Education Access in Ireland for

Students with Vision Impairment

2024 Report

An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs

ANGEL EYES NI
EQUALITY FOR CHILDREN WITH VISION IMPAIRMENT

Féach
For Kids with Low or No Vision

Table of Content

Glossary

AT	Assistive Technology
CA	Classroom Assistants
CFVI	Curriculum Framework for Vision Impairment
CYP	Children and Young People
EA	Education Authority
ECC	Expanded Core Curriculum
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
JCQ	Joint Council for Qualifications
NCSE	The National Council for Special Education
NI	Northern Ireland
ROI	Republic of Ireland
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
SENDO	Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SET	Special Educational Teacher
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SSP	School Support

I just wanted to thank you both for such a fantastic training day today. So much insight, information, and learning. Plenty to work on and bring back to my school.

- SNA Dublin

Executive Summary

Education Access in Ireland Project

In 2023/24, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Dáil Éireann, awarded Angel Eyes NI and Féach funding for the Education Access in Ireland project, through the Shared Island Civic Ireland Fund. The initiative aims to enhance educational outcomes for blind and partially sighted children across Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI). The project focused on improving the skills of classroom and special needs assistants (CAs/SNAs), while also comparing the educational provisions available in both jurisdictions. The findings emphasise the urgent need for training and improved support systems for students with a vision impairment throughout Ireland.

This paper reports the key findings on two project strands, making recommendations for improvement in both jurisdictions:

01 Training Impact

Assessment of two one-day training workshops involving 34 CAs/SNAs from NI and ROI to evaluate their confidence, skills, and knowledge in supporting visually impaired students.

02 Comparative analysis

A review of the similarities and differences in the educational provisions for visually impaired students between the two regions.

Key Findings

01 Training Impact

Overwhelming Demand

In less than a week, 270 CAs and SNAs registered for the workshop, highlighting the urgent need for training.

Confidence

All participants (100%) reported a significant increase in confidence when it comes to supporting students with vision impairment. This highlights the value of focused training for CA's and SNA's.

Skill Enhancement

Every assistant (100%) improved their ability to create inclusive learning environments for visually impaired students, showing greater competence in adapting classroom practices.

Knowledge Acquisition

A significant increase in knowledge was recorded, with 100% of participants gaining a better understanding of how to adapt printed materials and use assistive technologies (AT) to enhance curriculum access. Notably, 79% of participants indicated that they would immediately apply their new knowledge, particularly in integrating technology into daily classroom practices.

02 Comparative Analysis - Shared Challenges

Training Across both jurisdictions

86% of participants had received no prior training in supporting visually impaired students, and 56% reported low understanding of assistive technology before the project's workshops. This lack of training severely limits the effectiveness of classroom and special needs assistants in both regions.

Assistive Technology (AT)

While AT is recognised as essential for students with vision impairments, training gaps persist. Both jurisdictions heavily rely on AT, in Northern Ireland it is exclusively the iPad, in the South more diverse technology options are available with students using a mix of iPad's or Laptops, however many assistants feel ill equipped to support students in using these tools effectively. Additionally, WiFi inconsistencies in NI have created barriers for AT usage, in the South over 50% of students additionally have digital cameras which allow them to access the board without WiFi, this leads to unequal access to learning tools.

Specialist Provision in ROI vs. NI

Students in ROI receive more structured support, including 1:1 tutoring, typing grants, and summer provision that help them develop essential skills. By contrast, students in NI lack similar provisions, limiting their ability to independently access the curriculum.

Exam Access Arrangements

There is a stark contrast in exam accommodations between the two jurisdictions. In NI, exam access is more flexible, with students benefitting from adjustments that cater to individual needs. However, in ROI, the State Exam Commission offers less flexibility, with limited options for time extensions or modified exam papers. This often forces students in ROI to take exams in ways that do not align with their normal working methods.

Recommendations

The project's findings demonstrate that classroom and special needs assistants are pivotal to the success and inclusion of visually impaired students. However, substantial gaps exist in their training and the resources available to them. To address these challenges, the following recommendations are made:

01 Standardised Training

Develop and implement a unified training program for CAs, SNAs, and teachers across NI and ROI. This training should encompass the needs of both print and braille users and include ongoing updates based on evolving educational practices. By establishing standardised training across both jurisdictions, assistants can provide consistent and effective support, ensuring no child is left behind.

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02 Assistive Technology

Introduce a media assessment to ensure that students have access to the most suitable technology for their individual needs. This should be paired with comprehensive training for both students and educational staff, ensuring that AT is utilised to its fullest potential as a learning tool. Without proper training and resources, AT will remain an underutilised asset in many classrooms.

