

Needs Assessment: Dingle Boys and Girls Schools

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Introduction

This needs assessment was developed in collaboration with our established community partners, Scoil Iagnoid Ris (boy's school) and Bunscoil an Chlochair (girl's school), in Dingle, Ireland, under the supervision of Dr. Sharon McCloskey. The purpose of this needs assessment was to identify the occupational needs of the principals and teachers of the boys' and girls' schools to best support the students in Dingle. The project aimed to identify occupational barriers affecting students' participation in education and leisure, as well as gaps in occupational performance that can be addressed by occupational therapy students through the development of tangible tools and strategies. There was an emphasis on school-based occupational therapy supporting inclusive education, teacher capacity building, and whole-school participation initiatives.

Community/Population Description

Based on information gathered during an interview with Micheal Ó Muircheartaigh, the principal of Bunscoil an Chlochair, Dingle, Ireland, is a small coastal harbor town located in County Kerry with a population of roughly 1600 people (Dingle Peninsula Tourism Alliance, n.d.). The Dingle community welcomes refugees from different parts of the world, including Ukrainian families, making the town and schools culturally diverse (Ó Muircheartaigh, personal communication, July 8, 2026). At Bunscoil an Chlochair, there is a total of 129 students, including 24 Ukrainian students.

The town preserves many traditional Irish customs, and Gaelic is the first official language of the town. Dingle is located in a Gaeltacht area, an officially recognized region where Irish is the primary language of the community. However, due to the large

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number of tourists who visit Dingle each year, English is also commonly spoken and understood. Tourism accounts for 30% of economic activity in Dingle. Increased tourism leads to challenges such as seasonal employment and fewer long-term housing leases. The community has an aging population, underscoring the need to provide facilities that encourage young families to move to Dingle (United Nations, 2020). Finally, Dingle preserves and values Irish culture through music and dance, fishing, Irish sports, art, and food (Failte Ireland, n.d.).

Literature Review

O'Donoghue et al. (2021) examined the current state of school-based occupational therapy (SBOT) services in Ireland to better understand how occupational therapy (OT) is delivered in schools and identify opportunities for improvement. Researchers used a cross-sectional online survey and collected responses from 35 pediatric OTs in a school setting. The study found that therapists primarily provided one-on-one interventions focusing on sensory processing, handwriting, hand function, and activities of daily living rather than using classroom or school-wide approaches. The study noted that practitioners commonly collaborate with teachers to identify students' needs, which is a strength of SBOT. However, limited time in schools, lack of role clarity, and differences between the health and education systems create barriers to effective service delivery. The study concluded that therapists require additional training in evidence-based school practice, alignment with national guidelines, and greater collaborative school participation in service delivery interventions to improve student outcomes.

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Jansson & Heitz (2020) explored the experiences of occupational therapists (OTs) working in Irish schools. They found that lack of time was a barrier to efficient and effective service delivery due to long waiting lists, high caseloads, and frequent referrals. Additionally, clear communication with the school staff was challenging as OTs often served as mediators between the parents and the school staff. They concluded that clear communication and established roles between the OT, school staff, and parents are crucial to ensure the child receives and engages in their recommended interventions to improve student outcomes.

Grajo et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of 46 international studies examining occupational therapy interventions to improve academic participation in children and youth. The review identified interventions targeting educational participation, literacy, and handwriting. Strong evidence supported therapeutic handwriting practice, while moderate evidence supported classroom yoga and creative, parent-mediated, and peer-supported literacy interventions. In contrast, weighted vests and stability balls demonstrated limited evidence for improving classroom participation. Overall, the authors concluded that occupation-based interventions are more effective than interventions focused solely on underlying performance skills.

Shevlin and Banks (2021) found that despite years of national policy reform designed to promote inclusive education, Ireland's special education system continues to operate parallel to the main education system, creating a dual system of education in Ireland. With a thorough review of Ireland's education system and policies, the authors found that the Irish education system was not following their mission in committing to inclusive education. Strong evidence supported this with the implementation of special

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classes within the schools, which allow students with special needs to learn in a small, separate classroom environment. The implementation of special classes has grown with the increase in students with special needs, but these students continue to be isolated from their non-disabled peers. Overall, their research findings show that there is a need for systematic change from policymakers in promoting equitable access and participation for students with special needs in the Irish education system.

