MIC
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RiSE
Realising Inclusive Special Education

An Roinn Oideachais agus Óige
Department of Education and Youth

RISE Together: Building Capacity for Inclusive Education Through Collaborative Systems Leadership





Education Research Conference 2025
Presenting Authors: Johanna Fitzgerald, Donal O'Sullivan

Presentation Aims

- **Introduce the RISE Strategy:** Explain its purpose and scope in promoting inclusive education.
- **Highlight Key Principles:** Values-driven leadership; Evidence-informed practice; Collaboration and participation;
- **Share Implementation Insights:** Overview of methodology and partnerships; Key findings and impact so far:
- **Discuss Future Directions:** Sustainability and system-level improvements; Opportunities for continued collaboration

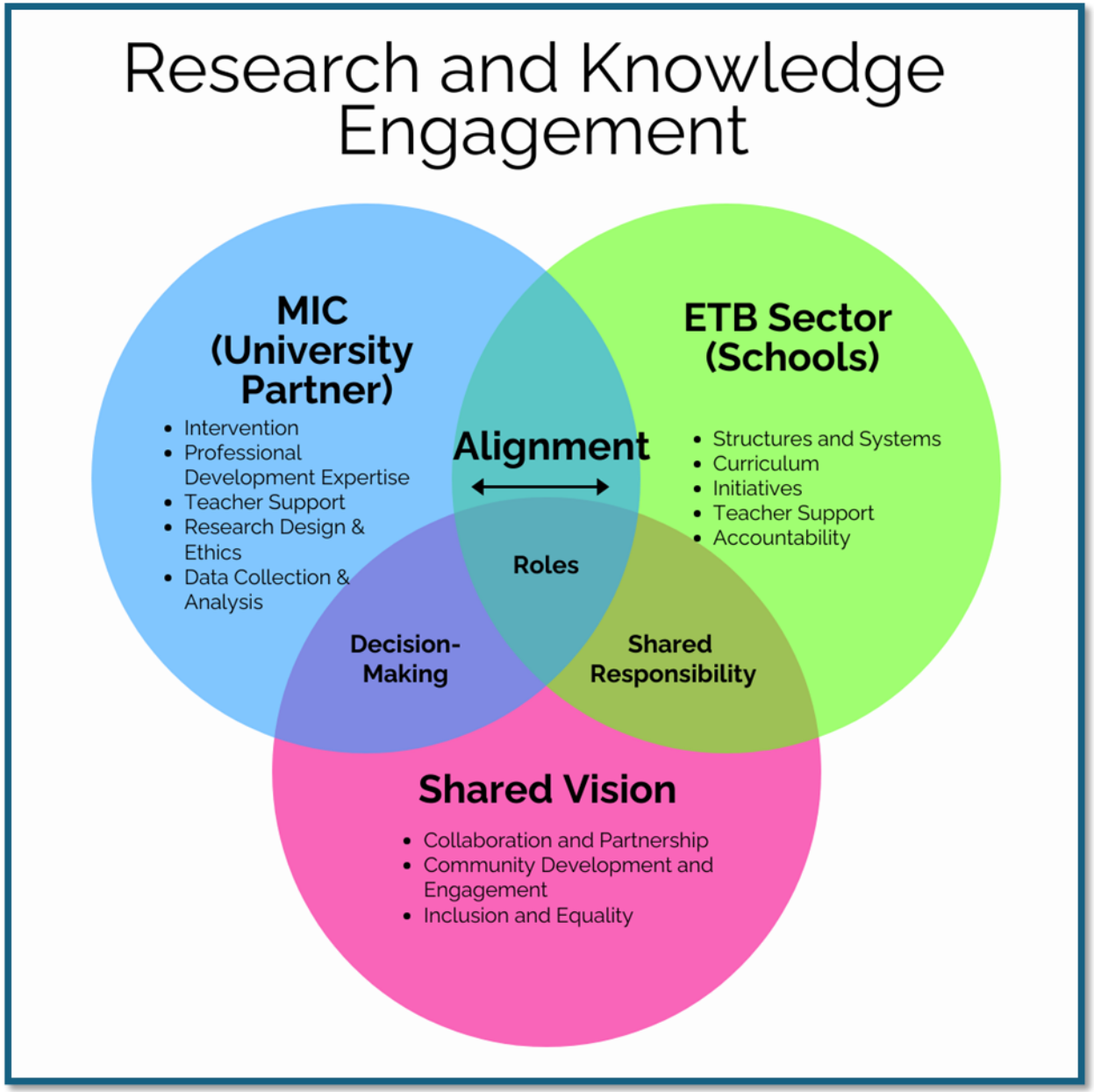
Acknowledgements

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- ETBI RISE Team of Inclusion Coordinators
- MIC Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education & Research and Graduate School
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Research Context

