

Measuring Educational Engagement, Progress and Outcomes for Children with Special Educational Needs: A Review.

This research study has recently been commissioned by the NCSE (January 2011) and is being undertaken by researchers at Birmingham University and St Patrick's College of Education, Dublin.

Background and Overview

The purpose of this study is to explore how best to measure and assess how children with special educational needs are doing in the education system, in order to ensure that the system is adequately serving their needs.

There have been significant increases in investment to support children with special educational needs over the past decade or so, as well as policy and legislative commitments to better services and greater inclusion of these children in the mainstream education system. Despite these changes and supports, there is currently limited evidence relating to the educational engagement, progress or outcomes of these pupils. The NCSE Implementation Report noted the historical basis of this evidence gap, in stating that there had been '*no structured emphasis on outcomes and an almost endemic fascination with inputs, with no means of ascertaining what outcomes are being achieved for children with SEN*' (NCSE 2006:17).

The availability of robust data on formal (e.g. literacy, numeracy, early school leaving) and more informal (e.g. well being, socialisation, independence) educational progress and outcomes is crucial to helping us understand whether children with SEN are engaged with school and achieving relative to their learning needs. It will also contribute to greater transparency and to providing baseline information for children with SEN from which the impact of interventions can be measured.

However, the issue of educational outcomes measurement can be difficult. It raises questions about the fundamental aim of education and the kind of measures that should be used to indicate progress. It is complicated by the fact that learners have a very wide range of needs, interests, capacities and aptitudes, and by the impact of a range of factors such as

social class, gender, culture and school contexts and resources on pupil educational engagement and outcomes.

In Ireland, for example, these difficulties have been articulated in debates about the publication of school level state examination results and a fear that a focus on these kind of results would create 'league tables' in which the most well resourced schools, with the highest levels of academic attainment will appear to be doing best. These type of data fail to capture significant levels of progress and achievement among many pupils with special educational and other needs or aptitudes, as well as the educational achievements of schools which serve greater numbers of these students. Focusing on examination results also aligns school performance with a very narrow understanding of educational engagement and achievement as academic attainment.

Some formal educational outcomes data are recorded nationally on a range of measures and from a number of sources, both within national and international initiatives in Ireland (e.g. standardised test results or national assessments in primary schools¹, state examination results, PISA²). However, there may be limitations associated with these data which have implications for what can be learned about educational outcomes for children with SEN.

Aside from these national level data on outcomes, a considerable amount of formal and informal assessments of pupil progress and outcomes are undertaken by teachers at school level. These may be more meaningful than national level attainment data. However, it is not clear how frequently these assessments are formally recorded or documented at school level or if data arising from these assessments are sufficiently uniform to be harmonised across schools to indicate trends. The Department of Education and Skills school inspections also play an important role in evaluating teaching and learning in schools, but these are not specifically intended to measure individual pupil engagement, progress or outcomes.

¹ *Standardised tests* in mathematics and English are required to be carried out twice in a pupil's primary school career and are developed by the Educational Research Centre (ERC). *National Assessments*: As part of the ERC's work in monitoring the outcomes of education, national surveys of achievement at primary level have been carried out in association with the Department of Education and Science. The surveys have been conducted in the areas of English (reading), Irish (reading and oral language) and mathematics. It is planned to extend the range of assessments to include other areas of the curriculum in future years. The reports from the assessments draw on assessment data, but also from a range of contextual data, based on school, parent and pupil characteristics collected by questionnaire. (Source: www.erc.ie)

² The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international survey of 15 year olds students that takes place every three years. Students' literacy in science, mathematics and reading is assessed in PISA. PISA produces internationally comparable education 'indicators' and is used by many countries to provide guidance on developing educational policy. In Ireland 165 randomly selected schools took part in PISA 2006, with up to 35 15 year old students randomly selected in each school. Just under 4% of students were excluded due to additional educational needs that precluded participation. (Source: *Ready for Tomorrow's World? The competencies of Irish 15 year olds in PISA 2006 Summary report* at www.erc.ie)

Research Aims

Taking into account the difficulties associated with generating meaningful educational outcomes data the proposed international literature, policy and practice review has the following general aims:

- To provide an overview of how educational engagement, progress and outcomes (both formal [e.g. numeracy or literacy] and informal [e.g. well being, socialisation and independence] are currently recorded or measured in the Irish education system and the potential of this data for helping us to understand how children with special educational needs are doing in school.
- To review and document how educational engagement, progress and meaningful outcomes (both formal and informal) for children with special educational needs are tracked and measured internationally.
- To identify models of good practice for measuring and tracking educational engagement, progress and outcomes for children with special educational needs that are both appropriate to their learning needs and sensitive to school and national contexts.
- To identify lessons from the review that relevant to the Irish education system.

The study will pay particular attention to the broad vision of education enshrined in the EPSEN Act;

‘that people with special educational needs shall have the same right to avail of and benefit from appropriate education as do their peers to assist children with special educational needs to leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity, in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives’ (EPSEN Act 2004, Preamble).

Key Research Questions

The research questions to be addressed by the study include:

- What can be learned from the international literature about frameworks for measuring meaningful educational engagement, progress and outcomes (both formal and informal) for children with SEN?
- How is this done currently in a selected number of countries/jurisdictions?

- What data on educational engagement, progress and outcomes (both formal and informal) for children with SEN are currently collected in Ireland?
- What can be learned about children with SEN from this data?
- What are the gaps and what information do we need to gather in order to establish improved and meaningful data for pupils with SEN?
- Do we need new indicators or additional data?
- How can this data be collected/generated, drawing on the international experience and how can we strengthen current systems or create new systems of data collection?

Key Research Tasks

The research tasks will include a focus on the following:

- (i) Defining what is meant by *engagement, progress and outcomes*, both formal and informal, for children with special educational needs, with reference to the international literature and the national policy and practice context, and in a way that is compatible with the broad vision of education expressed in the EPSEN Act.
- (ii) Provision of an overview of how educational engagement, progress and outcomes (both formal and informal) for children with SEN are currently recorded or measured in the Irish education system and the range of data currently or potentially available that could assist in the documentation of how children with special educational needs are doing in the education system.

An analysis of the potential of this data for helping us to understand how children with special educational needs are doing in school, identifying gaps that need to be addressed.

- (iii) A review of the international literature on measuring meaningful educational engagement, progress and outcomes for children with SEN
- (iv) Drawing on an initial international review of practices and policies, the study will also identify models of good/best practice in a number of other countries/jurisdictions illustrative of a broad range of issues; and will document in

detail how engagement, progress and outcomes for children with SEN are measured and documented in these contexts, at national and/or school levels (the selection of countries/jurisdictions and rationale to be decided in agreement with the NCSE);

- (v) The identification of lessons and recommendations that are appropriate and sensitive to the Irish context and an outline of how current systems of data collection could be strengthened or new systems of data collection could be established.