

Article

Leading Inclusive Learning, Teaching and Assessment in Post-Primary Schools in Ireland: Does Provision Mapping Support an Integrated, School-Wide and Systematic Approach to Inclusive Special Education?

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Abstract: A parallel system of inclusive and special education persists in Ireland despite attempts to move towards integrated provision for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) along a flexible continuum of support. Even in mainstream schools, duality exists and discrete delivery of special education continues to create 'siloed' approaches to education for some students. This paper outlines a research and knowledge exchange initiative involving a higher education institution and a management body for post-primary schools in Ireland attempting to develop integrated, school-wide, systematic and collaborative approaches to inclusive and special education. Theoretically underpinned by Hornby's model of Inclusive Special Education (2015) and a conceptualisation of the SENCO role in the Irish context, a pilot process was implemented to support the development of an integrated response to a continuum of need. A year after initial implementation a review was undertaken. Focus group and individual interviews with SENCOs, Curriculum Leaders and Principals in six schools indicate that the initiative, while still in its infancy, raised awareness about inclusive special education amongst staff and provided data-informed approaches to education. The centrality of leadership in promoting school-wide approaches to inclusive special education also emerged. Finally, the importance of situated community of practice approaches to professional learning were identified as critical to leading change in schools.

Keywords: inclusive special education; school improvement; school self-evaluation; multi-tiered systems of support; Ireland; post-primary education

1. Introduction

For students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), inclusion in regular post-primary education in particular has been challenging, and is the focus of this paper. Recognising what is appropriate education for students with SEND is problematic [1]. The term inclusive education offers no universally agreed definition [2–4] and much of the debate seems preoccupied with placement as the constitution of inclusive education [5,6]. Furthermore, special education no longer seems fashionable [6,7] and has been described in the literature as incompatible with inclusive education [2,7]. This is partly arising from the 'All Means All' agenda [8] towards *full inclusion*, a concept described as 'ideological purity' by Norwich [9], legislated for and ratified by 177 countries under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [10]. The release of General Comment No. 4 by the UN provides greater clarity to the terms of the CRPD, and emphasises inclusion as a process requiring genuine systemic level reform and transformation

if all children are to receive equitable access to high quality education ‘under the same roof’ [11] (p. 36).

2. The Policy Reform Priorities for Inclusive and Special Education in Ireland

For the past three decades, socially responsive approaches to inclusive education have driven educational policy reform internationally. Rapid reform in Ireland, as in other jurisdictions, has resulted in increasing levels of diversity in regular education and arguably practice has some catching up to do vis à vis moves away from historical and deeply entrenched categorical approaches to funding and provision [12–15]. While recent changes to the post-primary curriculum in Ireland are enabling greater levels of inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities [16], systemic level barriers relating to how post-primary schools are structured and organised limit participation for some students [14,17]. Progress is often hindered by inflexible and discrete approaches to learning, teaching and assessment [12,18] and a lack of access to support [17]. Furthermore, performativity agendas and increasing demands for ‘value-added’ accountability within the teaching profession are time-consuming and harmful to the inclusive education agenda [19,20] and erode teachers’ sense of autonomy and agency [20]. Moreover, the constant generation and monitoring of student data in a performativity driven agenda has been described by Pearson et al. [21] (p. 55) in their study investigating SENCOS’ insights into the future direction of their role in a changing policy context, as ‘more paperwork for less impact’ and consumes inordinate amounts of time, perceived by SENCOS, as better spent working directly with students.

Efforts to respond to increased diversity in regular education have resulted in a variety of different and often segregated provisions for different kinds of students [14], and special class provision in particular for autistic students has experienced a proliferation. Is this a retrograde step or does it reflect a system of education which is needs led and adaptable? Limited research on the role of special classes and the assumption that students’ needs will be better met through these classes has been challenged, with calls for more research into their efficacy [12,14,15]. Between 2011 and 2019 in Ireland [15] (p. 2):

- Overall student population in schools increased by 7.5 percent;
- Government expenditure on special education increased by 46 percent;
- Special education as a percentage of the total education budget increased by 12.7 percent;
- Additional teaching posts for special education increased by 46 percent;
- Provision of special classes increased by 196 percent;
- Number of students enrolled in special classes increased by 155 percent;
- Number of special schools has increased by 13 percent.

Ireland’s current policy reform priorities are influenced by its recent ratification of the CRPD [22]. In 2019, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the independent statutory body responsible for allocation of additional resourcing to schools to support inclusion of children with SEND, published an interim progress report entitled *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society* [15], following a request by the Minister for Education to advise on appropriate educational provision for students in special schools and classes, and to make recommendations which would lead to improved outcomes for students. The report, summarises the NCSE’s progress to date in preparing its advice by setting out emerging findings from a preliminary analysis of information from the consultation and research strands of the review and the steps towards completing the policy advice for submission to the Minister. The progress report acknowledges fundamental tensions within the current system and presents conflicting stakeholder views on inclusive education and recognises:

‘it is now timely to review whether special schools and classes should continue to be offered as part of the continuum of educational provision for students with more complex special educational needs or whether greater inclusion in mainstream classes offers a better way forward’ [15] (p. 4)

Publication of the report has contributed to heated debate about the future of special education in Ireland. While some countries (Germany, United Kingdom, and USA) have refused to fully comply with UNCRPD, in other parts of the world it has now become policy (Italy, Portugal, New Zealand). If the full terms of the CRPD are adopted and legislated for Ireland, it will also see the abolition of special schools and classes, in favour of full inclusion, or at the very least, a dilution of special education in a system currently providing partial inclusive education (i.e., a dual system offering a continuum of provision) [23]. Building integrated and systematic approaches to education for all students across a flexible continuum, while recognising the distinct needs of some, and responding accordingly, is therefore necessary to maximise inclusive education. However, research illustrates the struggle schools continue to experience in attempts to implement, with efficacy, evidence-based practices which can meet needs across a continuum [24,25].

3. Inclusive Special Education: A Temperate Approach to Education for All

Positioning of inclusive and special educations in the literature as binary concepts is unhelpful [26–28]. Recent appeals for a more temperate approach to inclusive and special education, which considers the necessary co-existence of both [2,26,27] acknowledges the common, distinct and unique needs of students. Theoretically framed by Hornby's model of inclusive special education [29], we acknowledge both inclusive and special education as equally important components of an integrated education system and a recognition of a continuum of teacher expertise to meet common, distinct and unique needs of students [18]. Hornby spotlights the significance of high-quality teaching and learning in his model, and advocates for the use of established, evidenced-based interventions, informed by strengths-based individualised profiling of students. Furthermore, while the model recognises that most students should be educated in mainstream classrooms, it advocates the need for flexible movement across a continuum of provision for students with significant needs. The importance of developing effective organisational procedures and systems to optimise learning for all students, across an integrated continuum is essential, as is a close partnership between regular and special schools, with co-location being the ideal.

