



*Supporting children through school-based occupational therapy: A primary
school teacher's perspective*

Marino Institute of Education

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Abstract

Collaboration between education and health professionals is considered key to best practice and the application of inclusion policies. An increase in occupational therapy services within mainstream schools in recent years has led to occupational therapists working closely with teachers to integrate a shared goal of supporting the educational outcomes of children with additional needs. However, an increase in occupational therapy-teacher collaboration has also begun to highlight the complexity of a collaboration process formed by professionals with conflicting philosophies of service provision and for whom services are constructed differently. With that, it is imperative that primary teachers are professionally supported and prepared to promote inclusive educational experiences for children with additional needs through occupational therapy-teacher collaboration. Despite this, literature reveals a wide gap between current professional training and the essential knowledge that both the teacher and occupational therapist need to support inclusive education through collaborative practice. Thus, the research question that drove this study was: ‘What are primary school teachers’ perceptions of occupational therapy-teacher collaboration in facilitating inclusive education?’. Understanding primary school teachers’ views on the supports required to facilitate inclusive education through occupational therapy-teacher collaboration is crucial in improving the educational experiences and outcomes for children with additional needs.

For this research project, a qualitative method was used, and data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. A total of eight primary school teachers with experience in working collaboratively with an occupational therapist were interviewed. This research identified poor access to occupational therapy services for children, a deficit of teacher training surrounding collaboration with occupational therapists and, inadequate face-to-face contact with occupational therapists, all of which impact the educational outcomes and experiences of children with additional needs. Recommendations from the study include the provision of

teacher education surrounding collaborative practice with occupational therapists, better access to occupational therapy services for children and enhanced communication between teachers and occupational therapists.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Exploring collaboration with paraprofessionals to enhance the inclusive daily functioning of the classroom for students presenting with additional needs (AN) is a focus of inquiry in literature (Barnes, Cipriano and Xia, 2021). The current research trajectory provides an additional and focused insight into working with occupational therapists (OTs) in primary schools in Ireland in order to achieve more effective inclusive practice. The research question underpinning this study is: What are primary school teachers' perceptions of school-based occupational therapy (OT) in facilitating the inclusion of children with additional needs in primary schools?' This chapter will highlight the background and context for the study, the rationale for the research and outline the organisation of the study.

Background and Context for the Study

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) asserts that every child has the right to a full education regardless of disability and without discrimination of any kind. Inclusive education legislation and policy (for example, The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN), 2004; Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools, 2017) advocates an inclusive model of educational provision. Moreover, the premise by Rose and Shevlin (2021) that inclusive practices are embedded by teachers in all settings, so all learners maximise their ability regardless of needs is common across scholarly work (Colum, 2020; Colum & Mc Intyre, 2019). This is reflected in practice with "fewer than 1% of students in Ireland now attending a special school" (NCSE, 2014, p.9) and approximately 8,000 pupils with "specific disabilities" in mainstream schools (National Disability Authority, 2022). However, despite improved educational provision for children with AN and advances in policy, challenges still exist and looking towards a collaborative approach with paraprofessionals may

ease barriers (Boshoff & Stewart, 2013; NDA, 2022b; Kennedy & Stewart, 2011; Patton et al., 2015; Villeneuve, 2009). The collaboration of the OT and teacher is a health-education partnership of great importance when considering how difficulties with occupations relating to education are the most common referral to paediatric OT services; and a 2021 Health Service Executive (HSE) report revealing a worrying 18,838 children awaiting access to OT services in Ireland (AOTI, 2021; Case-Smith & Miller-Kuhaneck, 2020; Chung et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential that teachers are professionally supported and prepared when collaborating with OTs to promote positive, inclusive educational environments and experiences for pupils with AN (NDA, 2022b; O'Donoghue et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2015).

Rationale for the Study

The rationale for this study is based on the preparedness of teachers to support inclusion through collaborative practice with OTs. Notwithstanding the importance of OT-teacher collaborative practice in supporting inclusion, very little national and international research exists on this collaborative relationship from the perspective of the teacher (Benson, 2013; Bolton & Plattner, 2019; Hutton, 2009; O'Donoghue et al., 2021). Thus, the researcher was inspired to explore and analyse primary school teachers' perspectives on OT-teacher collaborative practice in facilitating the inclusion of children with AN. Furthermore, the researcher sought to determine if there was a demand for teacher's professional training surrounding OT-teacher collaborative practice or if current training is sufficient. Lastly, the rationale for this research project comes from the researchers own background and training as an OT and experience as a primary school student teacher.

Organisation of the Study

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The current chapter provides a background to this study and rationale followed by chapter 2 which provides a critical review of relevant literature

surrounding this topic. Chapter 3 will then outline the methodological approach of this study and detail the use of a qualitative research design and semi-structured interviews used to collect data. Moreover, the measures taken to ensure the validity and reliability of this research project will be explored as well as the ethical considerations of the study. Chapter 4 will present the findings of this study using key themes which are discussed and analysed with reference to relevant literature. Lastly, chapter 5 will present a summary of these results as well as recommendations based on the data gathered.

Terminology

In literature and in practice pupils with additional needs are often referred to as pupils with special educational needs (SEN). Throughout this dissertation I will use the term additional needs where possible.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will review literature pertinent to the research question. In order to set the scene, definitions of inclusion are presented; this is followed by international and national legislation concerning inclusion. Subsequently, school-based occupational therapy (OT) provision and practices in Ireland are outlined. This is followed by the examination of both teachers' and occupational therapists' perceptions of school-based OT. Finally, this chapter concludes by drawing the main arguments together.

Inclusive Education

As a term, inclusion articulates a dedication to educate every child, to their maximum ability regardless of their additional needs (Meegan & MacPhail, 2006) and while this assumption is from nearly two decades ago, it still holds strong in literature for all learners across the education continuum (Gilson, Gushanas, Li, and Foster, 2020). Irwin and Elam (2011) state that, through removing the barriers from and within education, diverse needs of all learners are responded to. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2011) characterises educational settings with strong inclusive cultures as those with a positive ethos and learning environment whereby all learners feel welcome and experience a sense of community and belonging. However, the NCSE (2011) states that the onus of inclusion should not only be on the educational setting rather responsibilities should be expanded to the government and the wider community including healthcare professionals. This is echoed by NDA (2022) who state that, like educational professionals, health professionals play a significant role in supporting children with AN to achieve their personal and educational potential; and an argument that this study will explore through its research question (Lynch et al., 2021; Shevlin et al., 2009).

International Legislation

The advancements surrounding inclusion in Ireland has been a slow process with international trends being a catalyst for the development of inclusive education policy over the past thirty years (Howe & Griffin, 2021). In 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) released *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), producing a guidance framework for educational inclusion policies (UNESCO, 1994). Article 24 of the CRPD was adopted on the 13th of December 2006 to reaffirm and protect the human rights of those with additional needs, stating that children with disabilities should not be discriminated against and have the right to participate in mainstream schools (De Beco, 2014). Nationally, Ireland has followed much of these international trends with the development of inclusive school environments for pupils with AN being an important aspect of Department of Education policy (Howe & Griffin, 2021; DES, 2007). The most current debate around inclusive policy examines the tensions around a movement to an all-inclusive school as advocated by the NCSE with an emphasis on moving away from special settings (Day & Prunty, 2021) which is in line with international trends. Though yet not implemented, Day and Prunty (2021) examine this shift and ruminate on the best approach for inclusive schools but find a place for all settings as per needs of the learners (Colum & McIntyre, 2019). Moreover, in order to move away from special education settings, schools must be equipped with adequate resources and support staff with different areas of expertise such as OTs (Lynch et al., 2021; NDA, 2022b).