Education and Training Boards Ireland

Mary Immaculate College of Education and Liberal Arts

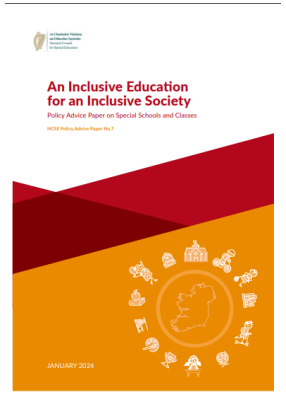


Special Education in the Irish Context: A Snapshot

- Concerns regarding increased demand for specialist provision.
- Move to needs-led approach.
- Diagnostic model of resource allocation and placement co-exists.
- Implications for teacher education and leadership for inclusive education.

- Period of significant paradigm and systemic reform underway, driven by ratification of UNCRPD:
  - Review of legislation
  - Policy Direction- An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society
  - Engagement with EASNIE to build roadmap for an inclusive education system

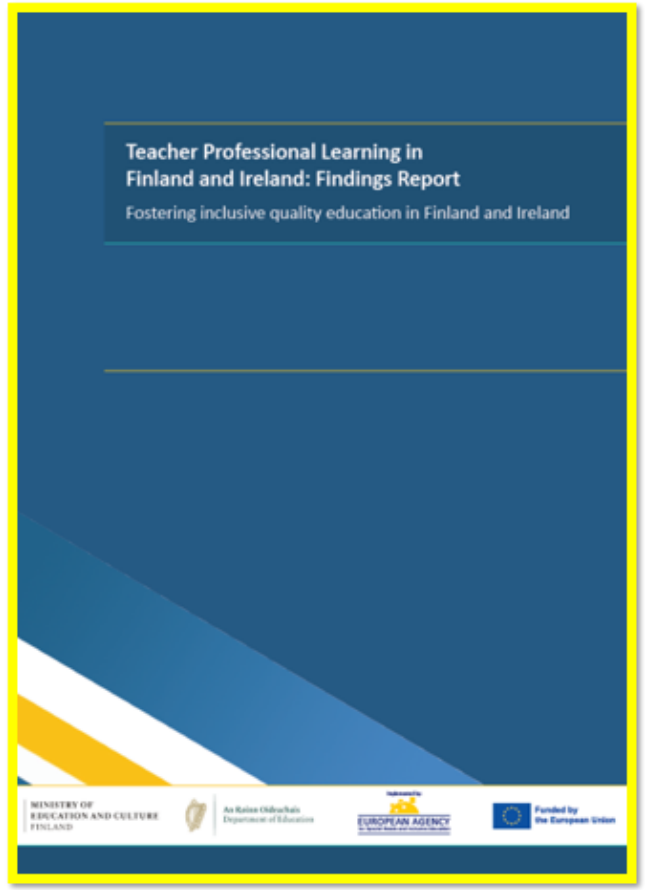




Teacher Professional Learning in the Irish Context: EASNIE (2025)

Identified a need for:

- Systematic, integrated, multi-disciplinary, sustained and evidence-informed approach to TPL
- Bridging the gap between policy and practice implementation
- Establishing a National Framework for Inclusive TPL
- Recognising and resourcing leadership for inclusive education
- Strengthening monitoring and evaluation of TPL
- Investing in contextually-sensitive whole-school CPD



Responding to the challenge

- Duality in the system persists (Florian 2019).
- The system is overwhelmed (NCSE 2024).

Underlying assumptions:

- The quality of teaching is the single most important factor influencing student outcomes (Cosgrove et al. 2014; Engida et al. 2024).
- When leadership is embedded in practice teaching is more effective (Harris 2008).

