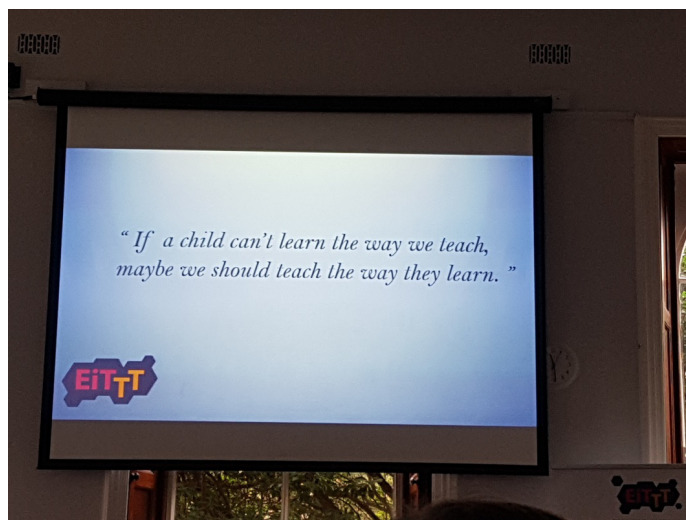
Other observations were similar to those made a day earlier after the visit to mainstream schools. Partners were very taken with every aspect of this educational provision:

- › 'The Principal – huge amount of influence'
- › 'The active role of the Special Needs Assistants'
- › 'The use of the walls of the classroom – pictures, learning plans, communication, behaviour plans'
- › 'Opportunity to achieve in the school the level 1 award in the language curriculum'

## EiTTT Partners Engage With the Student Teachers

Thirty-five student teachers randomly selected from the B.Ed. 2 year group were invited to return to college from school placement for one day during the learning week, to meet and share their views about this placement with the project team. The designated day was the second last day of the students' placement and the EiTTT team visit to MIE. In preparation for this, all students in the year group had completed and returned a questionnaire documenting their views on the placement experience. A representative sample of these questionnaires was displayed for partners to read upon their arrival in MIE that morning. As the students arrived, they were seated in groups with several team members assigned to each group.

Three students had agreed in advance to open the learning day by sharing video diary reflections which they had been invited to record before and during their placement.



These three students were drawn from special education school settings that were quite diverse and geographically dispersed. They had put together video and audio self-recordings of their views and feelings as they prepared for, and proceeded through their first practical experience of special education. As all partners agreed, their presentations were very powerful. The students had recorded their very individual learning journeys over the preceding weeks with commendable sincerity. They spoke of apprehension and anxiety before the placement, but also of an openness and curiosity; a ‘not knowing what to expect’. As placement began, their recordings described their rapid immersion into a new world that course work alone could never have revealed; ‘you just couldn’t understand without being in the school’. The depth of their learning and reflection in such a short period of time was very apparent.

However, it was also evident that despite the wealth of experience described in their work with the children and the teachers, the students were largely unaware of the progression in their learning; ‘I wasn’t really teaching them’. This response came from a student to a question posed by one of the team as to whether the experience might impact on that student’s future mainstream practice. The response highlights student teachers’ still early stage of understanding of concepts of ‘teaching’, ‘curriculum’, ‘learning’ and ‘education’. It puts an onus on teacher educators to enable students to tease out these conceptualisations by ‘unpacking’ their experience of the placement immediately afterwards, through questioning, discussion and analysis with teacher educators. Indeed, as partners suggested, it is likely that the value of the placement is conditional upon the quality of such supported reflection subsequently. Following these presentations many more questions and comments followed from project partners and other students.

Of the latter, some students spoke of having their ‘eyes opened’ to the possibility of a new career direction in education, while others felt that special education ‘is not for me’. Most students were of the view that their learning had just begun, that the experience of the placement had raised many questions for them, and that the opportunity to experience more such placements in diverse settings during their teacher education course would be very beneficial to their professional development.

