

Title:

**Inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream primary
education:**

A parents and teachers view

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Signed Declaration

I declare that this research dissertation and the research involved in it are entirely the work of the author. This work, or part of it, has not been submitted for a qualification to any other institute or university.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Abstract

This study sets out to explore inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream primary education. It examined the view of professionals and parents in the area of inclusion in mainstream education. The study was conducted on five teachers working in a local primary school and four parents of children who have a disability.

The main objectives of this study were;

- To identify the benefits of inclusion for children with disabilities.
- To explore the challenges that children with disabilities may encounter in inclusive education system.
- Identify the challenges that the teachers, parents and other children may encounter in an inclusive environment.
- To explore what can be done to promote inclusion in the education system.

It was decided to undergo this particular topic as it was an area of particular interest. The interest was particularly in whether or not schools around the country are following legislation and policies in relation to the inclusion of children in mainstream education. Qualitative research was undertaken in the form of structured and semi-structured interviews as this method allows for the collection of rich data from participants. Due to this topic being a sensitive topic, this was the best approach because if any participant were to feel uncomfortable at any time they could skip a question or finish the interview at any stage. Participants that were selected for the research study interviews were teachers that are currently teaching and parents that currently have a child with a disability that is involved in some form of an inclusive learning environment.

The main findings from this study were in line with the aims of objectives and are broken up into reoccurring themes. The benefits that were found from this study include the social development for children with disabilities. All participants agreed that children with disabilities benefited from being included within a mainstream inclusive learning environment. Although, the benefits were largely associated to social benefits there was only one reference to the academic benefits. This is an

area that needs to be looked at in the future for inclusive environments to not only benefit the child with disabilities socially but also academically.

There were many challenges associated with an inclusive learning environment. The lack of funding and resources available to children with disabilities was found throughout. There was a lack of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) support to children with disabilities. It was found that the SNAs had more than one child to support at once and at times had to try calm down and resolve two situations at the one time. Time constraints for teachers were a challenge as they found it difficult to achieve IEP (individual educational programmes) for children with disabilities.

It was found in the study that partnerships between all professionals; teachers, parents and professionals such as speech and language therapists need to be brought together to achieve the best possible education for the child with a disability. Currently some parents have to bring their child outside of school hours to other professionals; this may have a knock on effect on both the child's time within the classroom setting and parents who may have to take an annual leave holiday to bring their child to these appointments. This is an area that professional bodies need to employ more supports within mainstream education. If this were to happen, the development of an inclusive environment can be achieved.

Literature
Review

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the existing literature in relation to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream primary school education. Definitions of the term inclusion will firstly be explored. The history behind the definition of 'disability' will then be examined and the development of inclusion in relation to legislation and policies regarding the education of children with disabilities will be presented. This review will also explore the benefits and challenges that exist for children with disabilities, and the challenges that may exist for parents and teachers in relation to their inclusion in mainstream education.

The education of children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities is now an established key policy objective in many countries (Lindsay, 2007). In Ireland there are approximately 8,000 pupils with disabilities enrolled in 114 Special Schools throughout the country and there are also approximately 8,000 pupils with "specific disabilities" in mainstream classes in primary schools (National Disability Authority, 2017).

Definition of disability

People with disabilities have always existed in our society, but for various reasons they have become more visible today and we are more aware of their presence than we were in past centuries (DePauw and Gavron, 2005). In the past, people with disabilities were labelled as disabled, impaired or handicapped because they appear different from others on account of their appearance, behaviour or ability to learn (Baquer and Sharma, 1997). In the 1970's, the World Health Organisation (WHO) commissioned Philip Wood to develop a classification system for disabilities (Barry-Power, 2010). It was divided into three sections; disability, impairment and handicap and is known *The International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps* (ICIDH). Wood defined a disability as 'any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being'. He defined impairment as is 'any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function' and he defined handicap as 'a disadvantage for a given individual) resulting from an

impairment or a disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal (depending on age, sex, and social and cultural factors) for that individual' (Wood, 1980).

In Ireland, The Disability Act 2005 set out the following definition: "disability", in relation to a person, means a substantial restriction in the capacity of the person to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment (The National Disability Authority, 2017).

Definition of inclusion

In 1998, Florian suggested that while there were many definitions of inclusion put forward in multiple contexts, no single definition had been universally accepted. Ten years on from this assertion, a single definition is still elusive, which may reflect the complex nature of inclusion locally, nationally, and internationally (Florian, 1998, as cited in (Winter & O'Raw, 2010). The terms integration and inclusion are often used in the same context even though there are differences in between the two concepts. Integration has generally been conceived as making additional arrangements such as teaching, support and assistive technology for a specific group of pupils though there was minimal change to the overall school organisation (Carey, 2005).

The term inclusion captures, in one word, an all-embracing societal ideology. Regarding individuals with disabilities and special education, inclusion secures opportunities for students with disabilities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms. Establishing a successful inclusive classroom varies in complexity, based upon the challenges created by the disability at hand (Special Education Guide, 2013). Inclusion is a normative concept. The policy of inclusion is aimed not at promoting equity, but at establishing narrow cultural parameters of normality to which all must have the opportunity to conform (Armstrong, 2005).

Growth of inclusive practice in schools

The inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools is a national and international development that is supported in national legislation and in statements and reports that have originated from such international bodies as the United Nations and the Council of Europe (Department of Education, 2007). In Ireland, all children have the right to access free primary education (Government of Ireland, 1937). The legislation includes the Education Act (1998), the Equal Status Act (2000) and Equality Act (2004), the Education (Welfare) Act (2000), the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) and the Data Protection Acts (1988 and 2003). These acts provide a statutory basis for education policy and provision by the Department of Education and Science and its agencies in relation to the education of all children, including those with special educational needs (Department of education, 2007). The Education Act 1998 and The Equal Status Acts 2000-2011 prohibit discrimination of any child (Lodge and Lynch 2004). Similarly, The Equal Status Act 2000-2011 prohibits direct and indirect discrimination in all areas of life, particularly the provision of services including educational services, on a number of grounds; for example gender, religion, disability, race, and membership of the traveller community.

In 2004, the Government launched the National Disability Strategy, with the aim of trying to integrate existing and future law and policy in the area of disability. The Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN) provides education to children, under the age of 18 years, with special educational needs (Citizens Information Board 2017). It centres on “individual education planning, educating children in inclusive settings and the provision of a range of services, including assessments and educational support” (NCSE 2010). Section 2 of the EPSEN Act 2004 requires that: “A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with: • The best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act • The effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated” (Education.ie, 2017). The Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2014) is responsible for the education of children with special

educational needs through a number of support systems. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was established under the EPSEN Act 2004 and provides planning, assessment and service delivery, for example resource teaching and special needs assistance to school-going children.

The Report by the Special Education Review Committee 2008 found that special education operated in virtual mutual isolation. As a result, the Committee observed that this system made it extremely difficult for students with Special Education Needs (SEN) to realise one of the main goals of education; that they will be capable of full participation in their local communities. Since this report the Department of Education policies has increasingly promoted mainstream education (Shelvin, Kenny & Loxley, 2008). Carey (2005) states that there is no one way to learn, no one way to behave and there is no one solution that will solve all children's learning or behavioural difficulties. Advocates of inclusive education maintain that developing inclusive education systems needs to be viewed as a process rather than an ideology or a particular collection of practice (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the EASPD conference showed practical examples on how to make education more inclusive. Since its adoption, the CRPD has brought a new way to understanding "disability" that entails the combination of two elements: the physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment of the person and the barriers in society. For a child with disabilities, their disabilities depend not only on the individual abilities but also on the degree of accessibility in the environment of the person (Halachev, 2015).

Lloyd (2008) stresses the need to denormalise schools and the systems within them. She rightly emphasises the need to develop a broader notion of terms such as success and achievement to make them attainable for learners with special educational needs. The UN convention on the rights of the child (2009) states that segregating children into 'special schools' prevents equal access to social and curricular opportunities and leads to labelling of children. Internationally over the last 20 years, inclusion of children with disabilities has been encouraged in mainstream education (Irish National Teachers Organisation, 2009).

