

Competence and Confidence of Newly Qualified Teachers in Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in School Settings

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I am a final year student on Bachelor of Education programme in Marino Institute of Education (MIE). My choice of topic for my research was Special Education because it is an area that I feel strongly about researching. At the outset, I felt that as a final year student going out as an NQT in September 2020, I wasn't competent and confidence in supporting children with SEN to the highest degree, especially in SEN settings such as an ASD unit. This research and topic have provided me with a huge insight and many answers to my research question.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion, Special Educational Needs, Newly Qualified Teachers, Documentary Analysis

INTRODUCTION

This article uses documentary analysis to outline the journey of inclusion on an international platform and how that has influenced our educational landscape in Ireland. The research explores the experiences and challenges faced by pre-service teachers and newly qualified teachers (NQTs) when supporting children with SEN. In particular, the researcher sought to identify whether or NQTs are equipped with sufficient knowledge, strategies and experience for them to educate children with (SEN) confidently and competently whether it be in a mainstream class or a SEN setting. The documents that were studied include literature which outlined survey results on student experiences of inclusive education and SEN modules, and experiences of SEN placements. The literature identified SEN skill gaps as noted by pre-service teachers. This article is a snapshot of a broader dissertation which explored initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in Ireland, briefly outlining and examining inclusive education modules and their delivery in ITE.

CONTEXT

The approach to children with SEN in education policy has progressed significantly over the last four decades. The review of literature from the 1970s to current day reveals that there has been a move towards the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream school internationally. The catalyst for the changing approach towards the education of children with SEN began in the UK in the 1970s with the publication of the Warnock Report (1978) which advocated for the facilitation of integration and expansion of special needs services. The influence of the Warnock report can be seen in the landmark report published by the Special Education Review Committee (1993) on provision for children with SEN; and was further emphasised by the Salamanca Statement (1994) calling for children with SEN to be educated in mainstream schools.

In Ireland, the Education Act (1998) made significant progress in the educational provision for children with SEN. Setting out the objectives and principles underpinning the Irish education system, the Act made provision in the interests of the common good for the education of every person in the state, including any person with a disability or who has other special educational needs. In 2004, the introduction of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act underlined the importance of mainstream schooling for children with SEN in Ireland. It also introduced the implementation of Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) to support the individual needs of children. Policy set out by the Department of Education (DES) since 2017 consolidates the inclusion of children in mainstream classes by equipping schools with Special Education Teachers (SETs) to further support teaching and learning (DES, 2017). The most recent development has been the ratification of Article 24 of the United Nations convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities that stipulates that all children should be educated in general education settings (United Nations, 2019). While there is general consensus that mainstream education has benefits for all children, it brings with it certain challenges for teachers, particularly pre-service teachers and NQTs with little practical experience. These challenges and experiences are the focus of this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using documentary analysis. The majority of the documentary analysis consisted of literature from Ireland, however there was a certain amount of international literature analysed also. Academic literature, policies and reports were reviewed and examined in order to ascertain whether preservice teachers and NQTs feel confident and competent

supporting students with SEN in the classroom. The literature analysed was specific to education and SEN. There were limitations to presenting the data, the author could have discussed a myriad of findings, however, the restriction of word count limited the number of findings and a dearth of literature pertaining to the competence and confidence of NQTs in supporting children with SEN prevented in-depth exploration of certain themes. Themes that emerged from the findings were: *The Inclusive School* – the study found how schools developed from segregated medical model to the current all-inclusive educational model of schooling (NCSE, 2020). This was shaped over four decades of international and national policy and legislation from the Warnock Report in 1978, Education Act 1998 in Ireland, EPSEN, 2004, to the current debate on an all-inclusive school (NCSE, 2020).

NQTs: Training, Experience and Outcomes – what was deduced from this theme was that despite the changes to ITE and the increased the number and range of school placements offered to students, which contributes substantially to their range of experiences, it does not address a significant variability in the capacity of schools and cooperating teachers to promote more inclusive practices (NCSE, 2018). Additionally, in regard to competence and confidence of NQTs, Travers et al, (2010) outlined in their report that a number of studies point to the fact that many teachers lack the preparation and experience in dealing with students with SEN and those from minority ethnic and /or minority language groups, in inclusive settings (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000; Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Winter, 2006). However, with all schools now participating in the Droichead process which support the professional learning of NQTs during the induction phase, thus laying the foundations for subsequent professional growth and learning for the next phase of their career (Teaching Council, 2018/2019), perhaps NQTs will feel more equipped and prepared in educating children with SEN confidently and competently whether it be in a mainstream class or a SEN setting.

Finally, *Factors to Support NQTs for Effective Inclusion* were addressed through school contexts, CPD and collaboration. What emerged from the school context was the importance of leadership, King (2017) and how it should be introduced to teachers should be at preservice level. The finding showed how leadership is an integral part of the school context to further promote good practice and influence on NQTs.

