

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Northampton		
Unit of Assessment: 23 Education		
Title of case study: Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools): transforming special education provision in Ireland		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010 - 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Richard Rose	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2005 - 2020
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		

1. Summary of the impact

Professor Richard Rose's research on special education in Ireland, commissioned by the Government of Ireland's National Council for Special Education (NCSE), constituted Europe's largest longitudinal study of schools-based SEN provision. As the first study of its kind in Ireland, this multidisciplinary research programme has:

- directly shaped Irish national policy on special education, leading the Irish Department of Education and Skills to enact policies increasing allocation of SEN support resources and changing longstanding models of therapeutic support for SEN students;
- enabled a significant shift towards evidence-based design/delivery of teacher training in Ireland in relation to SEN and inclusion;
- prompted international innovation in special education practice, training and professional development.

2. Underpinning research

Rose was Principal Investigator on **Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish School)**, a longitudinal study commissioned by the Government of Ireland's NCSE. **Rose** led a multidisciplinary, international research team with colleagues from Trinity College Dublin and the Institute for Child Education and Psychology Europe. This longitudinal study assessed SEN students' educational outcomes and schools' implementation of inclusive education policy over three years in Irish mainstream and special schools. Project IRIS was the first study of its kind in Ireland and remains the largest study of schools-based SEN provision conducted in Europe [3.1]. **Rose** was responsible for leading four key phases of underpinning research:

Literature and policy review

A thematic review was undertaken of existing research and policy relating to development and outcomes of special and inclusive education in Ireland. The review found that, though most Irish schools had developed appropriate SEN policies, a range of evidence gaps and practical/systemic barriers, not least in relation to funding allocation models, mitigated against the development of inclusive learning environments [3.2]. The review identified key aspects of national policy and teacher training which could be transformed through evidence-based interventions in Ireland (as in many national contexts where children with additional needs remain culturally and institutionally marginalised) [3.2].

National consultation: survey

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Rose and colleagues undertook an online consultation of all special schools and a stratified sample of primary and post-primary schools in Ireland. Responses were received from staff directly involved in special education in 1,178 schools [3.1]. The survey produced a substantial dataset regarding special education policy, provision, experience and outcomes in diverse Irish school contexts. The survey evidenced widespread commitment to principles of inclusive education, but also highlighted extremely variable practice in schools and a clear need to enhance teacher training to enhance confidence/skills of teachers, principals and SEN assistants [3.1]. The survey also evidenced marked geographical inequalities in school resourcing and access to therapeutic services required by many students, particularly in rural communities [3.1].

National consultation: focus groups

Rose and colleagues conducted qualitative research with a national sample of 84 teachers, principals, SEN organisers/assistants, teacher educators and national stakeholder groups [3.1]. The focus groups identified a clear need for teacher training and professional development, particularly around therapy provision, effective use of SEN Assistants' skills, and supporting SEN students with assessments, targets and outcomes [3.3].

Longitudinal case studies

In a sample of 24 schools, **Rose** and colleagues undertook longitudinal observation, assessment and consultation with 150 students, in addition to classroom observations and 538 semi-structured interviews with teachers, staff and parents/carers [3.1]. Major findings from this unprecedented dataset include a need for teacher training/development interventions to build staff 'confidence', which is critical in determining student outcomes and experiences [3.4]. The case studies also evidence a need for national policy and school leadership to be underpinned by more consistent resourcing [3.5], and teacher training/development practices to be underpinned by accessible, evidence-based resources to support school communities develop inclusive ethos/practices [3.6].

3. References to the research

[3.1] **Rose, R.**, Shevlin, M., Winter, E., & O'Raw, P. (2010). Special and inclusive education in the Republic of Ireland: reviewing the literature from 2000 to 2009. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25(4), 359-373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2010.513540>

[3.2] **Rose, R.**, Shevlin, M., Winter, E., & O'Raw, P. (2015). *Project IRIS - Inclusive Research in Irish Schools: A Longitudinal Study of the Experiences of and Outcomes for Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Irish Schools*. National Council for Special Education.

[3.3] Shevlin, M., Winter, E., **Rose, R.**, & O'Raw, P. (2013). Investigating perceptions of the assessment process for pupils with special educational needs within an Irish context. *Irish Educational Studies*, 32(2), 121-137. [2]. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2012.744862>

[3.4] **Rose, R.**, & Shevlin, M. (2016). The development of case studies as a method within a longitudinal study of special educational needs provision in the Republic of Ireland. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 16(2), 113-121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12066>

[3.5] **Rose, R.**, & Shevlin, M. (2017). A sense of belonging: childrens' views of acceptance in "inclusive" mainstream schools. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 13(1), 65-80. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1142322>

[3.6] **Rose, R.**, Shevlin, M., Twomey, M., & Zhao, Y. (2017). Gaining access to support for children with special educational needs in the early years in Ireland: parental perspectives. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 25, 379 - 392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2017.1321529>