03 Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) and Curriculum Framework for Vision Impairment (CFVI)

Schools should implement these frameworks as standard practice. These curricula provide essential skills that enable visually impaired students to access education and navigate daily life. While the ECC is used informally in ROI, it should be formally embedded into educational practice. In NI, where the CFVI was recently introduced, more focus is needed to integrate this framework into everyday learning.

04 Policy Advocacy

Advocate for policy changes that ensure consistent, high quality support for students with vision impairments across both jurisdictions. NI would benefit from adopting some of the specialised provisions available in ROI, such as the Typing Grant and Summer Provision. At the same time, ROI should align its exam access arrangements with NI's more flexible approach, allowing for reasonable adjustments based on individual needs.

05 Peer Networks

Establish and expand peer-to-peer networks for CAs/SNAs, for continuous knowledge sharing and support. These networks would enable assistants to collaborate, share best practices, and find solutions to common challenges, creating a more connected and informed support system for visually impaired students.

Impact

The Education Access in Ireland project has highlighted the impact that well trained classroom and special needs assistants can have on the educational success of students with a vision impairment. The workshops demonstrated that targeted training can significantly boost confidence and skill levels, but also revealed that much more needs to be done to ensure equitable access to education across both jurisdictions. By adopting these recommendations, both NI and ROI can ensure that all students, regardless of vision impairment, have the support they need to thrive in the classroom and beyond.

> I think the course was unbelievable. Anyone supporting a child with vision impairment should go.” 1 day was enough – because you gave us stuff to take away and have a look at it.

Introduction

Angel Eyes NI is a registered charity, founded in 2007, supporting over 600 families of children and young people (CYP) with vision impairment, across the province. Its vision is to ensure equal life opportunities for children and young people with a vision impairment, with a particular focus on equal access to education. Since 2015, Angel Eyes NI has provided a bespoke Education Advocacy service for this cohort of children, securing access to the necessary Special Educational Needs provision for the individual child's needs. In 2019 it developed in collaboration with Ulster University a Level 4 training programme for Classroom Assistants (CAs) supporting children with Vision Impairments. This charity has expertise in advising and supporting families through their child's educational journey.

Féach is a registered charity, supporting 500 families of CYP with vision impairment across Ireland. Its vision is very similar to that of Angel Eyes NI, advocating for equal rights, equal access and equal opportunities for all CYP with vision impairment. It does this through guides for parents for every stage of their child's life, guides for primary and post primary school, as well as webinars for parents and school staff on various topics around supporting CYP with vision impairment. To date Féach has over 450 teachers on their mailing list who regularly attend webinars and use their guides. Féach also provides peer to peer monthly support meetings for parents/guardians, and advocates on their behalf with government departments and service providers.

Angel Eyes NI and Féach have worked on several education projects independently to provide guidance and information in their jurisdictions to those supporting children and young people with vision impairment in schools.

In 2022, Féach launched a Guide for Schools (primary and post primary), providing information on best practice, including the use of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC). In 2023 Féach started developing an Assistive Technology /Information Technology Audit and resource Toolkit for Special Education Teachers (SET) supporting students with vision impairment. This has been trialled by several students and will be further tested in 2025.

In 2018, Angel Eyes NI, in partnership with Ulster University, conducted a pilot study with 30 classroom assistants, identifying the need and desire

for accredited training; 60% of participants reporting to have had no prior training on educational strategies to support their pupil, and 78% having received no training in assistive technology. In partnership, the charity and university co-designed a Level 4 accredited course, in which 80 CAs have since successfully completed.

Further to this, Angel Eyes NI delivers Visual Awareness training to schools throughout Northern Ireland, using innovative Virtual Reality technology, delivered through the Social Enterprise Empatheyes, a trading subsidiary of the charity. The training is led by an eye-clinician, assisted by a qualified teacher, simulating paediatric eye-conditions for all school staff, raising awareness of the daily and educational challenges of pupils with vision impairment.

In February 2023, Angel Eyes NI published a report documenting the inequalities of education access for this cohort of children and young people, identifying 4 educational recommendations including training for educational staff.

This project aims to make a positive impact on the educational outcomes for this discrete, low incidence disability group of children and young people, throughout the island of Ireland, by highlighting the importance of effective training of educational support staff. Through partnership, we can draw on our knowledge and expertise of supporting children with vision impairment in mainstream education, to deliver two, contextualised, high quality, one-day training sessions across the two jurisdictions.

Background

Project Activities And Implementation

01 Workshops

Training reach

In November 2023, both charities co-designed and promoted workshops in Dublin and Belfast through their social media platforms and email databases (for parents/ carers and professionals). In under a week, the response was overwhelming with 270 potential CAs and SNAs expressing an interest (55% of applicants requesting to attend the Dublin workshop), through the completion of an online Microsoft Form. 20 applicants were selected from each jurisdiction, with half of the participants working in primary level education and the other half in post-primary. However, only

34 applicants were able to attend on the day (17 in the north and 17 in the south) due to schools being unable to release the staff at the last minute. This only highlights the integral role the classroom assistant plays in both supporting the children, and in the overall operations of the school.