Models of inclusion

Despite inclusion dominating the educational landscape, there is a lack of clarity regarding its translation in practice (Sikes et al, 2007). In the past, an approach known as the medical model of disability was the approach taken. Under this model of disability, the inability to join in society is seen as a direct result of having an impairment and not as the result of features of our society which can be changed. If the person with the disability could not function in society then they were placed in an institution or isolated at home (Barnes, Mercer and Shakespere, 1999). This attitude can make those who have a disability less likely to challenge their exclusion from mainstream society (Moyne, 2012). The social model of disability is the approach that is taken in today's society and it makes the important distinction between `impairment` and `disability`. The social model has been worked out by disabled people who feel that the individual model does not provide an adequate explanation for their exclusion from mainstream society - because their experiences have shown them that in reality most of their problems are not caused by their impairments, but by the way society is organised. In the individual model, definitions of impairment and disability are combined as `impairment`. This means that both the cause of functional limitation and the functional limitation within the individual itself are separated from external factors (Moyne, 2012). The social model of disability creates an inclusive life for someone with a disability and they become an active member of society (Barnes et al, 1999).

The US paved the way to inclusion of children with disabilities with the introduction of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which was subsequently amended as the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1990 and updated again in 1997, to promote 'whole-school' approaches to inclusion (Evans and Lunt, 2002). Whole school approach is a development which attempts to unify different processes and systems to enhance inclusion (Ekins & Grimes, 2009). Inclusion is not to erase or to ignore differences between individuals. Rather inclusion aims to enable all students to fully belong to the school community and to be educated within a framework in which differences between individuals are accommodated and celebrated. The successful inclusion of students with special educational needs requires effective

collaboration between mainstream teachers and teachers in specialist roles (Department of education, 2007).

A Whole School Approach has advanced the concept of support and broadened the sense of responsibility beyond particular individuals such as the principal (Florian & Rouse, 2001 as cited in Shelvin, Kearns, Ranaghan, Twoney & Winter, 2009). It does however, require intensive effort on the part of the entire staff where ideas and views are expressed and explored. Only when ideas are shared can they evolve, mature and blossom into new truth (Carey, 2005). Likewise, The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2002) state that in order for the Whole School Approach to be effective it is compulsory that professional input be provided to all staff members in the school. Professional inputs have been identified as speech and language therapists, psychologists, social workers, physiotherapists, nurses, occupational therapists and resource teachers. The Whole School Approach is an essential approach to take in order to create supportive environments for students with disabilities (Westwood, 2004 as cited in Shelvin et al, 2009).

Another aspect of inclusion is the inclusion of parents to act in partnership in the education process (Education Act, 1998). Lorenz (2002) states that the relationship between teachers and parents can be a partnership which involves sharing of expertise and control in order to provide the optimum education for children with disabilities. The word 'engagement' should be used to reflect the active roles that parents play at home and in the school. The partnership between parents and educators toward advancing inclusive practices is a critical component in its success (Stetson, 2015). The standards for parent/family involvement published in 2009 by the National Parent Teacher Association sets out six standards regarding what parents and schools should provide for each child regardless if they have a disability or not. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker and Sandler (2005) found that a number of factors influence how motivated parents will be in the education of their child. For example knowing what is expected of the parent by the school, the confidence the parent entrusts in the school to help their child, the level of confidence the parent has to help their child and how involved the teacher makes the parents feel are all factors on promoting how involved the parent will be in the child education.

Promotion of inclusion

As in the legislation discussed earlier, people with special educational needs shall have the same right to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have such needs. Education for children with disabilities to be in mainstream settings where appropriate for the child, and as far as is practicable; 'as resources permit (Citizen information.ie, 2017). A positive school ethos and the positive attitudes of staff within a school are factors that contribute to the success of an inclusive system (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010 as cited in Shelvin, Winter & Flynn, 2013). The O'Donoghue case 1993 and Sinnott 2000 case marked a shift towards recognising the rights of these children to appropriate education and represented a move from traditional approach (Shelvin et al, 2008). As a result of this the Department of Education had to assume responsibility for these children instead of the Department of Health (Shelvin et al, 2008). Therefore responsibility is on the Department of Education to make sure children with disabilities are given equal opportunities to succeed in mainstream education like their peers.

Children need to be allowed to demonstrate their own unique strengths and genuine personalised learning is the way to equity (Glazzard, 2011). In Spain, during the nineties, significant progress was made: the new concept of 'special educational needs' was introduced, special education became a part of the general education system with a common curriculum for all students, and curriculum adaptations and educational differentiation were on the basis of attending students' educational needs. Spain is considered to have one of the most inclusive educational systems in Europe with less than 0.4% of SEN students being educated in separate special schools (EADSNE 2003, 2011; Hegarty 1998).

Benefits of inclusion for children

Studies on inclusion have indicated that during their formative years, children develop language more effectively if they are with children who speak appropriately and accurately for their age group (www.inclusionireland.ie, 2017). Similarly Shelvin et al, 2008 states that students with disabilities could acquire basic communication

and motor skills through interactions with peers without disabilities who provided them with cues, prompts, and consequences.

Children with and without a disability learn from each other in an inclusive school. School is an important place for the child to learn social skills and develop friendships. Friendships develop due to social interaction and this will help children learn from each other. In an inclusive school, students are taught that people may look, learn or act differently. This kind of instruction enables children to have patience when the person in front of them in line is moving more slowly than they do (Specialneeds.com, 2017). In the inclusive school, all the students can learn to accept and value individual differences (Department of Education, 2007). Children in an inclusive learning environment learn to have respect and understand children of different abilities. Children with disabilities benefit greatly from social inclusion for example it increases self-esteem for the child and a sense of belonging in a community (Shelvin et al, 2008).

Similarly, the department of education state children with disabilities benefit socially from inclusion through a reduced sense of isolation and be subjected to less negative labelling. Mainstream children also benefit greatly as they learn that developing social skills among children with Asperger's syndrome is facilitated through drama. Mainstream children can also benefit as teachers are more apt to break instruction into finer parts, repeat directions, coach students in the use of learning strategies and offer individualised support when a student with special educational needs is in the classroom. Students with low-achievement, who are not classified as having special educational needs also benefit from these effective teaching strategies (Department of Education, 2007). Classroom teachers should work closely with the special needs assistants and designate tasks for them to enable the child to benefit from the education plan (Shelvin et al, 2008).

Johnson (2007) argues that many researchers have concluded that children with disabilities or special needs should be educated with peers to the greatest extent possible, since it is evident that children positively improve their skills and development, specifically social skills and relationships with peers, when placed with others their own age (Johnson, 2007). This view is somewhat supported by DeVivo

(2013) who states that children with intellectual disabilities may be able to develop better social skills by attending regular classes and spending time with other children that do not have intellectual disabilities, but the issue goes both ways. Engaged behaviour for children with disabilities was highest when peers acted as tutors. It seems clear that, by simply providing more opportunities of partner learning, inclusive classrooms could increase the engaged behaviour and academic achievement of students both with and without disabilities (Logan et al 1997 as cited in Katz & Mirenda 2002). Peer tutoring programs are a specialized form of cooperative learning. Students work together to learn academic content, with a typical student playing the role of tutor to a student with disabilities. Programs that have used students without disabilities as tutors have consistently proven to be effective in teaching a wide range of academic, self-help, communication and social skills to students with disabilities (King-Sears & Cummings, 1996; McDonnell, 1998 cited in Katz & Mirenda, 2002). Use of these strategies appears to facilitate the academic and social success of students both with and without disabilities.

Challenges of inclusion for children with disabilities

Access issues remain an issue for parents gaining access for their child into mainstream education (Shelvin et al, 2008). Shelvin et al, reported that children with autism require multiple referrals and could end up in a school far away from their local community. Schools are unable to provide leadership in identifying and responding appropriately to the educational and social needs of a child with a disability. The extent of the child's difficulties appeared to be a major factor in deciding if the child was accepted into the school. Schools found it more difficult to cater for children with intellectual or emotional/ behavioural difficulty than a child with a physical disability (Shelvin et al, 2008).

