

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme leading to the award of the degree of Professional Master of Education, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute and any other Institution or University. I agree that the Marino Institute of Education library may lend or copy the thesis, in hard or soft copy, upon request.

Signature: _____

Printed name: Amy Quirke

ID No.: 17342937

Date: 13/05/2019



*An Associated College of
Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin*

Professional Masters of Education 2018-19

Dissertation

Student Seat Number: D248

Year of Course: 2nd

Word Count: 10,948

Lecturer: Rory McDaid & Barbara O'Toole

Date of submission: 13/05/2019

I have read and I understand the plagiarism provisions in the programme handbook and in the Plagiarism Policy document. I have also completed the Online Tutorial on avoiding plagiarism, "Ready, Steady, Write," located at

<http://tcd-ie.libguides.com/plagiarism/ready-steady-write>.

By placing my student number below, I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Student Number: 17342937

Abstract

Background: Given the nationwide prevalence of multi-grade classrooms and the international trend towards inclusion education, limited research has been conducted in relation to children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in a multi-grade classroom in an Irish context. The international move towards inclusion is rooted in legislation in Ireland, giving children with SEN a legal footing when trying to obtain an inclusive education. This study examines the provision of an inclusion education from a teacher's perspective, discussing the barriers, training and challenges as perceived by multi-grade teachers.

Methods: Qualitative methods were used to gain perspectives from practicing teachers regarding their attitudes towards inclusion, training and barriers that may exist. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight practicing teachers. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed.

Results: The findings suggest that the lack of an internationally accepted definition of inclusive education is problematic, for policymakers, teachers and individual children. Changes in support allocation for schools in Ireland is a move in a positive direction, but this research finds some issues that may be problematic in the future regarding the assessment of children. Special needs assistants (SNA) support and its' role in the context of an inclusive education was divisive in this study. Research from the UK suggests the role of teaching assistants has a negative effect on student outcomes and this needs to be considered in an Irish context.

Conclusion: An increase in the provision of training, both during their initial teacher education and continuous professional development for multi-grade teachers is needed in Ireland. The lack of diversity in Irish staffroom's is also potentially problematic, and a shift in the routes of entry to primary teaching may be required in Ireland. Further research is needed in the area of SNA support, inclusive practices and diversity in Irish classrooms.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank my eight participants who agreed to be interviewed for this research project and who facilitated me after school during their own personal time. Their generosity, honesty and interest in the subject matter were very much appreciated.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Ms. Ann Molumby for her guidance and support during this process. I would like to thank my friends and classmates in Marino for all their encouragement, help and humour over the last two years. I would also like to thank my sister Siobhán for all her help during the research process.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, and especially my parents for their endless encouragement and support in all aspects of my life. I could not have achieved this without them.

Abbreviations

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DISS	Deployment and Impact of Support Staff project
SEN	Special Educational Needs
EPSEN	Education for Persons with a Special Educational Need Act
HSE	Health Service Executive
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
ESRI	The Economic and Social Research Institute
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland study
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
TA	Teaching Assistant
CA	Classroom Assistant
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
SET	Special Education Teacher

Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	4
Abbreviations	5
List of Appendices.....	7
Literature Review	10
Methodology	22
Data Analysis	33
Teacher as a Facilitator of an Inclusive Education	35
Challenges Facing Teachers.....	42
Provision of SNA Support.....	49
Conclusion.....	52
Reference List	56
Appendices	i

List of Appendices

Appendix I	Interview Schedule
Appendix II	Coded transcript
Appendix III	Codebook
Appendix IV	Research Consent Form
Appendix V	Letter to Board of Management

The aim of this research project is to examine how multi-grade teachers create an inclusive educational experience for all children in their class, with a specific focus on SEN. The primary objective is to gain a knowledge of the teacher's lived experiences regarding the provision of an inclusive education, and a sense of the value that is placed on this.

Given the current international trends in education regarding inclusive education, and the prevalence of multi-grade schools in Ireland today, very little research has been conducted regarding inclusive education in a multi-grade setting. In fact, there is very little current research on multi-grade schools in Ireland, which is an area worthy of study, as last year, one quarter of all primary school children were educated in a multi-grade setting (Department of Education & Skills, 2018). The Salamanca Statement in 1994, which the Irish Government is a signatory of, is framed by a rights-based perspective on education (The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994). It sets out both the importance and value of an inclusion education and places this in a much wider social policy context encompassing health, social welfare and employment.

The aim of an inclusive education in an Irish context is defined as equipping children with SEN with the resources they need in order to leave school with the "skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity, in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives" (Education for Persons with a Special Educational Need Act, 2004). In an Irish

context, the Salamanca Statement and the EPSEN Act that followed in 2004 resulted in a drop in the enrolment of children in special schools, and a rise in the number of children with a range of different needs attending a mainstream school (Banks & McCoy, 2017). While these figures are welcomed, issues remain regarding the provision of an inclusive education. Today, there is no one definition that is accepted by all stakeholders, and some academics consider an inclusive education to be multi-faceted, consisting of a range of different factors, including physical, geographical and social inclusion (Shevlin, Kenny, & Loxley, 2008; O'Riordan, 2017).

