



A study to investigate mainstream primary school teachers' experiences of implementing targets and goals outlined in an Individual Education Plan into their daily practice

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Declaration

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Abstract

The aim of this research study is to explore mainstream primary school teachers' experiences of implementing targets and goals outlined in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) into their daily practice. In recent years, Ireland's education system has gone through major change. Particularly in the area of mainstream education, which now aims to cater for the individual needs of all learners. IEPs are often used to help with planning for these individual learning needs. In Ireland IEPs are at the core of The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004. Research suggests that mainstream primary school teachers' have input into the development of IEPs. However, some studies suggest that teachers may face challenges when implementing the targets of the IEP into their daily practice. Therefore, using qualitative methodology, this study explores eight mainstream primary school teachers' experiences of implementing these targets into their daily practice by means of semi-structured interviews. The data was collected and analysed on a thematic basis. As a result of this thematic analysis, three main themes emerged.

The present study found from the data collected, that the participants viewed IEPs as worthwhile and valuable in supporting students learning. It was however evident, that the participants had concerns about their ability to implement these targets into their daily teaching. This research discovered that the main challenges facing the implementation of IEP targets and goals into daily practice were lack of time, class-size and mixed-level classes. The importance of good communication between all involved in the child's learning was highlighted along with the need for adequate teacher training regarding IEPs. Further research similar to this study should be conducted on a larger scale in order to identify exactly how best to implement the targets and goals outlined in an IEP into daily practice.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This research project is concerned with mainstream primary school teachers' experiences relating to Individual Education Plans (IEP). It is specifically concerned with the mainstream primary school teachers' experiences of implementing the targets and goals outlined in an Individual Education Plan into their daily practice. This study will be conducted using a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews with eight mainstream primary school teachers will be used to gather the data.

In Ireland IEPs are at the core of The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004. However, this section of the Act has never been fully commenced, therefore schools develop IEPs under their own guidelines. Research would suggest that schools are taking the initiative in developing IEPs, though there is inconsistency in their use and in perceptions of their usefulness (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, O' Raw & Zhao, 2012).

The researcher is a final year Professional Masters of Primary Education student and has received initial teacher training in Special Education Needs (SEN) and in the IEP process. During this training it was highlighted that due to the lack of legislation surrounding IEPs, there is often a lack of consistency with the IEP process within different schools. The researcher was curious to find out more information relating to this area. For those reasons it was decided to focus this research study on gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges facing teachers' when implementing the targets and goals of an IEP into their daily practice in a mainstream classroom setting.

Chapter 2:

Chapter two provides a review of the literature surrounding Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Individual Education Plans (IEP) in the primary school context.

International and national literature regarding SEN from a variety of articles, books, and journals are reviewed as a means to gain a deeper understanding of the research topic.

Chapter 3:

Chapter three outlines the methodological approach utilised for this study. A qualitative paradigm is used with semi-structured interviews used to collect data. The chosen research design, the research context and the research participants will also be discussed. Finally, the researcher's positionality will be described, and ethical considerations and limitations of the study will be outlined.

Chapter 4

Chapter four outlines the findings from the collected data. Through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts a number of themes and sub-themes emerged. This chapter presents these findings with reference to the literature reviewed in chapter two. Three main themes that emerged will be presented as follows: The challenges facing mainstream classroom teachers' when incorporating IEP targets and goals into their daily practice; The importance of communication and teamwork, in every step of the IEP process; Teachers' confidence with the level of training provided in relation to IEPs.

Chapter 5

Chapter five provides a brief summary of the main findings. The researcher also presents suggestions and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

For the purpose of this study I will be exploring teachers' experiences relating to IEPs. I will place a particular focus on mainstream primary school teachers' experiences of implementing the targets and goals outlined in an IEP into their daily practice. An IEP is defined by the NCSE as:

a written document prepared for a named student, it specifies the learning goals that are to be achieved by the student over a set period of time and the teaching strategies, resources and supports necessary to achieve those goals. It is developed through a collaborative process involving the school, parents, the student (where appropriate), the Special Needs Assistant and other appropriate professionals to fully assess the needs of the pupil. There is a process involved in developing the plan and it is the quality of this process that determines the quality and effectiveness of the Plan.

(NCSE, 2006, p. 4)

In recent years, Ireland's education system has gone through major change, particularly in the area of mainstream education, which now aims to cater for the individual needs of all learners. There have been many changes to policies and practice as a result of these significant developments regarding the provision for Special Educational Needs (SEN). Special educational needs are defined in the EPSEN Act 2004 as:

a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person

without that condition and cognate words shall be construed accordingly. (EPSEN Act, 2004)

The inclusion of all children with SEN has been at the forefront of these developments. The UNESCO (2008) definition of inclusion states that inclusive education is: ‘an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination’.

To gain a clearer understanding of the inclusion of children with SEN in schools and educational settings and the importance of IEPs we must understand the literature surrounding the international and national perspective of the developments of Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education.

International developments on Special Educational Needs

In 1994 The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Conference on Special Needs Education was held in Salamanca. The Salamanca Statement was an international policy with an emphasis on improvements concerning the provision of SEN in many countries across the globe as it adopted a new framework for action. It called for major reform of the ordinary school with its aim to develop inclusive education systems looking towards inclusion in both the school community and the wider community involving external organisations (UNESCO, 1994). The document provides a worldwide consensus of the direction SEN should take with regards to policy and practice, guided by the values and actions proposed by the convention.

Many countries began to make efforts to promote more inclusive education policies and practices in the years following the conference. The Council of Europe Action Plan

2006-2015 was implemented to encourage the rights to full education for those with disabilities. The United Nations International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) placed strong obligation on governments to provide inclusive education for all under Article 24 “Education”.