Environment Description

Dingle is a small tight-knit community located in the remote and rural geography of the Dingle Peninsula, West Kerry. The community is known for its deep community connections, cultural roots, and thriving Irish language. The schools, Bunscoil an Chlochair and Scoil Iagnoid Ris, offer education through Irish, with emphasis on bilingual development, sports, and integration into civic and community life. Walking and cycling are common modes of transportation for the students to and from school (Ó Muirheartaigh, personal communication, July 8, 2026). The school has limited technology and there is limited educational infrastructure (Ó Muirheartaigh, personal communication, July 8, 2026). For example, there are no dedicated art, science, music, or physical education classrooms, with many activities taking place outside (Ó Muirheartaigh, personal communication, July 8, 2026). As a result, participation is often affected by weather conditions due to the lack of adequate indoor space. The lack of resources and barriers should be considered when developing occupational therapy programming to support student participation, learning, and overall well-being.

Current Programming in Place

Due to lengthy delays in Ireland's Assessment of Need (AoN) process, schools often rely on teacher observations and identified student needs to provide support while students wait for formal assessments (RTÉ News, 2025). Qualified special education teachers provide individualized and small group instruction based on students' identified needs within the school setting. At Bunscoil an Chlochair, two special education teachers work with a select number of students who receive twenty to thirty minutes of targeted support, including working on academics and socio-emotional needs. Community members and local businesses frequently partner with the schools, giving presentations and educational experiences to students. Students have opportunities to participate in organized sports, including hurling, Gaelic football, swimming, and basketball. Despite these strengths, access to specialized services is limited. Psychological assessments conducted throughout the Assessment of Needs process are insufficient. Additionally, occupational therapy assessments occur once a year, or sometimes not at all. School staff reported that, because Dingle is a rural community, they feel their students are at a significant disadvantage in accessing the specialized services needed to support their learning and development. These limitations highlight the need for additional school-based support and resources to ensure students receive services that promote participation, learning, and overall well-being.

Theory, Goals, and Key Questions

The Model of Human Occupation (MOHO), the Person-Environment-Occupation Model (PEO), and Sensory Integration Theory guided the needs assessment by informing

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questions about the students' needs, classroom environment, and school resources.

MOHO emphasizes that occupational engagement results from the interaction between volition, habituation, performance capacity, and the environment (Cole & Tufano, 2020). Within the needs assessment, MOHO was used to explore how the student's motivation to attend school, their ability to meet the curricular requirements, the school routine, and the student role influence their educational participation (Jansson & Heitz, 2020).

The PEO model examines the relationship between the person, environment, and occupation (Cole & Tufano, 2020). For this needs assessment, the PEO model explored the relationship between the student, the classroom and school environment, and education (O'Donnell et al., 2023). Ayres Sensory Integration theory supports task and environmental modifications to enhance occupational performance (Cole & Tufano, 2020). Sensory Integration theory can guide interventions and modifications in the classroom to help with emotional regulation and attention. Identifying the student's needs and school resources can be helpful in supporting educational performance (O'Donnell et al., 2023). These occupational therapy theories and models shaped the following key questions used in the needs assessment.

1. What are the needs of your students in the classroom setting?
2. Tell us more about the classroom environment/ school schedule? What is the general routine of the day? Do they change classes, have electives, etc.?
3. What kind of set up/resources do you currently have in the classroom, and what resources do you feel that you may need?
4. What special education services are currently being offered in school to support students' learning, and how does that differ from general education?

5. If we were to provide an informational workshop for the teachers, what topics would they want to learn more about, and what format would be most beneficial for their learning?
 - a. Examples: pamphlet, video, slide presentation, scholarly articles
6. Tell us about the new grass/nature space. What does it look like, and what is your vision for its purpose? Is there anything particular we can do to prepare for our trip and using these new spaces?
7. Is there anything that we have not discussed that you think is important for us to know?

Data Collection Methods

Our data from key informants and stakeholders were gathered through two semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom with the school principals. One 45-minute interview was conducted with Principal Michael Ó Muirheartaigh of the boys' and girls' schools, and a second 30-minute meeting was held with Principal Pádraig Ó Corcoráin of the boys' school. During both Zoom interviews, occupational therapy and physical therapy students from Sacred Heart University gathered qualitative data and identified the needs of each school community.