Lodge and Lynch (2004) argue that provision for children with special needs is relatively 'ad hoc' within the Irish education system. Lodge and Lynch state that enrolment policies in schools state that in certain circumstances they will postpone enrolment of the child until the appropriate supports and resources are put in place by the Department of Education. Yet the department will only put supports in place

once an individual is enrolled in a specific school. This can result in delays and difficulties for parents in enrolling their child.

The degree of inclusion can be affected by personal characteristics such as age and degree of disability (Robertson et al, 2001 as cited in Shelvin et al, 2013). The current emphasis on raising attainment of children with special educational needs is also hugely problematic for learners themselves. Lloyd (2008) emphasises that current educational policy focuses on compensatory measures, which aim to enable all learners to achieve norm-related standards. This system perpetuates a 'deficit view of children' (Lloyd, 2008) and fails to embrace diversity (Lloyd, 2008) by attempting to normalise all learners.

The current focus on narrowing the attainment gap between those learners with and without special educational needs results in compensatory and deficit approaches geared towards the normalisation and indeed standardization, of groups and individuals rather than contributing to the denormalization of the institutions, systems and rules which comprise education and schooling (Lloyd, 2008).

The tensions between the inclusion agenda and the standards agenda create an uneasy relationship and 'in such a relationship there will be winners and losers and it is suggested that the losers will be the children who are deemed as having special educational needs' (Cole, 2005). MacFarlane & Woolfson (2012) state that mainstream teacher attitudes may be a contributory barrier to successful inclusive practices. This may be affected as teacher inclusive practice relies on the teacher's knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes (Hornby, Horne and Timmons, 2009). Anderson (2006) state that attempts to create inclusive classrooms may result in the needs of the child with a disability being overlooked, unintentionally in the desire to treat everyone the same. Anderson also states for schools to be inclusive communities, negative attitudes toward disabilities need to be removed.

Challenges Parents and Teachers face

A challenge teachers may face is a lack of confidence in providing an inclusive environment. The teacher may lack the skills and lack confidence to give personal

instruction (Croll and Moses, 2010). The fear of the unknown combined with a lack of teacher confidence or unfamiliarity with working closely with another adult within the classroom (Slevin et al, 2008). Teachers appeared to have significant difficulties with children who have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011 as cited in NCSE, 2013). Teacher resistance to children with special educational needs is understandable. Cole (2005) emphasises that inclusion presents as risk on many levels. For teachers, children with behavioural issues may test their skills and patience and have a detrimental impact on the education of the majority. Children with special educational needs can have an adverse effect on school attainment data and individual teachers are held to account on the basis of their scores.

Due to this children with disabilities were often seen as someone else's problem in the past and the responsibility was left to the recourse teacher. Teachers often report that they require additional skills to implement inclusive practice (Winter & O'Raw, 2010). Another problem teachers faced was a lack of information about a child who entered their class. Mainstream teachers need some training in SEN, particularly in the areas of curriculum differentiation and whole school approaches to SEN (Slevin et al, 2008). Likewise in Spain, most teachers report lack of training, time, resources and supports when they try to address their students' learning needs (Chiner & Cardona, 2013). The short courses and in-service days which teachers and some classroom assistants are currently offered are not adequate: 'hands-on training' is required for teachers to work with children with disabilities and/or SEN. Awareness of disability issues, and skills in teaching and learning strategies suited to children with disabilities, should be a compulsory programme element for students in teacher education colleges (Chiner & Cardona, 2013).

In a study by Slevin, Winter and Flynn (2013) teachers questioned whether inclusion of the child in mainstream education was in their best interests for example making them to adapt to mainstream rules, routines and regulations (Department of Education, 2007). However a knowledgeable approach and positive attitudes on the parts of parents and teachers proves vital to triumphing over any obstacles which may emerge (Special Education Guide, 2013). A real difficulty is lack of time for

collaborative planning with the classroom teacher for these resource teachers (Slevin et al, 2008).

Parents have had to fight for their children's rights and requirements, so that schools can react defensively to empowered parents, seeing them as a threat where they should build relations and see them as an asset (Shelvin et al, 2008). In terms of overall standards, these learners are likely to have a detrimental impact on school performance data, especially in small schools. Thus 'educating children with special educational needs seems to present risks on many levels...' (Cole, 2005: 342). Many of the participants spoke about parental resistance to inclusion. The interview data revealed that parents were most resistant to the inclusion of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream schools. Many of the participants were able to give examples of parents who had questioned whether placements were appropriate and had expressed anxieties about the detrimental impact on their child's education. The data suggests that parents start to resist inclusion when there is a cost to their own child's efficient education (Glazzard, 2011).

Conclusion

To conclude, creating an inclusive learning environment has many benefits both socially and academically for both children with disabilities and other children. There is no one way of learning and children learn this within an inclusive learning environment. Children with disabilities form friendships with other children from being a part of an inclusive environment. Although there are many benefits, many challenges may arise as part of an inclusive learning environment. Teachers may face many challenges when including children with disabilities as the child may display challenging behaviour and may take up a lot of the teacher's time. Teachers also face a lack of time when planning and this affects their ability to deliver an inclusive environment. Overall, including children in mainstream primary education has many benefits but also gives rise to many challenges for the children with disabilities, the parents and teachers.

Methodology

Methodology

Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream primary education from the perspective of teachers and parents. The theoretical and practical rationale for using interviews as the primary method of data collection will be discussed including the actual process involved in conducting the research. This will be followed by a discussion on the participants, materials, procedure used for this study as well as ethical considerations and limitations of this study.

Research Method

Bowling (2002) states that the choice of an appropriate research method is essential. The methods utilised to answer a specific research question are critical to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the findings. Therefore, the specific design and methods of a study are vitally important to the conduct and appraisal of research (Coverdale, Roberts, Louie and Beresin, 2006, cited in Turner, Balmer and Coverdale, 2013; p.301

The thinking guiding qualitative research differs from those in quantitative research. Qualitative research approaches entail the choice of correct and appropriate methods and theories, the recognition and analysis of different perspectives, the variety of approaches and methods, and the researchers' reflections on their research as part of the process of knowledge production (Flick, 2006).

A qualitative method emphasises quality. "Qualitative research can be construed as a research strategy that usually emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data and that predominantly emphasises an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, in which the emphasis is placed on the generation of theories" (Bryman, 2004, p.19).

A qualitative researcher wants to understand the issue through the eyes of the participant (Puchta & Potter, 2007).

A research strategy that emphasises quantification in the collection and analysis of data is known as quantitative research. Quantitative research shows the relationship between theory and research, in which the purpose is placed on the testing of theories. Both qualitative and quantitative research represents a view of social reality as an external objective reality and has incorporated the practices and norms of the natural scientific model and of positivism in particular (Bryman, 2004).

For this research study, qualitative research was chosen as the nature of the topic is sensitive and conducting qualitative research through the form of interviews is beneficial as you can gain much more knowledgeable information on the topic and if the participant feels upset they have the option to leave at any time or skip the question at any time. This methodology is conducted through semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were conducted before the researcher undertook the study (See appendix 4 & 5). The questions were semi-structured for the teachers allowing the participants to speak freely and openly on certain topics. The interviews were structured for the parents due to the interview being in relation to the sensitive topic that is the child's disability. Within the interviewing context, opportunities can be accessed to gather more information, ask follow up questions and clarify questions; however this will only occur in the semi-structured interviews. Semi structured interviews are the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The researcher asked specific questions, which made it easier for the participants to answer questions on their views and experiences.

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on five teachers and structured interviews were carried out on four parents in a Primary School. The age range of interviewees varied from 25 to 45 years plus. The teachers consisted of two males and three females. For confidentiality reasons these will be referred to as T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5 and the parents which consisted of four females will be referred to as P1, P2, P3 and P4.

T1 was male with 32 years of experience working as a primary school teacher. He has been teaching in the same school all his life.

T2 graduated in 2011 from St Patrick's College Drumcondra. She has worked in many schools doing sub work and covering maternity leave etc. until she got a permanent job in 2015. She has been teaching senior infants for the past two years. She has taught all levels throughout the years but the majority of her work would be with the infant classes. She also spent a good bit of time as a learning support teacher.

