



# Inclusivity through exclusivity: An evaluation of the provision of a special education needs (SEN) placement within second level art & design teacher education in the Republic of Ireland



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Students immersed with persons with SEN has led to positive attitude formation.
- The pre-service period of a teacher's life offers potential to influence attitudes.
- The host organisations value the placement highly.
- The placement is achieving the outcomes specified by the NCAD.
- This paper captures the narrative of the placements from the student perspective.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 17 February 2016

Received in revised form

1 February 2017

Accepted 8 February 2017

### Keywords:

Teacher education

Art and design

SEN

Placement

## ABSTRACT

It is a feature of Irish second-level teaching that teachers will encounter pupils with special educational needs (SENs). To prepare them, the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) has designated SEN placements as part of the ITE programme, whereby students are immersed in SEN settings. These placements have been acknowledged as good practice by Merriman & Rickard, on behalf of the National Parents and Siblings Alliance (2013). Over the ten-year duration of this specific SEN placement, this immersion has led to positive outcomes for both the student teachers and the centres in which they have been placed.

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## 1. Introduction

This research evaluated the effectiveness of a specific teaching placement opportunity provided by the National College of Art & Design (NCAD), Dublin, Ireland. Its findings have a reach outside the Irish context, with implications for Initial Teacher Education (ITE), for art and design and for education policy and practice in relation to inclusion. The evaluation was based on the qualitative reflections of student teachers in two cohorts, 2014 and 2015 ( $n = 25$ ), and of their hosts, with a view to ascertaining if a placement such as this

was “successful” in promoting positive attitudes regarding inclusion, and in addressing the art and design elements of self-expression and creativity, while working collaboratively. The findings reaffirm the importance of positive engagement with individuals with disability, in order to effect attitudinal change and overcome fear and prejudice. The placement of student teachers within a variety of exclusively special educational needs (SEN) settings, and the subsequent sharing of experiences, has been shown to change attitudes and enhance awareness among the student teachers. The placement also displayed the significance of art and design processes in empowering SEN students and the positive potential of collaboration between undergraduate and postgraduate NCAD students working with pupils and adults with a variety of SENs. The structure of the placement and the immersion of student teachers in exclusively special needs environments may appear counterintuitive, when the aim is to promote inclusion. The explicit objective of this initiative, however, was to promote

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attitudinal change and positive dispositions among the student teachers towards working with SEN learners. Intensive and dedicated immersion was consciously adopted as the platform for such attitudinal development and the exposure produced evidence of positive attitudinal change and improved perception towards the idea of inclusion. This is similar to an intervention with student teachers in Arkansas reported by [La Porte \(2015\)](#). [Corbett's \(1999\)](#) idea that special schools can be “centres of expertise” (p. 68) is true of the partner placement centres. Pre-placement anxieties diminished and confidence increased among the student teachers. The collaborative art work produced was of a high quality and gave voice to the pupils and service users. The teacher education programme in NCAD prepares students for teaching in the visual arts at second level and part of this remit is preparing to meet real-world challenges, including pupils with SEN. The human rights mandate of inclusion is current Irish government policy and teachers need to be equipped for this. However, this is not occurring in all Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) involved in ITE. Indeed, the NCAD treatment of SEN has been commended and singled out as good practice by Merriman & Rickard on behalf of The National Parents and Siblings Alliance (2013).

Before reporting on this research, it is important to state its boundaries and limitations. It is not attempting to address the philosophical arguments of “abled” versus “disabled”. The stance of the researcher looks past the medical model of “disability” and more to the human rights model: beyond inclusion to integration. Nor is the research attempting to limit art and design solely to this context by discussing its potential and usefulness for individuals with SENs. Art and design is a disciplinary domain that has its own integrity and role in all education settings. Its potential impact in SEN settings is but one feature of its educational repertoire.

## 2. SEN and Irish policy and provision

The term “special educational needs” is defined in Ireland by the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004) as:

a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition ... ([Government of Ireland, 2004](#), section 1).

Within the Irish context, the Government of Ireland Education Act (1998), the Education (Welfare) Act (2000), the Equal Status Acts (2000) and (2004) and the EPSEN Act (2004) provide a legislative framework for the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. The EPSEN Act (2004) establishes that: “People with special educational needs shall have the same right to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have such needs” (p.5) and details a statutory framework for assessment and individual education plans for pupils with SENs. So, the policy of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) ([Ireland, n.d., 2007](#)) is to provide special needs education in mainstream settings as far as possible. The EPSEN Act (2004) provides that, depending on the best interests of the individuals, children are to be educated either in an inclusive setting or in mainstream education.

