

## Rob Kitchin and Frank Mulcahy

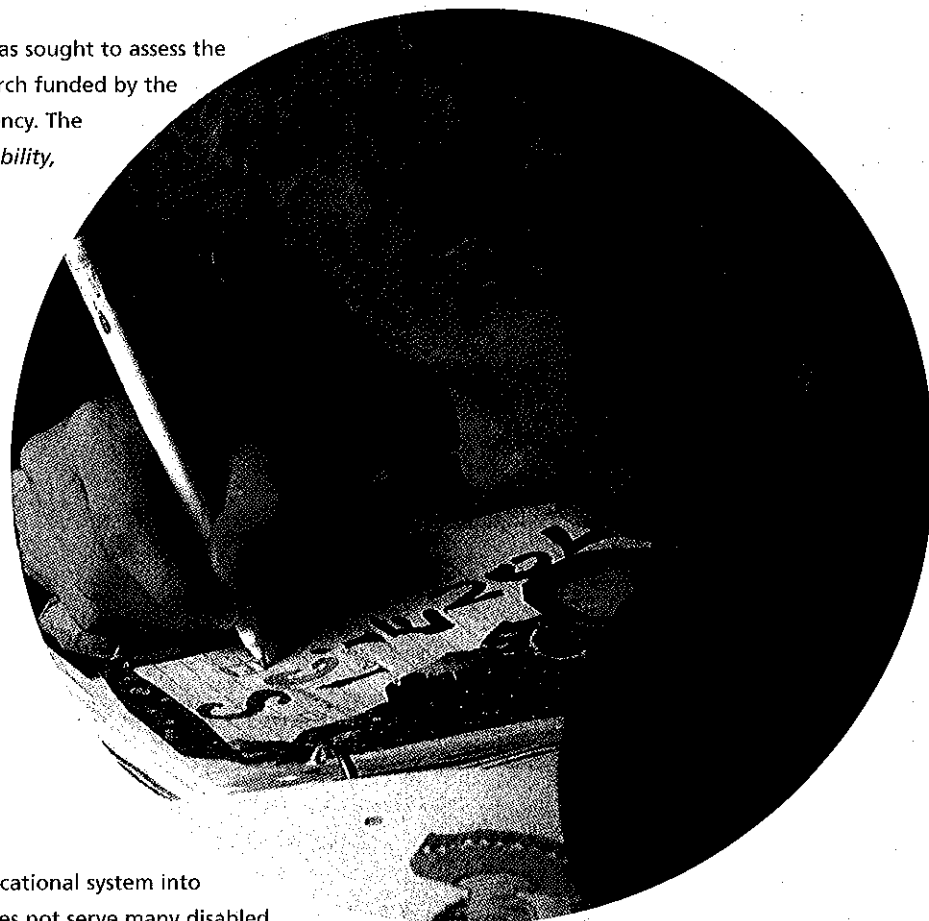
In 1998, recognising the injustices of the education system for disabled children in Ireland, the Education Act provided them and their parents with the legal right to seek an education in their local community. Resources were allocated to schools to develop the appropriate infrastructure to accommodate their local disabled children.

The Kildare Network of People with Disabilities has sought to assess the viability of the 1998 Education Act through research funded by the Royal Irish Academy and the Combat Poverty Agency. The results were published last year in the report *Disability, Access to Education, and Future Opportunities*.<sup>1</sup>

### The Study

The research undertaken was threefold:

- The evolution of Irish governmental policy in relation to the education of disabled children was charted;
- A survey to gauge how many disabled children currently attend mainstream schools and to assess levels of physical, educational, and social access was sent to all schools in County Kildare;
- Interviews were conducted with ten school principals about their experiences in teaching disabled children and their concerns.



### An Unequal System

The research revealed that the division of the educational system into two separate streams, mainstream and special, does not serve many disabled children well. They often end up in environments defined by their physical limitations, not by their mental capacity, and they are removed from their community and peers. The vast majority of mainstream schools are inaccessible, physically, socially and educationally. Furthermore, whilst on the face of things schools seem willing to accept any disabled children who apply, interviews revealed that many school principals would be forced to turn away disabled children because of structural constraints, particularly those requiring large amounts of remedial and specialised teaching. Despite the requirements of the new Act, we found that schools had limited plans to improve access for disabled children, or to provide disability awareness training for staff and students. In part this was due to a belief that the current hegemony would continue, but also due to issues of cost and a perceived lack of need.

### Conclusion

Mainstream schools at present represent a landscape of exclusion for disabled children, and unless there is significant structural investment, they will continue to do so. The reality of the situation is that, despite the ground-breaking qualities of the Act, schools are ill-equipped to teach disabled children and are likely to be for sometime. Without significant investment in school infrastructure, teaching resources, teacher retraining and a commitment to enforce legislation, this Act will fail to deliver the inclusive education system sought by the disability movement. Disabled people will continue to be denied the education needed to gain well-paid, long-term, and secure work, and the negative aspects of segregation such as the perpetuation of stereotypes and divorce from peers and the local community, will persist.

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<sup>1</sup> Kitchin, Rob and Mulcahy, Frank (1999) *Disability, Access to Education, and Future Opportunities*, The Kildare Network of People with Disabilities.