Developments at National level regarding Special Educational Needs

In 1991 the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) was established in Ireland to report and make recommendations on educational provision for learners with special educational needs. This resulted in the SERC Report publication in 1993. The Report proposed seven principles, which affirm the right of all learners with special educational needs to an individualised and appropriate education. It highlighted the desire of many parents to have their children with special needs be educated in mainstream schools. Integration was also recommended with as little segregation as possible for all students from their peers. It also expressed the need for the provision of adequate services and resources to achieve these principles. There was also a recommendation to introduce a school psychological service which should deal with issues of assessment and assist with planning.

Following on from the SERC report, in 1995 the Department of Education published *Charting our education future: White Paper on Education*. It advocated that each individual, regardless of personal circumstances, had a right to access and participation in the education to the level of their personal potential and ability (Flood, 2010). In 1999, another White Paper, *Ready to Learn* was published by the Department of Education and Science. This paper highlighted the importance of early intervention for children with SEN.

A number of recommendations were put forward to government following these publications. These included; the provision of adequate training for all teachers, access to

child education experts, and the extension of the services of the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS) to the early years sector. NEPS was formally established as an executive agency of the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 1999, with the purpose of being responsible for all educational psychological services for children. NEPS psychologists work with both primary and post-primary schools and are concerned with learning, behaviour, social and emotional development.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was established as an independent statutory body by order of the Minister for Education and Science in 2003. Its purpose was to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children. However, since 2005 it is now formally established under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN Act).

The main provisions of the EPSEN Act include the duties of boards of management, the enrolment of children with special educational needs, the content of individual education plans, the implementation of individual education plans, the role of the principal in relation to individual education plans and assessment, the rights of parents, and the role of the National Council for Special Education. Section 2 of the Act 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 and the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated

The Act also sets out a statutory framework for the preparation and implementation of IEPs.

Individual Education Plans

As the IEP is at the core of the EPSEN Act, the NCSE responded to the Act by publishing guidelines on the process of IEPs in 2006. However, due largely to economic reasons, parts of the EPSEN Act were deferred in 2008, including guidelines surrounding IEPs which have left teachers not legally required to prepare IEPs. Regardless of this, Rule 126 of the 1965 Rules for National Schools under the Department of Education (1965) states that teachers are required at the beginning of the school year to prepare a definite and detailed scheme of work in each subject suited to the needs of their pupils. Although the use of IEPs is an established practice in many countries, research indicates that the incorporation of IEPs by teachers in practice may not be routine (Bergin, E. and Logan, A. 2013) and as each country has its own legislation and practices, IEPs may vary from country to country (Prunty, 2011).

Prunty's (2011) findings noted that teachers in her study considered the involvement of the class teacher as crucial to the development and implementation of the IEP and in the best interests of the child. Ní Bhroin's (2016) report found that practices relating to the pupil's IEP targets reported by teachers indicate that these are typically addressed by appropriate teaching methods and strategies and made known to all involved in the pupil's education, but less typically incorporated in the class teacher's plans. The reports suggest that teachers are involved in the IEP process and are aware of the children's targets. However, there is little research into the area of teachers responding to the targets in their everyday teaching and planning. This raises the question of the effectiveness of IEPs, if the specific targets being set may possibly be overlooked in the mainstream classroom.

Planning for individual learning needs has been a feature of special educational provision for some time. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning and development takes into account these individual learning needs through The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Griffin and Shevlin (2011) suggest that an appropriate balance between supported independent learning in individual, small group and whole-class settings help as a strategy for children with SEN to improve their academic ability to work on their own with the gradual release of responsibility. Dolan and Walsh (2009) also suggest that tasks should be structured correctly providing the students with a chance to succeed, which are in line with Vygotsky's theory. Therefore, Vygotsky's ZPD theory suggests that because some pupils' actual development levels and potential development levels vary greatly from the curriculum guidelines, an IEP would be the best solution when planning goals to support these pupils learning.

Teachers' Perspectives of the IEP

Lee-Tarver (2006) conducted research on American mainstream teachers' views on the utility of IEPs as tools when planning and implementing the educational objectives for pupils with SEN in inclusive classrooms. Her findings noted that the majority of teachers found the IEP to be a useful tool when planning and implementing the curriculum in their classrooms. She also reported that the teachers were using the IEPs as tools for organising and structuring their teaching. However, many of the respondents also indicated that they felt they were not involved when choosing the IEP goals for their pupils when the IEP was being drawn up.

This contrasts with the guidelines put in place by the NCSE where it states that the IEP should be developed through a collaborative process which specifies the learning goals that are to be achieved by the student. If the class teacher is not involved in this process, it

questions how achievable the targets and goals would be. The vision of inclusive education systems as set out in the Salamanca framework for action will not be possible for schools to achieve, if the guidelines set out by policy makers are not taken into consideration.

Rotter (2014) also carried out research on American mainstream and Special education teachers. She states that unfortunately very little recent research has been carried out on the IEP as a process. In the context of Irish research to date, the majority of the research is heavily focused on the production of the IEP, rather than on the implementation in the classroom with regard to the class teacher. Her research focused heavily on the usefulness of the IEP, examining if the teachers read the IEP, how early in the school year they read it, how often they referred back to the document and how they record information from those IEPs for reference in day to day planning.

These findings also echoed the findings of Lee-Tarvers (2006) research, with the majority reporting they find the IEP a useful tool within their planning. However, it was highlighted that approximately 30% of the teachers in this survey expressed their desire to have either simplified IEPs or IEPs that are more specific to the student in question. It was therefore recommended that teachers should work together in collaboration to design instructionally relevant goals and objectives that would relate more clearly to their classroom planning needs. The lack of incorporation of IEP targets in the class teachers' plans was echoed in findings by Ní Bhroin et al (2016) which support a need to further develop collaborative and coordination skills for implementation.