In Ireland, research has shown that while teachers are conscious of the importance of the provision of an inclusive education for children with SEN, they struggle to provide it (Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire, 2018), with a range of issues identified by research, such as time, training and resources (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015). There is limited research available in relation to multi-grade schools, which is concerning as Ireland has a particularly high prevalence of multi-grade schools. This research project addresses the following research questions:

1. What practices do multi-grade teachers consider to be inclusive?
2. What barriers to inclusion do multi-grade teachers perceive there to be?
3. What are teacher's opinions regarding training they have received regarding inclusive practices?

Literature Review

This chapter firstly reviews what exactly constitutes an inclusive education and the policies that frame the provision of such an education. This is then examined in the context of a multi-grade classroom. Children with SEN being educated in an inclusive setting is examined in both an international and Irish context. Teacher training and CPD is considered, as well as the role of SNA in the context of an inclusive education.

Inclusive Education

There is considerable debate in the literature over what precisely constitutes an inclusive education and there is also some critical commentary (Florian, 2014) of the very premise of inclusive education. The critical literature claims that an inclusive education promises more than it delivers, and that the definitions offered up by different literature are a “conceptual muddle” (Florian, 2014). Others are critical of the policy developments towards inclusion being pushed purely by financial reasons as opposed to sociological concepts of equality and education (Abawi & Oliver, 2013). There is conflicting evidence of this in other studies which reference the escalating costs of resourcing a child with SEN (Banks, Frawley & McCoy, 2015). Due to the fact that the very idea of an inclusive education is a relatively new concept, teachers are still unravelling this in the classroom, but there is a clear focus in the literature on the fact that inclusive practices are of benefit to all children, not just those who have additional needs

(Blum, 2014). Also referenced in literature is the lack of a clear definition of inclusive education and that it differs depending on the context and location. One author has defined it as the child being free from exclusive practices, while developing in an inclusive environment (O'Riordan, 2017). It is clear though, that an inclusive education refers to several factors; educational inclusion, locational inclusion and social inclusion (O'Riordan, 2017; Shevlin, Kenny, & Loxley, 2008) and this then widens the parameters of a school's responsibility to provide an inclusive education for all.

Ireland's educational landscape is unusual in that it is shaped by both legislation and litigation, with the result that from the early 2000s onwards, the DES was mandated to assume the responsibility of the education of children with profound and severe needs (O'Riordan, 2017). This was followed by the EPSEN Act (Education for Persons with a Special Educational Need Act 2004, 2019) in 2004, and thus began the State's obligation to provide for an inclusive education for all children, regardless of ability (Shevlin, Kenny, & Loxley, 2008). Today, this policy is underpinned by the fact that almost 12% of students in primary schools are considered to have some form of a SEN (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015), with this figure based purely on children with diagnosed needs. One could assume that there may be children without access to a psychological assessment so this figure may be significantly higher. It is interesting to note that in this study, that the findings showed that school size is a significant predictor of the number of children

with SEN in the school, as opposed to the location, socio-economic make up or gender classification of the school.

While this mandate to provide an inclusive education for all children, regardless of their level of need is admirable, the training of teachers regarding meaningful inclusive practices in the classroom must be examined. Some literature points to the need for strong supports for teachers outside of the classroom in order to fully implement an inclusive education inside the classroom (Tiwari, Das, & Sharma, 2015). In one study (Day & Prunty, 2015), the authors conclude that while schools showed a genuine commitment to the provision of an inclusive education, they all referred to the challenges and barriers they experienced involved in implementing these practices.

Multi-grade Classroom

There is some recent Irish research on the early years in Irish multi-grade classes (O'Driscoll, 2015), and there is a vast body of literature regarding inclusive education in a variety of different contexts, there is very little regarding inclusiveness for SEN in multi-grade classrooms. The lack of Irish literature is notable, considering the prevalence of multi-grade schools in Ireland in rural areas. Some of the Irish literature makes a distinction between a multi-grade classroom and a consecutive grade classes (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004), as do the statistics from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) but some do not make this distinction (Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire, 2018). For the purposes of this

research, it will focus only on multi-grade teachers as opposed to teachers of consecutive classes.