Criteria were selected to maximise the learning potential of the participants, drawing on the skills and expertise of the workshop leaders. The following criteria were applied:

- Employed as either a CA or a SNA supporting a pupil with a vision impairment (83% of the 270 applicants)
- Working in a mainstream school or in specialist provision in a mainstream school (89%)
- Pupil accesses print or an electronic device as main learning media (91%)

9% of the total applicants (n = 270) were currently working with a pupil whose main medium is braille and 11% were working within a Special School setting. The future aspiration would be the development of specialist training to train and upskill this workforce.

Workshop Content

The one-day workshops were held on 2 consecutive weeks in February 2024, in Belfast and Dublin respectively. In the workshops the 34 participants were taught fundamentals of how to effectively support students with vision impairment in the classroom through 4 sessions.

Virtual Reality Technology

Using innovative technology as a training tool, the participants received a VR experience, simulating common paediatric eye conditions, including those of the students the assistant's support. The session was CPD accredited and led by an eye-clinician, providing clinical insight and knowledge into how various eye conditions and functions can impact educational access.

Adapting Printed Materials

Participants received teaching and resources on the key fundamentals and strategies of how to appropriately adapt and reformat materials to make them accessible to visually impaired students.

Assistive Technology

Participants learnt strategies on how to use their pupil's technology effectively in the classroom, supporting curriculum access.

Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC)/ Curriculum Framework of Vision Impairment (CFVI)

Participants were signposted to and provided information on the 2 frameworks, with discussion on how these might be implemented in their practice/ school environment.

Rich discussion flowed throughout all sessions, with participants asking pertinent questions, and discussing how to facilitate curriculum access with the course leaders, a qualified teacher and a parent Education Advocate with lived experience.

Additionally, through discussion, most assistants alluded to feelings of being 'lost' and under supported in their roles. This was also reflected in the workshops pre-evaluation with over a third of participants rating the advice and guidance they receive to perform their role as below satisfactory.

Each participant received both a paper and digital resource pack. The pack included handouts of all the information covered with links for further independent/ self-directed learning. Examples of adapted worksheets (from primary level to GSCE/ Higher Level examination), and information on making accessible documents were also included. Participants commented how they never had the opportunity to see examples of good practice before, nor discuss the merits of applying various strategies/ methodologies with their peers before.

02 Evaluation/Methodology

Evaluation of the workshops was conducted with the purpose of assessing impact across three key areas: confidence, knowledge and skills of assistants supporting pupils with vision impairment. Evaluation results were captured in digital format through Microsoft Forms, using quantitative and qualitative questions. All participants completed a pre-training and post-training evaluation.

Key Findings

Pre-training evaluation

- 73% rated their confidence as satisfactory or below (with 31% rating this as low)
- 56% rated their knowledge of how assistive technology can support students with vision impairment as low.
- 35% had a poor understanding of how to adapt materials to support a student with vision impairment.

Following the training session

- 100% of SNAs and CAs reported improved confidence in effectively supporting a pupil with vision impairment.
- 100% reported improved knowledge and understanding of how to adapt printed materials to support a pupil with vision impairment.
- 100% reported increased knowledge of how assistive technology can support a pupil with vision impairment in curriculum access.