Irish Legislation

Influenced by international trends, Ireland has saw many changes and policy developments surrounding inclusive education. The Education Act, 1998 sets out the right to education for every person in the state and placed responsibility on the Minister for Education and Skills to

ensure that those with AN receive a level and quality of education appropriate to their needs and abilities. It also gave statutory rights to parents in relation to their children's education and placed responsibility on social, health and education services to ensure that no child is excluded from schooling. Just six years later, the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004* was introduced which supports the educational rights of those under 18 years with additional needs and sets out a range of services to be provided to those with additional educational needs (DES, 2004). Under the EPSEN Act, parents can seek assessments of their child's educational needs, emphasis was placed on curriculum differentiation, the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) was formalised, and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was established. The EPSEN Act 2004 also recognised collaborative practice between education and health professionals as key to best practice and the application of inclusion policies in supporting children with AN (Howe & Griffin, 2021). Despite this being seen as a new beginning at the time, the deterioration of the economic situation in Ireland from 2005 onwards stalled much of EPSEN with only some parts being implemented (O'Mahony, 2004). While the Minister called for its review in the current times (DES, 2022), the main facets of the Act are seen as best practice approaches opposed to statutory declarations (Inclusion Ireland, 2022). In terms of best practice approaches, collaborative practice between health and education professionals has been one of the many important developments; and one examined through the research question of this study (NDA, 2022b).

National Educational Psychological Service

In 1999, a collaborative approach between the health and education sector was created through the establishment of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). A team of psychologists, NEPS work in partnership with teachers, parents, and children in identifying educational needs and provide a range of services aimed at meeting these needs (Lynch et al., 2021). NEPS consultative model of service delivery based on a tiered model led to the

introduction of the Continuum of Support framework (DES, 2017). The Continuum of Support framework recognises a child's needs occur along a continuum, ranging from mild to severe and from transient to long term. It also recognises that a child requires different levels of support depending on their identified educational needs. The model is a problem-solving model of assessment and intervention that allows the school and class teacher collect and analyse data as well as to plan and review the progress of individual pupils. However, the school and teacher also have the support of NEPS in developing whole school approaches as well as strategies suited to individual classes/groups of pupils (DES, 2007; Lynch et al., 2021).

The Continuum of Support Framework

The Continuum of Support framework moves from simple interventions that are classroom-based to more individualised and specialised interventions. The first tier of the framework focuses on *Classroom Support*, an intervention process co-ordinated and carried out by class teacher within the regular classroom. Tier two of the framework focuses on *School Support* which is an assessment and intervention process usually co-ordinated by the learning support teacher that may be working alongside the class teacher. Interventions at the *School Support* stage are additional to those provided through classroom support provided at tier one. NEPS are typically involved in a consultative and advisory capacity with pupils receiving *Classroom Support* and *School Support*. Lastly, the third tier is *School Support Plus* which is generally characterised by the school requesting the involvement of relevant external services that can undertake more detailed assessments and development of intervention programmes. *School Support Plus* is typically for children with enduring and/or complex AN and whose progress is considered poor despite carefully planned interventions at the previous two levels (DES, 2017; Lynch et al., 2021). Throughout the model, the child may also be referred to access other multidisciplinary support such as OT.

The Philosophy and Role of Occupational Therapy in Mainstream Schools

According to the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA, 2011), occupations are defined as meaningful, purposeful activities that make up everyday life. Occupations bring meaning to one's life and has the power to influence the health of a human being (Case-Smith & Miller-Kuhaneck, 2020; The American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 2011). For school-based OTs, the primary outcome or goal is to assist the child in achieving health, wellbeing, and participation in their life through the engagement of occupation. For children, the occupation of education includes academic as well as non-academic occupational performance. Play, leisure, social participation, and activities of daily living (ADL), are all necessary in helping children succeed in their role as a pupil and their occupation of education (O'Brien and Miller-Kuhaneck, 2020). Difficulties with occupations relating to education are the most common referral to OT services for school-aged children however, despite this, OT provision in Ireland is not always school-based (Case-Smith & Miller-Kuhaneck, 2020; Chung et al., 2020).

Current Paediatric OT Provision in Ireland

Currently in Ireland, paediatric OT provision is generally delivered through a nationwide network of primary and community care services that are based in clinics. When working with children in clinic-based delivery services, a traditional medical-model approach is used which places an emphasis on a child's deficits. Moreover, a medical model approach of identifying diagnoses or specific deficits typically centre on a need for diagnostic assessment being a key driver for the child accessing further supports for example, assistive technology for use in school or educational accommodations (Lynch et al., 2021). In Ireland, families and children experience long waiting lists once referred to primary and community care OT services. 2019 statistics from the National Disability Authority (NDA) indicate that a total of 18,838 children were on a waiting list for OT assessment within the primary care services with 8,109 waiting

over a year (Association of Occupational Therapists Ireland, 2020). Once a child is assessed by an OT in the primary care setting, intervention takes the form of what is known as a remedial approach whereby the OT works to remediate the child's presenting difficulties. Unfortunately, as McCartney (1999) outlines, there are many challenges to the remedial approach. Primarily, the OT interventions occur within a clinic rather than the child's own learning environment which in turn does not necessarily support the generalisation of skills to the classroom. This is echoed by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT, 2016) which state that educational needs should be addressed in the school setting as interventions are most successful when implemented in the child's natural environment versus clinic environment (Benson, 2013; Case-Smith & Miller-Kuhaneck, 2020; Kaelin et al., 2019; Bucey & Provident, 2018). Furthermore, a clinic-based approach does not commonly include educators or classroom staff as part of the team such as the primary school teacher.

The Primary School Teacher

Irish primary school teachers, also known as national schoolteachers, teach a range of primary school subjects to children aged 4 to 12 years (DES, 2022). Primary school teachers are involved in the intellectual, moral, social, and physical development of pupils in their class. Depending on the needs and size of a school, the primary teacher may be responsible for more than one curriculum class for the entire academic year (Citizens Information, 2022). According to Grad Ireland (2021) the role of the primary school teacher is extremely rewarding however it is also intensive and requires constant concentration as well as immense creativity and energy. In addition to classroom time, the primary teacher's role involves the preparation of teaching and assessment materials, grading, reporting to other staff members and providing feedback to parents/guardians. The primary school teacher also plays a crucial role in the implementation of inclusive education practices under the guidance of the 2019 Primary Language Curriculum and *Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Pupils with Special*

Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools (DES, 2017). Such inclusive practices include adjusting classroom management, lesson content, pedagogy, and assessment methods so to enhance teaching and learning for pupils with AN (de Boer et al., 2011; DES, 2019; DES, 2017; NCSE, 2011). Furthermore, the primary school teacher is responsible for communicating and working alongside relevant professionals that work with a child in their class such as OTs.

A Push for a Health- Education Collaborative Practice

The important collaboration between the OT and teacher is very much captured in a 2009 HSE *Report of the National Reference Group on Multi-disciplinary Disability Services for Children aged 5-18* which stressed the need for moving from a clinic-based model of therapy service delivery towards school-based intervention for children. Moreover, it emphasised the achievement of this through a working partnership between the education and health sector stating that a major role is played by school staff, who may spend up to six hours per school day with a child and can greatly impact the child's independence, achievements, and self-confidence (p.49). Subsequently, the HSE *Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People* (2016) programme emphasised the need for the development of a national, unified approach to delivering of disability health services so to ensure that education and health sectors would work together to achieve accessible, equitable services for all children and their families. Such findings and recommendations saw some progress towards school-based health services with Government funding being made available by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to establish the *In-School and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project*.