There is a vast body of ESRI research on education in Ireland, and there is other work done with schools generally (McCoy, Smyth, & Banks, 2012), with multi-grade schools (Quail & Smyth, 2014) and separately on inclusive education and SEN, both from a policy perspective (Banks & McCoy, 2011) and a ground level approach (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015). The Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study gives a comprehensive insight into the modern Irish classroom, and specifically the experiences of nine-year-old children (Smyth, 2015), a third of whom were educated in a multi-grade class in 2014 (Quail & Smyth, 2014). The data from the GUI has informed other research, and Quail and Smyth's work was the first to examine the potential impact of a multi-grade classroom on academic and social outcomes for children. While other research on Irish multi-grade classrooms do exist, they predominantly focus on the teacher (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004; Darmody & Smyth, 2011).

Quail and Smyth examined academic outcomes and found that nine-year olds in a multi-grade class were more likely to be taught by an experienced teacher. Reading scores of nine-year old children were positively associated with the teacher experience in this study, and overall, Quail and Smyth found that being taught in a multi-grade class had little effect on academic outcomes. However, they noted the significant differences in outcomes between genders in multi-

grade classes. The presence of older children was associated with more negative outcomes for girls, but not boys, as girls had lower reading and mathematic scores in standardised testing in a multi-grade class when compared to a single grade class. Socially, girls made more “social comparisons” than boys and as a result reported more negatively about their abilities and popularity than their peers in a single grade class, which effected their self-image and performance. The findings in this study point to the added layer of complexity for teachers in dealing with the ‘gender dynamics’ and age differences that occurs in mixed, multi-grade classes. Quail and Smyth also raise the issue of single sex schools, highlighting the need for debate in order to facilitate better outcomes for girls especially.

A study conducted on Irish multi-grade primary schools and their inclusive practices researched perceptions of mainstream teachers in relation to how they meet the needs of children with SEN in multi-grade classrooms (Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire, 2018). This research points to the similarities between inclusive best practices and what teachers in multi-grade classrooms considered standard practice. Often teachers in multi-grade classes were unaware that their practices were in fact inclusive practices. This research indicates that supporting pupils with SEN in this classroom context adds an “extra layer of complexity”, which has not been researched to any great degree internationally. Other research in an Irish context suggested that teachers teaching multi-grade classes were more stressed than teachers in single grade classes, reflecting the complexities of the role (Darmody & Smyth, 2011). This report highlighted the need to support multi-grade

teachers through professional development. Interestingly, this report suggested that a teaching principal was associated with higher stress levels among all teachers in the school and the authors questioned the “long-term viability” of the teaching principal position.

Inclusive Practices for SEN

Some research (Ellis, Tod, & Graham-Matheson, 2008) is critical of both the lack of ongoing training for teachers regarding inclusive practices and also the lack of practicing teachers’ engagement with the literature that was produced for them. It is suggested that teachers feel that these departmental publications are created outside of the classroom context by those who are unfamiliar with the modern classroom, and so lack a practical solution to their inclusive practice difficulties (Blum, 2014).

Initial teacher education (ITE) has been shown to play a significant role in the future inclusive practices of newly qualified teachers (NQT) (Hopkins, Round, & Barley, 2018). The authors of this research note the importance of trainee teachers developing their teacher identity and that creating a programme of work for a student and working with them over a period of time under the supervision of an experienced teacher was particularly effective. Irish research has noted the importance for an ITE to address multi-grade teaching but argues that there is no need for a separate programme for multi-grade teachers (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Mulryan-Kyne argues that the diversity of any class, regardless of whether single

grade or multi-grade means that the challenge is dependent on the context, that no two classes are the same, and one cannot simply claim multi-grade teaching to be more complex than a single grade class.

In a multi-grade context, time has been noted as a significant barrier to inclusive practices for SEN (Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire, 2018), and the tension between meeting the needs of the class group simultaneously to the children with SEN is also a factor.

International Context

Ireland's implementation of inclusive education and practices comes decades after this was first addressed in Australia, New Zealand, the USA, UK and Nordic countries. It has been noted though that while there were policy changes from far earlier than Ireland in these countries, budgetary restrictions meant that the implementation of these practices held up proceedings (Shevlin, Kenny, & Loxley, 2008).

There is a significant volume of publications regarding inclusive practices from Austria, Finland (Saloviita, 2018) and Switzerland (Luder, Moretti, Kunz, & Diezi-Duplain, 2011). Switzerland is interesting because the different states adopt different educational policies, and while international best practice in inclusive education means one school system for all, some states in Switzerland are providing a more exclusive education than others, rather than inclusive. In Switzerland, all states signed an undertaking to include 98% of Switzerland's pupils

in mainstream schools, and teacher training was used to work towards this aim. This rate is currently 96% in Finland and literature suggests that Ireland are lagging behind other countries in this regard (Banks & McCoy, 2017). Ireland is not the only country where the initial teacher education (ITE) has been flagged as unsatisfactory as regards inclusive practices. Finnish research has also shown a need for an improvement in the professional training and CPD (Paju, Raty, Pirttimaa, & Kontu, 2016)