The collaborative relationship between the teacher and the SNA was analysed and it shows that in ITE in Ireland, there is no mandatory modules or placement that places emphasis on learning how to collaborate alongside an SNA in the classroom. Lastly, CPD emerged as an important tool for NQTs in terms of developing their competence and confidence with SEN,

especially with the The Teaching Council developing Cosán, the National framework for teachers' learning (The Teaching Council, 2016). Perhaps CPD through the frameworks provided by Cosán and The Teaching Council, NQT's can ensure they develop and implement inclusive practices in the classroom and SEN settings, where ITE may be short of providing.

When reviewing literature for the purpose of this dissertation, an important element on analysis of this research was that interviews were conducted to final year student teachers exploring in more depth their perceptions of their experience of ITE, including the intended impact on outcomes for students with SEN (NCSE, 2018). Therefore, on analysis of the NCSE (2018) in particular, it offers reputable and relevant findings regarding teachers feeling ill-equipped in supporting children with SEN, thus presenting a correlation over the last fifteen years of a lack of confidence and competence for student teachers and NQTs in the provision of inclusive education. It must be noted however, this research relied significantly on the NCSE *Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion* report, (2018). However, it would have further supported the study if there was additional data from other sources where final year student teachers and/or NQTs interviewed in relation to their experiences of ITE and how prepared they feel with regard to supporting students with SEN.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Over the last two decades there have been concerns from both pre-service teachers and NQTs about feeling unprepared to provide for the inclusion of children with SEN in their classrooms. In an Inspectorate report '*Beginning to Teach*' (2005), some NQTs expressed concerns about their lack of preparedness for managing the learning and behavioural needs of a wide range of pupils. Pre-service teachers were concerned that their initial teacher education course did not equip them to differentiate their teaching, to prepare them for working in disadvantaged areas, or to provide for pupils with SEN (DES, 2005).

More recent literature also points to gaps in the provision of inclusive education. According to a report published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018, while pre-service teachers now report feeling well prepared for inclusive teaching in terms of developing appropriate values and attitudes, they still felt relatively under-prepared in terms of confidence in their knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in school contexts. This is in line with much of the literature on confidence and competence in SEN. Travers, et al. (2010) note that many teachers lack the preparation and experience in dealing with students with SEN

in inclusive settings. Similarly, Drury and Kinsella (2009), report the insufficient numbers of teachers who possess the expertise in special needs education.

For pre-service teachers, the main sources of learning about inclusive education is personal experience, college modules and placement learning in ITE. College modules dedicated to inclusive education and SEN significantly contributed to pre-service teachers' learning. The report found that modules impacted student's understanding of inclusivity as a concept; their practical pedagogic knowledge; and how prepared they felt in terms of general inclusivity in the classroom. However, students indicated that there was a need for more dedicated SEN modules, and the delivery of workshops rather than lectures would be more beneficial.

A skill gap was identified by students in the area of teaching and learning for children with SEN. Students stated how they felt ill-equipped for teaching children with special needs, not feeling confident teaching children with ASD, and a general lack of input around various SEN resulted in negative experiences on placement. In the NCSE (2018) report, students noted the important role the SNA plays and suggested that more information on how to work with an SNA would be beneficial as part of the SEN module. The students' perspectives are reflected in literature pertaining to SNA support which reports the tensions between theory and practice (Casserly et al, 2018) and the undefined role of SNA support. King (2017), addresses the importance of leadership for inclusion where social learning processes through collaborative practice are key (Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010).

"The recognition of the role of leadership in supporting inclusive learning for students and for teachers new to teaching or to the school is an important dimension of the Irish educational landscape" (Donnelly, Murchú, & Thies, 2016). This suggests that leadership is one of the key factors in supporting NQTs in their experiences of working with children with SEN. Nevertheless, there is a gap in ITE in preparing student teachers in expanding their views to see best practices through the lens of teacher leadership, which can be shaped through an expansion of their knowledge of themselves as leaders, others in the school community, schools as organizations, and teaching through sharing strategies (Bond, 2011). Bond suggests that ITE programmes could have a discrete module on leadership from the very beginning. Teacher leaders need to have a positive disposition, be trustworthy and reliable and be confident in their abilities, resilient and above all, possess a sense of humour (Bond 2011, cited in King, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore the competence and confidence of NQTs in supporting children with special educational needs (SEN) in school settings. Following documentary analysis of literature, policy and reports on the topic, it was found that the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream settings has become a core element of education provision in Ireland and internationally. Legislation from the Warnock Report, 1978 up to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2019 depicted a mandated framework to support children with SEN in mainstream settings.

Despite the huge leap in progression over the last forty years, it is clear that there is still a gap in the provision of adequate training, particularly at a pre-service level to ensure the competence and confidence of NQTs in supporting children with SEN in their classrooms. Literature reviewed highlighted how lack of expertise and experience can impact the experiences and outcomes of pre-service teachers while on placement, but also when newly qualified. There are many factors that support pre-service and newly qualified teachers for inclusive practice, including the school context, collaboration, continuous professional development, SEN based placements and dedicated SEN modules. These supports need to be utilised to ensure pre-service and newly qualified teachers increase their confidence and competence levels in order to appropriately support children with SEN in school settings.

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