Formalised SEN provision in schools is promoted in the model which also recognises the importance of developing school-wide capacity to respond to diverse needs of all students. Emphasising the critical role of regular teachers to meet common needs of the majority of students in partnership with specialist teachers, tasked with meeting distinct and unique instructional needs of students with SEND, are important elements of the model and signal the need for integrated and collaborative approaches to learning, teaching and assessment across the continuum.

4. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in the Irish Context: The Continuum of Support

A multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) is an evidence-based framework based on three tiers of support aimed at assisting at-risk students [30] and complements Hornby's model of inclusive special education in that it is intended to support implementation of a systematic and adaptive approach to meeting the needs of students with SEND. MTSS frameworks exist in many countries internationally, such as Finland, USA, Canada, England and Australia, and are mandated in some jurisdictions like Finland [17,24,31,32]. Interventions to support students can range from school-to community-based approaches to support common needs of students at tier one, to more distinct and unique needs at tiers two and three. The Continuum of Support (CoS) (Figure 1) [33,34] is an example of a MTSS for students with SEND, and more broadly for students at risk, and frames the response to intervention in Ireland [35]. The CoS provides a graduated solution-oriented framework of assessment, intervention and evaluation in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, with an emphasis on academic, social, emotional and behavioural supports. For schools to address the needs of all students three distinct school-based processes exist: school-wide and classroom support (support for all); school support (support for some); school support plus (support for few). Whole school and classroom support involve

processes of prevention, effective mainstream teaching and early identification. These systems are available to all students and in theory should effectively meet the needs of most. Considerable emphasis is placed on the provision of appropriate classroom-based preventative interventions and in-class support in preference to withdrawal methods of educational support [14,17,35,36].

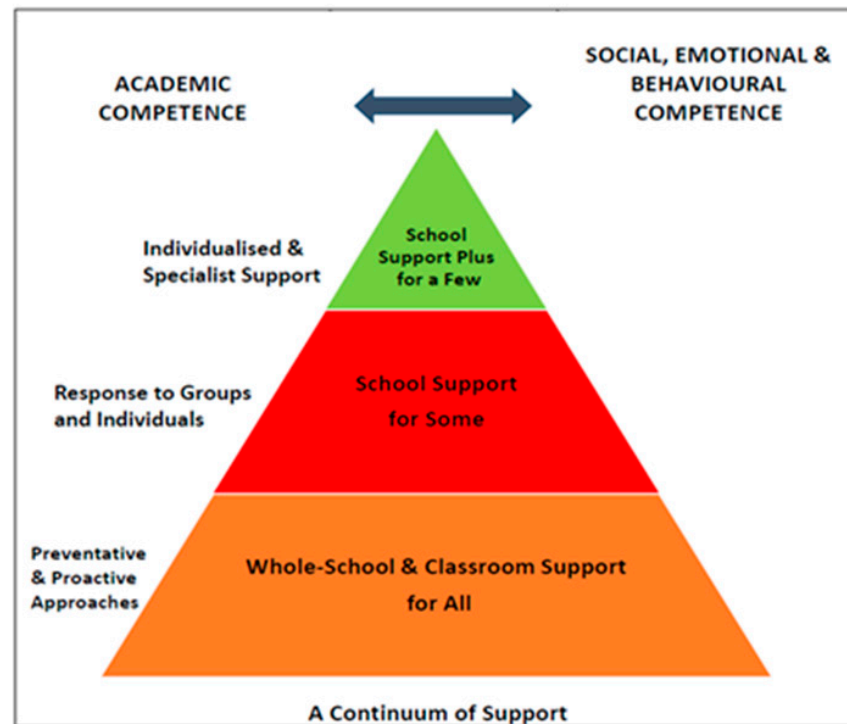


Figure 1. National Educational Psychological Service Continuum of Support. Adapted with permission from [33,34]. 2007 and 2010, National Educational Psychological Service [33,34].

While schools are attempting to provide a cohesive framework for data-driven, evidence-based interventions across the CoS, they are not always aligned and in practice, access to tier three therapeutic interventions is severely limited [17,36]. Implementation of MTSS frameworks such as the CoS is challenging and some have argued that it blurs the lines between regular and special education [37]. For instance, it is not clear if all tiers should address the distinct or individualised needs of some students [31]. Should regular classrooms be able to accommodate these individualised needs through tier one interventions? Can tier two and three interventions occur in the regular classroom or should students be removed for specialised intervention? Equally ambiguous is the allocation of additional resourcing to schools for special education. Can additional funding be used to support students at tier one of a MTSS approach to inclusive and special education [31]? Current service delivery models in Ireland and elsewhere, which, arguably are still embedded in deficit constructs of disability, apply categorical systems to allocation of resources, prioritising placement over student progress [24]. Furthermore, a graduated, data-informed response to a continuum of need requires evidence of the need for tier two and three interventions. How long should a student continue to fail before receiving access to additional support [17]? MTSS frameworks have also impacted on the role of special educators [37,38] now required to work in more collaborative ways with regular teachers in regular classrooms, and in Ireland, co-teaching models of provision are promoted by the DES Inspectorate, despite limited data on student achievement in co-taught classrooms [24]. Notwithstanding limitations of the MTSS approach to inclusive special education, it is the framework universally adopted in the Irish context and it underpins the approach to the initiative outlined in this paper.

5. Implementing a Strategic School-Wide Approach to Inclusive Special Education: Rationale for the Initiative

The initiative was initially motivated by research conducted by one of the authors which explored the role of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in the Irish post-primary context and was later developed in consultation with the Director of Schools and Education and Training Board (ETB) Team involved. The original study involved 27 SENCOs in an early phase of the research [39], followed by a more detailed study involving 6 SENCOs and their principals [18]. While small-scale, the research found that discrete approaches to the delivery of special education persisted and SENCOs were often tasked with responsibility for students identified with SEND, leading to greater levels of isolation and burgeoning workload. The research recommended the development of an integrated, systematic and school-wide approach to provision for students with SEND, seeking to reposition special education at the heart of learning, teaching and assessment and by default embed the work of SENCOs and SEN teams at the centre of school improvement. A conceptualisation of the SENCO role emerged from the research (Figure 2), integrating Hornby’s model of inclusive special education and embedding processes of school self-evaluation across a continuum of support to enable data-led approaches to provision. The conceptual model illustrates the unique position the SENCO maintains and demonstrates how the SENCO role requires specific skills to support both specialist and universal approaches to inclusive special education [18] (p. 12). Some elements of the model are aspirational and require empirical validation. The model may also be too ambitious in its expectations of SENCOs’ capacity to provide both universal (tier one) and specialist supports and interventions (tiers two and three). For instance, not all SENCOs have formalised leadership roles in schools [39] and implementation of school self-evaluation is not uniformly embedded in schools [40]. This initiative is an attempt to provide empirical validation and translate this model in schools to build SENCO leadership capacity and support data-led, systematic and collaborative approaches to school improvement across the CoS.