T3 was a female with 9 years teaching experience. She has done further studies in the area of special education and has also worked in that area. This is her second school to teach in since she graduated, she taught in her first school for 3 years and current school the last 6 years.

T4 is a female teacher who has 8 years' experience. Before joining this school she has worked in a special school for 7 years. She has completed numerous courses including Health Promotion, 'Lámh' course along with the standard first aid and manual handling courses.

T5 was a 27 year old female. She has a BSc (Hons) in Sports Science and Health from DCU and then went to the University of Glasgow and did the PGDE in Primary Education. She has taught every age group and is currently teaching 4th class.

P1 is a mother to a 9 year old boy with autism. The child was diagnosed with Autism at the age of 4.

P2 is a mother to a 12 year old boy in 6th class with developmental coordination disorder (DCG) and autism. He has attended this school since the age of 5.

P3 is a mother of a 12 year old boy with a bowel disorder and Asperger's Syndrome. He was born with the bowel disorder and was diagnosed at the age of 9 with Asperger's. He had a SNA since the age of 5 due to toileting needs.

P4 is a mother of an 11 year old girl with Down's Syndrome. She has attended school since the age of 5. She has an SNA and is in mainstream education within the school setting.

Materials

A tape recorder was used when carrying out the interviews. All participants agreed that the use of a recording device was acceptable. Each participant signed a consent form prior to the recording taking place and this form outlined the purpose and reasoning for the recording (See appendix 2). In addition to the recorded sessions, observations were made and notes were taken to support the data as well as paying attention to tone of voice and body language. Patton (2002) recommends the use of a tape recorder when conducting interviews which can be helpful for analysing the data. Audio recordings are important in qualitative research as it allowed the researcher to pay attention to body language of the participants. Information sheets were given to parents after the interviews with a list of counsellors in the event that they became upset (See appendix 3).

Research Procedure

A letter was written to the school principal which explained the outline of the study (See appendix 1). The letter included details of the study, the author's name and contact details and assurance of confidentiality for any information obtained was also included. The staff that agreed to partake included five mainstream primary school teachers. For the structured interviews with parents, the principal of the school helped seek out parents and then a letter was forwarded to these parents outlining the purpose and details of the study. The purpose of this letter was to seek their participation in the study. Once achieved, contact was made by telephone and meetings for interviews were arranged. A pilot interview was constructed in the form of a role play and examined by the supervising lecturer and fellow student. After discussion alterations were made to the layout and wording before final questions were agreed upon. In order to construct the study the interviews have to take place. Interviews were arranged with both teachers and parents after school hours to suit their individual's requests. Dexter (1970, cited in (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) describes an interview as 'a conversation with a purpose'. A semi-structured rather than structured interview was used by the researcher to interview the teachers as it was thought to allow more freedom within the conversation, for both the interviewer and interviewee, yet still allow for comparability when analysing the data. A

structured interview was used for the parents for ethical reasons as it involved a sensitive topic. Once the interviews were completed the data was transcribed onto the computer. This was carried out so that common themes would emerge from the research.

Ethical Considerations

According to May (2001; p.59) the development and application of research ethics is required “not only to maintain public confidence and to try to protect individuals and groups from the illegitimate use of research findings, but also to ensure its status as a legitimate and worthwhile undertaking”. The ethical considerations are a very important part of gathering or planning any form of research. The participants were informed about their rights prior to taking part in the interview, from a cover letter and a consent form prior to the interviews. Their rights included, confidentiality and anonymity, all participants were also informed of the purpose of the study, and if any of the students felt uncomfortable answering any questions they had the right to move on to the next question at any time. The participants were assured that all the data is going to be used for the sole purpose of this research and it will be destroyed at a stipulated point in the future and information was stored securely, with access available only to the researcher. Names have been changed to T being the teachers and P being parents and no information presented in this research allows participating individuals to be identified.

Due to there being a sensitive nature to the topic ethical issues were important to be addressed. The principal of the school was used as a gate keeper in selecting participants for this topic. At the end of the interview an information sheet was given to parents with a list of local counsellors in the area for them to contact if they wished. Researching children’s experiences demands a respect for each child as a ‘unique and valued experienter of his or her world’ (Greene and Hogan 2012). No children were interviewed for this study. The researcher was very much aware however, that a respectful and sensitive approach was appropriate when approaching and speaking with parents, particularly where children may be in a vulnerable position.

Limitations

Qualitative research has its own limitations. As the interviewer is the main instrument of data collection, it is they who decide what to concentrate on. As a result, Bryman (2004) notes that quantitative researchers sometimes criticise qualitative research as being too “impressionistic and subjective”. Wilkinson (1998) highlighted the need for researchers to overcome any issues by clearly articulating the perspective from which the material was approached. One of the limitations to be acknowledged about this research was the relatively small scale nature of the study. The amount of teachers and parents interviewed is limited to only five teachers and four parents which therefore makes it difficult to get a deep insight into their viewpoints on the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education. It cannot be assumed that the findings are representative of all school settings in the country, or representative of the attitude or experience of all teachers. Larger scale studies on the same topic may yield different results as it would incorporate a larger response from more professionals.

Results

Results

Introduction

This section describes the findings obtained from both the semi structured interviews with teachers and structured interviews with parents on the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream primary education.

Method of Analysis

To analyse the findings a thematic approach was used which identified the re-occurring themes which emerged from both the semi-structured and structured interviews. Braun & Clarke (2006, p.79) states that thematic-analysis “minimally organises and describes your data set in rich detail”. They continue to state that using thematic analysis allows the researcher to increase their understanding about individuals, situations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It minimally organises and describes data set in (rich) detail. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998)

Many themes emerged once the data was read several times. The themes that were chosen for the purpose of this study were the context of both the semi-structured interviews and structured interviews. The only exception was the theme where this was predominantly the responses from the professionals. While presenting the data the participants will remain anonymous and referred to as stated in methodology.

From analysing the data the following themes emerged:

- The benefits of inclusion in terms of social development of the child with a disability.
- The challenges attached to an inclusive education environment.
- Professional experience of inclusion in primary education.
- Recommendations for a more inclusive school environment.

Theme 1 - The benefits of inclusion in terms of social development of the child with a disability

This theme will address the benefits for a child's social development that was highlighted by all participants in the research. Both parents and professionals agreed that children with disabilities benefit socially for being part of inclusive practices within the educational system. Social benefits were noted far more frequently than educational benefits. The following quotations from both the professionals and the parents show this.

It is believed that children with a disability benefit socially as they feel the same as the other children. P1 states that *'Children with disabilities have the opportunity in an inclusive environment of being like every other child. They are given the opportunity to take part in classes, sports, and games just like every other child. This benefits the child socially because they are engaging with other children in their classes'*.

Similarly, P2 also mentions the benefits for a child's social development and made a reference to outdoor activities. *"The other children are great; they have grown up with him and included him in activities that they feel he has interest in such as GAA. He now wants to become part of activities that they are a part of"*. This particular parent stated that he has now become more social thanks to being part of an inclusive environment. *"Before he had attended school he just wanted to be left alone and didn't want to engage in anything. He would sit at the back of the classroom like a 'loner' when he first started and not want to partake in anything but now he is in 6th class and has grown up in an inclusive environment he is up and about engaging in classes and activities"*.

Basic education for children can be learnt in any type of setting whether it be at home or in school. It's the social aspect of learning that children may find difficult and within an inclusive learning environment it gives children with disabilities the opportunity to learn the social aspect of being part of an inclusive environment. T1 states *"It's the interaction in a group and developing your personality and character that is so much more than just learning your ABC's and 123s"*. Being included is good for their self-esteem and not only children with disabilities benefit from being in an inclusive environment. T1 continues to state *"Other children also benefit as it is*

good to be around people that have disabilities. They become very understanding and caring at an early age. They become very understanding of abilities and become aware of areas of development. It prepares them for life”.