The interview consisted of interviewer-developed questions, included in Appendix 1, designed to gather information about the students' learning needs, the classroom and school environment, available supports and resources, existing special education services, teachers' professional needs, and other factors that would inform effective collaboration and support. The same interview questions were asked of both principals, except for one additional question posed to Michael Ó Muirheartaigh

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regarding the purpose and design of the new grass space. Prior to these meetings, both principals conducted a focus group with their teaching staff to gather their perspectives on student and school needs. The principals then shared this information during the interviews, allowing teacher perspectives to be incorporated into the data collection process.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed by all team members, and several themes were identified. Key themes were identified, including:

- Occupational therapy is not a mandated service under the special education system.
- Supporting students with diverse needs in the classroom.
- The need for school and classroom resources and equipment.
- Developing strategies to maximize the functionality of existing spaces for all students.
- The staff's willingness to accept new ideas through sustainable resources.

Results

Both principals shared the unique needs of their students, including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, anxiety, trauma, suicidal ideation, and physical deficits. Occupational therapy is an under-resourced service and is accessed on a case-by-case basis. Services are provided at the school once or twice a year, generally on a consultative basis to teachers.

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Bunscoil an Chlochair Girls School is in the process of creating a special education classroom and would like to develop a therapeutic outdoor space but need guidance on how the space can best support the various needs of the students. Each classroom has a smart board, and each student has a computer, but each school lacks specialized equipment for students with disabilities. Both principals shared that the teachers in the school are open to the resources and knowledge that Sacred Heart faculty and students are willing to provide.

Discussion

Based on the aforementioned themes, this needs assessment identified a clear gap between the current supports available to students and the resources needed to promote engaged occupational participation in education, play, and leisure. Although the schools demonstrate strong community involvement and dedicated teachers, limited access to occupational therapy, psychological services, and special education resources restricts their ability to provide for the varying needs of the students. These barriers are in addition to Dingles' rural location, which contributes to reduced access to specialized services and lengthy wait times for evaluations. As a result, teachers are often responsible for supporting students' wide range of learning challenges, including sensory, behavioral, and physical needs, without the proper resources to aid them.

Findings also emphasized the influence of socioeconomic and sociocultural factors on occupational engagement. Dingle's strong sense of community and emphasis on outdoor activities provide meaningful opportunities for physical and social

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participation. However, limited educational infrastructure and access to services create barriers to Dingle students' success.

A major strength of this needs assessment was the collaboration between the two principals, who gathered information from their teachers before the interviews. This allowed multiple perspectives to be brought forward instead of representing only two stakeholders. Additionally, the use of semi-structured interview questions between the two principals strengthens the reliability of the findings. Limitations were that this needs assessment was limited by a small sample size of two principals, which may lead to some perspectives not being fully represented.

Overall, the priority occupational needs identified in this needs assessment include maximizing the use of outdoor environments and equipment, providing practical resources for teachers, and increasing students' participation in the classroom.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Recommendations to improve teacher capacity building included providing workshop-style presentations and creating tangible and sustainable resources that could be utilized within the classroom to support students with various needs. In partnership with teachers, SNAs, school leaders, families, and after-school staff, we offered practical professional learning, classroom-based coaching, and accessible resources that support participation for all students. Suggested strategies included emotional regulation tools, sensory-informed environmental support, and movement and readiness for learning strategies. Recommendations also included different adaptations that could be made to the school and after-school spaces. The creation of an inclusive school toolkit by

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occupational therapy students helped schools retain and share the OT school-based strategies over time. Recommendations and proposed programming were collaborative and in partnership with principals and teachers to ensure they fit each school's mission and priorities.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

1. What are the needs of your students in the classroom setting?
2. Tell us more about the classroom environment/ school schedule? What is the general routine of the day? (Do they change classes, have electives, etc.)?
3. What kind of set up/resources do you currently have in the classroom, and what resources do you feel that you may need?
4. What special education services are currently being offered in school to support students' learning, and how do they differ from general education?
5. If we were to provide an informational workshop for the teachers, what topics would they want to learn more about, and what format would be most beneficial for their learning?
 - a. Examples: pamphlet, video, slide presentation, scholarly articles

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6. Tell us about the new grass/nature space. What does it look like, and what is your vision for its purpose? Is there anything specific we can do to prepare for our trip and make the most of these new spaces?
7. Is there anything that we have not discussed that you think is important for us to know?