The Case Study: Co-Teaching for Inclusion in Mainstream Schooling Lukkari Primary School, Nurmijärvi, Finland (2017) expresses the success of working collaboratively and the teachers said that the support they gain from each other helps with overcoming one of

the barriers of inclusion. Although this is an ambitious model it suggests the outcomes for both the pupils and the teachers have a positive effect on their teaching and learning.

In a study conducted by Travers et al (2010) addressing the challenges and barriers to inclusion in Irish schools, they found among other challenges that two-particular time-related challenges arose in relation to inclusion of students with SEN. These were the lack of time for effective planning for individual needs and for differentiating the curriculum appropriately. It seems that maybe the expectations of teachers are often too much. Teachers may be faced with a demanding workload and unfortunately the needs of the students may suffer. In many cases a teacher may face a number of students in their class with additional needs which places extra pressure on creating an inclusive classroom for all. Further research needs to be carried out in this area particularly now since the NCSE released a progress report in October 2019 on Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes which is looking towards a total inclusion approach.

Differentiation

As stated by The Special Education Support Service (SESS) (2008), the identification of realistic learning objectives for each lesson enables the student to experience success when working individually or in groups and students need to be actively engaged in their learning environment. Dolan and Walsh (2009) advocate that teachers should take care to plan differentiated lessons, using a variety of teaching methodologies and assessments, ensuring inclusivity, recognising their achievements. The Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Difficulties refers to the term ‘differentiation’ as;

the process of varying content, activities, teaching, learning, methods and resources to take into account the range of interests, needs and experience of individual students.

Differentiation applies to all effective teaching but is particularly important for students with special educational needs. Within any group of students there will be a wide range of ability and experience. Learners vary in their intellectual and physical capabilities and in their motivation, interest, health, and backgrounds. This variation calls for flexible approaches, allowing for differentiation to provide challenges and successes for all students, while accommodating those who are experiencing difficulties and those who are in need of further challenge.

Project IRIS (2015) found that strategies for the promotion of differentiated teaching were seen to be limited in most schools and teachers often reported their knowledge of specific teaching approaches were limited. Although, where teachers had received further professional development in SEN and inclusive teaching, they were more adept at providing well differentiated modes of teaching and assessment.

A study by Travers et al (2010) identified difficulties teachers are experiencing with differentiation, particularly with SEN. Several teachers interviewed expressed difficulty with differentiation where there was a variety of learning difficulties in any one class group. The main challenge was the time needed to differentiate the curriculum appropriately for students with SEN.

Special Needs Assistants

The NCSE Special Needs Assistant Scheme outlines the role of the Special needs assistant (SNA) as;

SNAs play an important role in assisting the teacher to support students with special educational needs who have significant care needs. They act in a care and support role that is non-teaching in nature and work under the guidance and supervision of

the principal/teachers. The SNA usually supports a number of students with care needs in the school (2015).

Ware et al. (2011) study found that support from an SNA was overwhelmingly the most common form of differentiation, occurring nearly five times as frequently as all other forms of differentiation combined. Also support from an SNA was combined for some of the time with other differentiation strategies. The Guidelines on the IEP process by the NCSE gives further information on the SNAs involvement in relation to IEPs. It states the SNA has a direct involvement in supporting the child with special educational needs. Therefore, they will have valuable information relevant to the development of the IEP. It is important that the SNA is given the opportunity to share information with the IEP co-ordinator about the child's talents, strengths and needs. They may support the implementation of targets relating to the care and access needs of the child and provide feedback which will contribute to monitoring and reviewing the child's progress (NCSE, 2006).

Project IRIS found that SNAs demonstrated commitment to the pupils with whom they worked with and teachers, parents and pupils asserted that they made a significant contribution to their learning. It was also clear that SNAs were undertaking a pedagogical role not envisaged in DES circulars and that joint planning between the SNA and the classroom teacher generally ensured the pupils' support needs were met. However, that must not take from the fact that it is the obligation of each teacher to provide the correct support and structures for children with SEN under EPSEN Act, 2004 and The Education Act, 1998. It may be time for the role and duties of the SNA to be re-evaluated, considering the changing dynamics of the mainstream classroom.

Conclusion

The purpose of this review was to explore how mainstream primary school teachers' implement targets and goals outlined in an IEP into their daily practice. In doing this, the chapter examined the literature surrounding SEN, inclusion and IEPs from a historical and legislative context both internationally and nationally. There is strong evidence from the literature that mainstream primary school teachers' have input into the development of IEPs. However, some studies suggest that teachers may face challenges when implementing the targets outlined in the IEP into their daily practice.

The chapter also explored differentiation methods and strategies used by teachers and the involvement of SNAs in the IEP process. Furthermore, the literature suggests that teachers acknowledge the positive effect of working collaboratively on the IEP process from creation to implementing the targets in the classroom. However, there seems to be a lack of research regarding the implementation of IEP targets and goals in a mainstream setting. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of how the IEP works in the classroom, this study will investigate how mainstream primary school classroom teachers' implement the targets and goals outlined in an IEP into their daily practice.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This study investigates how mainstream primary school teachers' implement targets and goals outlined in an IEP into their daily practice. The aim of the study is to gain an insight into the experiences of mainstream classroom teachers' regarding the IEP process with a particular focus on how they implement the targets and goals set out in IEPs into their daily teaching. Much of the research to date focuses on the drawing up of the plan, with less emphasis on how the targets and goals are met within the mainstream classroom setting. This chapter presents the methodology used in the study outlining why the researcher feels the chosen methodology is appropriate for this study. The chosen research design, the research context and the research participants will also be discussed. Finally, the researcher's positionality will be described, and ethical considerations and limitations of the study will be outlined.