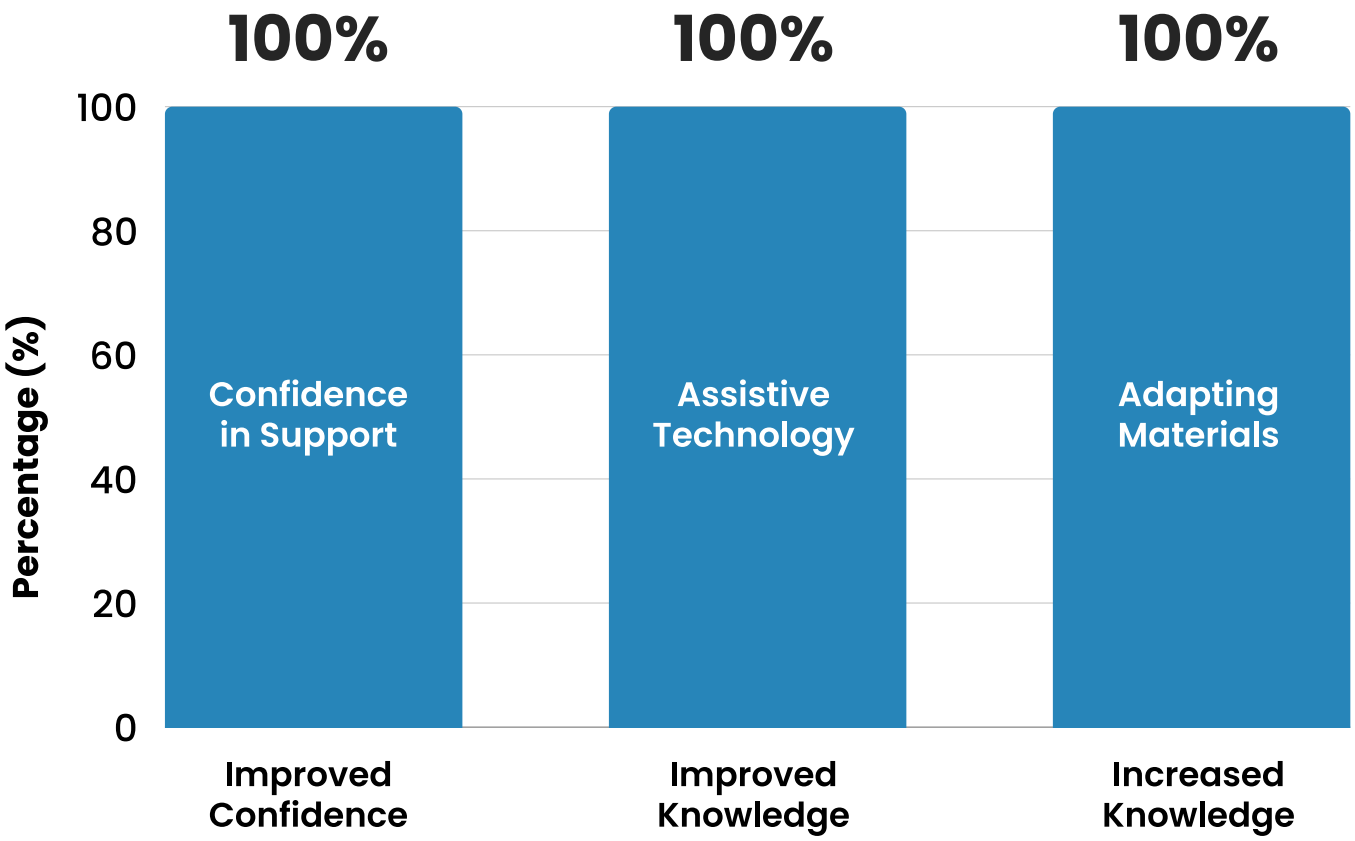

Chart 1 - Participants evaluation following training.

Most SNAs and CAs expressed a need to better understand the assistive technology their pupil uses. When asked, what one thing from the workshops would participants immediately put into action, 79% responded with a comment relating to the use of technology. Additionally, when asked what one thing participants might do differently, the topic of technology again prevailed, with 40% of answers relating to this. Lastly, participants were asked in which areas of support, if any, would they like more training. 56% of respondents answered that they would like further training on assistive technology.

The opening session of each workshop involved the use of innovative Virtual Reality Technology. The technology increases participants

understanding of common paediatric eye conditions, increasing empathy and understanding of why adaptions/ reasonable adjustments are necessary to enable curriculum access for pupils with vision impairment Research has shown VR training has a 74% better memory retention compared to other training modalities ensuring lasting impact and learning.

Participants completed pre and post training evaluations specific to this accredited Virtual Reality training.

Key Findings

Pre-training

Chart 2 - Recognised Importance of Training and Understanding Challenges

- 100% of participants felt training in visual impairment and awareness was important to their role.
- All participants hoped the session would help them better understand the challenges their pupil faced with curriculum access.

Following the training

Chart 3 - Enhanced Understanding and Adaptation Knowledge

- 100% felt their understanding of vision impairment had increased, with 85% rating this as a significant increase.
- 100% felt their appreciation of the daily living challenges of this cohort had increased, with 85% rating this as a significant increase.
- 100% reported an increase in their knowledge of the importance of adapting resources and environments, with 90% rating this increase as significant.
- 100% reported the topics covered as relevant to their role.

3-months following the workshops, a short qualitative survey was emailed to participants to ascertain if any were implementing their workshop learning in their daily practice. 100% of respondents are actively applying elements of their learning in their support, with particular reference to the use of technology. Additionally, 100% of respondents report they disseminated their acquired learning and resource pack to other staff members.

> Thank you so much for a great day at training. I have learnt to much and came away with so much knowledge that I will be putting in place for my child in school.

Comparative Analysis

Through the development and implementation of the training sessions, several key similarities and differences in provision were identified across the two jurisdictions. The project has provided a mechanism to highlight areas of challenge and of best practice, drawn from each jurisdiction, and to make recommendations to help improve outcomes, across the isle of Ireland, for this cohort of children and young people with SEN.

Shared Challenges

Legislative Framework & Funding

Both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have established robust legislative frameworks to support children with vision impairment within the broader context of SEN, safeguarding participation and inclusion.