These Irish policy positions stem from an evolving international awareness, from a human rights viewpoint, of the importance of inclusion. For example, Article 24 of the *International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (December 2006), states:

with a view to realising the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, states shall ensure an inclusive, education system at all levels and lifelong learning. Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all ([UNESCO, 2006](#); section 2).

Europe followed suit and a strong political consensus has emerged across the European Union, on the importance of inclusive education ([European Commission, 2013](#); [Meijer, 2010](#); [Peters, 2007](#)). As a result, there has been a notable increase in recent years in the enrolment of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland ([Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2010](#)). This has led to it being a normal feature of the teaching career in Ireland that all second-level teachers will encounter pupils with SEN.

While the DES' policy is to ensure the maximum possible integration of children with special needs into ordinary mainstream schools, pupils who have been assessed as having special educational needs have access to a range of special support services ([DES, 2007](#)). In integrated settings, or in special classes/units attached the school, they receive assistance from learning support and resource teachers and care support from special needs assistants (SNAs). There are also over 140 special schools dedicated to particular disability groups. Among them are: special schools for pupils who have a general learning disability at a mild or moderate level; schools for visually impaired and hearing impaired students; a few schools for pupils with physical disabilities and a small number of special schools for pupils who are emotionally disturbed ([Citizens information, 2015](#)). All of these settings offer potential areas of employment for art teachers and a selection of them are regularly used by the NCAD as partner organisations for the SEN placement module for students in ITE.

There are international recommendations from UNESCO to include content on inclusion as part of teacher training programmes (1994). The [Teaching Council of Ireland \[Registration\] Regulations \(2009\)](#) provide that the course of initial professional preparation shall include three major areas: Studies in the Foundation Disciplines of Education, Professional Studies and a Practical Teaching Programme. One of these foundation disciplines is identified as “Inclusion and Diversity” to include: Meeting Diverse Needs such as Children with Special Educational Needs, Disadvantaged pupils and Intercultural Education.

## 3. Value of art and design education for pupils with SEN

There is a danger in associating the value of art and design with people with SENs of diminishing the subject and the individuals. However, this cannot prevent the articulation of the benefits of the subject for those with SENs. Art is not just a subject in itself, but “visual intelligence” is a means of engaging with all knowledge and interpreting the world ([Gardner, 2006](#)). While pupils with SEN may have difficulty with kinaesthetic, mathematical and linguistic forms of expression, their artistic intelligence may not only be accessible but highly developed. As early as 1982, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation suggested that the arts can provide an “all embracing” experience that includes developing the aesthetic, creative, moral, psychological and social functioning of school children ([Karkou & Glasman, 2004](#)). Individuals with SEN are firstly “individuals” and are also privy to this “all embracing” experience. Each individual's SEN is unique and art as a subject can facilitate individual expression in an unlimited variety of ways. Art has been long recognised

as offering a means of engagement with pupils with SEN (Wexler, 2009; Gerber & Guay, 2006; Blandy, 1994; 1999). Eisner (2002) describes working in the arts as a way of “creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others and, sharing a culture” (p. 3). Education through art can be a powerful pedagogical tool transforming the lives of young people by enabling them to engage with significant ideas about their own cultural context (Allan, 2010). “The value of art, craft and design education for pupils with SEN is not to compensate for abilities that children and young people don't have, but to identify and develop the abilities they do have” (Earle, 2012, p. 43).

Visual arts education places an emphasis on the importance of making art (perceiving and exploring the visual world) and responding to art (looking at and responding to the visual world). This area affords endless opportunities for sensory and creative exploration, with a wide variety of stimulating visual and tactile materials being made available (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 1999, p. 35).

The NCCA in Ireland advocates a thematic approach to teaching art, craft & design to pupils with mild general learning difficulties because of the potential for curriculum integration, enabling the teacher to make explicit the connections between different areas of knowledge/learning. “For the student with mild general learning disabilities, a comprehensive art, craft, design education can play a substantial role in his/her cognitive and emotional development” (NCCA, 2007, p. 4).