Research Design

Phenomenology is based on individuals, where the persons experiences come first, most commonly with new information collected of a lived experience within a particular group. Phenomenological research is a 'design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the research describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants' (Creswell, 2014). The goal is to understand what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). As this study is concerned with the personal experiences of a group of teachers it was felt that a phenomenological method would be best suited.

Therefore, a qualitative approach was used to carry out the research. Dawson (2009) states that qualitative research explores attitudes, behaviour and experiences and it attempts to get an in-depth opinion from participants. As the study is exploring teachers' experiences, it was felt that qualitative methodology would be best suited to the study more so than quantitative. O' Donoghue (2007) contributes that it is conducted through an intense and/or prolonged contact with the subject of the research. These subjects are typically 'banal' or reflective of the everyday life of individuals, groups, societies and organisations. Punch (2000) contributes that quantitative designs typically have well-developed pre-specified frameworks, compared to qualitative designs which show more variability as quantitative methods generally show physical proof such as numbers. This would reinforce the researchers reasoning for choosing qualitative methodology, as the subject of the research is more concerned with the reflective practice of the everyday life of mainstream class teachers.

Research Method

The researcher felt the most appropriate research method would be in the form of face-to-face semi-structured interviews. According to Denscombe (2010), semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to explore the participants' views and feelings in relation to a particular topic in greater detail. By using qualitative semi-structured interviews, the researcher gained detailed information from primary school teachers' experiences of implementing IEP targets and goals into their daily practice. A variety of open-ended questions were used during the interviews which allowed the researcher to probe particular questions, eliciting as much relevant information as possible. According to Moustakas (1994), the researcher should strive to gain the answer to two general questions; "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situation have typically influenced or affected your experience of the phenomenon?". Therefore, the researcher was

mindful of this when creating a list of possible questions and had the freedom to adjust questions and probe the participants during the interview.

However, due to the closure of all schools in Ireland on March 12th, 2020 by directive of the minister, as a precautionary measure of the spread of Covid-19, the researcher was unable to continue using the method of face-to-face interviews. Therefore, the method for the remainder of the participants changed to telephone interviews. Telephone interviews are more commonly related to quantitative research more so than qualitative research. Quantitative researchers frequently employ telephone interviews, usually in the form of telephone surveys, as a common data collection method (Aday 1996). The telephone interviews lack of use in qualitative research is highlighted as Patton's (2002) influential text, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, fails to acknowledge the use of phone interviews in qualitative research. However, a study by Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) found that 'both face-to-face and telephone interviews yielded similar information'. The researcher was mindful of ethical issues and challenges that might arise from using telephone interviews as a method of research. Therefore, headphones were used rather than having the phone on loudspeaker, with confidentiality being adhered to.

Data Collection

A sample of eight research participants were chosen on their experience of working in a mainstream classroom setting with at least one child with an IEP. Convenience sampling was used to gather the participants as the researcher felt this was the best option due to the short time frame of the research project. With convenience sampling the researcher 'chooses the sample from those to whom they have easy access' (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2011). Originally eight participants were chosen from one large senior school in Dublin which the researcher was on school placement in. However, due to the changes in circumstances during

the research project, only five of these participants were interviewed. Therefore, a further three participants from different schools were recruited and interviewed using telephone interviews. Four of the original participants were interviewed face-to-face while one was interviewed using telephone interview. Although this was unintended the variety of participants added to the research study as it gave a mixture of school and classroom settings.

A pilot interview was carried out at the beginning of the research project to allow the researcher to amend the questions and identify key areas to probe. Ball (1993) states that a pilot interview is an essential step to collecting background information and to adapting research questions that are suitable in an interview. Following the pilot interview the researcher amended the questions as some of the questions were generating the same type of answers. It also showed where the researcher needed to probe further to get the richest data possible.

The first four interviews were carried out in the school building after the school day. The interviews were audio recorded by the researcher and lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. The following four interviews were conducted using telephone interviews. The researcher contacted the participants and arranged a convenient time to conduct the interview. These participants were reminded of confidentiality before the interview. These interviews were also audio recorded and lasted approximately 15 minutes. Following the interviews all recordings were transcribed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) state that qualitative data analysis involves organising, accounting for and explaining the data. As a result of this process, patterns, themes and categories emerge. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data for this study. Following the data collection, the interviews were transcribed. The transcribing

process allowed the data to be coded and interpreted by reading through the transcripts and drawing out the key themes that emerged and coding these themes accordingly. Coding is a method that helps to establish similar information that occurs in the interview process (Denscombe, 2010). The main findings obtained through the data analysis were then discussed in further detail in the 'Data Analysis' chapter.

Positionality

As the nature of qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument, the positionality of the researcher must be considered. It is reasonable to expect that the researcher's beliefs, political stance, cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process (Bourke, 2014). The researcher is a Professional Master of Education final year student. They have had some training with regard to IEPs, however, they have no personal experience of using them. The training the researcher received regarding IEPs was mainly focused on the creation of the plans. During this time the researcher observed many of their peers anxious about the IEP process. This created a curiosity surrounding the IEP process and how they are implemented in the mainstream classroom. The researcher has worked as a SNA in the past for a short time. During this time, they supported the IEP under the guidance of the class teacher, however, they were never a part of drawing up the plan. These experiences generated a curiosity and prompted the researcher to focus their research question on this area.

Ethical Considerations

Creswell (2014) highlights the importance of considering and treating with caution all possible ethical issues that may arise during the research process. As the participants for this study are mainstream primary school teachers they present as non-vulnerable adults with low

risk research as they are able to provide informed consent and will have the freedom to withdraw at any stage. However, ethical approval from Marino Institute of Education was approved before any data collection began. The participants were ensured of confidentiality and data protection with the aim of minimizing risk of harm.