In-School and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project.

Building on models already established such as NEPS, the Demonstration Project emerged as an innovative plan to develop a programme of therapy service delivery, which integrated therapy and education school-based provision to provide the right support at the right time in

context (Lynch et al., 2021). Unlike a remedial approach that comes with clinic-based therapy, the Demonstration Project built upon experiences and expertise in delivering tiered model services to schools through the Continuum of Support framework. The *In-School and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project* was implemented in the school year of 2018 to 2019 in 75 schools and 75 early years' settings. The project set out to build capacity and inclusion through a collaborative approach between school and therapy staff. Since its launch, the provision of these school-based therapy services has since continued as part of a wider pilot of a *School Inclusion Model* and continued into the 2021 school year (Lynch et al., 2021).

Benefits of Collaborative Practice through School-Based OT

The demonstration project found several positive impacts of school-based therapy on supporting inclusive education. The 2021 Evaluation of In-School and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project revealed positive experiences from participating pupils of the project. Parents of participants were found to value the potential of the project to overcome community waiting lists for therapy as well as appreciating the in-school nature of therapy provision removing the need for their children being taken out of school to a clinic-based setting. The report also revealed the benefits of the demonstration project for teacher participants. Teachers reported an increased ability to differentiate because of therapists working in the school setting. Moreover, teacher participants revealed the information and strategies they acquired during their work with therapists enabled them to better identify a child's needs and resulted in more positive academic engagement by pupils. Looking through the lens of the therapist, the report found that therapists viewed collaborative practice as a strength of school-based practice. This supports similar findings from an international study by Bayona et al., (2006) which specifically explored collaborative OT-Teacher practice as well as findings from an Irish context by Patton et al. (2016). In a study from Switzerland, OTs revealed that working alongside the child in the school environment helped them bring an OT

perspective that complemented the education system to accommodate the needs of the child (Echsell et al., 2019). However, despite the benefits of school-based OT services in supporting inclusive education, there are also many challenges.

School-based Occupational Therapy Challenges for OTs

From an Irish context, a lack of government funding and difficulty in recruiting therapists impact access to OT services (AOTI; 2021; Lynch et al., 2021). Other barriers include teachers having a poor understanding of OT interventions, OT staff having limited time on the school site and school staff being unable to fulfil recommended OT strategies (Patton et al., 2016; Mills & Chapparo, 2018; Rens & Joosten, 2014). In a study by Cahill and Reyna (2013), therapists articulated concerns of educators perceiving the role of the OT as one that offers solutions to “fix” a child’s difficulties. O’Donoghue et al. (2021) suggest that much of these challenges are influenced by the need for OTs to spend more time in schools to develop relationships and an authentic collaborative practice. A quantitative study, O’Donoghue et al. (2021) investigated the perspectives of thirty-five paediatric OTs working regularly in schools across Ireland through the utilization of a cross-sectional online survey. Participants of the study revealed receiving no training specific to school-based practice thus impacting their knowledge on how services are constructed across the education system. Moreover, the study indicated that OTs require continual education on evidence-based school practice from an Irish context and clarification of their role. (Lynch et al., 2021; O’Donoghue et al. 2021; Patton et al., 2016; Mills & Chapparo, 2018; Rens & Joosten, 2014).

School-based Occupational Therapy Challenges for Teachers

In supporting inclusive education, teachers also face challenges such as poor resources, inadequate training, and large class sizes (INTO, 2019). Literature suggests that when it comes to supporting children with additional needs, many teachers feel unprepared. This is evident in a study by Patton et al. (2015), teacher participants articulated a lack of training in relation

to supporting children with AN. A qualitative study using focus groups as the data collection method, a total of forty-four primary school teachers participated. Participating teachers identified a need for OT involvement in initial teacher training (ITT) and continuous professional development (CPD). Furthermore, research suggests that school-based OT interventions can prove difficult for teachers to implement due to some interventions requiring one-to-one time with the child which can prove difficult for teachers with large classrooms. Large volumes of materials and time required for OT interventions also prove challenging for teachers to implement. Other challenges include curriculum differentiation with Patton et al., (2015) revealing how some teachers found it a disadvantage for children with AN learning and doing different things to the rest of the class.

Conclusion

In Ireland, collaborative practice between education and health professionals is considered key to best practice and the application of inclusion policies yet little is known about school-based OT-teacher partnership both nationally and internationally (Boshoff & Stewart, 2013; Kennedy & Stewart, 2011; O'Donoghue et al. 2021 Patton et al., 2015; Villeneuve, 2009). Previous literature has explored school-based OT through the lens of the therapist however, there is a need to explore the views and opinions of primary school teachers. Understanding teachers' views on facilitating inclusive education through school-based OT-teacher collaboration is crucial to improving the educational outcomes for pupils with AN. Doing so will aid and direct us in developing policies and training programs that will directly benefit pupils, teachers, and therapists in delivering inclusive education through collaborative practice.

Chapter 3- Methodology

Introduction

An exploration of the methods employed to collect and present the data for this dissertation is presented in this chapter. To begin with, the guiding aim of this research project is considered as well as the research approach and methods undertaken to collect data. Subsequently, the rationale behind the research design of this project is explored as well as methods of data analysis. Lastly, the ethical procedures adhered to throughout this project and positionality of the researcher will be discussed.

The research question underpinning this study is: What are primary school teachers' perceptions of school-based occupational therapy in facilitating the inclusion of children with additional needs in primary schools?.

Aim of research

The overarching aim of this research project is to explore primary school teachers' perspectives of school-based OT in facilitating the inclusion of children with AN. Having completed a comprehensive literature review and identifying the gaps within the research, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do teachers define their role in supporting pupils through OT-teacher collaboration?
2. How is support of pupils through the provision of school-based OT currently demonstrated by teachers?
3. What are the contextual factors affecting teachers in supporting pupils through OT-teacher collaboration?

Research Methods

Documentary analysis

An analysis of documents which formed the basis of the literature review (chapter two) was the method employed in the first phase of this project. Through this method of documentary analysis, an understanding of the national and international research surrounding this topic was presented. The second phase of this project consisted of semi-structured interviews with eight participants and sought to explore primary school teachers' perspectives on OT-teacher collaborative practice specifically within an Irish context. The research gaps identified in the literature review led to the development of the research questions driving this research project.

The Semi-structured Interview Method

In order to gain quality information about participants' experiences in a qualitative study, the most used method are interviews. Through interviews, the researcher can acquire the knowledge and opinions of the participants as well as their beliefs and feelings on a particular topic (Bryman, 2008). Moreover, a less structured approach to interviews allows for more flexibility and provide participants with an opportunity to convey their point of view more freely. A less structured approach involves all the participants being asked the same initial set of questions while allowing the researcher to compare responses without difficulty. For this research study, data was collected using semi-structured interviews carried out by the researcher. The data gathered allowed for the organisation and analysis of data around emerging themes.

Semi-structured interviews are an effective way to obtain data essential to addressing a research question and in generating qualitative data. Cohen et al. (2018) recommend the use of semi-structured interviews for the gathering of data on the more unquantifiable aspects of question responses such as assumptions, values, and beliefs. Furthermore, the use of semi-

structured interviews allows participants to raise concerns and matters they deem important. Rubin and Rubin (2012) stress the importance of using open-ended questions throughout the interview process to avoid restricting the responses of the participants. Throughout the interviews it is crucial that the researcher remains unbiased and careful not to express an opinion; rather, the researcher should remain open minded, listen, and observe interactions with the research participants (Braun and Clark, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015).