#### 4. Policy and challenges for initial teacher education (ITE)

While progress has been made towards including pupils in mainstream education in Ireland, significant challenges remain (Day & Prunty, 2015). One of these problems can relate to teachers feeling unprepared to handle the challenges posed by pupils with SEN (Cassady, 2011). It is a policy imperative for teacher education to educate for inclusion. Inclusion is the total education of learners with SEN in mainstream education, as described by various researchers (Ainscow, 2000; Ainscow, Farrell, & Tweddle, 2000; Carrington, 1999; Dyson & Millward, 2000; Lambe, 2007; Skidmore, 2004; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE) in 2010 conducted an international literature review on teacher education for inclusion. They concluded (p. 43) that pre-service teacher education was “vital to the continued development and success of inclusive educational practices” (Dev, 2002; Donnelly, 2010; Loreman, Earle, Sharma, & Forlin, 2007; Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2005a, b) and they also quote Chionna, Elia, Rossini, Santelli, and Villani (2006), who state that pedagogical and subject knowledge are insufficient and that “sensitivity and emotional and relational intelligence are essential” (EADSNE, 2010, p. 38). Loreman in, an address in Glasgow in 2005, stated that teacher training institutions will become pivotal in ensuring that teachers have the attitudes and skills that they require to move closer to an inclusive educational system (p. 2) and that pre-service training may be “the optimal time to address educators’ concerns and alter any negative attitudes about inclusive education” (p. 1). Improving and increasing training provision at the pre-service phase of teacher education was thought to be the most effective method of promoting better attitudes to inclusion (Lambe & Bones, 2006).

Research has shown consistently that positive attitudes of teachers are a predictor of the successful implementation of inclusive practices in the classroom (Ahmed, Sharma, & Deppeler, 2012; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008; Loreman & Earle, 2007;

Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006; Loreman et al., 2007; Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, & Earle, 2006; Loreman et al., 2005a, b; Loreman, Sharma, Forlin, & Earle, 2005; McKeskey & Waldron, 2002; Avramidis, 2001; Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2001; Mowes, 2000; Vaughn, Elbaum, & Schumm, 1996; Bacon & Schultz, 1991). Furthermore, the research shows that the pre-service period offers significant potential to influence positive attitudes in this regard through both education and experience (Avramidis et al., 2001; Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Jung, 2007; Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, & Simon, 2005). If student teachers complete their pre-service education without having developed positive attitudes towards inclusion, their existing attitudes are difficult to change and may have a negative effect on the integration of learners with disabilities into mainstream settings (Subban & Sharma, 2006; Tait & Purdie, 2000). A focus on initial teacher education “would seem to provide the best means to create a new generation of teachers who will ensure the successful implementation of inclusive policies and practices” (Cardona, 2009, p. 35).

Regarding the imperative on ITE to meet more diverse needs, the European Commission Communication *Improving the Quality of Teacher Education* (2007) calls for different policy measures on the level of member states, as “classrooms now contain a more heterogeneous mix of young people from different backgrounds and with different levels of ability and disability” (p. 4). The *Learning-Support Guidelines* (DES, 2000) and the *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines* (DES, 2007) (the latter of which sets out advice for school managers and teachers in relation to the education of pupils with SEN at this level), together with agencies such as the NCCA, the Special Education Support Service (SESS, 2015), the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the *Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland* (ASTI) (2013), the National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2004) and authors such as Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2010 refer to the necessity of developing positive attitudes and values, in teachers, to support inclusive practice. The onus is clearly on ITE to expose future teachers to SEN environments, in order to create positive attitudes.

“The recurrent challenge of all professional learning is negotiating the inescapable tension between theory and practice” (Shulman, 1998, p. 517). Burke cites Burke and Sutherland (2004), Feiman-Nemser (2001), Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon (1998), Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995), and Fisher (1992) as contending that,

acquiring theoretical ... knowledge about teaching in college/university and applying it subsequently in classrooms, has been superseded by a research-based belief that effective professional learning needs to be context based and mastered in situations similar to those in which it will subsequently be exercised (Burke, 2009, p. 39).

In order to foster positive attitudes through both education and positive experiences with people with SEN (i.e. attempt to bridge the knowledge/attitude/behaviour gap), a placement, fully immersed with people with SEN, appeared to provide a good solution. Therefore, NCAD provides student teachers with dedicated SEN placements during their ITE, with a view to breaking down barriers and overcoming prejudices. From as far back as Yaker (1994), whose work commenced in the 1960s, it was established that information and contact were the best ways of influencing attitudes toward people with disabilities. Therefore, it is imperative to prepare future art teachers, during ITE programmes, to be able to teach pupils with SEN, and to overcome any prejudices or apprehension they may have about teaching in this area before

embarking on their teaching careers. Immersing the students with adults or pupils with disabilities has led, over the ten years of running the placement, to positive outcomes for the partners (student teachers in NCAD and the individuals in the host organisations). These perspectives are presented in this paper, together with an account of how the placements are structured and assessed.