Irish Context

Research from an Irish context has shown there to be three main barriers to inclusion in Irish schools; school, teacher and the child/family (Day & Prunty, 2015). From a teacher's perspective, Day and Prunty identified the need for more expertise in meeting students' needs, and that the lack of time was also a factor. The authors noted that throughout this study, the opinion that is not realistic for teachers to differentiate for all children occurred frequently. While teachers agreed that in an ideal world, each child would be differentiated for, they reported that this was impossible on the ground. Also, the intimidatory factor of the deeply academic literature regarding these inclusive practices is something to consider, which has been suggested as a barrier to accessing research (Willemse & Boei, 2013). Research from the UK has suggested that there is a lack of engagement by practicing teachers with research (Williams & Coles, 2007). While respondents in

this study were “positively motivated” towards the use of research in their practice, their actual use of research was limited.

Other research has suggested that there must be link during a teacher’s ITE to research, creating a capacity to research during the teacher’s professional career (Willemse & Boei, 2013), which would make teachers more likely to access research information and apply it to their practice. This study also emphasised the need for the colleges of education to recruit staff based on their “research expertise” in order to foster a research culture. Other research has highlighted the importance of CPD for practicing teachers, with one Irish study noting that CPD take-up was found to relate to the specific children in a teacher’s class (Banks & Smyth, 2011). This study also found that teachers working in multi-grade schools had a higher uptake of CPD than those in single grade classes.

Research has also highlighted the lack of diversity that exists among the teaching profession in Ireland (Devine, 2005) and this situation has not improved according to more recent research on the 2014 graduates of the teacher training colleges (Keane & Heinz, 2016). While Ireland’s population has diversified significantly in the last twenty years, Ireland’s teachers have not, remaining predominantly white, Catholic and female (Keane & Heinz, 2016). Research has suggested that this lack of diversity in schools directly impacts on already marginalised children; migrant children, Traveller children and asylum seeking children, creating a sense of ‘other’ (Bryan, 2009). Other research has suggested

that this lack of diversity of staff composition impacts the inclusivity of a school, outlining that in order to provide an inclusive education for children, that there first must be a truly inclusive school community (O'Riordan, 2017).

The role of the special needs assistant (SNA) is widely regarded as a vital aspect in the provision of an inclusive education in Ireland today. Internationally, while the title and parameters of the role varies, there are significant similarities between Ireland, the US and the UK in practice. In the UK and USA, teaching assistants (TA) or classroom assistants (CA) as they are known are involved in both care role and education role, however, this differs from Ireland, where the role of the SNA is strictly mandated to a care giving role. The DES has been very clear regarding the role of SNA's, defining it as strictly caregiving, allowing the child access to an education that otherwise, may not be possible (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2015). However, some Irish research in this area suggests that although the guidelines are quite clear about the role of an SNA in a pedagogical context, SNA involvement in teaching and learning is occurring in mainstream schools regardless (Logan, 2006) which suggests a difference between policy and practice.

Research from the UK in 2009, the 'Deployment and Impact of Support Staff' (DISS) study, was a largest study of TA's and support staff conducted in the UK (Webster, et al., 2010). It was conducted over five years and is significant in both the sample size and breadth of the research, which was conducted on the effects of support staff on pupils. The study has shown that there is a significant

negative effect on students' progress who are receiving TA support, and while it recognised the value of TA support, the authors were clear that the system of support in schools must be reconsidered and amended to better serve the child who are in need of the most help in the education system. Their research outlines how the majority of student's working with TAs were those who were failing to meet expected levels or progress or had an SEN. The authors highlighted the inequity of the students with the highest level of need working pedagogically with those least qualified, and how this practice could a factor in explaining the reason for the negative effect of TA support on pupil's progress.

While the DES has been very clear about the duties of the SNA and has consistently outlined their care-giving role (Logan, 2006), research has consistently suggested that SNA's are often acting beyond their official remit in a teaching and learning capacity (Logan, 2006; Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2015; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). This has been recognised by the DES (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) however this situation is unchanged as of research carried out in 2015 (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2015). While Irish principals have acknowledged the role SNA's play in facilitating group work, particularly in English and Mathematics (Keating & O'Connor, 2012), the authors of the DISS project in the UK emphasize the need for a re-evaluation of this practice (Webster, et al., 2010).

From a child's perspective, Irish literature shows that some children are frustrated by SNA support, especially during peer interactions. Logan's research with children who receive SNA support highlights children's perceptions of this support (Logan, 2006). While one child acknowledged the help of the SNA with practical issues such as staying in a particular area while in the yard, another child outlines the issues he faced socially where other children were reluctant to include him as he was constantly monitored by the SNA (Logan, 2006). Research from the UK has suggested that children with diagnosed SEN are more likely to be bullied and isolated in school and to experience relationship difficulties (Norwich & Kelly, 2004). While the authors of this research do not explore possible reasons for this, SNA support may be a factor in this. The DISS study highlights that the deployment of the TA in the classroom to an assigned pupil results in less peer interactions for the child. Peer interaction, both in and out of the classroom for children with SEN is recognised in research as being an aspect of school inclusion (Nordstrom, 2011), that is vital for a truly inclusive education.