## Students and Project Partners in Conversation

Following these presentations, all thirty-five students seated in groups with project partners, conversed at length. For more than an hour, until the conversations were reluctantly drawn to a close, students and project partners listened to, and learnt from one another with great enthusiasm. A note-taker at each table summarised proceedings. The positive impact of the placement for students was reiterated. Their learning appeared to be wide-ranging. It was specific to the special needs context, **transferrable to mainstream classrooms** and relevant for their general professional development as future teachers. Some of the students’ and partners’ comments are as follows:



## Learning for Future Practice

***‘You see that each child has individual needs. Diagnosis is the same but each child is different’***

***‘Learning shouldn’t be measured by your peers. It’s just yourself’***

***‘It was beneficial to see how resources are used for children with different needs and strengths’***

***‘Resources – more active learning taking place than passive learning. Children need variety in their lessons to be engaged’***

***‘Visuals, timetables, schedules, PECS books, sentence strips, Apps, curriculum (adapted)’***

***‘Strategies – Now, Next, Then’***

***‘UDL’ in practice***

***‘Technology used to engage children’***

***‘Music worked really well with children in a special needs setting’***

*‘Focus on life skills – important for children with serious disabilities’*

*‘Rewards systems – children are rewarded for good behaviour and other behaviour is not dwelt on’*

*‘Special ed. teachers need patience’*

*‘Team teaching – powerful way of working together’*

*‘Teachers in mainstream schools with attached units rotate every year to ensure to keep interest and reduce repetition’ (partner comment)*

*‘Interesting to observe the teamwork with the teachers and the SNAs’ (partner comment)*

*‘Need flexible teachers and systems’ (partner comment)*

*‘Resources like visual timetable could be used in mainstream placements’*

*‘You learn strategies which you can use in mainstream’*

*‘Realising children can only focus for such a period of time and need to burn off energy after doing work’*

*‘Importance of frequent breaks for the children’*

*‘Parents getting involved / communicating about their children’*

#### **Other Comments from Students**

*‘Good that the placement is not optional. You are pushed out of your comfort zone. Gives you the chance to try SEN schools and opens your eyes as to whether or not you would like it in the future’*

*‘Inclusion is best when everyone is benefitting – both the child with special educational difficulties and the children in the mainstream class’*

The students also noted their learning from the project partners:

**Learning from Belgium:** – *‘Kevin told us about the donkeys and garden that they use in their [special] school as an outlet for the children. The children help to take care of the animals and garden. Animals work well with children with ASD to help the children to calm down’*

– *‘For children in the special school there is integration with mainstream schools e.g. two days in the special school and three days in the mainstream school’*

– *‘Children diagnosed with Dyslexia in Belgium must stay in mainstream schools’*

**Learning from Finland:** – *‘Integrate when possible. Recognise that it is not always possible’*

The main ‘drawback’ of the placement experience seemed to have been its brevity! As already highlighted, this was a key theme during the week. Not only were students eager for more such experience, several suggested that they should be required to engage more formally during the placement by taking responsibility for teaching the children. Alternatively as they proposed, they might progress towards this with further such placements during their teacher education course, so as to provide for the possibility of selecting to undertake such experience for part of their final, assessed, ten-week school placement in fourth year. Typical comments were as follows:

*‘Not long enough’*

*‘Only one placement’*

*‘Two-week special ed. placement in 2nd year – not enough in our opinion’*

*‘Students only see one area of special education – need more than one experience to see more’ (partner comment)*

*‘The importance of experiencing different settings and classrooms’ (partner comment)*

*‘Not teaching, just observing’*

*‘Students are not sure if they would be confident teaching in a special school after just one placement’ (partner comment)*



*‘Give students the choice in their last year to organise their long placement themselves – e.g. five weeks in a special school + five weeks in mainstream’*

**Partners reiterated their views as to the value of the placement for future teachers, and added some suggestions in accordance with those of the students:**