In the Republic of Ireland, the duty of the school to make reasonable adjustments for children in education is set out in the legalisation. Schools are required to prepare Special Support Plans (SSP) for students with SEN (Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, EPSEN, 2004), outlining the reasonable adjustments and supports needed. Furthermore, the Disability Act 2005, requires public bodies to ensure that those with disabilities can access services, including educational services. The Education Act 1998 sets out the general framework for education in Ireland, including provision relating to equal access for all students and the school's responsibility to use their resources to ensure students with SEN receive appropriate education. The National Council for Special Education

(NCSE) is responsible for coordinating the provision of education and support services for children with SEN.

In Northern Ireland, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005 (SENDO) explicitly outlines the duties of schools and other educational institutions to make reasonable adjustments. Educational institutions are required to take reasonable steps to ensure disabled pupils are not placed at a substantial disadvantage to their non-disabled peers. Other relevant legislation (as listed above) includes the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 SEN Framework, as amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2016. The Education Authority (EA) provides guidance and support to schools in implementing reasonable adjustments and compliance with SENDO. It is responsible for provisions listed in a pupil's Statement of Special Educational Needs.

However, difficulties in the full implementation of legislation are apparent in both jurisdictions, primarily due to funding needs and the lack of resources.

Training

The role of SNAs and CAs is very similar across both jurisdictions; a non-teaching role to support teaching staff with reasonable adjustments, i.e., adapting learning materials, such as Braille and enlarged text, helping pupils with the operation of their assistive technology, classroom integration through encouragement in social interaction and personal care including, organising materials and navigating the school environment. Therefore, this resource, the SNA/CA, is pivotal in facilitating

curriculum access, participation, inclusion and the overall success of this cohort of children and young people.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report, Impact Review of Special Educational Needs (June 2020), reported the expenditure on classroom assistants as significant, at £88 million in the financial year 2018 – 19. In the 2022 Budget, the Irish Government allocated approximately EUR 720 million for Special Needs Assistants. The expenditure on CAs/SNAs is a substantial part of the total SEN budget, year-on-year. In both jurisdictions, this expenditure has been rising over the years with more children identified with SEN and attending mainstream schools.

With such high costs attached to this crucial role, it is even more important this workforce be trained to carry out their job effectively.

Despite the importance of this role, to date, there has been no evaluation on the impact of this workforce on the attainment and success of CYP with vision impairment. Furthermore, despite the requirement of specialist skills and knowledge, there is no qualification nor pre-training required for employment in the role. Training for this workforce is delivered by the Qualified Teachers for Vision Impairment (QTVI) in Northern Ireland, and the equivalent Visiting Teachers (VTs) in the Republic of Ireland.

However, if we take the 34 participants from this project as a subset of this workforce, in which 86% reported to never had training, we may infer there is a lack of professional development opportunities for this group of SNAs/CAs. This was also reflected in a research paper by Ulster University, Exploring the Role and Experience of Classroom Assistants Supporting Pupils with Visual Impairment, (Little et al, 2023), in which only 17% of

participants (CAs in Northern Ireland) reported to have received any training for their role. Therefore, it is vital there is redress, those supporting children with vision impairment must receive standardised, high-quality training that is evaluated for impact.

Evaluations from the workshops highlight both the need and desire for training. 100% of participants felt the training should be provided to all CAs/ SNAs supporting a pupil with vision impairment. Furthermore, participants anecdotally commented that such training should also be provided to teaching staff. Assistive technology is a common area of knowledge and skills deficit across both jurisdictions, with most participants stating this as the key area they wished to receive further training in.

Similarly, in both jurisdictions, career pathways and progression for this workforce are unstructured and limited. With increasing workloads, lack of training opportunities, recognition and low salaries some of the workshop participants spoke of low morale within the workforce. This reflects the wider 2023/24 ‘work to rule’ industrial action, taken by classroom assistants in Northern Ireland.

> Would you be able to open it to new teachers – they would definitely find it beneficial!

> I thought the information from the course was outstanding!

Assistive Technology

The many benefits of children and young people with vision impairment accessing learning through technology has been widely researched and published, for attainment, independence and employability. Research is reporting that it improves student's reading fluency, comprehension, speed and vocabulary. When students use text-to-speech technology, their writing quality and length of writing projects increase. Older students report better editing when using text-to-speech than when reading for editing purposes on their own. Ann Orr and Lorena Parks summarize this research in Educator's Ezine (2007).

'Any adaptive device or service that increases participation, achievement or independence for a student with a disability may be considered assistive technology (AT). Assistive technology helps students who are visually impaired (with and without additional disabilities) increase their access to the general curriculum and improve their academic performance.' (Teaching Visually Impaired, VI Assistive Technology, Carmen Willings, 2020) Assistive technologies '.....improve an individual's functioning and independence, thereby promoting their well-being' (World Health Organisation, 2018)

71% of the total workshop applicants (n =270) support a pupil who uses some form of assistive technology to support curriculum access. 94% of the CAs and 94% of the SNAs all support a pupil who use some form of technology as a tool to access the curriculum.