While there is a wide range of research on inclusive education, this is not surprising due to the international move towards a more diverse mainstream classroom. There is some good research in Irish context's, however it is clear that there remains a need for further research in the area of SNA support.

Methodology

Research at its most basic level has two aims; firstly to answer a question that is identified by the investigator by creating a research design (Tuckman & Harper, 2012), and secondly, to draw a conclusion from these findings in order to answer a research question. A researcher must also be aware of the limitations to her research and flag this in a completed piece of work. Research in the field of education is a major contributor to the policies and strategies used by educators, administrators and policymakers (The Editors of Salem Press, 2014). It follows that teachers must implement the findings that good quality research uncovers in their practice and monitor the results. It is clear from research though that while most teachers recognise the importance and need for research, many believe that the findings of research are not applicable in the classroom (Bas & Zivlun, 2017).

It has also been noted that because of the complex environments that researchers are collecting data from such as classrooms, there is need for what some commentators call more 'scientific rigour' (Winn, 2003) when conducting research. The increased focus towards research in the field of education is obvious, and contemporary educational research considers far more variables than older research previously did, such as cultural and religious implications which are more significant in today's global society than previously (Ayiro, 2012). This is something this researcher will consider when collecting data. A qualitative research design was used to address the research question of how multi-grade

teachers create an inclusive educational experience for all students in their class, with a focus on those children with SEN.

Mixed Methods

Mixed methods research involves an aspect of both quantitative and qualitative data, which some refer to as the “most natural” of data collection methods (Norwegian Educational Research towards 2020, 2012). Some critics argue that mixed methods of research are the most effective method of data collection, where a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods heighten the reliability of the data (Zohrabi, 2013). However, for small-scale research such as this project, as mentioned already, there are limitations to the breadth of data that can be collected. There were three months allocated to collect, collate and analyse the data in this study. The word count is limited to ten thousand words which again limits the breadth and depth of data collection and analysis. These factors acted as barriers to this form of research design.

Quantitative Research

Quantitative research has been referred to in literature as a “counting and measuring” method of data collection, as opposed to the “logic of describing and searching for meaning” utilised in qualitative research (Brigham, 2015). Quantitative data is statistical in nature meaning that the information collected is quantifiable and may be statistically analysed (Ayiro, 2012). Numeric data must be collected from many people and trends analysed for trends and relationships

among variables. This research design was considered unsuitable for this research project, as there were several factors that were prohibitive. Given that a large-scale study is required for quantitative research, the researcher had concerns about the recruitment challenges. The research question focuses on multi-grade teachers, who are busy practitioners and the researcher was conscious that attempting to conduct research on teachers during the academic year was going to be a challenge. This factor combined with the in-depth responses that are possible in qualitative data, was the deciding factor in choosing qualitative research.

Qualitative Research

Some critics encourage educational researchers to use all research methods at their disposal (Winn, 2003), where each method's results offer answers to the research question which can then be threaded together to form a conclusion to the research question. However, for the purposes of this research, the author is restricted by both time and resources, so this restricts both the method of research and the number of participants. Having consulted the literature regarding educational research, the researcher decided to use qualitative methods to collect data. When considering the method of data collection, several options were considered.

Some research has pointed to the potential email interviewing has as a qualitative method of educational research (James, 2007). Emailing is

advantageous due to practical constraints, such as location or time issues. Also mentioned in the research was the benefit to the participant of being able to collate their opinions in a coherent matter before submitting it to the researcher. While this is something the researcher considered, as it may have saved time during the data collection stage of research, it was decided not to be appropriate because the researcher was attempting to interview busy, practicing teachers. By using email as a method of data collection, it may influence the response rate.

Focus groups were also considered for this research project. Focus groups allow participants to “interrogate and debate issues raised” in a group setting (Barbour, 2007, p. 111). The interviewer does not interview the group by exchanging questions and answers, but instead acts as a facilitator of discussion, based on the assumption that people with something in common are more inclined to discuss this in a group setting (Flores & Alonso, 1995). While some argue that focus groups are more suited to encouraging participants who may be otherwise reluctant to discuss their beliefs and practices (Barbour, 2007), the researcher was aware of the fact that participants may be reluctant to discuss their practices and opinions on inclusive education with their colleagues and other strangers. This combined with the possible logistical difficulties of gathering all participants together meant that this was not a suitable means of data collection for this research project.