## 5. Context of placements

The model for educating student teachers in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) has two traditionally recognised formats. One is the undergraduate Bachelor degree programme (concurrent model BA in Art & Design and Education, of four years' duration) and the other is the full-time postgraduate professional qualification (consecutive model Professional Masters in Education [PME] of two years' duration). Since September 2014, these have been the minimum requirements for registration as a teacher in Ireland. Both these models are utilised in the School of Education NCAD in the preparation of art and design teachers. The programmes combine block periods of practical, school-based, teaching experience with periods of face-to-face academic and vocational study. As with all ITE programmes, on foot of DES and Teaching Council (TC) policy initiatives (TC, 2011a, b), both the NCAD programmes have recently undergone review and restructuring. Currently, on both restructured programmes in the college, students engage in at least two blocks of school placements in mainstream schools and one two-week block placement in a dedicated SEN setting. The SEN placement takes place at the start of the second year in both programmes. A particularly interesting feature of the module is that Professional Master in Education (PME) and BA students collaborate on the placement, with the PME student acting as a mentor to approximately three undergraduate students. The collaboration between the typically more mature PME students and younger BA students in pursuing common learning experiences is a rich field for research.

The placement settings range from special schools, catering for pupils (4–18 years) with moderate to profound physical and intellectual disabilities, to centres serving adults with moderate to severe learning difficulties. Settings include schools for pupils who are deaf, visually impaired or with autism. The term used to describe an adult with SEN served by the host organisations has evolved over time, from “patient” (medical model) to “client” (business model) to “service user” (person focused model) – the preferred current terminology for usage in the sector.

This placement has taken place each year since 2006 and the number of host organisations involved and students being placed has increased substantially during that time. In 2006 there were 12 student teachers placed in one host organisation, while in 2016 there were 47 students placed in 12 host organisations.

## 6. The SEN immersion placement module design and outcomes

While it may appear counterintuitive to place student teachers in exclusively special education settings in order to promote inclusivity, this strategy has been found to be highly effective. “In order to prepare pre-service educators for inclusive classrooms they need to feel comfortable interacting with persons with disabilities and embrace the philosophy of inclusion” (Sharma et al., 2008, p. 784). Full immersion fosters deeper understanding, greater engagement with, and insight into, the abilities as much as the disabilities of service users. The focused engagement offers the opportunity to develop strategies for dealing specifically with people with SEN, as well as overcoming discomfort and even fear

and promoting tolerance. The outcomes of the placement experience are listed in Table 1.

The placement takes place at the start of the academic year, in September, outside the official college timetable, in order to facilitate the PME and BA student groups working together over two weeks. At the end of the previous academic year, in May, the PME/BA student groups are allocated to various SEN centres for placement. As shown in Table 2, they are afforded a two-day planning workshop, visit the placement, receive some lectures on the theme of SEN and have the opportunity to workshop themes and ideas, prepare their plans, materials, visual aids and ritual activities (one-to-one tasks), to present to service users while on placement.

The student teachers are given a brief and guidelines (see Table 3) during preparation. They are encouraged to engage and prepare over the summer period and upload images and plans to Google™ drive for sharing with each other and their placement tutor. Each group signs a mentorship contract in advance of the placement. They draw this up themselves under headings, detailing roles, responsibilities and expectations as well as a procedure for handling disagreement and conflict. During the preparation phase, the PME mentor coordinates the BA mentees to visit the site, get to know the service users/pupils, and brainstorm projects to implement in September. Each year the entire group works to a theme to promote service-user/pupil voice, and the theme for the academic year 2016–2017 was “other voices”. Each group is encouraged to give something back to the host centre or school, in the form of an artifact, display or presentation at the end of the two-week placement. However, process is emphasised over product, and the focus is on participation, involvement, learning and self-expression.

As detailed in Table 2, during the preparation days student teachers get an understanding both of how their placement area functions and the service users' needs. Three types of knowledge are viewed as important: subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of the pupils/service users. Before going on placement, student teachers prepare an idea for a scheme, including visual aids, resources and images of support-study-artists work, and present these ideas to the entire group of students and to some placement tutors. Students are encouraged to reflect on contemporary art practice in their selection or support-study-artists, to help inform the work. They submit the scheme before commencing the placement and submit daily plans as they engage in the placement.

The work in Figs. 1, 2 and 3 shows some of the variety of work engaged in.

