**Title:** Opportunities for educational reform to support pupils with dyslexia

**Purpose:**

This presentation aims to give an overview into the educational provision for pupils with Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia) at primary level in Ireland at present. Department of Education (DE) statistics indicate there are currently 542,417 pupils enrolled at primary level education as of September 2024 (DE, 2024). Currently there are fourteen special classes attached to mainstream primary schools nationwide that cater for pupils with Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia). This is in addition to the three special schools in Dublin, often referred to as “Reading Schools”, Catherine McAuley in Baggot Street, St. Rose’s NS in Tallaght and St. Oliver Plunkett NS in Monkstown offer an additional twenty-four classes combined. St. Killian’s School in Cork also caters for pupils with dyslexia as well as those with Autism (ASD). As an experienced primary school teacher who has researched and presented in the area of dyslexia as well as working first hand with dyslexic pupils on a daily basis I am often asked for advice. Ireland has like many other countries acknowledged in recent years there are challenges in the education system which uphold attempts to provide for a truly inclusive education for all pupils. The “crossroads” acknowledged by Banks and Shevlin (2021) are felt and experienced on the ground in schools. Teacher shortages outlined by the INTO (2023) add to already existing problems within the education system as a whole.

Approximately 10% of the population are believed to be dyslexic, but in some schools and countries that percentage can be higher. The special classes and schools above cater for 350 pupils approximately. Where does that leave the other 50,000 pupils in the primary school system with dyslexia? Among my current caseload as a Special Educational Needs (SEN) coordinator in school I believe there are in excess of 25% of pupils in one class I support with dyslexia, which manifests in poor reading and spelling primarily. For some pupils this is experienced alongside co-morbid difficulties such as dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and ASD. A significant number of pupils have a confirmed diagnosis of dyslexia from an educational psychologist either through the National Educational Psychologists Services (NEPS) or privately through the Dyslexia Association of Ireland (DAI) or other private service providers. Several do not have a diagnosis.

Our school policy is to use the problem solving process and the continuum of support framework (DES, 2007; 2017; 2024) to raise concerns around attainment levels and recognised difficulties within a literacy and numeracy profile with parents in the first instance, we also shortlist pupils for NEPS involvement. The continuum of support is an example of a phased or graduated process, where children’s needs and their responses to appropriate levels of support determine which phase or what type of support they receive. The autonomy is with the teachers and the classroom teacher has the primary responsibility for all children in their care (DES, 2017;2024). All communication with parents, class and Special Education Teachers (SETs) and outside agencies is recorded in the log of actions. Class teachers review the learning environment and put in place interventions for six weeks before the child receives additional support at a support for some level. This involves more targeted support that may be monitored in class through team teaching or on a withdrawal basis in small groups. Further information is usually gathered and additional testing may occur. Children with the greatest level of need are elevated to the highest level on the continuum, where they have highly structured and individualised evidence-informed interventions (DE, 2024). In an ideal world more children would have access to this level of support if and when needed but the reality is there is not always time and human resources available to provide for this. There is a dual aspect to my presentation, to highlight a significant finding from my doctoral case study on teacher resilience and to provide meaningful solutions for teachers, parents and policy makers.

**Method:**

Teacher resilience is an often forgotten aspect of education reform, despite it being acknowledged as crucial in times of change and it is an underexplored concept in the Irish educational sector. This multi-site case study addressed the research gap on the resilience of Irish primary teachers and principals in the face of national systemic changes that took place from 2016-21. Systemic changes considered for the purpose of this research study were presented as four pillars: legislative, curricular, Department of Education (DE) policy documents and Teaching Council policy directive. This research drew on the concept of teacher resilience as the capacity to continue to maintain and sustain a sense of commitment and agency in teaching throughout different career phases and in ever changing environments (Gu and Day, 2013). It was underpinned by a conceptual framework that draws upon the *Four Dimensional Framework of Teacher Resilience*, (Mansfield *et al*., 2012) and the Boon (2021) *Lived-in Resilience Framework*, to explore how experiences influence the capacity of teachers to be resilient throughout various career stages. At the heart of this study was the lived experience of participants throughout career phases addressing the lack of research on career-wide resilience. The research design was a multi-site case study approach, complemented by a large-scale quantitative survey that included 137 respondents. Survey data indicated that while some systemic changes had a negative impact on teacher resilience, not all changes impacted equally. Furthered by sixteen semi-structured interviews, it became evident that participants were highly capable of identifying which areas require further professional learning, in order to enhance their teaching, reform their practice and in turn sustain their resilience. Although the concept of systemic change explored in this study spans a vast range of issues impacting teachers and principals schoolwide to national policy level and beyond, this was chosen to reflect the curricular change, Department of Education (DE) policy and subsequent initiatives faced by schools from 2016-21.

**Results/Conclusion:**

Systemic changes did impact on the resilience of teachers throughout different career phases from newly qualified teachers (NQTs) through to teachers and leaders with in-excess of thirty years experience, however, not all systemic changes impacted equally. There were several unexpected findings, which related to special and inclusive education broadly. Participants at both questionnaire and interview phases indicated a preference for additional professional learning (PL) opportunities in relation to the revised SET model (DES, 2017) as well as specific PL for specialised settings. Respondents explained that sustained support would assist in their roles in teaching and leading schools to navigate inclusion. Teachers felt in some cases that their principals did not fully understand the roles and expectations around SEN and enhanced whole school knowledge of SEN would support this. During an unprecedented time for educators, the lack of support from outside agencies was also listed as an inhibiting factor.

In my experience as a facilitator and part time lecturer I have delivered one off PL webinars and a series of webinars on dyslexia to teachers and parents as well as delivering modules on dyslexia and inclusive education on post-graduate courses. Through this I have reached thousands of teachers committed to equipping themselves with the requisite knowledge and skills to support learners with literacy difficulties. Teachers are more knowledgeable than ever about assessments and programmes but often times they fail to understand the reason for assessment and the information that this assessment brings and how it can inform future teaching. The collaborative element was highlighted as a supporting factor for sustaining teacher resilience. King and Ní Bhroin (2020) proposed an effective framework for examining ways in which schools can develop inclusive practices to support pupils who have student support plans. The understanding that learning capacity is not fixed but rather open ended is vital (Florian, 2023). The performance of learners in Ireland in reading and mathematics has improved (DE, 2024). Sharing best practice evidence-based approaches with invested teachers is important but ensuring they are confident to implement these approaches is also necessary.

There is a role for specialist teachers to work with and alongside teachers and schools to support the implementation of specific interventions tailored to individual or small group identified needs. There is a ready made cohort of these dyslexia specialist teachers in Ireland currently with a Masters in Education in SpLD (Dyslexia) from Dublin City University, predominantly active and building capacity among their own schools and at a local level but a regional deployment is essential building on models currently in place in other EU and neighbouring countries. Ireland’s network of twenty-one full time and nine part-time Education Centres (ESCI) offers a valuable resource for addressing inclusive education needs. Establishing a formal partnership by affiliating dyslexia specialists with schools through the ESCI could help create a Community of Practice (CoP) approach (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or Professional Learning Community (PLC) (Brennan, 2017; Brennan and Gorman, 2023) to support inclusive education. The collaborative model would alleviate the burden on individual schools and empower teachers through shared expertise. Acknowledging that teachers and individual schools are engaging with PL at varying levels, the impact of the aftermath Covid-19 on teaching and learning and that successful teaching depends on the extent of the knowledge, competency and understanding of teachers ensures professionals and policy makers alike understand the full picture of inclusive education provision.