*‘Very important placement’*

*‘Experiencing it personally, not just theory’*

*‘The depth of knowledge about the pupils was surprising even after two weeks’*

*‘Great strategies for future careers’*

*‘Student teachers surprised that the students in schools weren’t learning ‘academic lessons – good learning’*

*‘Peer feedback might be valuable for example during first-year placement*

*‘Might be important to have another SEN placement in later years’*



On the final day of the learning week the team worked in country groups to reflect on all aspects of their learning during the week. Facilitated by MIE lecturers Dr Sandra Austin and Dr Anne McMorrough, they used the padlet tool (<https://padlet.com>) which enabled large screen presentation of concurrent feedback from each of the country groups. Some general points noted by each of the groups are as follows:

*‘The placement is important and significant for student teachers. They learnt new ways to make contact to pupils. It might be important to have several opportunities for SEN placements in different schools’ (Finland)*

*‘Student teachers have learnt so much during their placement – more than in lectures’ (Finland)*

*‘Student teachers are eager to get more information about SEN after their placement’ (Finland)*

*‘Every [school] student has his/her learning objectives’ (Cyprus)*

*‘The gap between theory and practice is diminishing with the placements’ (Cyprus)*

*‘The certificates of mainstream schools and special education schools are the same. In Belgium there are still some differences and that is not empowering for inclusive education’ (Belgium)*

*‘The pathways [SEN Pathways] set out by [Ireland’s] policymakers are very clear and easily translated for other use’ (Belgium)*

*‘In Ireland you can be a special needs teacher without doing any further study. In Belgium, schools oblige you to do a Bachelor after Bachelor programme’ (Belgium)*

*‘In Belgium the teacher education colleges do a lot of one-day school visits to mainstream schools and special schools before the students go on placement in special schools. We are worried that the [Irish] students will generalise the view of one school to all of them and not every special education school is the same’ (Belgium)*

*‘We had a discussion with a student on placement who said the experience of the first week (shock!) is totally different from the second. You learn a lot from teachers who are working there’ (Latvia)*



Finally, the EiTtT team came together again to outline their overall impressions of this placement experience in preparing future teachers for inclusive practice. They responded to three questions and offered some additional recommendations:

**1. Is this placement necessary? Is it valuable in initial teacher education (Why / not?)**

*'It's valuable and necessary for student teachers.'*

*'Yes, they can learn valuable things from the placement in special education schools that they can easily transfer to classroom practice in mainstream schools.'*

*'Yes . . . it has to be part of a bigger approach in teacher education about children with special needs.'*

*'It's their first or only contact with special education.'*

*'They learn very much more during that placement than attending lectures.'*

*'This helps student teachers to understand the theory better.'*

*'The placement helps students to evaluate their skills and feelings. It helps them to choose whether they would like to work in special education or not. Students have an opportunity to observe teachers' work, make their own decisions and learn how to behave and work in special education and decide would they like to copy the methods or not. This placement could help students to find out their own new skills, what they could do, how to react. During the placement they achieve more than expected.'*

*'Yes - reflection necessary! Knowledge about children with special needs important for all teachers'*

*'Placement is a very important part of each student's studying process. It is time and opportunity to check the given theory in practice and find out some new ideas and methods to use in further placements and teaching career.'*

**2. Is this placement necessary / valuable in preparation for mainstream teaching?**

*'This placement is very valuable for mainstream school. It gives a lot of . . . experience which students could use in mainstream schools even if there are not any children with disabilities. The knowledge in this experience allows students to understand what is inclusion and that it is not only 'academic learning'. It comes as a shock to students, because they are thinking firstly about including kids with disabilities / disadvantages in mainstream classes and teaching them the same as others. The placement shows that it is totally different. You have to teach them daily life skills . . . inclusion means a lot more than just the definition.'*

*'We strongly recommend this placement for Teacher Education. This is a good way to teach them to be an inclusive teacher also in mainstream setting. The placement is necessary for their further studies. After that they can concentrate on obtaining methods and strategies for SEN pupils.'*

*'The students will gain tools for their own 'teacherhood' during that placement. E.G. teachers must be open-minded, patient, positive; individual needs must be acknowledged and taken account of; focus on positive behaviour rather than negative; teaching is caring for children.'*

*'Transfer of methods / materials'*

*'They learn that teaching is not teaching but teaching is loving and caring.'*

3. What (if any) learning opportunities does it afford student teachers which might not happen otherwise (i.e. via course work alone?)