Each semi-structured interview completed in this study used open-ended questions, the first question was tailored to gain an insight to the teachers' general teaching experience. Following this, questions asked sought to progress the conversation to the teachers' understanding of school-based occupational therapy, their experience of working with school-based occupational therapists and their recommendations going forward. The interview questions of this research study were informed and guided by the literature review and to gain in depth information, follow-up questions and prompts were prepared for each question asked (see appendix 3). During the interview process, the researcher summarised the collected data and confirmed the accuracy of the information with the participants to prevent misunderstandings and ensure the validity of the information collected.

Pilot Interview

Due to the nature of qualitative interviews being rich in information and understanding of a person's experiences, it is important that the interviewer had skills in facilitating such interviews (Majid et al., 2017). Cohen et al. (2007) state that conducting pilot interviews increases the validity, reliability, and practicability of the interview procedure. Therefore, the researcher conducted pilot interviews with two participants. Through the completion of these pilot interviews, the researcher had the opportunity to adjust the interview questions to attain more depth and scope of information prior to the commencement of data collection for the

study. This was achieved by adding further prompts for question 6 (see appendix 3) which aimed to explore any concerns teachers may have surrounding OT-teacher collaboration as the previous prompts did not elicit whether the teacher had adequate resources to carry out OT recommendations.

Methodology: Choice and Justification

When deciding on the research design of this study, a qualitative design was considered the most beneficial as qualitative research allows for the exploration of perspectives, experiences, and behaviour (Denscombe, 2011; Page et al., 2012). Furthermore, qualitative studies provide a deeper understanding of a participant's experience while providing the researcher with a detailed understanding of the issue at hand and an opportunity to translate findings into recommendations (Creswell, 2013). Unlike quantitative studies, a qualitative design recognises participants' experiences and can capture an alternate and more detailed viewpoint (Dawson, 2019; Richie & Lewis, 2003). For this dissertation, a qualitative design was adopted to acknowledge the perspectives and experiences of primary school teachers who work collaboratively with occupational therapists in supporting inclusive education for children with additional needs. Moreover, as this research project concentrated on the perspectives of the primary teacher, a phenomenological approach was employed as it allows for a human-centred style of research and the gathering of unique and genuine accounts (Creswell 2013; Denscombe, 2011).

Data Collection Methods – Sampling Techniques

Between December 2021 and March 2022, eight primary school teachers were recruited from schools in Ireland using a purposive sampling approach. Purposive sampling technique was utilised as it allowed for the selection of a sample based on their relationship, knowledge, and expertise on a research subject (Freedman et al., 2007). Through purposive sampling

researchers intentionally select participants who can best advise the researcher about the topic being explored (Creswell, 2013). As a result, the data gathered from purposive sampling does not reflect the wider population. However, there is little value in taking a random sample approach as much of the random sample may lack experience with the topic being investigated and would therefore be unable to provide detailed insights or perspectives (Cohen et al., 2007)

To gather suitable research participants for this study, the researcher contacted principals and teachers that the researcher had the opportunity to network with during previous school placements and substitute work. Contact was made via phone and by email and a consent form was emailed to participants who agreed to partake for them to complete. Interviews for the study were all held at a scheduled time that suited each participant.

The Data Collection Process

For this research project, the teachers/participants all received an information letter outlining the details of the research project and an invitation to participate in the interview. Due to national COVID-19 restrictions that were in place during the initial stages of this study's data collection, participants were offered the opportunity to participate through Zoom, an online video conferencing platform. Six interviews took place on Zoom and were organised by the researcher. A link to the Zoom interview was sent via email to the participant 24 hours prior to the commencement of the interview. Two interviews were held face-to face in the latter stage of the data collection as the COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted. All eight interviews were recorded digitally using the researcher's personal laptop which the research participants were made aware of this prior to the commencement of the interview. The interviews took approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete. Research participants were given the option to create a pseudonym themselves or to request the researcher to create a pseudonym for them. Once each interview was complete, the interviews were immediately transcribed verbatim by

the researcher. To ensure confidentiality, the information collected was stored on a password protected personal laptop which was only accessible to the researcher.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was utilized to analyse the data gathered for this research study. The application of such analysis involved a comprehensive review of each interview transcript, data categorisation by way of coding and subsequent development of emerging themes (Clarke et al., 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, thematic analysis recognises recurring ideas within a data set by focusing on what the participants of the research study say (Hansen, 2006). In carrying out a thematic analysis of the collected data, the researcher was guided by Braun & Clarke (2021) six phased framework to thematic analysis, as documented in table 1.

Table 1

Braun and Clarke (2021) six phased framework to thematic analysis.

Phase		Description of the Process
1	Data familiarisation	This phase involved the researcher transcribing the data, reading through the data, and noting initial ideas.
2	Generating initial codes	The researcher began to code the entire data set in a systematic way and subsequently related the data to each new code.

3	Searching for themes	The researcher combined and compiled codes into potential themes. Data relevant to each emerging theme was gathered.
4	Reviewing themes	Themes were reviewed and refined. A thematic map for analysis was generated
5	Defining and naming themes	The data specific to each theme was analysed to produce the overall narrative while generating definite terms for each theme.
6	Producing the report	A final analysis was produced so to argue the choice of data extracts and how they relate to the research question.

(Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Beginning the data analysis process, the researcher initially became familiar with the data collected by reading and re-reading data transcripts and highlighting concepts and points of interest. Subsequently, initial codes were then generated prior to being analysed and arranged to produce overarching themes. In the next stage, codes were merged to generate potential themes which were then reviewed and refined to distinguish clear core concepts. The final stage allowed for discussion of the identified themes and their relevance to the research study question (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Reliability and Validity

Cohen et al., 2007 describes validity as the degree to which a measure represents the theory it argues and how reliable a reader deems a study to be. Furthermore, validity allows for the transferability of the study findings beyond the context in which the study was complete. When carrying out research, it is important that researchers are aware of what threatens the validity of a study, bias being one of these (Maxwell, 2005). With a focus on preventing bias in this research project, the researcher ensured the implementation of the following protocols. Firstly, the researcher observed a semi-structured interview protocol which followed an identical format and arrangement of words and questions for each research participant (Silverman, 1993). Additionally, to ensure internal validity, verbatim scripts of all data gathered were transcribed (Cohen et al., 2007). While the small sample size of this study does not allow for generalisations, rich descriptions of the data gathered will be provided which will in turn aim to facilitate the reader in making a judgement of transferability (Malterud, 2001).

However, despite the measures taken by the researcher to ensure reliability of the semi-structured interviews, it should be noted that additional questions arose during some conversations with participants. Although the questions asked were relevant to the topic, these spontaneous questions were not always replicated in all the other interviews. By closely following the interview schedule a baseline of questions was established for each interview reducing inconsistency and restoring reliability of the material. Once the interviews had been transcribed participants were offered a seven-day window to check the transcription and return any feedback. This process is often called respondent validation (Bryman, 2008). It should be noted that no changes to the transcripts were requested by the participants. Bias was reduced by piloting both the interview schedule with independent teachers to ensure there were no leading questions that could influence participants' responses.