In Northern Ireland, the Education Authority mostly provides the assistive technology used by children with a vision impairment, through the Vision Impairment Advisory Service and Qualified Teachers of Vision Impairment (QTVI) Vision Impairment. A criterion is applied to determine which pupils will receive the technology, with emphasis on visual acuity (how blurry we see something) as a determining factor. However, whilst this is one factor to consider, it is too narrow and there are many more that should be considered. It has long been our philosophical belief that there is no "eligibility" criterion for assistive technology. Rather, it is pertinent that the child is viewed holistically, for example, what other eye functions might be impacted, do they have an additional educational need, what is the pupil's preferred learning style, and what works best within the pupil's learning environment?

In ROI, assistive technology is primarily funded through the Department of Education's Assistive Technology Grant. To qualify, a pupil must have a diagnosed disability that significantly affects their ability to participate in the curriculum without the assistive technology, such as a vision impairment.

As in NI, the Visiting Teacher (VT) in ROI can provide specialised training to staff and pupils on the use of assistive technology and help in the implementation and effective use of these tools in the classroom. However, over half (56%) of all workshop participants rated their knowledge and understanding of assistive technologies as low. This is in relation not only to what devices might support their pupil, but also how to effectively use the device provided to their pupil. In discussion,

all the SNAs reported to have received no training on the effective use of their pupil's technology. This is reflected in the post workshop evaluation with 50% of the assistants (both CAs and SNAs) requesting further training on technology.

Further to this, in both jurisdictions, there is no planning, teaching and assessment of the pupil's progression of skills in using their technology. The acquisition of such skills should be a continuum, with assessment and monitoring to ensure pupil is progressing and the technology remains appropriate.

In NI, 88% of represented pupils use an iPad as their only form of assistive technology. None of the represented pupils have an external keyboard linked to the device, which would optimise visual access to the screen and be advantageous for the acquisition of touch-typing skills. Handwriting is a complex skill involving visual perceptual, neuromuscular, and motor components. There are also cognitive and social emotional factors that influence handwriting. Most students who are slow at handwriting or have poor legibility increase the quantity and overall legibility of text they produced with a keyboard. Rogers and Case-Smith (2002) looked at the issue of keyboarding versus handwriting and its effects on written work. This supports the use of keyboarding as a way to increase and improve a student's writing.

Just under half of the represented pupils link their device to the class interactive whiteboard. However, most of the classroom assistants stated

this was not used consistently due to Wi-Fi and connection difficulties.

Additionally, only 1 pupil uses a laptop, and 1 does not have access to any technology. Therefore, the range of technology is restrictive, is not being used to its full functionality. Furthermore, without a media assessment we cannot be sure if the device provided is best suite to the pupils' needs and/ or their school the environment. Assistive technology can give students who are blind or have low vision support in all academic areas as well as in the CFVI/ ECC. The selection of devices is contingent upon a variety of factors. To begin the process of consideration, the student's vision condition/ functional vision needs to be identified. Additional information should be acquired regarding the students' appropriate media format through the learning media assessment. The needs assessment also considers the environment in which the student receives instruction. It is also important to know about the student's plans after school graduation. When all of the above information is gathered, conclusive decisions can be made.

In the ROI, 53% of pupils are accessing laptops, and 41% iPads. 53% of these pupils also had digital cameras for board and close work. The cameras are not Wi-Fi dependent, and SNAs reported this works well in their individual school environments as Wi-Fi dependence would be tricky in some schools. Therefore, a wider range of assistive technologies is provided to, and used by, pupils in the ROI, supporting their unique needs, way of learning, and school environment. However, whilst a wider range exists SNAs, like CAs, have not received training in how to use these devices effectively.

Technology supports a pupil's independence. However, such independence can only be developed with the pupil accessing the correct technology with the appropriate accompanying teaching support on how to use it to its full functionality. Without this, the increased use of digital tools in education, training, recruitment, and job roles, accelerated by Covid-19, is actually a mixed blessing for people with disabilities. Inaccessible or inappropriate technologies, and poor digital practices, prevent disabled people from finding and thriving successfully in work (Geena Vabulas, Policy Connect, July 2021). These findings are also echoed in the VICTAR and Thomas Pocklington Trust longitudinal study, which shows that more must be done to enable visually impaired young people obtain equitable educational experience and to be supported to reach their potential in life (University of Birmingham, Dec 2019)

As noted by Douglas et al (2019), transition from full-time education to work should not be viewed as a single moment in time. Rather, it is an ongoing process in which the young person is helped to develop the necessary skills and experiences to move into employment. This includes the proficient use of workplace technologies.