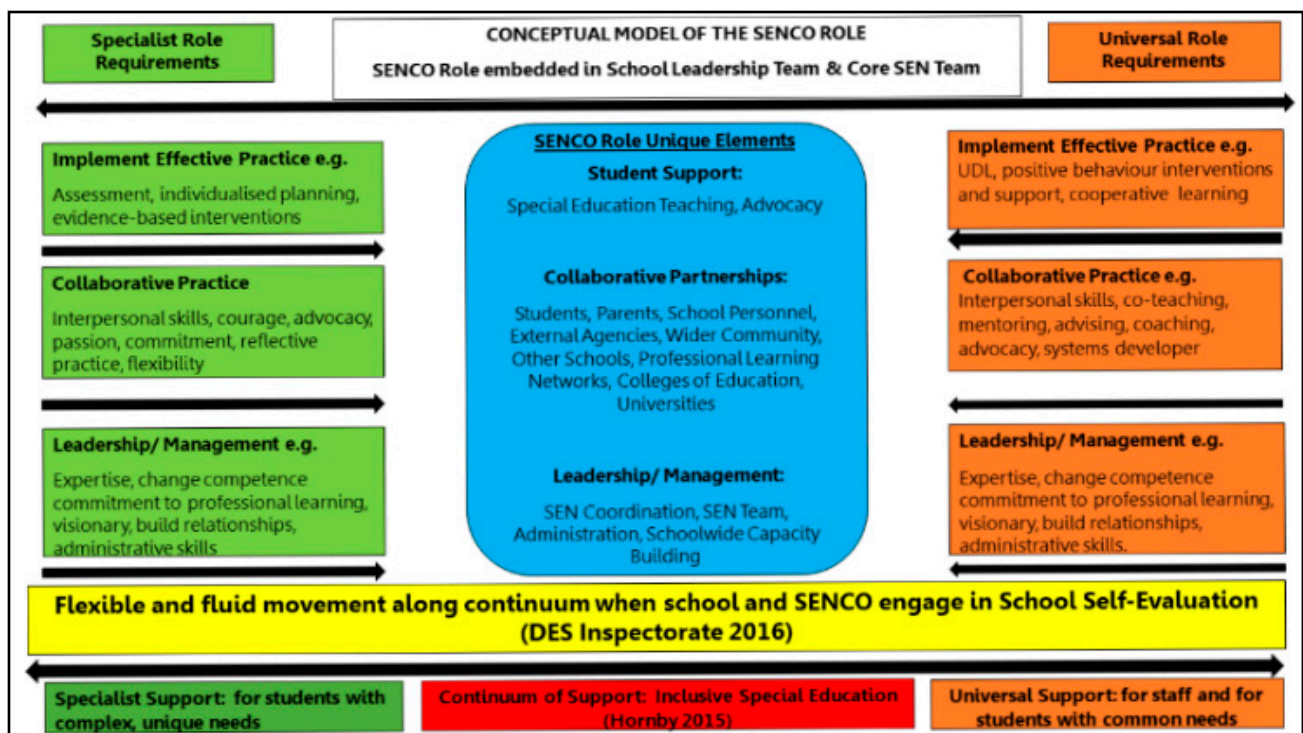


Figure 2. A conceptualisation of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator role within an inclusive special education framework. Adapted with permission from [18]. 2020 Fitzgerald and Radford.

The emphasis on research and knowledge exchange involved participants from pilot schools in co-constructing new practices in a shared collaborative space and derives from the perspective that policies are not simply implemented but are enacted through processes of interpretation and translation [40]. Knowledge exchange facilitates interpretation and translation of policy and enables ‘a process whereby researchers and practitioners work alongside each other in partnership, sharing their respective knowledge, ideas, evidence and expertise in order to achieve real world impact’ [41] (p. 180).

6. A Case Study: Implementing a School-Wide Approach to Inclusive Special Education in a Regional Education and Training Board (ETB)

The ETB involved in piloting this initiative, which was coordinated by the Director of Schools, established a Leading Inclusive Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LILTA) Team in 2016 tasked with guiding the eighteen post-primary schools in the region to support a broad response to students’ needs that is both balanced and challenging, and where wellbeing is intrinsic to learning and the enabling of learning. In 2017 partnership between Mary Immaculate College and the LILTA Team was established and the initiative commenced in 2018 when all schools were invited to participate. Six schools volunteered.

6.1. School Self-Evaluation across the Continuum of Support: Provision Mapping as a Response

Developing collaborative approaches to school self-evaluation as it relates to inclusive special education will require a systematic approach involving, for example, dissemination systems; cascading and situated systems promoting professional learning and collegial sharing; and creation of specialist SEN teams, all of which collectively induce school-wide mediated change. Facilitating collaborative practice between colleagues is essential and preferential to individual teachers working in isolation [42,43]. Systematic approaches to school improvement require distributed models of leadership; high levels of staff and learner engagement; collaborative planning; a commitment to continual professional learning and reflective practice [44,45]. Arguably, achieving balance between collaborative practice and teachers’ individuality can prove challenging [46] but strong leadership can promote equilibrium when teachers’ and principals’ perceptions of the school vision and culture are aligned [47].

This initiative integrates existing policy frameworks for school improvement to embed collaborative processes of school self-evaluation with the CoS through the *Looking At Our Schools Framework* [48] and *Continuing Implementation of School Self-Evaluation 2016–2020* [49] with a provision mapping processes [50]. At a policy level, lack of integration of these interdependent and inter-related frameworks encourages a discrete or ‘siloed’ approach to interpretation and translation in schools. In essence, provision mapping aims to support integration of approaches to learning, teaching and assessment across the three tiers of the CoS through implementation of a three-step process [35] (Figure 3) whereby needs are identified, met and progress monitored and reviewed at school-wide level, classroom level and individual learner level. However, we recognise the complexity involved in implementation of any school-wide process, and we are:

‘well advised to seek simplicity but, at the same time, distrust it (Bunge, 1962). Apparent simplicity can mask an underlying complexity that someone must acknowledge and understand to work successfully with or on a given matter’ [6] (p. 79)

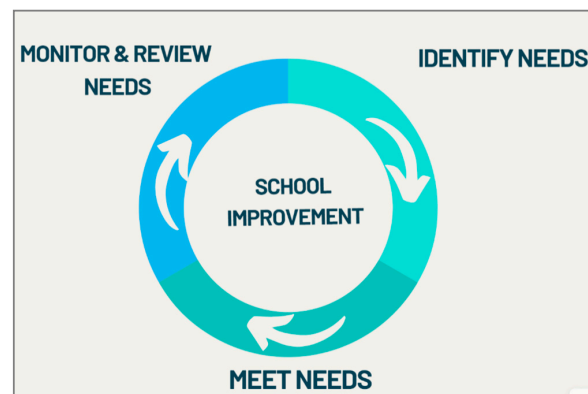


Figure 3. School self-evaluation process. Adapted with permission from [35]. 2017 Department of Education and Skills.