All participants received a letter outlining the details of the study. Consent forms were signed by the participants agreeing to participate in the interview and for the interview to be recorded. Approval was also sought from the principal to allow the interviews take part on school premises. Pseudonyms are used throughout this study and all data will be appropriately destroyed within 13 months upon submission of the research study, in compliance with the research data protection policy of Marino Institute of Education.

Limitations

Due to the short time frame of this study it was important to keep the sample size relatively small in numbers. The sample was confined to a sample of eight primary school teachers' experiences. There was a smaller chance of generalisation due to the small number of the sample. As a result of the school closures the method of data collection was also affected. The pilot interview was carried out using a face-to-face interview, however the researcher did not get a chance to pilot a telephone interview. The researcher found the lack of body language and the lack of rapport limited the data collected during the telephone interviews. There is also the fact that the participants have the right to withdraw their interview from the study, which would result in their data as invalid.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the researcher's main aim of the study. The section stated the methodology used in the study and the researchers reasoning for this choice. The research

design, research context and participants were also discussed. Finally, the chapter outlined the researcher's positionality, the ethical consideration taken and the limitations of the small-scale study.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

In this chapter the findings from the collected data are outlined. Through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts a number of themes and sub-themes emerged. This chapter will present these findings with reference to the literature reviewed in chapter two. Three main themes that emerged will be presented as follows: Challenges facing mainstream classroom teachers' when incorporating IEP targets and goals into their daily practice; The importance of communication and teamwork in every step of the IEP process; Teacher's confidence with the level of training provided in relation to IEPs.

Challenges Facing Teachers When Implementing IEP Targets

The teachers interviewed in this study all expressed positive attitudes towards the IEP. However, every teacher in the study also expressed concerns about their ability to completely implement them in a mainstream classroom because of a number of challenges. Participant G stated, *"they (the IEP) are absolutely worthwhile and in an ideal world they would work perfectly, but every classroom is different and it's not always possible"*. These views are in line with research that has found that teachers perceive IEPs to be useful tools to plan and implement educational goals (Lee-Tarver, 2006).

Time. The first challenge described by all the teachers was the issue of time. This mirrors Travers et al (2010) study addressing the challenges and barriers to inclusion in Irish schools, where they found among other challenges that two-particular time-related challenges arose in relation to inclusion of students with SEN. These were the lack of time for effective planning for individual needs and for differentiating the curriculum appropriately. The planning of the IEP was reported as taking up a lot of time and preparation. Most teachers agreed that trying to find a time that suited all people involved was a challenging matter as it often included the class teacher, the special education teacher (SET), the parents and in some instances the

student and an outside professional body. One teacher said that her school no longer brings the parent in for the meeting as it is too time consuming. Participant A noted, *"we found it hard enough to get the class teacher and the SET together without trying to get the parents as well"*. All teachers also echoed that the majority of IEP planning is done after school on the teachers own time. Participant A reported, *"myself and the SET will sit down together after school 2-3 days that suit both of us and work together, I don't mind because it has to be done and it makes my day easier once its (the IEP) all finished"*. This highlights the commitment the teachers have to their students and to the importance of the IEP as they are prepared to work together on their own time.

The time given to planning the IEP was not the only area regarding time that caused concern. All teachers interviewed highlighted time pressures throughout the day in the classroom. The main worry was that the teachers face such a packed curriculum they can struggle to fit everything into their day. Participant B reported *"you're lucky to get 4 or 5 lessons done in a day because there's so much going on, so for my differentiation strategies, maybe they're just simple things because like every day is so unpredictable"*. This highlights that although teachers may face challenges, they are still mindful of inclusion and aware of the need for differentiation. This is echoed by Travers et al (2010) study which identified difficulties teachers are experiencing with differentiation, particularly with SEN. However, this need for differentiation was highlighted by Dolan and Walsh (2009) as they advocate that teachers should take care to plan differentiated lessons, using a variety of teaching methodologies and assessments, ensuring inclusivity, recognising their achievements. It seems apparent that whilst differentiation may not always be planned, it is being incorporated into the classroom.

Class size. The issue of time led on to the next challenge with most of the teachers, the issue of class size. The average class size in Ireland is 25 students according to the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO, 2019). However, out of the eight teachers interviewed for this study only one of those teachers had fewer than 25 students in their class. The largest class size among the participants was 32 and the smallest was 16. The class with 16 pupils was however a multi-level class of 2nd, 3rd and 4th class which presents its own challenges and will be discussed further on in this chapter. These concerns are in line with research results, which outline the impact of class size on teachers' readiness and confidence in implementing inclusive approaches, making it an almost impossible task (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011).

The teacher with 32 students stated,

“this year I have 32 students in my class, only one of them has an IEP but I have a lot of other kids with different needs. There’s a couple of them waiting for assessments at the moment, so I find it really difficult and upsetting actually that I know I can’t give them all the attention they need”.

She also stressed,

“one of my students has a lot of behaviour and emotional needs and then I have another two in the middle of their parents separating so I have to deal with all those needs before I can even begin to deal with specific academic needs”.

These findings are supported by research that suggests that class size can inhibit teacher's implementation of IEPs (Schumm et al., 1994). Other research shows that teachers can spend more time with individual students and personalise instructions when class sizes are reduced (Finn & Achilles, 1999). These findings are reflected in the ongoing INTO

campaign to reduce class size. They argue, when class numbers are of a more reasonable size, modern teaching methods work, and teachers are able to spend the time needed with children (2019).