From a study of other research in the field (Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018), it was decided that interviews may be the most suitable method for my data collection. The researcher has consulted literature about interviewing as a method of data collection as a qualitative researcher, and it points to a clear and in depth knowledge of the interview topic and also the cultural context in which it stands (Dilley, 2000). Other research emphasises the importance of understanding how the research method design fits with the research question (Adams & Cox, 2008), and this was something this author considered when choosing a data collection method. Other studies of educational research suggested that interviews allow the interviewer to yield a level of depth that may not be possible with other data collection instruments (Xerri, 2018).

The advantages and disadvantages of interviewing as a method of data collection are well documented in the research. The importance of the “holistic snapshot” that is created by interviewing is mentioned by some researchers as an important factor to consider (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Semi-structured interviews, which allow the interviews to delve into social and personal matters (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) on a one to one basis have value. This research highlights the need for the interviewer to quickly develop a positive rapport with the participant and the importance of asking “carefully considered” follow up questions to add depth to the discourse. As with all methods of data collection, there are some disadvantages that were considered. Brown outlines the disadvantages of interviews and considers them time-consuming, with a potential for

inconsistencies (Brown, 2001). These disadvantages therefore contribute to the limitations of the research project.

Interviews. The literature outlines the benefits of semi-structured interviews (Fox, 2006); how the open-ended questioning and freedom to probe means that the topic can be discussed in detail, and different lines of questioning can be tailored to each participant. However, Fox also discusses the challenges posed by semi-structured interviews, namely that the analysis and interpretation of the responses from participants can be difficult to construct into any uniform response, as they can be so varied. This is something that this researcher considered when creating the interview schedule. The researcher is advantaged in that she does not have to navigate the outsider status within teaching. As the researcher is a pre-service teacher and has a knowledge of some of the jargon that may be used by the teaching profession, this may help participants when being interviewed, as they will not need to explain terminology (Merriman, et al., 2001).

Before carrying out the research interviews, a pilot interview was conducted. The literature emphasises the importance of pilot testing the instrument chosen for data collection (Turner, 2010). This allows the researcher to test out the interview and identify any flaws or weaknesses (Doody & Doody, 2015). Turner points to the importance of using the pilot on a suitable participant, and not someone removed from the field the research is being conducted in. Other research suggests an 'interviewing the investigator' approach (Chenail,

2011), where the researcher adopts the role of participant and a colleague or someone related to the field acts as the researcher. This interview would be recorded, and a similar process followed to a real interview. This allows the researcher to see the questions they have prepared from the participants perspective and may be helpful in assessing the structure of the interviews for the genuine interviews with participants. Weighing up the options this researcher has, a pilot interview was conducted with one the planned participants to assess the interview questions and flow of the session. Other research has outlined the highly significant issues that pilots raise, such as ethical considerations, representation and researcher health and safety (Sampson, 2004).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants. The first interview was conducted as a pilot, and both the questions and the format of the interviews were reviewed and amended following feedback from the interviewee. The researcher was too structured in questioning during the pilot interview and this affected the data collected. While the first participant answered the questions asked, their responses were considerably short and lacked the depth the researcher was aiming for. To combat this, in the interviews following the pilot, the researcher asked probing questions, which allowed the interviewee to expand on an answer or to clarify an issue. There were also some technical issues with the pilot interview and the researcher was able to resolve these for the following interviews.

The positionality of the research must be considered carefully when conducting research. Some commentators have suggested that a researcher's beliefs, political stance and cultural background are all important variables when considering their positionality (Bourke, 2014). Qualitative research by its very nature seeks to answer a research question through the lived experiences of individuals, so it is imperative when conducting interviews that the researcher remains clear on their positionality throughout the research process. The pilot interviews allowed the researcher to experience the atmosphere of an interview and helped the researcher facilitate the development of their answer, sometimes asking further questions as outlined in the research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Eight participants who are all practicing teachers were recruited and interviews were conducted in a location of their choosing. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher introduced the topic and clarified the purpose of the research. The system of data collection and data retention was explained, and the consent form was signed by the participant. There was no pre-prepared introduction and the rationale for this was to keep the interview as informal and collegial as possible. Participants were given a copy of the interview schedule to allow them to become familiar with the interview and the researcher clarified any questions before commencing. The audio was recorded with a Dictaphone and phone recording with the participants consent. Interviews ranged in duration from 25 minutes to an hour. The interview schedule was used for all participants and

there were no questions that the participants did not wish to answer. The schedule is presented in Appendix I.

The researcher increased methodological rigour by taking field notes to record points of emphasis during the interview, participant's tone of voice and body language during the interview. Field notes can be utilised as a data source for analysis and discussion (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017) and these were used by the researcher to immerse herself in the data as per the guidelines for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical considerations. Ethical considerations are of a particular importance for educational researchers, as often the researcher is dealing with the learning and behaviours of children and adults (Tuckman & Harper, 2012), and the researcher must first do no harm. Some literature notes that that the researcher must be able to assert from the beginning that her research will improve lives, essentially that this research will add some depth to the previous research in the field. Since this research will not involve children directly, this removes some of the ethical considerations that would make this high-risk research.