Positionality

When carrying out a qualitative research study, an important consideration is positionality. Cohen et al., 2007 state that positionality requires the researcher to recognise and locate their beliefs, values in relation to the research process and outputs. Foote and Bartell (2011) state that personal and work experiences shape a researcher's positionality which may in turn influence the researcher's encounters with the study, the research processes chosen as well as the researcher's interpretation of the study outcomes. Furthermore, to reduce researcher bias and inform the positionality of the study, it is crucial that the researcher engages in reflexivity. Reflexivity requires the researcher to disclose their own beliefs and positions and recognise how they may influence the design of the research study as well as the implementation and interpretation of the data findings (Greenbank, 2003). Therefore, guided by theory, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher of this dissertation has had personal experiences with occupational therapy, having attained an undergraduate degree in occupational therapy. Moreover, the researcher has worked in inclusive education. Both these educational and work experiences have very much influenced the researcher's choice and motivation for this dissertation. As a result of these experiences, the researcher sought to prevent personal opinions influencing the study rather, to adopt a neutral stance to gather information on this phenomenon.

Limitations

While this study highlights pertinent information relating to teachers' experiences of supporting children through OT-Teacher collaborative practice, it is important to outline its limitations. The primary limitation of this research study is the small sample size used which does not allow for a great variety of perspectives. Furthermore, with a small-scale project generalisation by the researcher is also a limitation. Conducting future research with a greater

sample of participants would be valuable to generalise the research findings in an Irish context. However, the findings of the study are worth consideration to promote and facilitate teachers in working collaboratively in the primary school context. Overall, although small, the sample size of this study allowed for in-depth perspectives of the experience of OT-Teacher collaborative practice.

Protection of the Participants

When conducting research, it is crucial that ethical issues are considered. According to Hammersley and Traianou (2012), the flexible nature of qualitative research and gathering of unstructured data in environments that are familiar to the research participant can lead to ethical issues. Moreover, Ryen (2016) states that it is the responsibility of the researcher to protect the confidentiality of participants. Thus, to ensure participant confidentiality and prevent any ethical issues arising throughout the study, the following procedures were carried out.

Firstly, approval of this study was sought and successfully granted by the Students Ethics in Research Committee (SERC) in Marino Institute of Education on the seventh of January 2022, reference number: SERC-07-01-22-01-PME-1-21. Participants were provided with a research information page which explained the study in detail, its purpose, and the intended use of the research. Furthermore, the information page encouraged voluntary participation in the study. The information page provided to participants clearly stated that participants had the right to exit the study at any time. Prior to each interview, each participant was required to complete a consent form which confirmed they were willing to partake in the interview and research study. Lastly, although the participants for this study were purposively selected, their anonymity was guaranteed and as stated earlier, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the research participants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current chapter detailed the research methodology used to gather data for this research study. The qualitative method of data collection that was utilized to explore the guiding aim of this study was critically discussed. Finally, ethical considerations and limitations of this study were addressed and concluded this chapter. The following chapter will present the findings of this research study and provide a detailed discussion and analysis.

Chapter 4 - Analysis and Discussion of Research Findings

Introduction

Though the implementation of a qualitative approach, this research project gathered valuable data which is explored and discussed in this chapter. Relevant literature as well as the literature studied in Chapter 2 will be drawn upon to critically examine this data. The findings of this study provide an insight into primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of OT in supporting children with AN in the mainstream classroom. The key findings relating to teachers' experiences with OTs are explored and discussed. The findings of the study are presented under three main themes which were identified through the process of thematic analysis and discussed further under subthemes. The key themes and subthemes are as follows:

Teachers' readiness to work collaborate with OTs

- Teachers' understanding of occupational therapy
- Prevalence of primary school children receiving OT
- Influence on Teaching
- Teacher education and training

Teacher Concerns

- Additional demands
- A 'good OT' vs. 'bad OT'
- Access to OT services

Teacher Recommendations

- Communication
- Education, training, and in-school supports
- The development of in-school supports

Teachers' readiness to work collaboratively with OTs

Influenced by their own education and personal experiences, the participants of the study were able to define their knowledge of OT and the impact this knowledge had on their experiences of educating and supporting a child with AN in the classroom.

Teachers' understanding of occupational therapy

A 2016 study by Benson et al. explored teachers' perceptions of the role of OT in schools through an online survey. Of the forty-seven respondents, the majority viewed OTs as valuable team members that play a significant role in assisting pupil success both inside and outside the classroom. These findings are supported by similar studies from an Irish context (Lynch et al., 2021; Patton et al, 2015, O'Donoghue et al, 2021). The said studies influenced the researcher to similarly explore an understanding of OT at the outset of the interview so to attain a level of comprehension among the participants of this study. The definitions and understandings of the participants are outlined in Table 2. While some participants understanding of OT was specific to the provision of assistive equipment, most emphasised how OT supported the child with their engagement and active participation in meaningful occupations both in school and at home.

Table 2*Participants Understanding of Occupational Therapy*

Participant	Understanding of Occupational Therapy
Emily	“Supports children to enhance their fine and gross motor skills as well as sensory development so that they can participate in their everyday activities both at home and here in school”
Rachel	“Can support children with poor muscular control and the basic day-to-day things such as eating, going to the bathroom, buttoning up coats, managing belongings, social skills... The OT can advise on what type of equipment is specifically suited to a child, and where to get it and that sort of stuff.”
Connor	“Helps with practical stuff we could be doing in the classroom with a child, improve their developmental levels and their ability to self-regulate.”
Mary	“Supports the child's learning and development... it's that whole holistic approach that you know and that's important.”
Niamh	“What the OT always has done for me, and the child has been around equipment, and using equipment safely. It was around supporting the child who has mobility issues”
Adrian	“It's equality of provision, and then levelling the playing fields for all children. So, if you look at a group of students through an OT lens it would be seeing how we can give them all the fairest

	chance. And how can we adapt our learning environment to create the most successful situation for each child.
Sharon	“Supporting children with sensory processing difficulties and the processes required for the participation in the everyday school activities... The factors that impact on the child’s participation within the school environment.”
Ciara	“The focus not just on the child’s academic goals but also play in the class and yard and self -care skills like taking on/off coat, washing hands... It was very much analysing the task and classroom environment with the goal of reducing barriers for the child”

How Teachers acquired their understanding of OT

Subsequently, an insight into how the participants arrived at this understanding of OT was explored. Most participants revealed they had no prior knowledge or exposure to OT before their professional interactions with an OT. Emily stated that, *“I always knew the importance motor skill development or sensory regulation, but I didn't realise they were there was a person specifically to help with that”*. Most participants learned of OT through these professional interactions, their own research or through information given by the parent/s of a child. None of the participants detailed acquiring their knowledge of OT through initial teacher training.

Prevalence of primary school children receiving OT

Participants insight into the prevalence of children with AN in the mainstream classroom acquiring or requiring access OT was then investigated. Connor stated, *“based on my experiences there is a high prevalence of children requiring OT or who are already in the*

process of being referred”, while Mary highlighted that “*most years I had at least one child in my class who was receiving OT*”. Interestingly, Niamh pointed out “*there’s an increase in children being referred to OT but unfortunately so many are spending years on long waiting lists*”. Although statistics make it difficult to determine the exact percentage of primary school-aged children that receive or have been referred for an OT assessment, the literature highlighted in Chapter Two maintains that long waiting lists prevent an overwhelming population of school-aged children from accessing paediatric OT services in Ireland (AOTI, 2020; Lynch et al., 2021).