"one of the most critical problems our schools face is not resistance to innovation, but the fragmentation, overload, and incoherence resulting from the uncritical and uncoordinated acceptance of too many different innovations"
(Fullan & Stiegelbauer 1991)

Bridging Policy & Research Implementation Gaps: RISE Strategy/Provision Mapping

- A close-to-practice **process** underpinned by research, policy and theory.
- A **system** that builds national, regional and local leadership capacity for inclusive school improvement.
- An **accountability tool** to deploy SET allocations and evaluate their impact.
- A **transformative** professional learning programme.

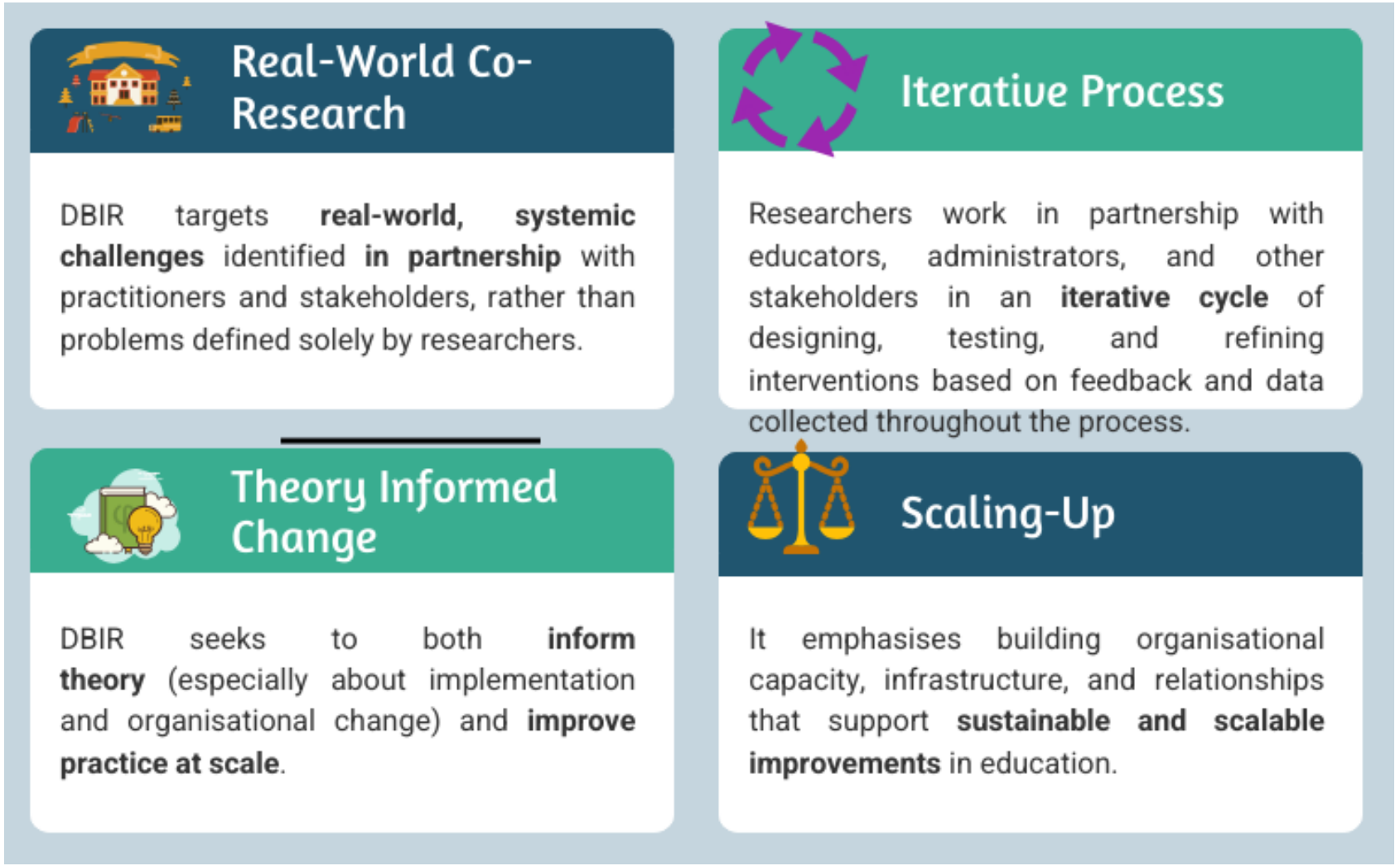


RISE Strategy: Iterative, collaborative, evidence-informed partnership with a focus on inclusive school improvement for all learners.