6.2. Provision Mapping

Provision mapping can be described as a self-evaluation and auditing process (Table 1 and Supplementary Materials Toolkit for Schools) which allows schools to identify how well provision for students with SEND matches need and recognise gaps in provision and areas of real strength. It allows schools to list the provisions and interventions available to students across the CoS, ranging from provisions for all students to specialist interventions for those with complex needs. In doing so, it provides a basis to strategically cost and plan provision, allocate resources and identify staff professional learning needs.

Table 1. Implementation of provision mapping process (adapted from Cheminais [50]).

Stages in the Process	Actions
Step 1	Capture current provision and identify resources allocated to provision.
Step 2	Audit projected need for the academic year.
Step 3	Compare projected need with current provision and identify any gaps.
Step 4	Consider evidence-based practices on what works best.
Step 5	Plan provision map for the next academic year.
Step 6	Involve parents, students with SEND, and all teachers in evaluating provision.
Step 7	Evaluate the impact of provision with evidence from wider student data.
Step 8	Engage in an annual strategic review of map to identify trends and patterns of need.

The process informs the school provision map (Supplementary Materials), which is a document that provides a summary of the different types of provisions and interventions currently available in schools to support the needs of ALL students across the CoS. According to Cheminais [50], the provision map can:

- Highlight repetitive or ineffective use of resources;
- Assess school effectiveness when linked with outcomes for students;
- Plan development to meet students' identified needs (including consideration of special class provision);
- Record changes in provision and transfer easily from year to year or school to school;
- Inform individualised education planning;
- Set annual success criteria for the SEND/Inclusion policy;
- Report annually on the success of the SEND/Inclusion policy;

- Demonstrate accountability;
- Inform parents, external agencies, NCSE and DES Inspectorate of how additional resources are being used to meet needs;
- Focus attention on school-wide issues of teaching and learning rather than on individual child issues.

In combination with SSE and CoS policy frameworks, provision mapping serves as the foundation and the scaffolding supporting the initiative outlined in this paper.

6.3. Aims of the Initiative

- Affirm and acknowledge existing good practice in relation to inclusive special education in schools.
- Support schools to develop school-wide systematic, collaborative and collective approaches to inclusive special education.
- Guide schools in their implementation of school self-evaluation to develop a school provision map, reflecting current provision for students with SEND across the CoS.
- Build systematic, collaborative and situated approaches to professional learning and capacity building.

6.4. Initiative Implementation

Between May 2018 and May 2019, we worked with Senior Leadership Teams, SENCOs and Curriculum Leaders (subject teachers involved in implementation of SSE) in six ETB schools. An initial overview of the initiative was presented to all 18 school principals and deputy principals in January 2018. Opt-in approaches to involvement in the initiative resulted in six schools volunteering (Table 2) and the process began in earnest in May 2018 when SENCOs from the six schools were invited to attend a clustered event to outline the initiative and provide opportunities for them to become involved in the design and development of processes and timelines for implementation of the initiative.

Table 2. Participating school profiles.

School Number	Enrolment	Gender	Catchment	* DEIS Status
School-1	<400	Mixed	Large town/rural	Yes
School-2	<900	Mixed	Urban/Small Town/Rural	Yes
School-3	<600	Mixed	Rural/Small Town	No
School-4	<500	Mixed	Rural/Small Town	Yes
School-5	<200	Mixed	Small Town/Rural	Yes
School-6	<600	Mixed	Small Town/Rural	Yes

* Delivering equality of opportunity in schools initiative (DEIS) (schools with disproportionality higher numbers of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds).

Following this meeting, resources including a provision map template, surveys for dissemination to parents, students and teachers, and CPD materials were over the summer months. At the beginning of the autumn term 2018, the LILTA team facilitated a full clustered day of CPD with the SENCOs and Curriculum Leaders from participating schools with an emphasis on the processes involved in systematic school self-evaluation across three tiers of the CoS.

Over the course of the academic year, a combination of school visits, clustered CPD events, online and telephone support and mentoring, and generation of resources assisted

schools to systematically gather and analyse data from staff, parents and students to develop a school provision map as outlined in Figure 4. This map would support a data-informed, strategic approach to school improvement across the CoS, support an audit of professional learning needs of staff and inform development in subsequent years. Principal engagement throughout the process was critical to support prioritisation of a collective and collaborative school-wide approach to meeting the needs of students with SEND [18] and will continue to play a central role in sustaining change based on trust and respect' [51].

Implementation of any school-wide intervention is linked to sustained support and professional development [52]. While professional learning is a highly individualised endeavour, models supporting transformation are those identified as collaborative, grounded [53] and adaptive [52]. Multi-modal approaches to initiative implementation in this study are illustrated in Figure 5. Approaches embraced situated, school-based learning involving school visits, training of trainers, coaching, mentoring and collaborative communities of practice [54] aimed at facilitating interpretation and customised translation of policy into practice [40].