Mixed-level classes. As mentioned previously, another challenge facing some teachers is mixed-level classes. Three out of the eight teachers interviewed for this study have mixed-level classrooms. Although the researcher appreciates this is a small number in relation to the small scale of this study, they considered it worth highlighting as the participants had strong views on it. Participant C stated,

“each class level needs a certain amount of time to go through the topics and when you’re with one class, then the other two need to be working independently, so I think it would be much easier to observe and implement the IEP targets if you are just focusing on one set class, my time is constantly split up between working with all three levels”.

This finding is mirrored by Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire as they state, teachers’ felt there was a lack of time in the school day to meet the needs of all children including those with SEN (2018). Furthermore, participant H noted,

“I have two IEPs in my class in two different class levels and the needs of both children are totally different. I try to implement the targets set out in their IEPs as much as I can but I find it hard sometimes because I’m trying to meet the needs of different class levels, the different abilities of all the children and give everyone a fair amount of my time”.

The challenges of multi-grade teaching are reflected in other research, Mulryan-Kyne states, ‘it is commonly stated in the literature that multi-grade teaching is more difficult than single-

grade teaching' (2007). Although it is evident that multi-level teachers' face challenges, these findings show that the teachers' are aware of the needs of their students and they try to divide the time fairly among the students.

The Importance of Communication and Teamwork in the IEP Process

The second main theme to emerge from the data findings was the importance of communication and teamwork in the planning and implementation of the IEP. The sub-themes to emerge from this are: The role of the teacher, the SET, the parents, the SNA and the principal; The importance of collaborative teaching between the class teacher and the SET; The importance of station teaching and in-class support.

Teacher relationships. All teachers interviewed for this study agreed that teacher relationships play a big part in the IEP being a successful tool. Participant F observed *"you know it can only work if we (class teachers and SETs) are all on the same page"*. While participant E highlighted *"although I'm the one with the child for most of the day, when he goes out with the SET it's important that the SET and myself are working and communicating closely to get the best results from working on the plan"*. The findings show that teachers are working collaboratively wherever possible. Some of the teachers stated that having good staff relationships provided for better teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Most of the teachers interviewed agreed that station teaching worked best for their students, but only when there are strong relationships and good communication between the staff. This form of differentiation through in-class support and station teaching were highlighted as important for inclusion. Therefore, good teacher relationships would benefit the learning outcomes of their students. This would allow for schools and teachers to best meet the learning needs of all pupils and is in line with Irish educational policy as it advises

that supplementary teaching arrangements be organised as inclusively as possible (NCSE 2013).

Collaborative teaching. Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie have identified five co-teaching models, namely supportive teaching, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternating teaching and team-teaching (2007). When asked about collaborative teaching, most of the teachers interviewed in this study identified in-class support and station teaching as the two most effective forms of differentiation when teaching children with IEPs. In relation to supportive teaching/in-class support, the class teacher ordinarily has primary responsibility for planning and teaching and the SET commonly assumes an auxiliary role, providing support to groups and or individuals (Friend, Reising, and Cook 1993). Station teaching involves teachers at predetermined stations, with additional centres managed independently by pupils or paraprofessionals. This model provides each educator with a clear teaching role, and pupils have the benefit of working in small groups (Casserly and Padden, 2018).

Participant E reported,

“I wouldn’t always incorporate the targets into my daily plans, but they would always be in my head, like when you do have time to spend one-to-one or in small groups especially like station teaching, I find it much easier to reach these goals using station teaching”.

Participant F also agreed that he finds station teaching one of the best ways to reach specific goals of the IEP, stating, *“during stations when the SET comes in I know that I’ll get the chance to usually work with some of the kids on their goals and because myself and the SET are on the same page it works really well”*. He further states that, *“it’s just important that the teacher and SET are on the same page though, it can be tricky for the students if the two teachers are looking for different things”*. Along with these findings expressing the need

for good communication between teachers, it also highlights the fact that teachers agree the needs of their students can be better met by reduced pupil-teacher ratio which supports the earlier findings of the challenges faced by large class size. Ní Bhroin et al (2016) echo these findings as they see a need to further develop collaborative and coordination skills to support the implementation of IEP targets.

Parents. The importance of the relationship the parents have with the school and the teachers was also expressed by many of the participants. This is in line with the EPSEN Act as it states that the Act provides for the greater involvement of parents of children with special educational needs in the education of their children (2004). It was previously stated that participant A's school does not require the parents to come into the school for the meeting, they do however complete a survey of their child's strengths and needs. Participant A stated,

“we find it works out okay this way, the survey we send home to the parents gives us the information we need to progress with the plan, we then send the completed plan home and the parent can read it and contact us if they have any issues with it”

She continues to say, *“most of the time its fine but sometimes you do get some parents not bothering and it can take weeks to get the forms back”*. These views are echoed by participant D,

“you really need the support of the parents too, like it's very frustrating when I'm working on a specific goal, let's say a behavioural goal and you know when the child leaves school and goes home that the parents are not reinforcing it at home, it makes you feel like the work your doing is pointless”.

Although the findings from this study showed the majority of teachers interviewed had a positive experience with parents, there were also some frustrations expressed among teachers in relation to parents. This would raise the question of how involved all the parents were in the IEP process. Some parents may have a lack of understanding surrounding IEPs, therefore, it may be beneficial to educate the parents on the IEP process and other supports available to their children. This greater parental involvement might change their perspectives and encourage the parents to work closely with the school to help their children achieve their intended goals. This collaborative approach between the school and the parents is mirrored in the NCSEs definition of the IEP.

Special needs assistants. The role the SNA plays surrounding the IEP was also identified. Five out of the eight teachers interviewed have access to an SNA in their classroom. The three teachers who do not have SNA access in their class this year said that they feel the needs of their pupils could be better met if they had an SNA. Participant E highlighted,

“if my class had an SNA, even just for a few hours a week I think it would make a huge difference to a lot of my students not just the students that have IEPs, but I feel that the whole class would benefit”.