Design-Based Implementation Research Methodology (DBIR) *(Penuel et al. 2011)*

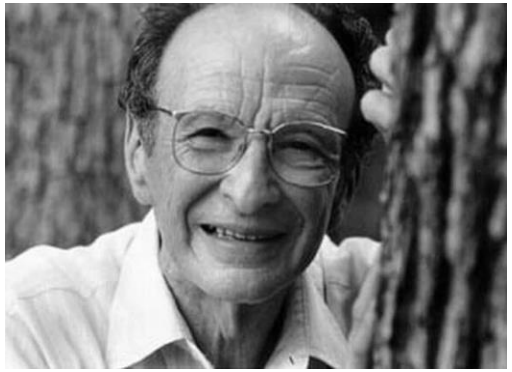
Participants: 210 ETB Post primary Schools across 16 ETBs;
Cross-sectoral pilot with 10 JMB, ACCS schools in collaboration with NCSE, LOETB, Cork ETB



RISE Research and Knowledge Engagement: Theoretical Assumptions



Inclusive Special Education (Hornby 2015)



Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1973, 2004)



Social Learning Theories (Dewey 1916; Bandura 1977; Vygotsky and Cole 1978; Schön 2017; Wenger 1998).



Systems Leadership (Ainscow & Chapman 2025; Fullan 2005)

Iterative Research and Implementation Cycle

2017-2018

Small qualitative pilot: 6 schools Limerick Clare ETB. Evaluated and published.

2019

ETBI Strategic Priority Group for Inclusive Education established.

2020-2023

Cycle 1: 14 ETBs; 33 schools.
Interim survey evaluation 2021.
Final mixed methods evaluation.

2023-2025

Cycle 2; 16 ETBs; 140 schools. National Coordinator for Inclusion, Special Education and Research appointed.
16 Inclusion Coordinators appointed.
Fourth evaluation wave 2025.

2024-2026

Cycle 3 Provision Mapping; Cross-Sectoral Pilot with NCSE, JMB, ACCS. Expansion across ETBs. 220 schools.

Open Access Article

Leading Inclusive Learning, Teaching and Assessment in Post-Primary Schools in Ireland: Does Provision Mapping Support an Integrated, School-Wide and Systematic Approach to Inclusive Special Education?

by Johanna Fitzgerald [1,*], Joe Lynch [2], Angela Martin [2] and Bernadette Cullen [3]

Key themes generated from research
(Fitzgerald et al. 2025 in preparation)

1

The RISE Strategy promotes a strengths-based developmental process which is positively impacting on outcomes for students with diverse needs.

2

Enhanced strategic planning in schools aligned with self-evaluation.

3

Increased collaboration among schools, developing teachers' leadership and skills through communities of practice.

Key themes generated from research
(Fitzgerald et al. 2025 in preparation)

4

Support for transparent, evidence-informed decision-making aligned with key policies.

5

A multi-disciplinary transformative model for sustainable professional learning and development.

6

Evidence-informed identification of schools' TPL needs with subsequent delivery of contextually relevant TPL aligned with key policy frameworks.

Conclusions: Key learnings so far?

- RISE leverages schools' untapped potential to improve themselves and optimise existing expertise in the system.
- Communities of practice, and networking opportunities build momentum, capacity and contextually relevant learning with a bias on critical reflection.
- Sustainable leadership originates within schools but requires ongoing support to thrive. That includes formal recognition of the SENCO role.
- Continued stakeholder collaboration between supports agile, research- and practice-informed responses to evolving policy and practice contexts.
- Framing inclusive school improvement through an ecological lens acknowledges complex interdependencies and enhances understanding of systemic effectiveness.

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THANK YOU

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