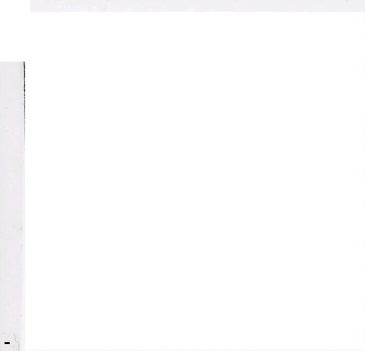




# Report on Educational Provision for Pupils with Down Syndrome in Mainstream Primary Schools in Limerick City and County





The value of persons with Down syndrome is  
intrinsically rooted in their humanity and in  
their uniqueness as human beings.

(Pueschel 1999, p. 4)



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Mr Pat Dowling, former Chairperson, Down Syndrome, Limerick  
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# Foreword

I am very pleased to be invited to read the findings of this study and to write the foreword. I have been invited to Mary Immaculate College on several occasions in recent years and I have been most impressed by the professionalism of the staff and students and their willingness to embrace and support the changes to special education required by the shift to inclusive education. I have also been impressed by the work of Down Syndrome Limerick and their interest in this work has enabled it to happen.

This is a small-scale but very competently executed piece of research. The report sets the findings within a comprehensive review of the relevant current literature on inclusive education and the inclusion of children with Down syndrome. The questionnaire data collected from both teachers and parents looks at all the significant variables that may affect a successful educational outcome and a happy experience for the child.

It is clear that these schools are doing well – all the children are happy at school and have friends. The schools could identify the benefits for the whole school as well as for the child. However, it is also clear that the teachers felt that they could do a much better job if they had more access to training, information and more multi-disciplinary support. There is a need for more support with differentiation in order to allow more children to access more of the mainstream curriculum and to learn in the classroom. All the needs highlighted in this report reflect my own experience of supporting inclusion for children with Down syndrome in a number of countries.

The research team should definitely be encouraged to extend this work with a survey across Ireland. They should also be encouraged to develop the continuing professional training in teaching children with Down syndrome that the teachers are asking for. While some of this will focus on the particular learning profile and the communication needs of children with Down syndrome, much of this training will enhance their ability to meet the needs of other children in their classrooms who need extra help to learn. Inclusive schools are the best for everyone – schools where every learner is an individual and is learning successfully at his or her own pace and every child belongs.

Professor Sue Buckley  
Emeritus Professor of Developmental Psychology  
University of Portsmouth



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There have been significant developments in special education provision in Ireland in recent years. An increasing number of children with special educational needs are attending mainstream schools. While this trend towards more inclusive forms of education is supported by legislation and government policy, little research has been undertaken within an Irish context to investigate the impact of inclusion on pupils with special educational needs.

This study examined educational provision for pupils with Down syndrome attending mainstream primary schools in Limerick city and county. It explored the experiences of inclusion for these pupils, viewed from the perspectives of parents and teachers. In addition, it examined the key issues that need to be addressed in order to ensure that children with Down syndrome fulfil their potential within the setting of mainstream primary schools.

Questionnaires were completed by principals and class teachers of 13 pupils with Down syndrome attending 11 primary schools. Nine parents of children with Down syndrome who were enrolled in primary schools also completed questionnaires. The responses of parents, principals and class teachers were analysed to provide both quantitative and qualitative data.

Findings from the study indicate that inclusion can be a positive experience not only for pupils with Down syndrome but also for the whole school community. It can contribute to the creation of a more caring and tolerant ethos where diversity is understood and accepted. In an inclusive learning environment, children with Down syndrome can be given opportunities to display a wide range of abilities, skills and talents. When provided with the necessary supports, these children have the capacity to participate, learn and achieve. Opportunities afforded by inclusive education to make friends and interact with peers, who serve as positive role models, bring important social benefits to pupils with Down syndrome. Data from this study suggest that these social benefits are highly valued by parents and teachers.

This research also indicates that a number of key issues need to be addressed in order to ensure that children with Down syndrome derive maximum benefit from placement in mainstream primary schools. These include: provision of continuing professional development courses for teachers; building partnerships with parents; availability of multi-disciplinary assessment and support; inclusion in the mainstream curriculum; and approaches to the organisation of support teaching.



It is noteworthy that data from the present study suggest that difficulty in accessing multi-disciplinary assessment and support was the issue that caused the greatest concern among parents and teachers. Furthermore, it is evident that addressing issues relating to partnerships with parents, inclusion in the mainstream curriculum and the organisation of support teaching may not be an easy task for primary schools, given the constraints of large classes, multi-class settings, lack of designated time for planning and collaboration and inadequate support services and resources.

The capacity of primary schools to develop the kind of collaborative approaches and organisational structures required for the delivery of high quality inclusive education for children with Down syndrome will be strongly influenced by one critical factor, according to the data from this study. That factor is the degree to which teachers are given opportunities to extend their expertise and skills through the provision of continuing professional development courses in educating pupils with Down syndrome.

Findings from this study have important implications for the ways primary schools are resourced and supported in their efforts to respond effectively to meeting the needs of pupils with Down syndrome. In particular, the issues of access to multi-disciplinary assessment and support for pupils with Down syndrome and of the provision of professional development courses for their teachers require immediate attention.