Participant A strongly agreed with this view saying,

“having worked with an SNA the last few years I really miss having one in my class this year, it’s so hard trying to meet the needs of all the kids and the help an SNA can give you can really change this”.

Other teachers who have SNA access in their classroom expressed a concern about the SNA policy. Participant B observed,

“sometimes the child’s needs are not just ‘care’ needs, so it’s hard to draw the line of what you can expect the SNA to do, my SNA is great but I think the whole policy of the actual role of the SNA needs to be updated”.

She goes on to say,

“there is a lot of times where I know my child with ASD will struggle with certain things and if his SNA wasn’t with him, he’d be absolutely lost because he really needs the one-to-one which I just can’t give him. So yes, sometimes it’s the SNA who works on his goals in the classroom”.

It is clear from the findings that some of the teachers feel the role of the SNA does not allow for them to help with certain IEP targets. Although, it seems apparent that the SNA is in some instances implementing these targets. This finding is supported by Keating and O’Connor (2012) as they found in their study that SNAs are becoming increasingly involved in duties outside their official remit. The commitment of the SNAs has been highlighted in the Project IRIS report, where it also made clear that SNAs were undertaking a pedagogical role not envisaged in DES circulars. Therefore, a review of the SNA policy could help with implementation of IEP goals within the classroom in the future.

Training and Experience

When asked about their training regarding IEPs most teachers agreed that no amount of training can prepare you when working with IEPs. Three of the teachers from this study have been teaching for over ten years and they felt they had very little initial teacher training in regard to IEPs. The other five teachers agreed that they did not feel they got sufficient training in regard to IEPs. Most agreed that what they know has been learned on the job by actually doing the plans and working with the children. Two of the teachers stated they had

training in their school from an outside source and spoke positively of this training. A number of the teachers also stated that they received a lot of support from their principals during the IEP process. When asked did they feel the need for extra training on IEPs most of the teachers interviewed said they felt they did not need further training as they were learning through experience. This contradicts other research in which teachers' were asked about further training, IEP related in-service training was identified as the most urgent (O' Gorman and Drudy, 2011). When asked about initial teacher training participant B reported,

"I don't remember ever getting proper training on IEPs when I was in college, there wasn't a lot of training around SEN back then, well not that I remember anyway. I have done different courses over the years, but I think how I do IEPs now is just from experience".

She further states, *"Writing up the plan is usually always nearly the same but trying to meet the goals is always different. Every student is different and every year every class is different, so you can't really know what to do every time"*. Another teachers statement concurs with this view, participant H noted, *"in college we did a good bit about SEN and understanding and writing IEPs, but I don't think any of that training helped with how you can implement the targets on a daily basis"*.

It was surprising to find that the teacher who is most recently out of teacher training felt that their training around IEPs was very poor. When asked about his experience on initial teacher training he said, *"no I don't think my training was sufficient, I suppose with my college you weren't hands on all the time whereas another college would be more hands on with more class time focused on the (IEPs)"*. He also said, *"I was lucky with the principal, she walked us through the first one and I took it from there, I suppose the more I do them the easier it will be"*. The overall findings from this study relating to IEP training suggest that

teachers' feel they can build their knowledge and understanding surrounding IEPs best from on the job experience, which shows the importance and value of learning from each other. Most felt that their initial training did not adequately prepare them for the reality of the classroom, and they did not express the need for further training at this point. However, they did acknowledge the value of training. This area may warrant further research around the training provided to teachers relating to IEPs.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the findings collected from the semi-structured interviews with eight mainstream primary school teachers. The findings from the interviews were analysed through thematic analysis. The themes and sub-themes which emerged from the interview transcripts were presented as follows: The challenges facing mainstream classroom teachers' when implementing IEP targets into their daily practice, the sub-themes presented were time, class size and mixed-level classes; The importance of communication and teamwork in every stage of the IEP process, the sub-themes presented were, teacher relationships, collaborative teaching, parents and SNAs; Teachers' experiences of training in relation to IEPs were also presented.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sought to investigate mainstream primary school teachers' experiences of implementing targets and goals outlined in an IEP into their daily practice. The study used a qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured interviews to answer the research question. Eight mainstream primary school teachers from a variety of backgrounds took part in the interviews. The data was collected and analysed on a thematic basis. As a result of this thematic analysis, three main themes emerged as were discussed in the previous chapter.

Summary of findings

The primary aim of this study was to investigate mainstream primary school teachers' experiences of implementing targets and goals set out in an IEP into their daily practice. It was clear from the data collected that the participants viewed IEPs as worthwhile and valuable in supporting students learning. It was however evident that the participants had concerns about their ability to implement these targets into their daily teaching. This resulted in the emergence of the first finding in this study which highlights the challenges faced by teachers when working with IEPs. The results found that not having enough time in the day was one of the most challenging issues for teachers when trying to implement targets into their teaching. A full curriculum was noted as being one of the reasons behind this. However, within this study the main reason teachers felt they did not have enough time to meet the needs of all their students was due to large class size. Many of the participants felt that all children would benefit greatly from reduced class size.

The second finding to emerge was the importance of communication and teamwork. The findings show that the participants viewed good communication between all involved in the IEP process as key to their success. The role of the teacher, SET, SNA, parent and principal were all highlighted within the findings. Communication between the class teacher

and the SET was discussed with a particular focus on how they can work together to meet the needs of their students. The importance of collaborative teaching was identified with a particular focus on station teaching and in-class support. It was interesting to note that the findings surrounding collaborative teaching were linked with pupil-teacher ratio, linking further to the issue of class size. The findings also presented the participants views on the SNA policy. The role of the SNA was identified as an area which teachers feel strongly about.