*‘Practice could be so different from expectation (positive and negative)’*

*‘The individual approach to children’*

*‘They learn to ‘leave’ the curriculum [for] the wellbeing of the child’*

*‘Not only that children have to adapt but the teachers also have to adapt’*

*‘After the placement the students are much more curious and are stimulated more by the courses at college.’*

*‘The student teachers are willing to get more information about SEN.’*

*‘Some student teachers are interested in working in special schools, others are not (they find this out)’*

## Partner Recommendations

*‘The students go on placement to very different schools. They should not generalise their ideas of special education schools.’*

*‘It’s important that student teachers share their experiences with peers and tutors as all of them have a different kind of placement.’*

*‘It would be better / important to get a second placement in different SEN setting / environment.’*

*‘In our opinion the placement is better in 3rd or 4th year. You could do some school visits in 1st or 2nd year.’*

*‘Repeat this experience in 3rd / 4th year.’*

*‘Students would like to have more placements in special schools to have more experience and new ideas and thoughts.’*

*‘Students (student teachers) would like to have more interaction with teachers and in the class.’*

*‘It might be useful / an idea to consider if the placement aims could also include teaching / co-teaching, not just observation. The student teachers would have been ready to teach but they felt it was difficult ‘because they were allowed to observe’. These partners felt the students were capable of so much more.’*

*‘Students learn what deep learning is – small steps – back to basics – so also explicit teaching.’*

*‘UDL . . . It is important to know this because they can use this learning in special education and use it in mainstream classes.’*

## Conclusions and Recommendations

- › The EiTTT team came to Marino Institute of Education in November / December 2017 to learn about how MIE's student teachers are prepared for inclusive educational practice in schools. The team specifically addressed the two-week placement that the students undertake in a special education setting. Informal feedback from student teachers and academic staff in MIE over many years has indicated that this placement serves as a valuable learning experience for future teachers, with much potential to advance their learning for inclusive practice. As student teachers have reported, the experience of this placement can demystify their thinking about 'disability' and 'special educational needs'. It can afford them greater opportunity than in mainstream classes to 'notice' variations in children's learning capacities and styles and to consider more carefully how to apply 'ordinary' methodologies to effectively respond to these. Research findings indicate that students' focus as future teachers may consequently shift from a preoccupation with children's 'learning difficulties' to a recognition of potentially 'problematic pedagogies'. Hence student teachers are better able to regard human 'difference' as a given and a starting point for all lesson planning.
  - › There was a unanimously positive response from the EiTTT team members about the potential of this placement experience for enhancing student teachers' professional development.
  - › It was seen to be a vital element in the preparation of inclusive practitioners.
  - › Partners recommended that student teachers be offered further opportunities to practise in 'diverse' settings during their teacher education course and that they be gradually assessed on this practice.
- › The importance of informed, supported reflection by the student teachers on this experience (i.e. in conjunction with teacher educators) was underlined.
  - › In conclusion, the EiTTT team highly recommends that teacher educators incorporate such placement experience in the preparation of beginning teachers for effective practice in our diverse world. In accordance with Walton (2017), we are not advocating a privileging of practical over theoretical aspects of teacher education, but rather that inclusive education be positioned above all as a form of professional knowledge that enables student teachers, to apply theoretically informed judgements to the complexity of learning diversity for the betterment of their own development and ultimately that of their students.

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