Likewise T3 talks about how children with a disability can get involved and mix with other children their age and learn from the other children in the class, *“children with disabilities get the opportunity to mix with different types of learners and get the opportunity to learn and be supported in a variety of ways e.g. Visual, auditory and practical supports. This benefits them socially as they are better able to understand and communicate”.* An inclusive school environment does not just benefit the child within school hours it lets them build friendships for life. *“For a child with disability being a part of an inclusive school environment can help them outside of school. From friendships they developed in school they can have the confidence to meet and play at the local GAA pitch with their peers”.*

Being part of a holistic learning environment children find identity and meaning for life. T4 also believes that children with disabilities definitely benefit from an inclusive learning environment as she believes *“it is essential to have an inclusive setting for holistic learning for every child”.* T4 agrees with T1 and believes that the *“The benefits go both ways, the children in the mainstream class develop a heightened sense of empathy, patience and understanding and appreciate how everyone learns differently and everyone is unique. The child with the disability has a sense and feeling of inclusion, belonging with their peer group. It greatly benefits them socially, and it is proven that children with disabilities will learn greatly from their peers, taking social and emotional cues from them”.*

This theme focused on the benefits of inclusion for children and paid particular reference to the social benefits. All participants stated that there are benefits to inclusive practices for the child with these benefits largely been social. All participants feel that their children have made great progress socially as they have gained confidence which helped their general self-esteem and they formed friendships with other children in their class as a result of inclusive education.

Theme 2- The challenges attached to an inclusive education environment

In this section, the many challenges that are linked with inclusive education are addressed. The issues raised throughout were lack of training and resources, behavioural difficulties in the classroom and the impact that inclusion has on other children in the classroom.

Training and resources among schools has been a reoccurring problem for many years. When speaking about training and resources, P1 outlined the lack of training among some of the teachers she has come across in her years in the school. *“The first day I attended the school I approached the teacher that was going to be teaching my child. This teacher was only three years qualified and to me she appeared nervous. She stated that she had 3 boys with autism in her class. She feared that she had a lack of training in the area and wanted to be put forward to further her training in this area. So together, the teacher and I approached the principal and asked for adequate training”.*

In addition to a lack of training and resources, children with disabilities face further challenges within an inclusive learning environment. P3 states that *“children with disabilities face many challenges such as a lack of concentration, strict timetables, speech and difficulty expressing themselves. Sometimes something may be upsetting my son and it’s hard to know what. English itself can be challenging in cases because often if the answer isn’t clear then to him it’s not there. It has to be written down. If it’s not written down then it doesn’t exist. Behaviours may arise from this as he is being told it doesn’t have to be written down but in his eyes it does”.*

T1 similarly recognises the problems that are faced by children with disabilities in an inclusive environment and states that being introduced to an inclusive environment may need to be a slow process due to individual needs of the child. *“For younger children with a disability they need to be slowly introduced to the mainstream setting at appropriate times that will be easiest for them, even to start off with eating lunch in the classroom with their peers. Each individual disability is different and needs to be managed appropriately and individually. Some might feel inferior to their peers if they can’t compete academically with them”.*

Integrating children with disabilities into the full school curriculum can be difficult. T3 agrees with this as she states *“Trying to include children with disabilities in all aspects of the primary school curriculum can be challenging. For some activities the child may not be able to join in with for example we had an athletics/football coach. At infant level the children don't seem to mind but as they get older they will be more conscious that they can't do something. The expectations of what they should have achieved intellectually may be too high for them and unrealistic for their ability. Even trying to find a school tour venue that is inclusive is difficult”*.

Challenges in extra-curricular activities may be a difficult aspect of full inclusion as it may be difficult to get venues that suit the needs of some children with disabilities. P4 talks about the challenges that are faced for the child while part-taking on school tours. She states that *“due to him requiring the toilet regularly, he becomes so nervous of being in an unknown new place and out of his comfort zone. Because of this it is difficult to decide whether or not it is suitable for him to go on the school tour”*.

T5 continues to state that some students with disabilities face *“curriculum challenges but if they are finding it difficult then the teachers and parents need to say we can get them to where we can and don't lose the ambition to get to as good of a level as possible”*.

Children may become disruptive within a classroom and this may cause problems within a classroom setting. T2 states that *“when a child with autism may have a ‘melt down’ because their page ripped or their pencil broke; it can have a knock on effect to the learning environment of the other children. Some children feel afraid as the volume in the classroom may be raised”*. She continued to mention that as the child gets older their behaviours may become more noticeable to other children and difficult to handle, *“Behaviours may become more apparent and disruptive as they move up through the different class levels. It can be slightly more difficult for the child to form friendships as I feel in the younger classes children aren't as aware of the disability as those in the older classes”*.

This theme addressed the challenges that inclusive practice faces in the experiences of the professionals and parents. It can be difficult when including children with

disabilities due to behaviours that challenge, and it can also be difficult for teachers when including children with disabilities in full curriculum due to their abilities.

Theme 3 - Professional experience of inclusion in primary education

This theme addresses teacher's experiences of inclusion in an inclusive environment. The following quotes represent what teachers have experienced in their teaching careers.

Every teacher agreed that inclusion in mainstream education is beneficial to both children with disabilities and other children as mentioned above. Their overall experience varies. The lack of training and resources available to teachers has had an impact on the experiences of teachers. T1 mentioned *"in my other job I was just thrown in the deep end. I had newly qualified and inclusion wasn't as big then as it is now. I didn't know where I stood with regards to full inclusion for the child..... I'll never forget it; the child was more advanced than every other child in maths. He had been attending a resource teacher and he had completed all of this maths before. I approached the principal and asked why he wasn't in all of the classes with the other children. The principal said that he wasn't able. As it turned out, the child ended up being included in every class and received his time out when he needed it"*. This is an example of how in the past inclusion was more focused on the disability of the child rather than their ability. In recent years society has changed and T1 continues to state *"now we focus on the ability of each child. For me I use it in football terms. 'The weak left foot' everybody has it. So I use it in terms of development of every student and every student has a weak left foot. For me this works, for others it wouldn't. It's the children you're dealing with as a whole not just the child with a disability"*.

T3 states that *"there's no one fits all model as every individual is different and has different needs"*. She feels that every child has the right to be assessed for suitability of inclusion in a mainstream setting. She continues to state that *"not all mainstream settings are suitable for children with disabilities and it depends on each setting"*. T2 agrees with this and states that *"all children have the right to be placed in mainstream regardless of their ability. But the question which must be asked is*

whether this is in the best interests of the child? Will some of their needs being ignored in a mainstream school setting? T2 then states that “at the end of the day it really does depend on the supports that are available for the child in a mainstream setting”.

T5 believes that it is very important to include children with disabilities at a young age. *“It is important that they are included when they are young as it is easier for smaller children to form friendships that are longer lasting. If they are included from a young age then they will learn tasks that they are able to do later in life”.* She went on to talk about the confidence that the child with disability can achieve from friendships they form at a younger age. *“These friendships they form gives them confidence going into later life. If the child didn’t have any friends then they would struggle with their self-esteem and self-confidence”.*

T4 believes that the amount of inclusion has to depend on the child’s ability to be included. *“I believe that there are so many more advantages than disadvantages of inclusion of a child with a disability in mainstream education not only for the children with disabilities but also for the other children in the classroom. One must look at the child’s ability though. Is it in the best interests of children who have a profound disability to be in a classroom with a lot of other children when they have not developed the skills to communicate or express themselves in any way?”*

In summary, teachers view on disability was a positive one but they all questioned the suitability of each child to be placed in a mainstream setting as every case differs depending on each individual’s ability. Friendships formed by children with disabilities gives them confidence among the group which has a positive effect on the level of inclusion.

Theme 4 - Recommendations for a more inclusive school environment

This final theme addresses the future of inclusivity and makes recommendations on how best to support an inclusive environment from both a teachers and parents view. The following quotes represent several recommendations from the participants and also indicate a number of obstacles which, in their experience, hinder the development of inclusive education.

T1 talks about *“the importance of early intervention is necessary. This will help both the teachers and parents in achieving a more inclusive environment. Partnership between the parents and teachers is also very important for inclusion. If there is lack of communication between the school and the parents then there will be a breakdown in inclusion for the child with disabilities”*.

P1 also mentioned that *“for an inclusive environment to be successful all professionals and the parents need to work together to make sure that the child is included in activities they are comfortable partaking in”*.