Collaboration and cooperation between schools and universities are major elements in successful programs that have brought real change to teacher education. The most promising criteria for judging the quality of preservice and inservice preparation

**Table 1**  
Special educational needs placement outcomes.

Year 2	Special Educational Needs Placement Outcomes.
<b>Students will be able to:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan an education intervention, design and implement appropriate art workshops for special education service users enabling user “voice”</li> <li>Recognise the contribution of all learners</li> <li>Cater for individual needs. Develop ideas and methodologies for practical learning situations</li> <li>Work as part of a group</li> <li>Work with service users with physical or learning difficulties</li> <li>Develop skills in reflection and self-evaluation and presentation</li> <li>Develop tolerance and understanding towards variety of SENs</li> <li>Value the power of art and design in enabling user voice</li> </ul>	

Source: National Council of Art and Design, 2015.



**Table 2**  
Sample placement plan.

Sample of placement plan	
Day	Task
<b>May</b>	
1	Introduction to the SEN experience in the HEI. Lecture on special education, policy and procedures. Visit a host centre.
2	Presentation on that host centre. Orientation to working in special education environment
3–4	Site-specific visit to your placement area in your host centre. Get to know your pupils/service users
	Preparatory workshop. Research and plan the project in groups with help of art and design specialists. Tutorials.
	Prepare visual aids. Complete mentorship agreement
5	Present your ideas to the college group and tutors
<b>September</b>	
1	Present ideas to service users/pupils and do some warm up activities
2–9	Work with service users in host centre to produce an artifact for display or an outcome for the centre
10	Group presentation telling the story of the placement and what you learned
30	Diary and reflective paper due. Display of work and visit to the NCAD by service users
45	Return the work to host centres

**Table 3**  
Guidelines for SEN placement.

Guidelines for SEN Placement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You need a lesson plan each day for the group</li> <li>• Include Aims, Learning outcomes, Methodology and some Ritual Activities</li> <li>• Include a List of Resources for each day</li> <li>• Plan short individual tasks around the theme e.g. “other voices”</li> <li>• Collect and bring resources to work from and with</li> <li>• Bring ideas boards, samples of finished work, images or artifacts of support study artists work and visual aids to help motivate service users and staff and visual aids and support studies. Physical examples to support ideas and proposed brief!</li> <li>• Think of planning activities suitable for a child aged 5–8. If working with moderately intellectually challenged people, pitch your language simply but remember they are adults so you need to be careful how you package it.</li> <li>• Create a final piece of completed work that shows new skills introduced to the working group supported by a variety of evidence boards ready for display in each area</li> </ul>

appear to be the perceptions of those learning to teach and to improve their teaching (Russell & McPherson, 2001, p. 13).

While on placement, each group presents a theme visually to the service users/pupils, which should be informed by getting to know them and speaking with the care workers/teachers in their area. Sometimes, the host organisation sets a specific brief which the students strive to fulfil. The aim is to give the service users as much autonomy and involvement as possible, and allow them to express themselves. The students spend nine days on site working collaboratively on the project with care workers/teachers and service users/pupils. At the conclusion of the placement, the group mentors show a Powerpoint™ presentation to their peers, visually documenting their placement experience and evaluating the experience in the light of their own learning, highlighting the benefit/potential of art and design in the context of their placement.

All student teachers are visited, while on placement, by a school placement tutor from NCAD, and are assessed on the quality of engagement and preparation. This assessment generates a group grade. The individual students are also assessed on their capacity to reflect on the placement experience in the context of SEN provision in an Irish context.

Reflection or “critical reflection” refers to an activity or process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making and as a source for planning and action (Richards, 1991, p. 1).

The individual assessments of PME and BA students differ. The PME students are assessed on their mentoring role and evidence of

planning and preparation. They are also assessed on their final presentation which includes a reflective evaluation in the light of theory. The BA students are required to record and submit a visual diary. They complete the diary as a contemporaneous account of progress and record their thoughts and feelings. The diary shows evidence of planning and presentation and records their experiences day to day, while on placement. It includes an evaluation of the placement experience based on the advice of Brennan (2005) in relation to evaluation of work placement. Students identify what, if any contribution art and design education can make in their placement setting, using appropriate references and following academic guidelines. Collaborative diary-keeping has been shown to be a useful tool to promote critical reflection (Richards, 1991). The group and individual grades are collated to arrive at each individual's overall grade for the placement.

The students in the initial pages of their diaries often express feelings of fear and apprehension at going on placement to work with adults or children with SEN:

I ... didn't know how to ... overcome a special educational need. With the help and patience of the staff, I quickly felt at ease and knew I was in for an exciting and inspiring couple of days (T2, evaluation).

These feelings change over the course of the placement and in almost all cases develop into students feeling comfortable. In general, they report enjoying the experience and it being one of the most valuable on their course.