Thank you so much for yesterday. I really enjoyed the course and to meet so many other CA's in the same situation as myself. This is my 7th year working with a child with a visual impairment and it is so good to know we have you , Angel Eyes and Féach to reach out to and know there are so many different ways we can help our children which will improve how they can access education and achieve greater outcomes but also improving every aspect of their lives and give them the tools they will require to gain as much independence as possible which they will have for the rest of their lives.

Diverse Solutions

Three key areas of good practice were identified as existing in either jurisdiction, which if adopted and fully implemented by both, would help improve outcomes for children and young people with vision impairment across Ireland.

01 Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) & Curriculum Framework for CYP with Vision Impairment (CFVI)

The ECC and CFVI share several key similarities in their approach to supporting the educational and developmental needs of students with vision impairment. Both recognise the unique challenges for this cohort of CYP, and provide a framework for comprehensive, specialised instruction, beyond the standardised academic curriculum. However, whilst the CFVI has been officially adopted by the Department of Education in NI, the ECC is still to be officially recognised by the Irish Government's Department of Education.

The CFVI was launched in Northern Ireland in March 2023. This is the initiative of several UK based vision impairment charities and has the buy-in of NI's Education Authority's Qualified Teachers for the Vision Impaired, being instrumental in its codesign. Furthermore, the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI), has endorsed the Framework, and will recognise it as a tool of assessment when inspecting schools supporting pupils with vision impairment. The CFVI is in its infancy, which might explain why only one participant from the Belfast workshop was aware of it.

The ECC has its origins in the United States (conceptualised in the 1980/90s) and is informally adapted in the ROI. It does not have recognition from the Department of Education nor the NCSE. However, Féach has worked hard to advocate for its use with educational professionals through its Guide for Schools booklets and training/ information sessions.

It would be exceptionally advantageous for schools to use the frameworks to plan, teach, and assess pupils with vision impairment The frameworks provide a tool to support specialised skills development (e.g., Braille literacy, use of technology), independence and self determination (mobility and navigation and self-advocacy), life skills (independent living and leisure/recreation), social and emotional development (social interaction and emotional wellbeing), and career and future preparation (employability skills and transition planning).

The frameworks support educational staff in making appropriate, meaningful, individualised targets for pupils, which are specific to their needs, are measurable, and timely. With the imminent implementation of the new Code of Practice, in Northern Ireland, and the introduction of Personal Learning Plans (PLPs), it is an opportune time for the CFVI to be widely adopted and utilised by all schools. It would be highly recommended that the ECC be officially adopted by the Department of Education in ROI, with the NCSE supporting schools in its implantation.

02 Specialist Provision

Specialist provision in ROI goes beyond what is available in NI, having increased potential to support CYP with vision impairment to become successful and independent learners.

In ROI, most schools have a dedicated Special Educational Teacher (SET) on staff, whereas in NI, every school is required to have a designated teacher to take the responsibility of coordinating special educational needs provision, liaising with parents/external agencies and overseeing staff training and policy (currently known as a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo)).

The duties of the SET in ROI, extend beyond those of the SENCo to include direct teaching. Such teaching can include the teaching of the specialist skills a pupil with vision impairment requires to access the curriculum, for example, support with the pupil's acquisition of skills required to use their assistive technology (Braille display, screen reader, laptop, iPad etc.), 1:1 time to catch-up on visual subjects, and social and emotional support, etc. They can also support the whole school with environmental modifications and adapting learning materials. Thus, schools in ROI have capacity to teach the unique and necessary skills for students with a vision impairment, as laid out in the ECC (or CFVI equivalent), through the SET. However, in NI, a SENCo is often also a subject/class teacher. Their time to fulfil their SEN duties is not ringfenced/protected in legislation, and as such they do not have the capacity to perform direct teaching of the CFVI.

Furthermore, in ROI the Department of Education funds a Typing Tuition Scheme. Students with a vision impairment can access 20 hours typing tuition in their school through the scheme, on the recommendation of the VT. Touch typing, as advocated in the ECC and CFVI, is an exceptionally important skill for students with a vision impairment, vastly increasing efficient use of their device and quantity and quality of work. It is a necessary employability skill, and with only 25% of persons with a vision impairment in employment (University of Birmingham, 2022), it is vital touch typing be explicitly taught to this cohort of children and young people.

Additionally, pupils in the ROI can avail of the Summer Education Programme, also known as Summer Provision, funded by the Department of Education. It is designed for pupils who have Complex Educational Needs, or those who are at risk of educational disadvantage, and is often facilitated at the pupil's own school. For the pupil with a vision impairment, the programme can help not only consolidate and reinforce prior subject learning but can also provide additional learning in the specialised and unique skills they require for curriculum access and inclusion in the wider school environment. The adoption of such a scheme in NI would also significantly enhance this cohorts educational experience and improve academic, pastoral and employability outcomes.