T5 also states that *“There are always specific courses in the education centres about different disabilities. They are very informative and can be quite helpful. Good communication between the class teacher, learning support, resource teacher and SNA is very important”*.

P2 stated that awareness and communication among teachers needs to be excellent as *“for a child who has a lot of hospital stays their levels of anxiety, worry and independence are not equal to a child not exposed to these circumstances. Schools should not be afraid to contact the parents to ask any questions regarding the child’s disability”*.

T4 recommends that Individual training programmes (IEP) are reviewed more regularly as the child might be progressing quicker or slower than anticipated. *“IEP are looked at termly and in my opinion this is too long. I think that the child with disabilities will benefit more if these plans are reviewed on a more regular basis and needs to be agreed on by teachers and parents”*. T4 agrees that partnership is important for the child to be given best opportunity in inclusive education *“It is important that parents and people working with the child on a daily basis are offered to be involved in this process to see the plan for the child in that given month”*.

T2 recommends that *“staff and students are all made aware of the child or children and their alternate learning needs. All targets for this student must be made available to those who he or she will be encountering on a daily basis”*.

T4 talks about experience that is beneficial in achieving an inclusive environment. *“In my experience, setting appropriate targets for the child works and also explaining to the child what is expected of them. If the child has been diagnosed as dyslexic, then*

explaining to the child that 'their brain learns to read words in a different way' and giving them the correct strategies to deal with the disability in the classroom will help. If the child has any additional equipment in the classroom that makes them stand out, making their peers aware of why they use it and making them aware of the needs of that child can also help. Knowing the child's needs, strengths and weaknesses are vital for them to feel comfortable in a mainstream classroom. Appropriate targets and programmes need to be in place for the mainstream setting”.

P3 state that “without resource hours and SNA’s then inclusion in mainstream classes simply would not be possible. We had to fight for both of these and even at that he only has a shared SNA. The SNA is dealing with two children in the class and sometimes this is not good enough. If they both decide to kick off at the same time then it is effecting the whole environment as the teacher has to get involved as the SNA can’t be in two places at the one time. I think going forward more SNA’s and resource hours should be made available and I know this is a challenge due to the lack of funding from the Department of Education but to ensure full inclusion I think it is necessary to give children with disabilities extra help where they need it”.

T3 states that “an inclusive environment is best achieved with an understanding and knowledge of the disability. It is the teacher’s job to ensure the child with disabilities feels part of the whole class setting. Being prepared is essential. Knowing the needs of the child and having appropriate adjustments made for the easiest transition for the child will help all, especially the child with the disability”.

This theme addresses recommendations by both parents and teachers.

Communication was one of the most important recommendations made by both the parents and professionals to ensure that children are included in mainstream education.

Conclusion

The first theme that emerged from the findings was the benefits of social development for all children involved in a mainstream primary environment. Children with a disability benefit as they are able to learn from other children and their behaviours and attitudes in the class. Children without disabilities benefit from an

inclusive environment as they become more aware of disabilities and they become more tolerant and accepting of children with a disability.

The second theme that emerged was the challenges that are faced within an inclusive environment. Parents, teachers and the child with disabilities themselves face many challenges in an inclusive environment. Children with disabilities face challenges such as the curriculum itself, funding to get adequate resources. Teachers face challenges such as a lack of training and a lack of resources. Some parents found that challenges such as including children with disabilities in activities outside of the classroom such as school tours challenging. These types of outing may make the child feel anxious and uncomfortable being in a new setting for the day. Another challenge the parents found was the lack of training among teachers.

The third theme that emerged was the experiences of teachers in mainstream setting. This result was a split experience. The general consensus was that inclusive practice is an attractive idea but that it may not always be the right option. All teachers felt that every child had the right to be assessed for full inclusion but in some cases, they agreed that it was not in the best interests of some children to be in mainstream education as some of their needs may be neglected due to a lack of resources. They all agreed that for successful inclusion it depends on the ability of the child and the supports that are available for the child. When including a child in full inclusion it is important to focus on the ability rather than their disability.

The final theme was the recommendations from both parents and professionals. The supports available to both the child and schools were a reemerging theme throughout every interview. Teachers were positive about the SNA's that they had within the classroom but found that they were under pressure to have to sometimes assist more than one child. Teacher training was another commonly requested support structure with numerous professionals noting that additional training in specific disabilities would be of benefit to them, the children and indeed to the school.

Discussion

Discussion

Introduction

This research study investigated the experiences of both parents and professionals regarding inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream primary education. It explored the benefits of inclusion in terms of social development, the challenges that are faced in an inclusive learning environment and it gives recommendations on how to best promote an inclusive mainstream learning environment. This section discusses the main themes that emerged from the findings of the study and these will be explored in terms of similarities and differences to the research described in the literature review.

Discussion of Findings

This study found that participants had similar views that every child is different and there is 'no one fits all approach'; "*there's no one fits all model as every individual is different and has different needs*" (T2). This is not surprising as in the literature it is established that there is no one way to learn or behave. There is no one solution that will solve all children's learning or behavioural difficulties (Carey, 2005). This is important when trying to establish or maintain an inclusive learning environment.

This leads us to a Whole School Approach which in theory is a development which attempts to unify different processes and systems to enhance inclusion (Ekins & Grimes, 2009). In this research study all parents and teachers agreed that children have the right to be assessed for their suitability for mainstream education. '*Every child has the right to assessment of their suitability for mainstream setting*' (T3). It was found in the literature that in order for the Whole School Approach to be effective it is compulsory that professional input be provided to all staff members in the school (Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2002). It was found that for effective inclusion in mainstream primary education, all professionals must have an input into child's Individual Education Programmes (IEP) and parents need to be included in this also. It is not surprising that communication between professionals and parents was seen as the most important form of communication in this study as it helps the school adapt more and learn more about the child with the disability at an early stage. As we found in the literature the partnership between the parents and

professionals in the education process is widely important (Education Act, 1998). Lorenz, (2002) states that the relationship between teachers and parents can be a partnership which involves sharing of expertise and control in order to provide the optimum education for children with disabilities. When participants in the study were asked about the professionals that were working with the child in a mainstream setting all parents said that it was as good as non-existent. This is alarming as parents had to get professionals outside of the school to assess their child such as speech and language or psychologist. Is this an area that needs to be addressed in terms of the availability of extra resources within mainstream primary schools?

MacFarlane & Woolfson (2012) state that mainstream teacher attitudes may be a contributory barrier to successful inclusive practices. This may be affected as teacher inclusive practice relies on the teacher's knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes (Hornby, Horne and Timmons, 2009). It was interesting to see that the question was raised among participants regarding the suitability of the child for mainstream primary education. Each child, each with their own needs, abilities and capabilities must be assessed in order to establish their suitability for placement in a mainstream setting therefore, sending a child to a special needs school must be considered as an option for parents. Some professionals who work at the forefront of the education setting had various opinions on its suitability for children with disabilities. Some teachers feared that the needs of some children with disabilities would not be met in a mainstream setting therefore that raises the question whether or not this is in the best interests of the child to be placed in this sort of setting? This was not the case for every child with disabilities. This is similar to Anderson (2006) who states that attempts to create inclusive classrooms may result in the needs of the child with a disability being overlooked, unintentionally in the desire to treat everyone the same. Anderson also states for schools to be inclusive communities, negative attitudes toward disabilities need to be removed. Although in this study every teacher agreed that every child has the right to be considered for mainstream primary education, the question must be asked whether some teachers believe that mainstream education is not always the best option for the child with disabilities. This study shows that teachers don't always believe that mainstream is the best option as the child with disabilities needs may be overlooked.

In this study the benefits in terms of the child's social development was found to be the most important benefit for children with disabilities. All parents and professionals are of the opinion that you cannot teach any child the social side of education in a mainstream inclusive learning environment. It is from being involved with other children on a daily basis in group work as well as individual work that the child will learn to socialise with people and feel comfortable in the company of individuals their own age. One teacher stated that *"you can learn the '123's and 'ABC's anywhere but it is from being involved in a group that personalities are formed"*. Parents agreed that the social benefits have had a massive impact on children's ability as before their child went to school they wanted to *"just be left alone"* and now the children are involved in activities throughout the day. It is important to note that from children being engaged and included within a whole classroom they will gain self-esteem and self-confidence as they feel part of the group and not different to any other child in the class. This is supported by Shevlin et al, (2008) as children with disabilities benefit greatly from social inclusion for example, increased self-esteem for the child and a sense of belonging in a community.