## 7. Examples of placement experiences

To give a flavour of the placements, three are described here. One group was placed in a school for deaf children who follow the mainstream school curriculum. The group spent time with the



**Fig. 1.** 'Signs in the Night Sky', Puppet Project with St. Mary's School for deaf children. Photographs with kind permission from Angela Clarke.

pupils and talked about what they would like to do during their time together. They decided to make puppets. This satisfied curricular outcomes for pupils aiming for the Leaving Certificate examination (Irish terminal state examination at the end of post primary education), and enabled pupil voice, because the pupils could create their own narrative for a puppet show and put on the show. The student teachers researched deafness and learned some basic sign language over the summer so that they could communicate more effectively with the pupils. They brainstormed a theme for the puppet show and, as two individual single-sex schools had recently amalgamated, it was thought that telling the story, through puppetry, of the beginning of sign language in Ireland and the establishment of their schools, could bring pupils and staff together. Through showing appropriate visual aids and with the help of host staff, the pupils and student teachers collaborated in adapting the story about how the Dominican sisters had gone to France in the 1800s to learn sign language and bring it back to the deaf children of Ireland. The children created penguin puppets (derived from the black and white clothing of the Dominican nuns!) to represent the sisters; created and painted a set with a sail boat;

and various storms and monsters were designed and created in order to represent the obstacles the sisters had to overcome on their return journey across the sea to found the schools and help the children. The pupils and student teachers designed a poster (another curricular outcome), invited parents and staff, and put on the puppet show for the entire school (see Fig. 1). The show was video recorded so that all pupils could have a record of it. The participants also acquired the digital skills necessary to do this.

The second example involved a group of NCAD students working in a large care organisation in West Dublin that caters for adolescents and adults with intellectual disability. They chose to explore the Irish myth about the salmon of knowledge. The story goes that the one who would eat of the flesh of this fish would have the gift of all the wisdom in the world. A very old clever man had spent his whole life trying to catch the fish, and when he succeeded he asked his apprentice, a young boy, to cook it for him. But, the young boy burnt his finger while cooking, licked it and was the one awarded the gift of wisdom. The student teachers and service users read the story and discussed the nature of knowledge, gifts and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2006). The service users explored



**Fig. 2.** The Salmon of knowledge project with Stewarts Care. Photographs with kind permission from Christine Browne.

their own unique gifts and then made a fish to represent themselves, expressing their individuality by using their favourite shapes, colours and materials: some of the fish were embroidered, some made with paper and some were 3D. They looked at the work of support artists to help with this, as well as at actual fish and images of tropical fish to explore texture and colour. They each incorporated into the fish their individual gifts. For example, some, who had represented Ireland in the Special Olympics, incorporated images of this event into the fish. Others, who could dance or sing, included representations of this. Many included dreams and wishes and enclosed them inside the fish. The entire collection of fish was hung in a net which they all wove together and, upon completion, the piece was placed as an installation in one of their cafeterias (see Fig. 2).

The final example of a placement was a centre in South Dublin that works with adults with intellectual difficulties. Student teachers were asked to work with the service users to reinvigorate a garden area to make it more user-friendly. Firstly, service users observed plants and did some initial drawings. Then the group visited the National Botanic Gardens with the service users and all the participants took photographs with individual disposable cameras. All this material was wall mounted together with the work of some support artists, and the service users discussed and critiqued the work together with the student teachers. The latter then combined the favoured elements into three options for a wall mural and the service users chose their preferred option. Then began the task of painting the wall and everyone was involved, whatever their capability level. There were some individual tasks, such as beading and painting pots and creating wind-chimes. The emphasis was on the use of recycled materials and the theme of “pathways”, as all the service users were on their own individual learning pathway. Everyone contributed to laying the pathway on the wall and discussed their own journey while doing so. They were interviewed and recorded in front of the wall and were very proud of the finished piece (see Fig. 3).

## 8. Methodology and ethics of the study

In order to continually improve provision and support, and to enable students to engage in self-evaluation against clearly defined criteria, they have been evaluating the placement experience annually since it began. Data from the student cohorts 2013/2014 ( $n = 15$ ) and 2014/2015 ( $n = 10$ ) who participated in the SEN placement have been used as the basis for this research report. Their evaluations were analysed using thematic analysis (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 1994) and the results are presented here. A word-search was also conducted, from the cohort of ten students who participated in the placement in third year in 2015, for words occurring most frequently.