03 Exam Access Arrangements

The range and parameters of exam access arrangements available for pupils with vision impairment is wider in Northern Ireland than in the Republic of Ireland.

Northern Ireland

In NI, exam access arrangements are governed and managed by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), an external body whose membership is comprised of the various examination boards across the UK. JCQ establishes standardised procedures for administrating examinations and adjustments for students with disabilities.

Republic of Ireland

Similarly, in ROI, the State Examinations Commission (SEC), established by the Irish government and reporting to the Department of Education, functions autonomously from schools and fulfils the same duties as JCQ.

However, there is disparity between the two governing bodies in the flexibility and parameters of some of the available arrangements. For example, JCQ can, when appropriate and with supporting evidence, allow for 100% extra time. This might be suitable for a pupil who is registered significantly sight impaired (blind) and uses Braille as their medium. In comparison, SEC have a strict policy of allowing only 10 minutes per hour of examination with a maximum of 30 minutes. In English, Irish, History and Geography Leaving Certificate Exams, there

is a limit of only 10 minutes extra time for the whole exam. Therefore, the same pupil might be allocated 4 hours to complete a 2-hour paper in NI, but only 2 hours 20 minutes in ROI.

Another worrying difference is in the provision of digital examination papers. Digital papers are an option for students in NI through JCQ. However, digital papers have only been available for students with vision impairment since 2023. Furthermore, modified digital papers have only been made available this year, 2024. Currently, both these initiatives are on a pilot basis. Pupils with vision impairment often use assistive technologies to access the curriculum and have established this as their 'normal' way of working. Therefore, it is pertinent that exam conditions reflect this. It is vital that this pilot scheme be fully implemented, and digital papers be available to all visually impaired pupils in the future.

Lastly, although the provision of modified papers is available across the two jurisdictions, the level/ quality of modification is lower/ more restricted in the ROI than NI. In ROI modified papers are only provided on A3 paper with some simplification of diagrams. A3 paper is not appropriate and widely advocated against as an appropriate media for pupils with vision impairment, being both cumbersome and trickier to visually access, with increased tracking from one line to the next.

This is not an exhaustive list but highlights some of the main issues of the access arrangements through SEC. To not disadvantage the visually impaired student against their peers it would be highly recommended that SEC aligned their access arrangements with those available through JCQ.

Conclusions

The Education Access in Ireland project, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Dáil Éireann, through the Shared Island Civic Ireland Fund, aims to enhance educational outcomes for blind and partially sighted children throughout Ireland. This report presents key findings from two project strands—training impact and comparative analysis—and offers recommendations for improvement.

The training workshops for classroom assistants (CAs) and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) showed a significant positive impact on confidence, knowledge and skill acquisition in supporting vision-impaired students However, the comparative analysis revealed shared challenges across both jurisdictions, particularly in the areas of specialised training, understanding of assistive technology (AT), and support received.

Key findings include

- All participants reported increased confidence and skill enhancement post-training.
- Significant knowledge gains were noted, especially in adapting printed materials and understanding available AT.
- A large percentage of assistants had received no prior training, and many rated their initial knowledge of assistive technologies and resource adaptation as low.
- Differences in the use of AT and support provisions were also highlighted. For example, there was a discrepancy in the types of devices used (iPads versus laptops) and the availability of additional support materials, such as the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) in ROI and the newly launched Curriculum Framework for Vision Impairment (CFVI) in NI.

> **Four children in my class have benefited from the learning I got from the course; 1 has a vision impairment and the others are neurodiverse.**

Recommendations

To address these findings and enhance the educational experience for vision-impaired students, we recommend the following:

01 Standardised Training

Develop a unified training programme for CAs, SNAs, and teachers across Ireland, with regular updates.

02 Assistive Technology

Introduce learning media assessments to ensure appropriate technology use and provide comprehensive training for both students and staff.

03 Framework Implementation

Embed the CFVI and ECC frameworks in schools as standard practice for supporting vision-impaired students.

04 Policy Advocacy

Advocate for policy changes to ensure consistent support across jurisdictions, including improved specialist provisions in NI and revised exam access arrangements by the SEC.

05 Peer-to-Peer Network

Develop a peer-to-peer network for continuous knowledge sharing among educational professionals.

These recommendations aim to create a more inclusive, supportive, and effective educational environment for vision-impaired students throughout Ireland. By addressing the identified gaps and enhancing training and support, we can ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed and thrive in their educational journeys.

Thank you so much for a great day at training. I have learnt to much and came away with so much knowledge that I will be putting in place for my child in school.

I just wanted to thank you both for such a fantastic training day today. So much insight, information and learning. Plenty to work on and bring back to my school. I look forward to hopefully joining you on the 5th March for the webinar. Safe travels home to you both.

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