Influence on Teaching

O’Donoghue (2021) noted that teachers credited increased outcomes for pupils resulting from the presence of OT which in turn resulted in a positive outlook towards OT-Teacher collaborative practice (Bayona et al., 2006; Bazyk & Case-Smith, 2010; Lynch et al., 2021). Participants in this study shared their positive experiences in relation to working collaboratively with the OT. All participants drew on the knowledge gained through these professional interactions and how such experiences continue to inform both their teaching and practices in the classroom. Sharon highlighted that “*Based on my experiences with the OT, I’m more aware of the environment and how things in the environment may be triggering the child rather than automatically presuming the child is being bold or disruptive.*” Other participants highlighted the crucial role played by the OT. Niamh identified the OT services as “a great help with the information and ideas around activities that they provided” while Mary stated, “*I have a much better awareness of fine motor skills and the importance on developing them through OT inspired activities.*”

Table 3

Areas of teaching influenced by OT-Teacher Collaboration

Areas of teaching influenced by OT-Teacher Collaboration	Percentage of Participants
Increase on environmental awareness on learning for a child	90%
Motor skills development	50%
Seating	30%
Adaptive equipment	40%
Movement breaks	30%

Teacher education.

Literature has found a gap in teacher education and professional development regarding collaborative practice with OTs (Benson et al, 2016; O'Donoghue et al, 2021; Patton et al, 2015). Consistent with these findings, the majority of the study's participants revealed their ITT and CPD did not and do not offer sufficient preparation on inclusive education through collaborative practice. Niamh revealed *"I don't recall collaborative practice or information on other professionals that can support children like OTs being discussed"* and added that *"if you want to learn more about OT it is up to you to do your own research or find available training"*. Similarly, Sharon stated, *"there is little to no training concerning collaborative practice with OTs which is a pity because you can learn so much from their outlook"* while Adrian stressed receiving no *"formal training or professional development"* in this area". These findings are crucial as O'Donoghue (2021) state a lack of education and training around collaborative

practice with OT can contribute to undesirable outcomes for both the child and teacher. This is supported by Echsel, 2019 and Missiuna and Pollock, 2012.

Teacher Concerns

Throughout the interview process, a variety of teacher concerns emerged. The participants were offered the opportunity to expand on these concerns and did so through stories based on their own personal experiences. The three main concerns that arose were the additional pressures that are placed upon teachers collaborating with an OT to support a child in the classroom, what teachers deemed as good and bad about OT collaboration and, the implications of poor access to OT services on children with AN.

Additional Demands

As detailed in chapter two, a 2015 qualitative study from an Irish context by Patton et al., explored OT-teacher partnership experiences of 44 primary school teachers and identified several concerns. While it is important to acknowledge the greater sample size of the said study, findings from this research project suggest no significant progress have been made to address similar teacher concerns identified by Paton et al. (2015). Rather, these concerns continue to impact OT-teacher collaboration in supporting children with AN. Niamh described the additional pressure associated with use of equipment prescribed by the OT for a child and a lack of knowledge on seating *“I feel that I may not be using the prescribed OT equipment properly.”* Emily described the pressure of *“carrying out all the interventions and achieving the goals set out by the OT while also carrying out your teaching duties.”* Interestingly, over half of the participants revealed pressure from parents to achieve OT recommendations. Adrian revealed that *“parents have either waited years on a waiting list to see an OT or are paying a lot of money for private OT... The parents want to know that the OT recommendations are carried out in school.”* Emily also added that there is additional time required to link OT

interventions with the academic curriculum. Despite these demands, it must be stressed that no unfavourable attitude towards OT-Teacher collaboration transpired in interviews with participants. While concerns and additional demands were expressed, all participants communicated a commitment and belief in the importance of collaborative practice with the OT to support children with AN in their classroom. It should also be noted that although very few studies surrounding teachers' perspective of OT-teacher collaboration exist from an Irish context, much international research relating to this topic have identified similar teacher concerns (Benson et al, 2016; Echsel, 2019; Missiuna & Pollock, 2012).

A 'good OT' vs. 'bad OT'

Much research highlights a need for increased collaboration and communication between OTs and teachers (Benson et al, 2016; Casillas, 2010; Lynch et al., 2021; Patton et al, 2015). An online survey by Benson et al., (2016) found that, of the forty-seven teacher participants (participants were teachers that currently work with an OT in a school) most presented positive insights into OT-teacher collaboration with a quarter reporting negative experience. Similarly, the majority of this study's participants shared positive insights into their work with OTs however, 60% of the participants highlighted their personal experiences with an OT with whom they felt did not fulfil their responsibilities to the child and the team collaboration. Emily stated, *"I received an OT report for one child in the class, but I got the same report for another child despite the children have completely different needs. I just felt it was a copy and paste job"*. Other negative interactions experienced by participants included a lack of communication, poor availability of the OT, and no direct interaction with the child/teacher. By ignoring these matters and the need for better communication and collaboration between OTs and teachers, pupil outcomes and participation in the occupation of education could be hindered (Benson et al., 2016; Hargreaves, et al, 2012).

Access to OT services

The majority of the participants of this study expressed concerns on poor access to OT services. According to 2021 Health Service Executive (HSE) figures, 18,303 children were waiting for an initial OT assessment with 9,490 of these children waiting for over a year (AOTI, 2020; Muldoon, 2020). Participants stressed the impact that this had on academic performance, pupil absenteeism and school participation pertaining to a child's AN. Sharon highlighted that *“a lot of children with mild or moderate additional needs are missing out on direct OT interaction ... I understand that the child with more complex needs need direct OT intervention, but it is difficult for children that are not getting interventions that are specific to the child and their interests.”* Connor identified concerns surrounding a child's academic achievement, *“I would refer a child to OT, but that child would then move on to another class and not gotten the support for that year”*. A 2020 report by the Ombudsman for Children's Office details the possible adverse effect of a delay in access to children assessment of needs services. The report revealed children waiting several years to access services and concluded that the main cause of such delays related to an insufficiency of HSE resources allocated to meet the demand (Muldoon, 2020).

Teacher Recommendations

Participants of the study were invited to share what other supports or information relating to OT-Teacher collaborative practice they would find valuable. The most popular recommendations were for improved communication between OTs and teachers, further training relating to OT-Teacher collaborative practice and increased access to OT services.

Improved OT-Teacher communication.

Poor communication between the teacher and the OT has been highlighted in the literature as a barrier that hinders OT-Teacher collaboration in turn impacting pupil outcomes (Barnes &

Turner, 2001; Benson et al., 2016; Kennedy & Stewart, 2011; Lynch et al., 2021). Niamh recalls an experience of not receiving any direct contact with the OT despite receiving an OT report of interventions for the child in her class. Niamh felt a need *“to be more informed on how to carry out these interventions... and who can I get advice from on these?”*.

Teachers recommended better access to information and advice relating to OT (Barnes & Turner, 2001; Hargreaves et al., 2021). Communication between the OT, teacher and parents emerged as a desire of this study’s participants. Participants suggested various approaches to facilitating such communication ranging from online meetings to one-to-one meetings. Participants willingness to learn new information and in turn provide better pupil outcomes through such means of communication became evident. Emily highlighted *“child-centred communication”* as crucial in supporting a child with AN in the classroom through OT-Teacher collaborative practice.

Niamh recognised the benefits of the OT, teacher, and other school members such as the SNA and principal meetings with the parent of the child referred to OT to set goals. Rachel revealed how, from her experience, such approaches worked well for pupil outcomes *“meetings were held with the OT and attended by me, the parent, the SET, and the principal... We reviewed old targets and new ones. We had individual responsibilities and support from the OT in helping the child to achieve their targets.”*

Education and training

Eighty percent of the study’s participants reported a lack of teacher training relating to collaborative practice with health professionals such as OTs. This is especially worrying considering the prevalence of school aged children referred to OT and who are awaiting initial OT assessments. Mary believes *“teacher training colleges could definitely provide an insight*

into OT". Participants also voiced a dissatisfaction towards a lack of existing supports in place for pupils awaiting OT assessments and how teachers can support children through OT.

