



Independent Living Movement Ireland Policy Paper

Developing a process of assessing and identifying effective and appropriate supports to enable participation of disabled people in inclusive education

Background

Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI) is a campaigning, national representative organisation that promotes the philosophy of independent living and to build an inclusive society. Central to the way we work is to ensure that policy decisions that impact on the lives of disabled people have to be directly influenced by those whose lives are directly affected. Our philosophy can be summed up as: ‘Nothing about us without us!’ and ‘Rights Not Charity’. Our vision is an Ireland where disabled persons have freedom, choice and control over all aspects of their lives and can fully participate in an inclusive society as equals.

As a Disabled Person’s Organisations (DPO), we are highlighting the key issues that need to be addressed in the process of identifying effective and appropriate supports for disabled children based on values of choice, control, participation, inclusion and equality.

ILMI consulted with its members on developing a process for assessment based on our values and in doing so, used “*Procedures used to Diagnose a Disability and to Assess Special Educational Needs: An International Review*” (hereafter in this ILMI policy document referred to as the “NCSE review”) developed by the NCSE as a framework for discussion about effective and appropriate supports for inclusion based on the lived experience of disabled people.

General Observations:

Language and Disability

Independent Living Movement Ireland recognises that language is a very powerful and evocative tool. Therefore, the language and terminology used in this submission has been carefully chosen to reflect the values of equality and empowerment which is at the core of this organisation. The term ‘**disabled people**’ has been used throughout this policy paper in accordance with the UPIAS classification of disability and impairment which has been developed by disabled people themselves (UPIAS 1976). Where disabled people are referred to in the submission this should be understood to include all disabled people, including those with learning difficulties, sensory impairments and people who have suffered from emotional distress and trauma.

The Social Model of Disability and developing process of assessing and identifying effective and appropriate supports to enable participation of disabled people in inclusive education

ILMI recognise the importance of developing an overall framework to guide policy development. In the NCSE review the importance of having such a model that informs “all participants in the system – politicians, administrators, professionals and parents” to ensure that all are “aware of and understand this perspective”. The NCSE reviews sees the use of a coherent model as vital and that the model “should be explicit, and policy should be seen to link with the model in a coherent and transparent way”.

The NCSE review recommended that policy “should be explicitly informed by an interactionist/ecological model (also referred to as a biopsychosocial model)”. ILMI as a DPO rejects the biopsychosocial model as an impairment-based medical model of disability. Any process to really promote inclusion of disabled people must be based on the social model of disability.

The social model of disability says that disability is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person’s impairment or difference. It is based on concepts of rights, dignity, autonomy and equality.

The social model of disability looks at ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for disabled people. When barriers are removed, disabled people can be independent and equal in society, with choice and control over their own lives. Barriers are not just physical. Attitudes found in society, based on prejudice or stereotypes (also called disablism), also disable people from having equal opportunities to be part of society. Disabled people developed the social model of disability because the traditional medical model did not explain their personal experience of disability or help to develop more inclusive ways of living.

The social model of disability informs key International Conventions such as the UN Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and is in contrast to the Medical / Charity Model of disability. This model individualises disability and promotes the idea that people are disabled by their impairments or differences. The medical model looks at what is ‘wrong’ with the person and not what the person needs. It creates low expectations and leads to people losing independence, choice and control in their own lives. The medical / charity model never recognises the rights of disabled people and assumes that disabled people need to be “looked after” or “cared for”. The medical / charity model has professionals make decisions for disabled people.

It is vital that any process of assessing effective and appropriate supports for disabled students needs to be based on the social model of disability to ensure that disabled students rights are realised in education.

Remove references to “Special Education Needs” and talk about Disabled Students

Recognising the impact of language to reinforce outdated models, ILMI calls for the removal of references to “special education” or “special education needs”. This term is very much

based on a paternalistic medical / charity view of disabled people and is not based on the social model or principles of the UNCRPD. Disabled children, disabled adults and the needs of disabled people need to be highlighted in the assessment, not “special education needs”. ILMI calls for the adoption of the term “effective and appropriate supports to enable participation of disabled people in inclusive education” to refer to the process for assessment.

Ensure that disabled students are central to any assessment process

Point seven of the NCSE review recommends that “that parents and the students themselves should be actively involved in the assessment of the student’s special educational needs and that they should actively contribute to the development of interventions”.

In developing a process of a new rights-based assessment process, disabled students themselves need to be recognised as central to the process and given primacy in any recommendations, separate from parents.

Supportive parents who have high expectations for their children often are key drivers for the progress and educational attainment of disabled students. However, in some instances parents who are unwittingly embedded in a medical view of disability will focus on “care”, “protection” and medical interventions as opposed to looking at their children fulfilling their potential as equals in an inclusive education system.

Given the prevalence of the medical / charity view in Irish society, we need to create ways for disabled students to be confident to express their desires for the future. It is vital that young disabled students can engage in discussions with disabled people from DPOs to build their capacity so that they can discuss how they can shape the process of assessment so they identify what (if any) effective and appropriate supports they want to participate in inclusive education.

Recruit Disabled People as Professionals within the Education System

In developing process of assessing and identifying effective and appropriate supports, it is vital that disabled people are part of the process as experts by lived experience to contribute alongside. Too often discussions about disabled students and disabled people generally are conducted by “professionals” who disempower disabled people by making decisions on their behalf, based on limited aspirations for disabled people.

Central to ensuring that disabled students have the confidence to direct any assessment process is to employ disabled advocates within the education system. Disabled professionals will bring the lived experience and will be able to provide peer support to young disabled students in identifying the effective and appropriate supports, and will provide a balance from the interventions of non-disabled professionals (OTs, NEPs, SENOs and so on) who may still be operating from a medical / charity view of disability and tend towards making decisions “for” the disabled student.

Disabled people need to be seen as providers of education and not just accessing education services. There needs to be a targeted approach to ensure employment of disabled teachers, support workers, occupational therapists and educational psychologists.

Disability Equality Training for educational professionals

All teachers, educational psychologists and people who will be involved in assessment of effective and appropriate supports must have mandatory disability equality training and fully understand the social model of disability. Having an effective process requires professionals who promote the right of disabled students to identify what supports they want and that the role of a professional is not to decide on behalf of disabled students but facilitate a discussion of their needs.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for all professional staff should include disability equality modules which must be delivered by disabled people. DPOs can work with the NCSE and Department of Education and Skills to establish links between schools and qualified disabled activists who can provide training.

Ensure the participation of disabled people in policy discussions around inclusive education

As per the UNCRPD and the HSE Guidelines for Effective Participation of disabled people, disabled people need to be supported to be involved in all discussions about developing inclusive education. Disabled people need to have representatives from DPOs to feed into discussions about provision of effective and appropriate supports at a national level or through SENO coordinator discussions, NEPS planning etc. to inform the conversations based on the lived experience of disabled people in the provision of inclusive education.

Support the involvement of parents of disabled people in the process of assessing and identifying effective and appropriate supports to enable participation of disabled people in inclusive education

Parents of disabled students play a vital role in ensuring that the educational needs of their children are met in an inclusive educational setting. Parents, as much as disabled students and education professionals, need spaces facilitated by disabled people to begin to explore their views on disability and how to raise expectations for inclusion for their disabled children. Again, there is a role for DPOs so that disabled people who have navigated the education system can provide analysis and insight into how effective and appropriate supports can promote inclusion, with the support of other parental peer supports that can give an insight into the social model of disability.