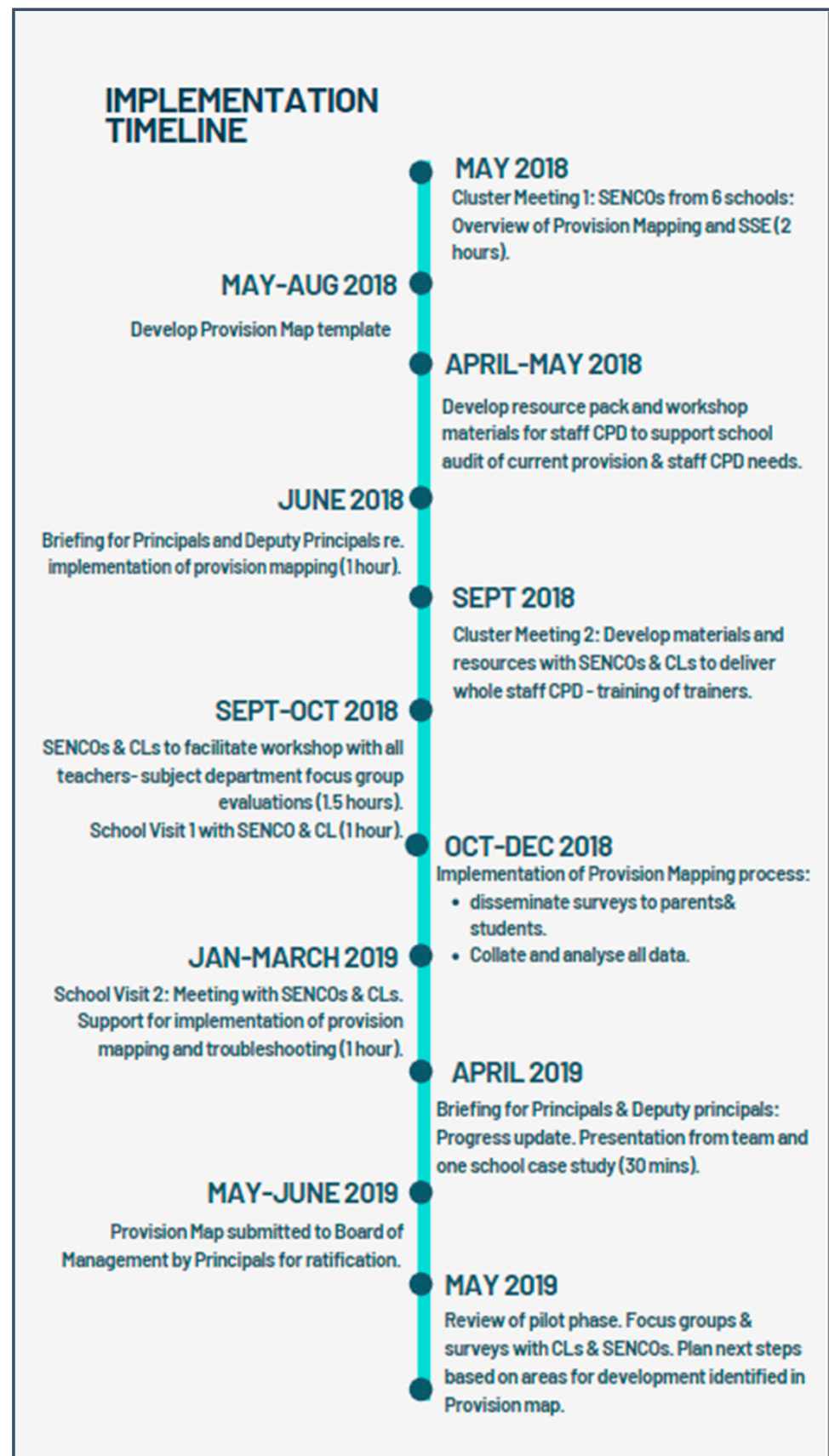


Figure 4. Initiative implementation timeline.



Figure 5. Multi-modal approach to initiative implementation and professional learning.

7. Reviewing the Pilot Phase: Participants’ Experiences One Year Later

In December 2018, it was agreed to undertake a review of the pilot and we developed a research plan as outlined in Figure 6, applied for and were subsequently granted ethical approval through Mary Immaculate Research Ethics Committee (MIREC Ref: A18-055/21 January 2019), and engaged in data collection. The following research questions guided focus group interviews with SENCOs (*n* = 7) and curriculum leaders (*n* = 3), and individual semi-structured interviews with principals (*n* = 5):

- i. What do you think were the benefits, if any, for the school as a result of participation in this project?
- ii. What challenges did you experience as a result of participation in the project?
- iii. How could the process be improved to support you and your school to implement school-wide systematic approaches to inclusive special education?

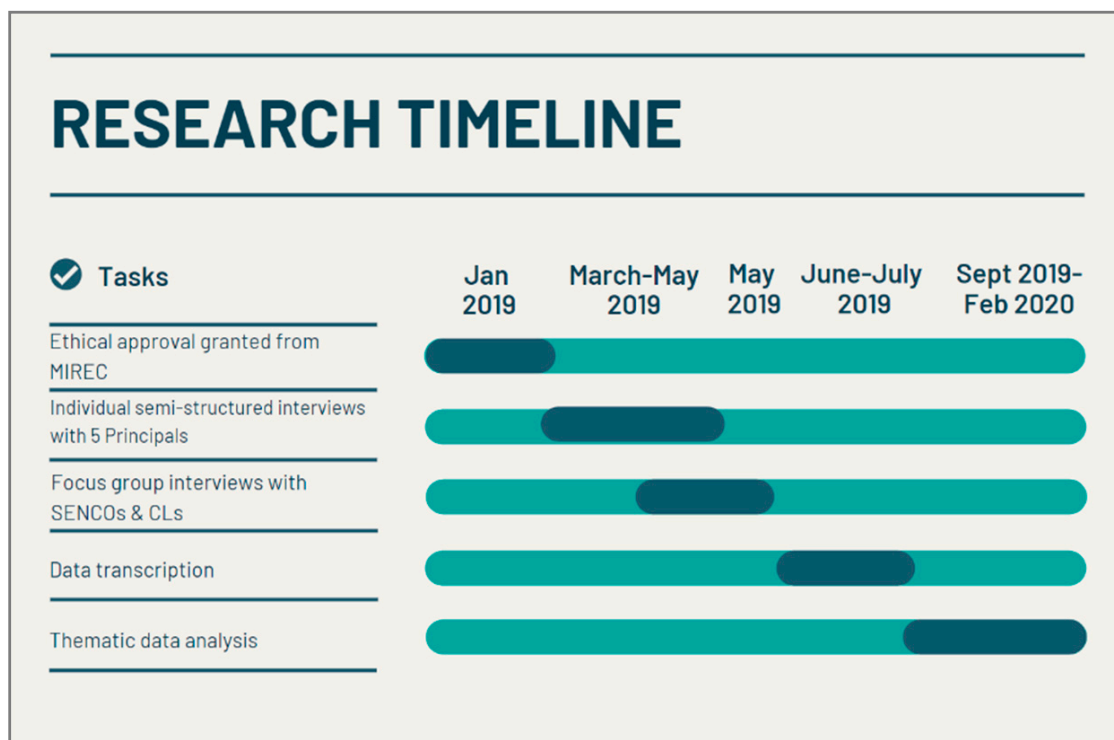


Figure 6. Research timeline.

7.1. Methods

A qualitative approach to the study was adopted, framed by interpretivism [55] to gain deep, rich insights into experiences of SENCOs, curriculum leaders and principals participating in the project. The qualitative approach provided 'an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a 'real life' context' [56] (p. 10). The lack of previous research on the topic warranted a qualitative approach. All six schools participating in the pilot project were invited to contribute to the research component, which was an optional element to the initiative. Fifteen participants provided informed consent to participate in the review. Curriculum leaders and SENCOs participated in separate off-site focus group interviews, lasting approximately 1 h each. Two researchers facilitated a focus group with the SENCOs, one led the questioning while the other took notes and summarised feedback at the end of the meeting to allow for clarification and member checking [57]. A third researcher conducted a focus group with the CLs. Individual, semi-structured interviews, of approximately one-hour duration, were conducted with principals in their schools. The principal in the sixth school was newly appointed and therefore was not involved in the project. Three of us were involved in interviews with principals. An interview schedule with guiding probes was devised to ensure consistency of approach between each interviewer [58].

Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Three of us engaged in thematic analysis of data [59]. Systematic and rigorous analysis involved an iterative process comprising six phases [59]. This approach allowed theoretical freedom relating to the analysis, which was both data driven, and theory derived from the theoretical framework [59]. A process of initial familiarisation with data through transcribing of interviews to systematic open coding and generation of initial themes as they related to the three key interview questions, to the final refinement of themes facilitated close engagement with data. Three researchers engaged in independent coding and categorisation of data to enhance reliability of codes [60] and developed a codebook each, utilising a template which sought codes, categories and illustrative quotations from the transcripts [61] to support data reduction. All three codebooks were merged, codes were compared and 83 per cent consensus was achieved in relation to a total of 178 codes generated between all three researchers. This researcher-level triangulation adds credibility and trustworthiness to the findings [60] and enabled us to test our individual favoured lines of interpretation and potential bias [62]. Examples of codes included: lack of time; pace of change; duty of care to students with SEN; importance of a school-wide approach; accidental collaboration; community of practice. Refinement of codes resulted in 91 which were then categorised thematically into 16 categories such as: inclusion; the development of teacher practice; embedding change; collaborative practice; distributed leadership; school culture and ethos. Key themes subsequently emerged following lengthy discussion between the researchers and intensive reading of codebooks [63].

Debriefing occurred with all participants following data analysis, and a summary of review findings was disseminated to all 18 schools, including the ETB Director of Schools. These findings informed further development of the initiative the following year across the 18 schools.

7.2. Limitations

Notwithstanding efforts to maintain ethical, rigorous and transparent approaches to the implementation and research processes, we acknowledge the small-scale nature of the research, the early stage of implementation of an initiative that will take years to embed, and our dual roles as researchers and developers of the initiative. The potential for researcher bias is acknowledged and to counter the risk, a reflexive orientation was adopted throughout to examine our interpretive biases and reactions to data. Furthermore, efforts to look for alternative explanations or disconfirming evidence in the findings remained a priority throughout the analysis of data through negative case analysis [62]. Equally, social

desirability bias may have been a factor and impacted on the validity of data, particularly when we developed close coaching and mentoring relationships with participants [64]. Issues of reliability and validity were addressed through honesty, transparency, trustworthiness, authenticity, depth, scope, subjectivity, emotion and idiographic approaches to capturing individuals [65]. Finally, the compilation of an electronic database preserved and presented data in an accessible format that will provide a chain of evidence or audit trail from which other investigators can review evidence directly and determine for themselves if the findings are justified [66].

8. Findings

Synthesis and analysis of data as they relate to the research questions are presented thematically.

8.1. What Do You Think Were the Benefits, If Any, for the School as a Result of Participation in This Project?

Participants had more to say in response to this question than any other and two broad themes emerged from the data:

- Provision mapping, while at the early stages of development, started to support a more integrated, strategic, school-wide approach to inclusive special education.
- A multi-modal and customised approach to initiative implementation and professional learning maximised opportunities for sustained impact in schools and authentic collaboration towards a shared purpose.

8.1.1. Provision Mapping, While at the Early Stages of Development, Started to Support a More Integrated, Strategic, School-Wide Approach to Inclusive Special Education

Findings indicate that participants engaged with policy implementation in a more meaningful way through the process of SSE to creating a provision map. CLs, SENCOs and principals were presented with the opportunity to examine their entire current provision for the first time, when *'stop and think time is pretty precious in schools . . . it created that space to have conversations, it created a focus to have those discussions'* (Principal 1).

The provision map was a practical resource that provided an explicit and tangible tool to guide SSE as reported by principal 3 when she said *'it provided a framework to categorise . . . and it's a great tracking mechanism. It gives a structure to something that could be unmanageable'*. Data from all participants revealed that it affirmed existing good practice in schools while also identifying areas in need of development. It served as an indicator as to what values are being purported within their schools, while also offering the opportunity for *'professional and personal learning'* (SENCO 1). This visual representation of work achieved *'essentially on one sheet of paper'* (SENCO 2) is an evidence-based evaluation of a school's provision. Moreover, it is a strengths-based approach on which a school can build upon. It assisted with planning and provided supporting evidence as to what gaps may be in a school's provision. This ultimately provided a much-needed confidence builder among CLs, SENCOs and principals as it served as a clear acknowledgement of work done and gave SENCOs and CLs in particular more courage to assume greater leadership responsibility in school, as conveyed by SENCO 2 when she said *'I also think that having something like this kind of gives you a bit of courage'*. In conversation with all participants, it was clear that particular themes arose as a result of the provision map's introduction. Immediately it allowed them to identify most, if not all, of the good practice being carried out by teacher's school-wide. Data suggest that it allowed them to notice that the silo-mentality that can often be evident within post-primary schools may not have been so stark and with the introduction of the provision map these not-so-robust silos were beginning to weaken. Also, CLs indicated that they had evidence, for the first time, which highlighted that subject departments school-wide engaged with the idea of supporting students across the CoS rather seriously. In fact, the provision map could be said to have introduced the concept of a school-wide voice around supports for students with SEND.

Evidence also emerged that the provision map provided a framework to facilitate purposeful collaboration between CLs and SENCOs as articulated by SENCO 1 when she said *'I have noticed . . . how meaningful the actions are, do you notice as isolation reduces the meaningful aspect increases?'* In conversation with the CLs and principals it emerged that engaging with the provision map as a research tool began to highlight cross-curricular commonalities. SENCOs indicated that prior to engaging with the initiative, attempts to develop cross-curricular inclusive pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning were limited and often occurred discretely. Primarily the provision map allowed the CLs in particular to clearly see the changing role of the SENCO, as reported by CL3 when she said, *'the view of SEN has now changed; you're now a key member of the staff'*.

Both the CLs and SENCOs said the initiative allowed them to see one another as agents of change within their schools. They felt more competent at managing change as well as embedding changes school-wide over the course of the year at a pace that was appropriate to individual school contexts. They also felt more confident to engage with other teachers who found curricular change challenging. Managing and embedding change is challenging at the best of times for any individual or organisation. CLs felt that the provision map raised the whole 'time' issue for teachers, especially when it came to discussing areas around developing good practice and how to engage school-wide around the area of learning and teaching. Time for discussion can also bring time for teachers to reflect and share both challenges and good practice. Principals, the CLs felt, were more willing to support this concept when the principal witnessed the diligence of both CLs and SENCOs engaging with genuine curricular change, both at a classroom level and school-wide. In conversation with principals, a similar theme emerged, as conveyed by Principal 2 when he said,

'it has kind of shone a new light on SEN provision in the school and even the mapping made a big difference in relation to that whole concept of SEN. It isn't just three or four teachers, everybody is a SEN teacher' (P2)

Vital to the support of all, some and few of the students within any school is the concept of curriculum planning. Curriculum planning involves classroom organisation, the content of the lesson, the style and pace of the lesson and the aims, objectives and outcomes planned by the teacher for particular lessons. CLs reported that the provision map focused attention on tier one interventions and informed the school's curriculum planning. It also had a possible impact on teacher practices, as well as identifying and possibly embedding good practice school-wide. Subsumed within the concept of teacher practice the provision map allowed teachers to identify evidence-based strategies and interventions that really work with all students in supporting them to access the curriculum, indicating further development of teacher skill competency and ultimately impacting on teacher agency.