All participants interviewed reported a positive outlook to the information gained through their collaboration with the OT with the majority appreciating OT strategies that they could implement in the classroom. Emily suggested that *"I have reframed my thinking with how I teach and think that therefore other teachers should know more about OT."* Similarly, Rachel stated that professional development related to collaborative practice with OTs would aid teachers in being more "confident and comfortable" in creating inclusive classroom environments. Literature corresponds with training and education specific to OT-teacher collaborative practice being of importance to teachers (Echsell, 2019; Missiuna & Pollock, 2012; Patton et al., 2015; O'Donoghue, 2021). These findings identify a gap in ITT and CPD regarding OT-teacher collaborative practice to support children with AN in the classroom.

Introducing guidelines or protocols.

Based on the recommendations made by the participants of this study, the findings reveal a need to develop better supports and procedures within schools to achieve optimal OT-teacher collaboration. Rachel commended a multidisciplinary team approach employed in a school she had worked in which the parents, teacher, OT, and other school staff directly involved with the child worked in collaboration. The targets set and agreed by the team detailed *"what we aimed to achieve, and we could link in with the OT if we required further guidance"*. Similarly, Benson et al. (2016) and Lynch et al. (2021) highlighted teachers appreciating plans with input from the OT and other appropriate school staff in addition to information from parents, to inform goals and support for a pupil.

Other participants felt that files should be maintained that document OT-teacher input. Adrian states that *“Files mean the new teacher knows why the previous teacher referred the child to OT or offer an insight into the child’s progress with OT”*

Interestingly, Sharon recalled a school providing in-service training on their learning from OT to other teachers, *“If a teacher worked with a child with a specific need, they would then share their learning from external professionals such as OTs with the others in the school community. That way it is not just one teacher with all the knowledge on how to cater for a specific condition or need. “*

Conclusion

In summary, there were several key themes that emerged from the data findings, these being: primary school teachers’ readiness to work collaboratively with OTs, teacher concerns surrounding OT-teacher collaboration and teacher recommendations. These themes and subthemes highlight inadequacies in the education, training and supports available to primary teachers working collaboratively with OTs. Where further support and information are needed to support OT-teacher collaboration, teachers also feel there are a lack of OT services available to children which in turn impact the educational experiences and outcomes for children with AN. Furthermore, teachers revealed poor communication and direct contact with OTs as challenges to the OT-teacher partnership.

Recommendations to improve OT-teacher collaboration to support children with AN are presented in the next chapter as well as an exploration of the limitations of this study.

Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

Introduction

Through a qualitative research approach, this study explored primary school teachers' perspectives of OT to support children with AN in Irish mainstream classes. Based on the findings of data gathered for this study, several recommendations for OT-teacher collaborative practice are presented in this chapter. The limitations of this study are also recognised.

Key Findings

The results of this study were consistent with both national and international literature (Barnes & Turner, 2001; Benson et al., 2016; Echsel, 2019; Kennedy & Stewart, 2011; Missiuna & Pollock, 2012; O'Donoghue et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2015) and emphasise that a gap exists in formal education surrounding OT-Teacher collaborative practice. In its place, teachers appear to obtain such knowledge through their own research and professional experiences. The findings found that although teachers showed a great understanding of OT and recognise the benefits of OT-teacher collaboration, teachers felt professional teacher training surrounding OT-teacher collaborative practice would be beneficial.

A lack of teacher training and education surrounding OT-teacher collaboratively practice seemingly impacts a teacher's confidence in carrying out OT recommendations. Such findings imply that some teachers are being placed in a position where they feel there is a lack of support in working collaboratively with OTs which could possibly contribute to undesirable educational experiences and outcomes for children with AN.

Recommendations

ITT and CPD

Taking the findings of this study and previous national and international studies into consideration, the following recommendations are suggested by the researcher. The foremost recommendation is for the delivery of teacher training relating to OT-teacher collaboration. Information about OT and how it can support children with AN in the school environment should be incorporated into ITT, while professional development should be offered for all teachers working collaboratively with an OT (Kennedy & Stewart, 2011; O'Donoghue, 2021; Patton et al., 2016). Teacher education should focus on how OT can support children with AN in the school environment, and how the OT and teacher can work collaboratively to support a child with AN in achieving their personal and educational goals. Contribution should be comprised of both the OT as a health professional and the teacher as an education professional during such training.

Improved Communication

A further recommendation based on the findings of this study is, improved shared communication and collaboration. All the study's participants revealed collaboration with the OT positively influenced their teaching and learning which is supported by research which found how good communication is crucial to OT-teacher collaboration (Casillas, 2010; Kennedy & Stewart, 2011; Patton et al., 2016). However, participants of this study expressed frustration with the lack of OTs available to children, poor direct contact with OTs as well as lack of communication suggesting that a more proactive approach for consultation is required. Participants of this study reported that the frequency and quality of communication with the OT varied from no direct contact, minimal contact to OTs providing consistent support and updates pupil progress. Data suggests that an increase in OT-teacher collaboration can result

in the teacher's perception of a pupil's progress increasing (Benson et al., 2010; Benson et al.; 2016; Casillas, 2010; Lynch et al., 2021; O' Donoghue et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2015). For OTs, it is essential to participate in school-based best practice to build a collaborative relationship with the teacher.

Provision of OT Services

A final recommendation is that OTs need to consider how school-based OT services are provided so to address the limitations in the OT–teacher relationship. The findings of this study reiterate a demand for OT services as well as inadequate OT staffing which has resulted in long waiting lists for children attempting to access OT services nationwide (AOTI, 2021). One aspect of school-based OT is to support a child's educational participation however, as discussed by Bazyk and Case-Smith (2010), this can include supporting the child's educational participation through direct OT service provision or, through consultation with the teacher and school team. Bazyk and Case-Smith (2010) suggest establishing a balance between direct OT services with the child and providing support to the teacher to help the child. The OT may need to establish a role that involves balance in their collaboration with the teacher in support of the pupil's educational progress.

For the stated recommendations to be prioritised, greater recognition needs to be given to enabling teachers to confidently work collaboratively with OTs to support children with AN. Until the importance of the OT-teacher collaboration in supporting the educational goals and outcomes for children with AN is recognised, it is probable that teachers will continue to encounter challenges highlighted in both this study and similar national and international findings.

Limitations of this Study

As the researcher of the study, I recognise that this study is based on a small sample thus exaggerated claims should not be made, however, the findings from this study indicate that there is a gap in ITT and CPD surrounding OT-Teacher collaborative practice to support children with AN. A larger scale qualitative research on this topic should be conducted to gain further insight, information on how to support inclusive education through OT-teacher collaborative practice. Additional research on this topic may confirm if a demand for teacher training around OT-Teacher collaborative practice to support children with AN exists at a national level.

Potential Future Research

The insight into teachers' perspectives on OT to facilitate the inclusion of children with AN in mainstream schools is essential to improving educational progression and outcomes for pupils. The perspectives and opinions of the teachers in this study could direct and assist future development of teacher training that will promote an inclusive education for children with AN in the mainstream classroom.

Conclusion

The motivation for this research study was a lack of research that existed from an Irish context on teachers' perspectives on school-based OT in supporting children with AN. Through the gathering of qualitative data, findings support the need for OT-teacher collaboration in providing support to children with AN. However, this study reveals how additional demands are placed upon teachers when collaborating with OTs. Moreover, to achieve optimal OT-teacher collaboration, teachers should receive training relating to OT-teacher partnerships and efforts should be made to enhance communication between OTs and teachers. The findings confirm the complexity of the process of collaboration between health and education

professional and highlight the need for dialogue between OTs and teachers to integrate their shared goal of supporting the educational outcomes of children with AN. Lastly, the findings stress the need for Government action on the resource constraints that surround access to OT services for children and emphasise the impact such constraints have on the educational experiences and outcomes for many children with AN.