The placement itself meets ethical guidelines. All the student teachers were Garda (police) vetted for working with children and vulnerable adults and worked under the supervision of members of staff and care workers in the host centres. The study met NCAD's ethical guidelines, as it did not involve asking the participants, who were all full-time students, to do anything they were not routinely doing as part of their course of study: module evaluation is a standard practice in the School of Education, NCAD. Permission was sought from the host institutions and individuals and their families for participation in the project, and to allow the service users and their work to be photographed. Only adults who had agreed to their image being used were photographed, and no personal or identifying information was used in the study. Student teacher evaluations were submitted, anonymised through the removal of the cover-page with their details, allocated a random code, and the data generated were subsequently handled anonymously and confidentially. Absolute anonymity could not be guaranteed, as sometimes the student could be identified through the description of the placement or the work carried out, but this was stated from the outset. This is a limitation of the study in that students may be inclined to report positive attitudes because of perceived vulnerability to staff assessment. However, positivity in general surrounds the SEN placement and it is frequently cited in the end of course





**Fig. 3.** Work in progress in Lakelands with Carmona Service Users. Photographs with kind permission from Sinead Rowe, Claire Gibbons and Lorna Gilmartin.

*viva voce* examination and to external examiners as one of the most rewarding and beneficial experiences of the course (Jeff Adams, External Examiner, 2013–16, personal communication). This adds further credibility to the qualitative findings reported here.

### 9. The student Teacher's voice

The evaluative responses ( $n = 25$  in total) were markedly positive regarding the overall experience. The most frequently cited words discovered through the word-search were positive, or used in a positive fashion. These were; “learn” ( $n = 39$ ), “different” ( $n = 15$ ), “enjoy” ( $n = 14$ ) and “experience” ( $n = 14$ ). Here are some examples:

I learnt so many things from this placement that don't think I will ever be able to communicate or record fully. The service users taught us so much and all of it is applicable to mainstream education (S3153, evaluation, 2014).

I found the placement to be one of the best experiences I have had. It was eye opening and an overall great experience (S3151, evaluation, 2014).

The nerves I carried with me to ... and the uneasiness I had once felt when I began working with the service users vanished within a day of working alongside them. It was a truly memorable experience (SG1, evaluation, 2013).

You could see that working with them on their clay tiles was really rewarding for them ... [and] equally rewarding for me too (A1, evaluation, 2013).

There was a lot of peer learning throughout the two weeks. We learnt both from each other and the service users and I do think that this placement will help in future dealing with special needs (S3154, evaluation, 2014).

The students unanimously thought art was useful in these contexts:

I think art and design was very useful here as we were able to incorporate the senses into our work using the aedp [art elements and design principles] such as texture, colour, movement (S3155, evaluation, 2014).

The end result was of a very high standard but the learning process was also a huge part' (S3154, evaluation, 2014).



Art provides the medium to sensorial experience for the service users in a way that they get and enjoy' (S3152, evaluation, 2014).

Art and design facilitates new learning and consolidating learning. As it is viewed as “less academic” to many people than, for example, maths, it allows for a low stress environment for service users to thrive and feel accomplished. It appeals to many different learning types and different intelligences. It can be combined with other elements, for example music or storytelling. SUs [service users] can also learn about other academic subjects through art e.g. geography and history (S3153, evaluation, 2014).

Some, who were placed in “special schools”, recommended that art could be used to even better effect. In these schools, which follow the primary school curriculum, art was only timetabled for one hour per week. It appeared as if it was “only used it as a way of rewarding the children rather than as a method of learning” (S3151, evaluation, 2014).

Students praised the help and support they received from their hosts on their placement. They recommended changes in the way their sessions were timetabled, as there was a long break between the preparation stage and going on the placement, and most reported dissatisfaction with this. “We felt that the preparation was too far in advance as we had forgotten the majority of what we learned” (S3156, evaluation, 2014). Conversely, the host organisations commented in their feedback that they thought the time for reflection had helped improve the quality of the work. Students reported overwhelmingly that they enjoyed learning by doing, and that they benefitted from the process of self-reflection.

There is no doubt that the attitude of the NCAD students changed over the course of the placement:

I think it is easier to learn first-hand and working with people, you learn more and faster by doing much better than just reading from a book as you get to know how everyone works and what it is that helps them to concentrate. Think this has had a big impact in how I would handle special educational needs in mainstream schools (S3157, evaluation, 2014).

I admit I did come in with certain expectations about the placement ... these expectations were quickly gone when I saw the amazing potential of the artwork the service users were creating. I have taken notes on this experience and hope that I can better myself as a teacher and apply what I have learnt into my schemes and future projects (G1, evaluation, 2013).