Within the literature, there were many social benefits for a child with disability learning from other children in their class. The children with disabilities could develop basic communication and motor skills through interactions with peers without disabilities who provided them with cues and prompts (Hunt et al, 1994). In this study parents and professionals both stated that other children were great with the child with disabilities but they made particular reference to the social benefits. One parent stated that *"the other children are great. They include him in activities that are of interest to him"* (P2). It is important to note that the Department of Education (2007) state that mainstream children also benefit greatly as they learn that developing social skills among children with Asperger's syndrome is facilitated differently. This is agreed within this study, that other children benefit from an inclusive environment as they learn that every individual is different and some have 'different areas of development than others'. Other children learn to become understanding and caring from a younger age. They will carry this with them for life. Students are taught that people may look, learn or act differently. This kind of instruction enables children to have patience when the person in front of them in line is moving more slowly than they do (Specialneeds.com, 2017).

Having said this, it is rather alarming that only one of the participants mentioned any academic benefits to a child with disabilities being involved in an inclusive education environment within the mainstream setting. It is noted that the academic gains of a child will inevitably be affected by the severity of the disability however academic benefits must be highlighted more if inclusion is to succeed. Peer tutoring programs are a specialized form of co-operative learning. Students work together to learn academic content, with a typical student playing the role of tutor to a student with disabilities. Programs that have used students without disabilities as tutors have consistently proven to be effective in teaching a wide range of academic, self-help, communication and social skills to students with disabilities (King-Sears & Cummings, 1996; McDonnell, 1998 cited in Katz & Mirenda, 2002). Inclusion is more than just social benefits and in this research study social development benefits were the biggest factors that arose and only one parent mentioned the academic benefits for both the child with disability and also the child without disabilities. Is this an area that needs more improvements if inclusion in mainstream primary education is going to reach full inclusion?

Another finding in this study was that both teachers and parents affected the amount of inclusion within the school. Parents and teachers found that inclusion is so much more than just the educational side of school; it was about being part of a wider community both in school and out of school hours where they have friends with similar interests such as GAA etc. These beliefs coincide with the literature from the Department of Education in particular stating that inclusion is not to erase or to ignore differences between individuals. Rather inclusion aims to enable all students to fully belong to the wider community and to be educated within a framework in which differences between individuals are accommodated and celebrated (Department of Education, 2007).

Although there are many benefits of an inclusive learning environment, just like everything an inclusive environment undoubtedly brings many challenges to a learning environment. In this study many challenges of full inclusion arose due to challenging behaviours from the child with disabilities. In a full inclusive learning environment routine is one of the biggest factors that may affect behaviours. It was found that strict timetables can be an issue if the child with disabilities is not finished a particular task. In these cases they may not be able to move onto the next task

until that task is finished. This can create challenging behaviours as the teacher is restricted to a time limit per topic on a daily basis to get the curriculum covered. If the child with disabilities cannot move onto next lesson this may affect the mood of the whole class. Literature states that for teachers, children with behavioural issues may test their skills and patience and have a detrimental impact on the education of the majority (Cole, 2005). Within an inclusive environment curriculum challenges for both teachers and children with disabilities are found in this study. Teachers found it difficult due to the lack of time they have to plan sessions and IEP's. Literature supports this as it states that a real difficulty is the lack of time the classroom teacher and resource teachers have for collaborative planning (Slevin et al, 2008). In this study it was found that children with disabilities may struggle with the curriculum because they may be finding a subject difficult or that they are not given enough time to finish off a particular subject which, as mentioned earlier may cause behaviours that can be challenging. More research is necessary on this particular area. Could it simply mean that giving more time to the student with disabilities to finish a particular subject can both help them academically and prevent behaviours that are challenging?

Lodge and Lynch, (2004) state that enrolment policies in schools state that in certain circumstances they will postpone enrolment of the child until the appropriate supports and resources are put in place by the Department of Education. Yet the department will only put supports in place once an individual is enrolled in a specific school. This can result in delays and difficulties for parents in enrolling their child. Within this research study the results differed with all four parents compared to the literature as they stated they had no problem accessing a suitable school for their child. They contacted the school and because many other children with both physical and intellectual disabilities had attended the local school, the school was able to accommodate the needs of their child. It wasn't until the child was enrolled and entered the school that additional resources were needed and it was then they found that there was an issue due to the lack of funding and resources available. Parents found themselves and the school fighting for adequate resources that the child required from the Department of Education.

The inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools is a national and international development that is supported in national legislation and in statements and reports that have emanated from such international bodies as the United Nations and the Council of Europe (Department of education, 2007). The Education Act 1998 underpinned the need to identify and make available resources that are needed for those with disabilities. Participants in this study found resources to be a major issue. Participants reported that it was due to a lack of funding, teacher training, resources, budget cuts and support staff coupled with rising class numbers were found to hinder the promotion of inclusive practice making it very difficult for schools to cater for the needs of children with disabilities. Participants found that a lack of SNA's were made available to the school and it was found that the SNA in one particular class was shared between two children and was left open to situations where she may end up trying to deal with two separate incidents at the same time. It was highlighted in the literature that inclusion of children with disabilities in a mainstream setting should be promoted where appropriate for the child, and as far as is practicable; 'as resources permit' (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). It was surprising that although there is legislation providing for the education of children with disabilities, inequalities within the system represents one of many obstacles that schools face when trying to promote and indeed include children with disabilities. Whilst both the literature and the findings are supportive of inclusive practices, evidence from the findings suggests that as always, there is room for improvement.

It was found in a study 'Teachers' Use of Inclusive Practices in Spain' that Spain was seen to be the most inclusive primary education in Europe yet teachers reported a lack of training, resources and supports when they try to address their students learning needs. Teachers in Spain continued to state that the short courses and in-service days which teachers and some classroom assistants are currently offered are not adequate: 'hands-on training' is required for teachers to work with children with disabilities and/or SEN (Chiner & Cardona, 2013). This is similar to this study as it was found that the lack of training amongst some teachers was an issue. One parent stated that when her child was first introduced to the class, she met the teacher to discuss her child's needs and both the teacher and the parent had to approach the principal to request training as it was not being offered to the teachers in the school. However it must be noted that not every teacher reported that they felt

they needed additional training in special needs education. One teacher in this particular study had further training in special needs education which is a great benefit in terms of her knowledge and ability to adapt to various situations. Teachers often report that they require additional skills to implement inclusive practice (Winter, 2010). Is the training in Ireland much more hands on and based on more real life situations? Or is this just one particular case where the teacher has confidence and the ability to handle certain situation? More research in this area is needed. Looking at the teacher's confidence in terms of the ability to handle children with disabilities needs to be assessed. Does this impact the level of inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education?

Forming friendships for children with disabilities may be difficult. The degree of inclusion can be affected by personal characteristics such as age and degree of disability (Robertson et al., 2001). More literature from the Department of Education (2007) state that children with disabilities benefit socially from inclusion through a reduced sense of isolation and are subjected to less negative labelling. In this study it was revealed that teachers found that forming friendships as children get older with children without disabilities may be more difficult for the child with disabilities. Children may become more aware of the term disability and labelling of the child may occur as the child gets older. However this study found that children can at a younger age develop friendships that they sustain throughout their years in primary education just like other children in their class. Parents stated that other children in their classes are great for including the child with disabilities regardless of what age they are. "*they have grown up with him and included him in activities that they feel he is of interest*" (P2). It would be interesting to see the types of friendships that the child with disabilities forms and whether they find it easier to form and maintain friendships with other children who have a disability or whether there is no difference for children in primary education?