4. Details of the impact

From the outset, Project IRIS was designed to co-develop research-led impacts with Ireland's NCSE, a statutory body which advises the Irish Department of Education and develops policy interventions to improve delivery of education services. Impacts were also developed via the project's steering group which included representation from Ireland's Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), and networks of teacher-training providers, school leaders, service-providers and service-users. Testimony from ESRI describes **Rose's** work as 'of immense policy importance in Ireland, largely attributable to the ground-breaking evidence emerging from this large-scale longitudinal study' [5.1]. Testimony from NCSE describes Project IRIS as 'important and fundamental' in shaping special education policy and practice, nationally and internationally: 'it is rare...[to] see the link so clearly between research conducted and its impact on policy advice and subsequent policy implementation' [5.2]. In particular, stakeholders describe three major lines of impact:

'Fundamentally' shaping Irish national policy on special education

NCSE's Head of Finance, Research and Governance describes Project IRIS as 'fundamental' in 'informing Irish policy and practice', by providing comprehensive longitudinal data about issues where evidence was previously 'only anecdotal' [5.2]. According to NCSE, **Rose's** research directly and significantly underpinned policy advice to the Irish Department of Education & Skills (DES) and Minister for Special Education and Inclusion, resulting in implementation of three specific policy interventions [5.2]:

- **New national approach to allocating support resources for SEN students (2017).** According to NCSE, 'Project IRIS provided evidence about challenges posed to the education system and the impact on parents by having our [national] resource allocation model linked to formal diagnosis (diagnosis of disability was required to access additional special education resources)... This had been the long-term basis of funding in Ireland and the research identified the multiple problems with it. Prior to this research, much of this evidence was only anecdotal or literature based' [5.2]. NCSE's policy advice to transition to more equitable needs-based assessments 'relied heavily' on Project IRIS data [5.2]. This new model is now operating in Ireland's 3,305 primary and 729 post-primary schools, ensuring that children with complex needs are better provided with therapeutic support, in-class assistance and specialist equipment where necessary [5.2, 5.3]. NCSE guidance to schools on the new allocation model is also explicitly underpinned by **Rose's** research [5.4].
- **New national approach to therapy provision for SEN students (2018).** **Rose's** findings about inequalities in access to therapeutic services 'provided the base' to support a shift in DES policies around therapy provision [5.2], directly prompting DES investment in an ongoing national pilot of in-school therapy for SEN children in 75 schools and 75 pre-school settings, resulting in 31 practitioners being trained in in-school therapeutic roles [5.5].
- **Towards new approaches to monitoring outcomes for SEN students.** **Rose's** findings about the need to develop enhanced support for SEN students around assessments, targets and outcomes directly led NCSE to commission three evidence reviews and ongoing feasibility studies regarding potential innovative models for measuring educational engagement, progress and outcomes in SEN contexts [5.2], and also underpinned multiple ongoing regional pilots of inclusive assessment design [5.1, 5.6].

'Benchmarking' and 'reimagining' inclusive teacher training/development in Ireland

In the light of findings identifying a need for enhanced, evidence-based teacher training/development interventions in SEN contexts, **Rose** and colleagues have worked closely with a number of Irish training/development providers to shape new training/development resources, which have been further developed/disseminated through input to training events organised by Irish Association of Teachers for Special Educational Needs (IATSE) and Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA) [5.6]. Teacher training/development providers describe Project IRIS as 'instrumental' in 'shaping...thinking and priorities' [5.1], requiring and prompting 'reimagining' of established practices [5.6]. For example, one provider describes how **Rose's**

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research was utilised to 'benchmark', 're-evaluate' and 'redevelop' eight initial teaching training programmes and multiple Post Graduate training materials to directly 'reflect...areas of recommendation highlighted in Project IRIS', incorporating 'excellent...influential' new resources on in-school SEN support, inclusive assessment, and engagement with SEN teams [5.6].

Facilitating international innovation in special education practice

Project IRIS research/training instruments have subsequently been replicated as prompts for innovative/inclusive educational practice in diverse national contexts. For example, **Rose's** research has been 'a primary source' in the inception of the 'Growing Up in Ireland' longitudinal study tracking 18,000 Irish young people since 2006, providing a replicable template for 'developing inclusive measures of student engagement, participation and wellbeing,... teaching and learning and school climate' [5.1]. Similarly, a consortium of Swedish researchers has used Project IRIS to develop a replication study, reporting that **Rose's** work 'provided greater detail about both the development and practical details of applying inclusive classroom practices than any other from a European context' [5.7].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] Testimonial from Education Research Coordinator, Irish Economic and Social Research Institute

[5.2] Testimonial from Head of Finance, Research & Governance, Irish National Council for Special Education

[5.3] NCSE (2018) *Altered Provision Project: Review of a Pilot Project*. Trim, NCSE.

<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/04247-NCSE-Altered-Provision-for-web.pdf>

[5.4] NCSE Support Service (2017) *Supporting you with the new Special Education Teacher (SET) Allocation Model*. Trim, NCSE Support Service. <http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Madeline-Hickey-New-Model.pdf>

[5.5] NCSE (2020) *Evaluation of In-School and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project*. Trim, NCSE. <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Demo-project-evaluation-final-for-web-upload.pdf>

[5.6] Testimonial from St. Angela's College, Sligo, Ireland

[5.7] Testimonial from Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Linnaeus University, Sweden