Participants were assured that the interviews would be conducted anonymously and that there would be no identifying information published in the dissertation and the researcher reminded the participants of their right to cease participation at any stage without reason. Participants were given a consent form

outlining the method of recording that was used. The consent form gave full details, in non-technical language of the purpose of the research and the proposed role of the person being invited to participate and how their data would be used in the research study.

Participants were assured that in the subsequent transcription, no names were used. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the interviews at any stage of the study and that the data would be stored on the researcher's laptop and in the cloud, both of which are password protected. They were also informed that there would be no data stored with identifying information as the file name on any devices.

Limitations of this research. The limitation to this research centres around the fact that this is a small-scale project, and the researcher was careful not to draw generalisations from a small pool of participants. Many of the interviewees are personally known to the researcher. The positionality of researcher is a potential limitation although this was addressed by the pilot interview. The researcher was not an anonymous Masters student conducting research, but a familiar face, and the dynamic between the researcher and the interviewees is complicated by this fact. This adds a power dynamic (Hopkins, 2007) to the relationship with some of the participants, which the researcher was conscious of during the data collection and analytic stages.

The researcher is also limited by the time and resources at her disposal. As a novice researcher, the researcher had to familiarise herself with research terminology and time was limited as the researcher was on School Placement during the data collection process. An independent analysis of the interview transcripts was not within the scope of the study so researcher bias may be present. Also, the word count of ten thousand words limits the breadth and depth of the data analysis.

Qualitative methods were used to collect data in order to address the research question. While limitations are acknowledged, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight participants.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes in the semi-structured interviews in order to answer the research question. The researcher followed the guidelines on thematic analysis as set out in literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As per the guidelines, during Phase One, the researcher familiarised herself with the data by listening back to the audio recordings and by reading field notes. Following this, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher checked back over the transcripts for accuracy as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006).

An initial list of ideas, also known as codes, were generated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to organise the interview transcripts and codes. The researcher searched for themes among the data codes. Key themes were identified, reviewed and refined as the researcher considered the validity of the themes as an accurate representation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final themes produced, as outlined in Table 1, support the data analysis and answer the research question. This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the qualitative interviews.

Seven participants were recruited. The demographic data is present below. The data presented is non-specific in order to maintain participants' anonymity.

Participant demographic data

Participant identification number	Teaching experience
1	Seven years
2	Thirty years
3	Two years
4	Thirty-one years
5	Eight years
6	Ten years
7	One year
8 (pilot)	Thirty-five years

Participants were asked about their experiences in multi-grade classes, their understanding of inclusion and how this impacted on their practice. The interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. An extract from the coded transcript is available in Appendix II. The codebook is available in Appendix III. The process led to the identification of three themes and nine subthemes. These themes are displayed in below.

Themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Teacher as a facilitator of an inclusive education	a) Defining an inclusive education b) Inclusive practices c) Training
2. Challenges facing teachers	a) Resources b) Outside agencies c) Labelling and parents
3. Provision of SNA support	a) Role of SNA b) Fostering independence c) Barrier to inclusion

Teacher as a Facilitator of an Inclusive Education

Defining an inclusive education. Initially, each teacher was asked to define inclusive education. Participant 2 regarded it as “providing an education to the best of your ability with the resources that you have, for each and every child in front of you”. Participant 5 outlined that “inclusive for me, is ... making sure that the children don’t feel different to anybody else, that they are always involved, be it ability based, or racially”. Participants’ definition of an inclusive education differed, with two mentioning the importance of children not feeling different,

while another mentioned equal participation. All centered around the concept of equality. This concurs with the literature in that it is very difficult to define what exactly an inclusive education is. It does seem to be a “conceptual muddle” (Florian, 2014) and a very subjective term.

Inclusive practices. All participants reported to engage in inclusive practices to provide an inclusive education to children in their classroom with SEN. Participant 1 has a child with ASD in her Infant class and she described her awareness of his need for movement breaks throughout the day. She outlined how she used children’s books, especially designed to educate young children about ASD. They now understand why the child with ASD sometimes behaves and communicates differently than them and this has helped foster an inclusive dynamic in the class. All participant’s described utilising peer tuition as a key methodology which created an inclusive dynamic in their multi-grade classrooms. While two participants emphasised the need for the teacher to foster the acceptability of this dynamic, all agreed peer tuition was a useful tool especially given the time constraints.