8.1.2. A Multi-Modal and Customised Approach to Initiative Implementation and Professional Learning Maximised Opportunities for Sustained Impact in Schools and Authentic Collaboration towards A Shared Purpose

The flexible approach adopted, whereby schools were encouraged to customise the policies, resources, approaches and timescale to their individual school contexts was important and acknowledged that a 'one size fits all' approach would not have supported translation of the initiative into contexts of practice.

The sustained approach to professional learning provided opportunities for SENCOs, CLS and principals to grow their knowledge, skills and understanding of school-wide, systematic approaches to inclusive special education, and an understanding of processes involved in leading and embedding change. SENCOs and CLs valued the community of practice approach to professional learning as illustrated by SENCO 4 when she said,

'I think it's a great type of peer mentoring, that we learned from each other . . . even if it is just giving feedback of what is going on in our school and realise we are not on our own and not in isolation. That the issues we have are affecting other schools as well. I

just think that it is important for that type of collaboration and peer mentoring and that collegiality we developed in this group.' (SENCO 4)

The clustered meetings, as articulated by CLs and SENCOs, created space for them to engage with us in an iterative cycle of knowledge exchange and development of shared approaches to initiative implementation. School visits offered occasions for individualised coaching and mentoring which, according to SENCOs and CLs, cultivated their professional confidence and enhanced opportunities for them to lead implementation in their schools. For principals, the professional learning in relation to recent changes to SEND policy was immense, and for recently appointed principals, it affirmed and acknowledged their leadership for inclusive education across the school. Principal 2 felt valued when he was able to support staff in a purposeful way that *'does a lot for staff morale'* while principal 1 indicated that his engagement with the initiative *'as somebody sitting in the room rather than somebody sitting with it at the top of the room'*, facilitated deep learning for him alongside his staff.

Positive professional relationships between teachers and their benefits were recurring themes within the data. The provision map provided the evidence that to bring about a cohesive approach to inclusive special education, authentic collaboration was essential. It also emphasised the importance of building upon existing collaborative practices as indicated by principal 4 when he said, *'we did not realise we had to improve collaboration'*. The process engendered focused collaboration towards a shared purpose, sometimes for the first time in schools, as articulated by SENCO 1 when she said, *'suddenly it was the first-time teachers were involved in the whole process and they did engage with it, they really did and that surprised us if I am honest with you'*.

8.2. What Challenges Did You Experience as a Result of Participation in the Project?

Emergent themes in response to this question were:

- Finding time, taking time, eating time and giving back time.
- Developing integrated approaches to the work of CLs and SENCOs.
- Building school-wide systematic approaches to inclusive special education.

8.2.1. Finding Time, Taking Time, Eating Time and Giving Back Time

Time is perhaps the most finite of resources in schools and implementation of change is the thief of time. All participants spoke of the challenges in finding time to engage fully with the initiative. For principals, the challenges associated with finding release time for SENCOs and CLs attending clustered meetings, particularly when competing demands were placed upon them arising from multiple initiatives in development simultaneously. Both the CLs and the SENCOs talked about the challenges associated with finding time to meet with each other and other colleagues. Authentic collaboration requires time which isn't often resourced in schools. Of interest was the notion of 'taking time'. While principals, SENCOs and CLs had volunteered their participation in the project and had bought-in to it, as a school-wide initiative, it had implications for all teachers' classroom practice and curriculum planning. A comment from CL 1 is indicative of how CLs and SENCOs felt about working with colleagues, *'you're suddenly very conscious that they now see you as another eater of their time because you've given them an additional work'*.

Some principals had a more global point of view in relation to making time for this particular initiative and discussed how the use of Croke Park Agreement Hours (33 additional hours a year worked by teachers outside of the scheduled school day) engendered a very *'prescriptive'* (P2) approach to whole staff collaboration or professional learning, when competing priorities fought for space on staff meeting agendas.

8.2.2. Developing Integrated Approaches to the Work of CLs and SENCOs

While relationships between CLs and SENCOs deepened over the course of the year, lack of clarity about role expectations for CLs in particular caused confusion amongst both CLs and SENCOs. Further analysis of data points to discrete roles in school, with

SENCOs assuming responsibility for coordination of SEND provision and advisory support to colleagues. Asking CLs to work in partnership with SENCOs to develop evidence-based inclusive pedagogical classroom practice at tier one of the CoS was a new departure for some. SENCO 4 reported that she *'thought there was not enough connection, it was great that our CL presented at the staff meeting with me but that was kind of the extent of it'*. It is important to remember that the role of the CLs was far newer than the role of the SENCO but attention and support was given to an ETB-wide community of practice for a number of years before the introduction of the provision mapping initiative. It was interesting and evident that a number of CLs remarked how their role was becoming somewhat isolating, a fact they had not fully noticed until the arrival of the initiative with the SENCOs and the implementation of the provision map.

8.2.3. Building School-Wide Systematic Approaches to Inclusive Special Education

While all participants acknowledged that the provision mapping process was a positive force for change in their schools and will take some years to embed, for principals, it left them with more questions than answers in some cases. Fundamental aspects of their job such as appropriate staffing assignments and the effective deployment of staff was brought to the fore. Principals indicated that teachers working in specialist roles to support inclusion for students with SEND needed careful selection as individual skills, competencies and dispositions of teachers was a key factor in allocation of targeted resourcing. Principals also acknowledged that while distributed leadership is the ideal, it can be a challenge. It is dependent upon the experience and personal capacity of staff members and can lead to dispersed or disjointed decision-making in certain contexts.

Data from conversations with all participants spotlighted that *'SEN is all our business'* (P3), but developing and embedding systems supporting greater levels of integration across the CoS would take some time. For some teacher's provision for students with SEND continued to be considered the remit of the SEN team.

8.3. How Could the Process Be Improved to Support You and Your School to Implement School-Wide Systematic Approaches to Inclusive Special Education?

A synthesis of the data indicates that the following adjustments could support refinement of the process in schools and inform future implementation:

- Bringing CLs and SENCOs together from the very beginning of the initiative would enhance opportunities for both to clarify their respective roles from the outset.
- Ensuring that all schools have had explicit whole staff professional learning and support in relation to the school self-evaluation process is foundational to the initiative and will provide opportunities for staff to engage collaboratively with how the school interprets and translates SSE policy frameworks.
- While subject department focus groups provided excellent opportunities to reflect on classroom level pedagogy to support the needs of all, some and few students, the questionnaire which needed to be submitted was too lengthy, and some of the language was jargonistic and SEND specific. A simplified and shorter questionnaire would be more accessible.
- Involving senior leadership teams in the project was central to its continued implementation. Opportunities for SENCOs, CLs and principals to meet together more often in clustered groups are recommended to facilitate continuity and consistency of localised approaches.
- Increase the frequency of cluster meetings with SENCOs and CLs. The support provided is invaluable and opportunities to share ideas, resources, successes and challenges provided motivation and a sense of ownership.
- The process is ongoing and requires sustained support. Coaching, mentoring and advisory models of support adopted by the LILTA team affirmed and acknowledged CLs' and SENCOs' practice and enhanced their capacity to lead and embed change in schools. It also provided direction for principals. This sustained approach to building

capacity is paramount to further deepening and embedding of the initiative in schools over successive years.