The third finding to emerge was the participants confidence with IEPs and their experience of training surrounding IEPs. The findings show that whilst almost all of the participants were confident with IEPs, they did not feel that this confidence came from previous training. The findings suggest that training surrounding IEPs can prepare you for the process of drawing them up. However, the findings would also suggest that no amount of training can prepare teachers on how to implement them into their teaching. There was strong agreement among the participants that this can only be achieved from experience and even at that it may still remain challenging due to the diverse classrooms within schools nowadays.

Recommendations

Considering the mainstream Irish classroom is constantly evolving, this chapter concludes with recommendations for further research. The findings imply that teachers are finding large class size as a major challenge when implementing IEP targets. Therefore, it would be recommended that class size be reviewed and seen as a priority to allow teachers meet the needs of all their students. A second recommendation suggested in relation to pupil-teacher ratio is the promotion of collaborative teaching. The findings suggest that in-class support and station teaching provide the teacher with a better opportunity to implement the IEP targets, while also allowing for greater one-to-one teaching or small group teaching

which would be of benefit to all students. Therefore, the promotion of collaborative teaching should be promoted, and further research undertaken in relation to the effects it can have on the school community.

It is also recommended that further research is needed to assess the role of the SNA. The findings highlighted that although the role of the SNA is on the basis of care, teachers' feel that if the SNA policy was to be reviewed the needs of students and IEP targets could be better met. Although a new SNA allocation model was announced by government as part of the phased roll-out of the School Inclusion Model, its full implementation has been deferred to 2021/22 in light of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. It is hoped that when this new model is implemented fully it will be of benefit to teachers, pupils and SNAs.

The final recommendation to be made is in relation to teacher training regarding the IEP process. The findings suggest that the training the participants have received regarding IEPs was more related to the drawing up of the plan rather than the implementation of the targets and goals. Therefore, it is recommended that IEP training in initial teacher training and within in-service training focus more on making the IEP a useful inclusive tool within the mainstream classroom. This may be further accomplished with professional development focussing on providing opportunities for teachers to share their experiences, as the value of learning from each other was already highlighted.

Conclusion

While the researcher acknowledges the small scale of this study which limited the research, the results revealed some valuable insights into teachers views on the IEP as a useful tool in everyday teaching. It is evident that today's diverse mainstream classrooms have students with a broad spectrum of needs. Research shows that teachers face a number of challenges in meeting the needs of these students on a daily basis. Through ongoing research,

changes to policy and legislation can help to eliminate some of these challenges, allowing teachers fulfil the needs of all their students. It was evident from this study that the teachers interviewed prioritised the needs of all their students. Although challenges were identified with the implementation of IEP targets into their daily practice, the teachers were always working towards meeting the needs of their students.

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Appendix I

Dear Principal,

I am in my final year of the Professional Masters in Primary Education in Marino Institute of Education. I am privileged to be completing my ten-week advanced placement in your school at this time. I am writing to request permission to conduct interviews with members of your staff for the purpose of my college dissertation. These interviews will take place during the two-week school-based activity block within my ten-week placement in your school. The purpose of the research is to explore primary school mainstream teachers experiences of incorporating specific Individual Education Plan targets into their daily practice. My research has received ethical approval from the Marino Ethics in Research Committee.

I would be very grateful if you would allow me to recruit approximately eight teachers from your staff. Interested staff, who volunteer to participate will be required to give written consent prior to the interview and will have the option to opt out at any stage. Confidentiality will be of utmost importance within my data collection. Interviews will be conducted outside of teaching hours at a time suitable to the participant within the school building and last approximately twenty minutes.

Your approval to conduct this research will be greatly appreciated. Please do not hesitate to contact me for any further information at xxxxxxxpme18@momail.mie.ie

Kind regards,

xxxxxx

I give xxxxxx approval to conduct this research with staff from xxxx SNS.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix II

Dear Teacher,

I am in my final year of the Professional Masters in Primary Education in Marino Institute of Education. I am in the process of my dissertation which is focusing on mainstream primary school teachers' experiences of implementing the targets and goals outlined in an IEP into their daily practice. For the purpose of the research study I will be using semi-structured interviews. It is my aim to recruit approximately eight mainstream primary teachers with experience of working with IEPs. Each interview will take approximately 15-20 minutes and will be recorded. Interviews will be conducted outside of teaching hours at a time suitable to the participant. My research has received ethical approval from the Marino Ethics in Research Committee. Confidentiality will be of utmost importance within my data collection.

I would be grateful for your participation in my research study. Please feel free to contact me at xxxxxxxxxxxx if you have would like any further information.

Kind regards,

xxxxxx

Appendix III**Consent to take part in research**

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves taking part in a face to face interview in relation to my experiences of Individual Education Plans.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in a dissertation.

- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in the possession of the researcher until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix IV

1. How long have you been teaching in a mainstream primary class?
2. In your experience, who would usually be involved in the development stage of the IEP?
3. How confident are you in the development of an IEP?
4. Do you feel you have much input into setting the targets and goals of the students in your class during the development of the IEP?

Probe questions.....e.g. how is this helpful.....

5. Do you find the IEP a useful tool when planning and implementing the curriculum in your teaching?
6. How confident do you feel in incorporating IEP targets into your daily teaching?
7. Do you face any challenges when incorporating targets from an IEP into your daily teaching?

Probe questions.....e.g. tell me about these.....how might these challenges be reduced etc;....

8. Do you feel that you have sufficient time for planning and differentiation of the curriculum?
9. What teaching methods and strategies do you use the most in relation to differentiation?
10. In your experience, when working with an SNA, do they support the implementation of the targets set out in the IEP?
11. What are your views on collaborative teaching in your class?
12. How confident are you with the level of training you have received regarding IEPs?
13. Is there anything you would like to add about the development or implementation of IEPs?