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Appendices

Appendix 1- Letter of Consent

Facilitating inclusion for children with additional needs through school-based occupational therapy: a primary school teacher's perspective

Letter of Invitation

(Insert Date)

Dear (Participant Name),

I would like to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting on the exploration of how school-based occupational therapy supports inclusive education for children with additional needs from the perspective of the primary school teacher. Through this research project, I endeavour to explore current and potential service provision of school-based occupational therapy (OT) practice for children with additional needs and gain an insight into the perceptions, strategies, and challenges of school-based OT for primary school teachers. Lastly, I hope that this research project will identify new directions and potential pathways for development of the important collaborative role that teachers and occupational therapists play in creating inclusive learning environments for children with additional needs. Your participation would involve a 30-minute Interview. This research is being supervised by Dr Veronica Ward. Please take your time to read through the details of the study in the Project Information (attached) and if you agree to participate, please sign, and return the attached Consent Form by email to (researcher's email).

Your input would be very valuable to this study. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Annmarie Collins

Professional Master of Education

Facilitating inclusion for children with additional needs through school-based occupational therapy: a primary school teacher's perspective

Project Information

I am a final year student studying the Professional Master of Education in Marino Institute of Education. This research will explore current service provision of school-based occupational therapy practice for children with additional needs. The research will also allow for an insight into the perceptions, strategies, and challenges of school-based occupational therapy for primary school teachers in supporting children with additional needs. Lastly, this research project will aim to identify new directions and potential pathways for development of the important collaborative role that teachers and occupational therapists play in creating inclusive learning environments for children with additional needs. This dissertation research is being supervised by Dr Veronica Ward. Only I will have access to the personal data that you provide. You are free to contact my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about the study: (supervisor's email).

Participating in this Research

Participation in this research involves a 30-minute interview. The interview will explore experiences of working with an OT as well as the benefits and challenges that came with these experience/s. It will also look at recommendations that could support teachers when working collaboratively with an OT. If you allow, the interview will be recorded by using a voice recorder to help with data analysis. The interview will take place online through Zoom at a day and time that is convenient to you. Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from this research for any or no reason, and at any time. The information you

provide will only be used for the purpose of exploring the research question set out above and will not be reused. In line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation, only essential personal data will be collected, and all identifiers will be disaggregated from the data as soon as possible after collection. MIE will be the Data Controller for GDPR purposes. With your consent, your personal data will be shared with my research supervisor but not with any other third party. Personal data will be destroyed upon completion of the research dissertation.

When reporting on the information you provide, your data will be presented using numeric identifiers and pseudonyms. Your anonymised data will be aggregated with information from other participants and documentary sources. Anonymised data will be shared in my dissertation and other research related activities e.g., presentations, journals, conferences.

Appendix 2- Consent Form

Facilitating inclusion for children with additional needs through school-based occupational therapy: a primary school teacher's perspective.

Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this study, please complete the following consent form and return it to me to the following email: (researcher's email).

I understand and agree that:

I am over 18 years of age

The Project Information has been communicated to me

I am aware that I can withdraw from this project at any time up to when my data has been anonymised and amalgamated

I will participate voluntarily without incentive

My data being treated with confidentiality and anonymity

I will take part in a 30-minute interview

My interview will be recorded using a voice recorder

My personal data may be shared with the research supervisor

My anonymised data may be shared in this dissertation and via other research activities as they arise.

Name (PRINTED):

Name (Signature):

Date:

Appendix 3- Interview Procedure and Questions

Title: Primary school teachers' perceptions of school-based occupational therapy in facilitating the inclusion of children with additional needs.

Introduction and the purpose of the interview

Thank you for taking part in this interview, I am very appreciative of your time. I am interviewing you because you are a qualified primary school teacher working in Ireland and you have experience of working with an occupational therapist to support a child with additional needs in your classroom. The purpose of this interview is to gain an insight into your experiences of school-based occupational therapy and your thoughts on supporting children with additional needs through OT-Teacher collaboration. The intention of this research project is to give a voice to the teacher in relation to OT-Teacher collaborative practice, particularly in an Irish context and to influence the development of OT-Teacher practices within the primary school sector.

Outline ethical considerations:

Before we begin, I would like to remind you that participation in this interview is voluntary, and you can decline to answer any question or opt out at any stage if you wish. The interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. The audio-recording and interview transcript from this interview will be stored safely and a pseudonym will be used to protect your confidentiality.

If you have any concerns or questions at any stage throughout the interview, please do not hesitate to interrupt me.

May I turn on the audio recorder and begin the interview?

Background of the Teacher

1. Can you tell me a little about your experience in primary school teaching?

Prompts:

- How long you have been a primary school teacher?
- What class are you currently teaching?
- What type of school you are teaching in?
- Have you always taught in mainstream or special education?

Teachers understanding of school-based occupational therapy

2. From your experience, what has school-based occupational therapy involved/focused on?

Prompts:

- What kind of assessments or interventions did the OT complete/recommend?

Follow up:

Do you think these experiences have influenced your understanding of OT and the role of the OT in the school setting?

The Teacher's Experience

3. Could you tell me about your experience to date with an occupational therapist in your classroom?

Prompts:

- What additional needs did the children have? What's your opinion on the role of the OT in supporting children with additional needs in the classroom?

Follow up:

- How do you think OT-Teacher collaboration impacts the way in which you teach a child?

Informed about school-based occupational therapy

4. From your experience, are you told the reason why the OT is visiting a particular child in the classroom?

Prompts:

- What information do you think would be beneficial to a teacher before the OT visits you and a child in the class?
- Is any training or professional development made available to you as a primary school teacher regarding OT-Teacher collaboration to support children in the classroom?

Challenges for Teachers

5. From your experience, does working collaboratively with an OT to support a child with additional needs place extra demand on you?
 - If yes, can you explain this extra demand.
 - If no, could you explain any further requirements necessary for a child with additional needs requiring OT-teacher involvement in comparison to a child without?

Prompts:

- Could you draw on some of these issues?
- Why do you think it places these extra demands on you?
- How does it make you feel?
- Have you had to adapt your teaching to meet OT recommendations/interventions for a child with additional needs?

Supports for Teachers

6. What concerns, do you think, surround OT-Teacher collaboration in supporting children with additional needs in the classroom?

Prompts:

- If there are recommended interventions made by the OT for a child, are you able to carry these out?
- Is there a designated staff member to assist you in carrying out these recommended interventions?
- Do you feel competent and supported in carrying out OT recommendations/interventions?
- Who, if anyone, do you contact should you contact with updates/outcomes on these recommendations/interventions?
- Who can you discuss concerns of the child's progress with?
- What is your opinion on the current OT-Teacher supports in place?

Follow up:

- What OT-Teacher supports do you think would be effective in addressing these concerns?
- Would you like to see any changes to the current supports?

Recommendations

7. What would you suggest as a way of supporting teachers and helping them to overcome the challenges they face when collaborating with OTs?

Prompts:

- Why do you think that would be effective? How would it support teachers and OTs?
How would it make things easier for OT-Teacher collaboration?
- Is there anything that you would like to address that was not addressed in the interview?

Closing the Interview

That has brought our interview for this research project to a close. I will stop the recording device now. I would like to thank you for your participation in this interview.