- All participants asked that the LILTA Team continue to provide whole staff professional development in schools specifically targeted at gaps identified in the school provision map.

9. Discussion

The initiative outlined in this paper, combined with preliminary findings reported by some of the key participants involved, and our experiences and reflections of the process one year into implementation offer key direction for the initiative but also have wider implications for how schools may be supported to interpret and translate policy [40] for real-world impact and school improvement, with a particular emphasis on the CoS [41].

Leadership- principal leadership in particular- is critical to implementation of school-wide change processes [18,45,67]. Principal 'buy-in' to this initiative was essential from the outset to elevate the status attributed to the initiative, to direct resourcing as appropriate and to facilitate opportunities for collective and collaborative approaches to implementation of the change process across the school. CLs and SENCOs highlighted the important role of their principals in prioritising the initiative and its subsequent implementation in schools. Combined leadership from principals, CLs and SENCOs also engendered self-evaluation of school provision for all students in a more integrated way, and teachers were beginning to see connections between interventions and approaches to learning, teaching and assessment across the CoS [17,18]. Principal support for this initiative will be essential in further iterations, and 'opt-in' approaches to engagement will be recommended.

While many teachers know that they are working hard to support the learning of their students, they were not aware of the broad impact their teaching strategies had on the students that they work with across the CoS. CLs and SENCOs experienced the introduction of the provision map as the initial stage of integrating the CoS with processes of school-self-evaluation to generate opportunities for creative and shared planning and action towards a common goal [53] whilst allowing for a data-informed resource allocation by both subject teachers and subject departments [17,68]. For many CLs and SENCOs, it brought capacity building into their role, something they had not experienced so clearly prior to the introduction of the provision map and reinforced the importance of situated, customisable and collaborative approaches to school improvement and professional learning [40,52,54]. Creation of communities of practice within and between schools facilitated authentic collaboration and sustained support for real world impact and change [51–53]. SENCOs and CLs reported on the importance of this approach and recommended that opportunities for clustered support be increased in future iterations of the initiative.

Roles within any organisation can be experienced as places of isolation and places that may be constantly under threat, be that threat real or imaginary. The change process itself can be painful [69] and add to a sense of threat. Within post-primary schools, validity of individual teachers and schools is often driven by harmful performativity agendas [20]. Not only do negative drivers of educational change engender a culture of competition, compliance and fear amongst teachers [19], they marginalise the most vulnerable students in the system and by default, those tasked with coordinating their provision [29]. Furthermore, prioritisation of placement over progression within the CoS [24] perpetuates duality and isolated, discrete approaches to provision for students with SEND. For many involved in the initiative they had at last new partners, decreasing the 'silo' mentality by developing collaborative data-led approaches to school improvement and by valuing and affirming purposeful efforts towards inclusive special education. The provision map provided undisputed evidence that real collaborative change was taking place school-wide as it guided teacher reflection and evaluation of teaching. For SENCOs, the conceptual model informing the approach to this study [18] served as a heuristic to guide their practice to implement changes but additional empirical validation is necessary in order to understand how the role will evolve and adapt to sustain changes to school-wide practices over time.

System-level change requires significant resource investment, time, and personal and professional commitment from those involved [45,70]. Finding time to engage with the initiative was a recurrent theme in this study, as it is in much of the literature relevant to school improvement [44–46,70]. What is notable, is that all schools in the pilot indicated their wish to dedicate more time in successive years despite the investment and commitment required, when set against a backdrop of competing priorities. Why is this? Arguably, analysis points to the importance of the process we engaged with to support schools. Working together in a climate that fostered mutual protection, trust and cooperation was perhaps more effective and produced greater results than individuals working and/or learning in isolation [44]. The multi-modal approach to implementation of the initiative and sustained support for professional learning through authentic knowledge exchange, collegial and collaborative sharing, combined with tangible and outputs, facilitated schools' investment in and sense of ownership of the initiative. Furthermore, while the provision mapping process required school-wide commitment, the provision map template provided tangible evidence of what schools were already doing and validated schools' efforts towards inclusive education. Starting from a position of strength, where good practice was affirmed, and a customised, collaborative and school-determined flexible pace of change guided implementation in schools, was perhaps motivational for all involved. The social and relational importance attributed to the process, and cultivated by the LILTA team carved out collaborative spaces for colleagues to meet, share, problem-solve and problem-pose towards a collective goal which, in time, will bring about change to inclusive cultures and practices, and alleviate the sense of isolation and burden of responsibility felt by SENCOs [18]. In this way, perhaps the actions of individuals will be influenced, but moreover, the 'thinking that informs these actions' [44] (p. 403). Social and relational approaches to school improvement arguably promote the development of organisational structures that 'stimulate and support processes of interrogation and reflection' [44] (p. 405), and may facilitate repositioning of SENCOs to important system-level leaders of change [39]. Findings testify to the value all participants placed on their social and collaborative experiences, which requires commitment and additional time, but evidently this time was well spent.

In many ways, the process raised more questions and identified areas for development in learning, teaching and assessment to support students with SEND at classroom level, and by default has helped to introduce evidence-based inclusive pedagogical approaches which might be essential for some, but are beneficial for all [2]. These identified areas for development will continue to inform school improvement plans and staff professional learning needs, and guide future development of the initiative in schools. The quality of teaching is the most important in-school factor that affects learner engagement and achievement [70,71]. An emphasis on building teacher capacity to respond to diverse learner needs at tier one of the CoS is essential to promote a universal response to inclusive special education [18] and perhaps minimise the more specialised interventions necessary for some students at tiers two and three of the CoS. However, while the provision map provides some direction in terms of how a graduated response to a continuum of need can be organised in schools, ambiguity remains as to how to operationalise resources [17,31] and while schools are moving towards flexible approaches to need, more work is required to build adaptive and responsive systems which facilitate evidence-informed movement across the CoS [29]. Furthermore, as access to therapeutic interventions at tier three of the CoS is limited (or absent in many contexts) [36], it will be important to integrate the roles of external agencies working directly with schools (e.g., NEPS, the NCSE, Speech and Language Therapists) with the provision mapping process moving forward.

10. Conclusions

The first iteration of this initiative offers early evidence in support of provision mapping as a process enabling integrated approaches to provision for all students across the CoS in schools. The process helped to create opportunities for meaningful collaborations and actions in schools, which are still evolving. The provision map has promoted a new

way of looking at how the needs of students with SEND can be met at classroom level, while also illustrating the inter-relatedness and inter-dependency between classroom level practice supporting common needs and more individualised, specialist teaching to support distinct needs of students. This reframing will undoubtedly impact upon the role conceptualisations of teachers and those working as specialist teachers and SENCOs. Further examination of the efficacy, the robustness, the opportunities for further development and the limitations of the provision mapping process are necessary as its application continues in other schools.

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