Evaluation of study

This section will provide an evaluation of the methodology of the study. The overall aim of the study was to investigate how inclusion is best achieved for children with disabilities in mainstream primary school by exploring teachers and parent's

experiences and opinions of inclusion within mainstream primary education. This study was successful in achieving this aim along with the specified objectives that have been outlined. This was accomplished by reviewing the relevant literature extensively and the completion of five semi-structured interviews with teachers and four structured interviews with parents. Participants for this study were parents and teachers who are directly involved with children with disabilities. They were chosen in order to get the richest data from the participants. Care had to be taken when interviewing parents due to the research project being based on a sensitive topic in the event that the parent would become upset when talking about their child's disability.

This study was undertaken in a rural mainstream school in the west of Ireland, meaning that the results from this study may not affect the overall view on the entire Irish population. Also, due to the study being carried out in a primary school it may differ from the attitudes and beliefs of other educational environments such as secondary education. Within this study it must be noticed that there was a gender difference when undergoing both the structured and semi-structured interviews. Only one male teacher took part in the research study. If the gender was equally distributive than this would eliminate any biases. It was intended at the start of the structured interviews (interviews with parents) that there would be both male and female participants but this was not possible due to work and other commitments by the fathers.

In future studies, it would be worth looking at what teachers and parent's expectations are academically for children with disabilities. One teacher in this study stated that both "*the teacher and parents can get the child to where we can get to and don't lose the ambition to get to as good of a level as possible*". Is the educational system currently focusing more on the social benefits and developments for children with disabilities more so than the academic benefits? And if so, should there be an equal footing on both in terms of overall development? Of course this will depend on the ability level of the child and how ready they are to be a part of a full inclusive environment, but the school has to implement inclusive practices to help the child to achieve both socially and academically.

The alternative to this study would have been a larger study across various primary schools around the country. This would give a greater insight to attitudes of the general Irish population on the topic of inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream primary education.

Conclusion

Children with disabilities are more involved in an inclusive learning mainstream environment due to legislation and attitudes from the public. Children with disabilities must be encouraged to believe that they can succeed like other children in their class. It is important that this is carried out taking into consideration the child's ability rather than their disability. If the focus is placed on their disability then this is already setting them out to fail and fall behind their peers. It is a belief of society that each and every child, regardless of their ability or indeed disability, is unique and that they all have areas of development that need exploring. It is ultimately the responsibility of all of the individuals that are involved with the child with disabilities on a daily basis such as the parents, teachers, SNA's and indeed friends to help the child to succeed to their full potential, develop and believe in themselves as individuals within society. If the environment is not inclusive at all times then it will be difficult for the teacher to adapt to this in certain situations. If the teacher has the confidence and has the attitude that an inclusive environment is beneficial to everyone in the class then an effective inclusive environment is more than likely to be created.

For an effective inclusive environment it is important that both teachers and parents communicate effectively. If the child is able to communicate it is important to ensure that they are involved in the process. It is important that parents and teachers work in partnership to get the best education that is possible for the child with disabilities. Although in stating this, within Ireland the area of disabilities is pretty much alive in terms of funding and resources being made to child. But the question must still be raised as to why within mainstream primary education is there still a lack of resources available firstly to the child with disabilities, secondly the parents and thirdly the teachers?

Conclusion & Recommendations

Conclusion

In conclusion this study looked at the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream primary education. It examined the views of both parents and teacher's views of an inclusive environment in primary school. The benefits and challenges of an inclusive learning environment were addressed in this study. The study found that currently there is a lot of social developmental benefits for a child with a disability but an inclusive learning environment lacks the academic benefits. The challenges that are faced among children parents and teachers within an inclusive learning environment include the lack of training among teachers and the lack of time for teachers to plan, lack of resources available to the child and parents. All these challenge make it difficult for an environment to be fully inclusive for the child with disabilities.

This study found that the government could do more to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities. Although in recent years, many policies and procedures for teachers and schools to follow more supports need to be available for schools to achieve an inclusive environment. Relationships between the parents and teachers need to remain in partnership to ensure the child is achieving the levels they are able to achieve. Governments need to look at other professionals coming into schools that the child requires instead of having to go outside of school hours for full partnership within an inclusive environment.

Recommendations

- Services and supports need to be put in place to help parents make the decision whether placing their child in an inclusive mainstream primary environment is the best interests of the child and help to see if long term goals are they going to benefit from being involved in an inclusive mainstream learning environment.
- More funding allocated to children with disabilities in mainstream education so that more supports are available to them such as more SNA's.
- More professionals to help the child within school hours to help with areas which may need developing such as speech and language.

- Teacher training needs to be achieved by all teachers in the area of children with special educational needs to develop their skills and understanding of children with disabilities.
- If every teacher is trained it will help the school adapt to children that have disabilities and not the children adapt to the school.
- Again all these recommendations are affected by the amount of funding that is available. If the government provide more money to the area of inclusion of children with disabilities, school will be able to adapt and create a much healthier inclusive learning environment and this will not just benefit children with disabilities it will benefit other children as less challenges are likely to occur as resources are in place to manage any issues and concerns that may arise.

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Appendices

Appendix 1



Consent Form

Dear participant,

I am currently studying a Masters of Arts in Child and Youth studies at Athlone Institute of Technology. As part of my study I have to complete a dissertation. The topic I have chosen is the Inclusion of children with disabilities in primary school education.

For my dissertation I wish to research professional's and parent's experiences of inclusion. I hope to gain better insight into the benefits, challenges and to hopefully make recommendations on how to better promote inclusivity in mainstream primary schools.

I propose to carry out interviews with teachers. In addition to this, I also propose to carry out interviews with parents of both children with disabilities and other children in order to obtain a more in depth perspective on the topic. In order to complete my research I need to seek permission from you to undertake these interviews. The duration of the interviews is intended to last between 20-30 minutes and will be recorded by myself for the sole purpose of the dissertation. The interviews will take place outside of school hours therefore not impeding on the schools day to day running. Your participation in this study is voluntary and if you wish to participate you may withdraw at any time.

The information obtained in the focus groups will be destroyed by 1st of October 2017.

With thanks,

Shaunagh Jackson.

Appendix 2



I grant authorisation for the use of any information given by me for the purpose of this research with the understanding that anonymity and confidentiality will be preserved at all times. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw my permission and participation at any time.

Is it OK with you to have the session taped? YES _____ NO _____

(Signed by each participant)

Appendix 3

Information sheet

Please see a list of supports available

- Celia Donohue, National Council for Special Education Tel: 091 569 778.
celia.donohue@ncse.ie 1st Floor, Custom House, Druid Lane, Galway H91 XV2C
. Fax: 091 560 424
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- Máire Aherne National Council for Special Education Tel: 090 662 8299.
maire.aherne@ncse.ie c/o Government Buildings, Convent Road Roscommon

Appendix 4

Teachers interview questions

1. Would you like to tell me a little about yourself?

How long have you worked here? What classes have you taught? Is this your first job?

2. Do you think children with disabilities benefit from an inclusive learning environment and in what way?
3. What are the benefits if any, for children with disabilities attending an inclusive school in your opinion?
4. In your opinion do you think other children benefit from an inclusive environment and if so in what way?
5. What challenges if any, do you believe children with disabilities may face in this type of school environment?
6. Do you think that an inclusive environment may cause any difficulties for other children in the classroom?
7. Facilitating inclusion is not just about taking a child with a disability and placing him/her in a classroom setting. It is about much more. What do you think are the appropriate steps to take to ensure correct inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities?
8. In your opinion, how do you think an inclusive environment is best achieved?
9. Could you make any recommendations on how schools can prepare effectively for children with disabilities?

Appendix 5

Parents Interview questions

1. Please tell me briefly a little bit about your child?
 - Such as age, class
2. How did you go about finding a suitable school for your child?
3. Did you ever consider a special school for your child?
4. Does your child have support of an SNA ?
5. What other professionals work with your child?
6. As a parent what is your overall view on an inclusive learning environment for children with disabilities?
7. What would you say your child likes about school?
8. What would you say your child dislikes about school?
9. What supports does your child have at school?
10. Does your child face any challenges in attending this school?
11. As a parent, do you experience any challenges with regard to your child attending this school?
12. Do you have any recommendations on how schools can prepare effectively for children with disabilities?