There were times I felt frustrated, upset and unnerved by situations that arose, yet I am now giving serious consideration to the possibility of working in a special needs context (M1, evaluation, 2013)

I developed a huge knowledge of disabilities and ways of using different teaching methods to adjust to them, as well as having a greater understanding of the importance of art education for these children ... I will take this new knowledge on board in the classroom ... (K1, evaluation, 2013).

“Positive attitudes [by teachers] towards students with special educational needs are crucial if these students are to feel accepted and part of the school and wider community’ (Wade & Moore, 1993, p. 89). It would appear, on the basis of this small study, that this placement is helping this cohort of students to develop these positive attitudes.

## 10. Attitude of a host organisation

Stewarts Care is one of the organisations which has been hosting the NCAD students for SEN placement since 2006 (Stewarts Care, 2016). The lead staff who liaise in organising the placement were invited to comment on how effective the placement has been from their viewpoint. The feedback thematically almost exactly mirrors the attitudes of the student teachers. Overall they find it a very worthwhile experience:

We have found over the last nine years that the Student placement has been a very motivating and positive experience for both our service users and staff. The ... Students bring a fresh approach with their ideas and this in turn invigorates the use of the existing materials and resources in the given areas (Stewarts staff evaluation, 2015).

In addition, they commented on the relationship formation repeatedly highlighted by the students, and which the research indicates is likely to be the lasting benefit of the placement:

The relationships that develop between the Service users and Students are unique and have a positive emotional effect on all concerned ... Students have supported and valued inclusion and person centeredness through the specific one to one attention that they can facilitate (Stewarts staff evaluation, 2015).

The staff noted the benefits to the service users of “fresh ideas” and “new faces”, which stimulates new and creative work and renewed engagement. “Participants [service users] gain and take part excited and willing to learn and work alongside new and activated creative individuals” (Stewarts staff evaluation, 2015). Finally, they acknowledged that “The ... placement continues to evolve and improve each year”.

In an evaluation from the Holy Family School for the Deaf, whose work was also referenced earlier:

These four girls came to our school like a whirlwind!! Their enthusiasm was infectious and from the very first day our students were captivated. Their planning, attention to detail, and sheer energy was something I had not experienced before (Art teacher, Holy Family School).

The most interesting thing is that disability was not even mentioned – it was all about the artwork.

## 11. Conclusion

According to Lambe and Bones (2007) and others listed above, the pre-service period of a teacher's professional life offers significant potential to influence positive attitudes. The findings of this research project provide unambiguous evidence that the placement, through the experience of engaging with people with SEN in a safe, supported and structured way, has proved effective in forming positive student teacher attitudes towards working with people with SEN. Through “group work”, “collaborative engagement”, “learning by doing” and the opportunity for “critical reflection”, student teachers have developed in their journey to become better teachers of all pupils. The placement experience has had significant success in the achievement of the learning outcomes specified in Table 1 and therefore can be deemed highly successful from the viewpoint of NCAD. Likewise, host

organisations such as Stewarts Care value the placement: “As an organisation we can fully see the benefits of continuing this educational link ... and we look forward to any opportunities to develop and add to the programme in the future” (Stewarts staff evaluation, 2015).

In summary, there are three important features of the experience that can contribute to the international development of inclusion policies and practices. Firstly, the value of ITE students engaging in an intensive immersion experience in a dedicated SEN setting has been shown to have significant positive impact on participants' attitudes to integrated, inclusive SEN teaching in subsequent mainstream classes. Secondly, the settings have facilitated rich exploration of the potential of extended and collaborative art education projects, which have specific resonance for SEN practices, as well as more general application in mainstream teaching. Thirdly, the internal structures of the placement model, facilitating mentor/mentee relationships between undergraduate and postgraduate students, has opened up further lines of research that may be of relevance to teacher-educators in Ireland and elsewhere.

For immediate purposes however, the most distinct finding of the research supports the counterintuitive proposition that immersion in dedicated SEN settings provides a strong platform for subsequent integrated and inclusive teaching and learning.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the cooperation and dedication of the following:

The organisations who host NCAD students each year: *Stewarts Care, St. John of God Carmona Services, Central Remedial Clinic, St. Michaels House, The Schools for the Deaf, Cabra. and Enable Ireland*, the care workers and teachers who help the student teachers feel welcome and at ease and the service users who make it all meaningful and worthwhile. A special thank you to Michelle Brennan and Sarah from *Stewarts Care* for their feedback.

All the student teachers in NCAD who have engaged so positively in the placements over the years and who have given their feedback, in particular the students who contributed to the projects referenced in this article.

Professor emeritus Gary Granville, for his support for me, for this placement and for proofreading.

A special thanks to Angela Clarke for her help with image creation and management.

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