Other participants described strategies they used to include children with Irish exemptions, by teaching thematically so children were exposed to the themes being covered through Irish through English or SESE. Two participants acknowledged that while withdrawal of children from the mainstream class is not seen as best practice, Participant 5 and 6 described how sometimes, in their view,

children need one to one support outside the classroom to consolidate their learning. Tiernan, Casserly and Maguire (2018) outlined that co-teaching was highlighted in their research as a key approach to facilitating an inclusive education. In this study, no participant mentioned team teaching as something they engaged with in the classroom. Also mentioned by Tiernan, Casserly and Maguire is the prevalence of withdrawal of full grades by the SET, where the participants in this study did acknowledge that withdrawal is not in line with best practice, mentioning the perceived stigma around withdrawal. This concurs with the findings of this research study, where three teachers had full classes withdrawn for mathematics, and all acknowledged that while it wasn't ideal, it was necessary.

This perceived stigma around withdrawal in both research studies is contradicted by research from the UK (Norwich & Kelly, 2004), where 40% of the children interviewed preferred withdrawal to in-class support for a multitude of reasons; most commonly cited was less noise, less distraction and better work. It is interesting that despite a national policy moving towards in class support, one wonders if children have been consulted. Children's voice in as a factor in policy making that has been examined by in an Irish context, with one study (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012) highlighting that in Ireland, "children's views are neither consistently nor reliably incorporated into educational decision making".

Participant 2 spoke about her commitment to a child being educated in his locality regardless of his level of SEN saying that that as a principal, she would facilitate this with resources and supports to the best of her ability saying, “I do believe, they deserve a shot ...if you’re given the supports, we’ll give it a shot”. It was clear that this participant placed a high value on both an education in a mainstream setting and on physical inclusion, something which has been discussed in literature in this field (Norwich, 2017; Mulryan-Kyne, 2004; Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire, 2018; O’Riordan, 2017).

Leadership in a school has been reported to have a direct impact on the inclusiveness of a school, and this is something that was considered by two participants in this study. Irish research in particular (Day & Prunty, 2015) has found that fostering a collaborative culture and ethos “seemed to underpin the leadership style”. Day and Prunty’s findings reported that prioritising early intervention and team teaching had a direct impact on the perceived inclusiveness of a school by its’ staff. These findings are borne out by this research, where three participants outlined the role leadership and school ethos play in the provision of an inclusive education.

While the literature suggests staff composition and demographics may act as a barrier to inclusion (O’Riordan, 2017), no participant in this research study suggested that the extent of staff diversity in a school could potentially act as a barrier to inclusion. It could be argued that there may be more urgent aspects of

an inclusive education that deserve attention before focus can be shifted to the diversity of staff, but the research is clear in suggesting that it does have an impact on children, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds. While schools attempt to demonstrate their inclusivity by accepting all children regardless of gender, colour, nationality, religion, sexual orientation and disability, a predominantly white, female, Catholic staff is not representative of Ireland today. While this is a policy issue, and something that is being challenged by the Migrant Teacher Project. This project is working with migrants in Ireland who hold teaching qualifications who have experienced difficulties gaining employment in their field in Ireland. Also, it is clear that there must be a shift in DES and training colleges in order to attract a more diverse population, so that schools truly are engaging in inclusive practices.

Training. Participants were asked about the training they received during their ITE regarding inclusive practices. All reported that they were unsatisfied with the level of training they received. Two participants with almost thirty years teaching experience outlined that training in SEN and inclusion did not feature in their ITE, which they acknowledged, would have been typical of the time, with Participant 2 noting “it (inclusive education) didn’t exist when I was in college”. Participant 7, the most recent graduate of all participants was not satisfied with the ITE he received regarding an inclusive education, saying that “it’s a very important aspect of teaching, but it’s something that gets overlooked”.

All participants regarded CPD as an important aspect of developing their skills in order to support all children in their classroom but reported that there was a lack of multi-grade and inclusive specific CPD available. One principal remarked that the provision of substitute cover for a course dictated whether a teacher could attend, as a three-teacher school could not manage with two teachers on any given day. Participant 2 regarded this as a major barrier for multi-grade schools in accessing the relevant CPD. It is interesting that although Participant 2 viewed substitute cover as a barrier, Irish research has suggested that multi-grade teachers have a higher uptake of CPD than those in single grade schools, and that location has no bearing on CPD take-up (Banks & Smyth, 2011). This research also highlighted that take-up of CPD is higher in classrooms where teachers report a more positive climate.

Participant 1 and 2 described that they believed, as a teacher, the majority of your learning must be self-directed. They explained that the relevant training will not be offered to you, it is up to the individual teacher to seek out the information they require and apply it to their practice.

The research on multi-grade CPD and ITE training concurs with the findings of this research in that CPD has been found to be inadequate and teachers did not consider themselves adequately prepared by their college of education (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004). The need for continuous up-skilling and CPD is something recognised in literature (O'Riordan, 2017) and in this research study. Participant 2 and 4

outlined the importance of school leadership when it came to teachers engaging with CPD.

As a principal, Participant 2 explained that while it is part of her role to encourage her staff to engage with CPD, she also was aware that she had to be cognisant of the fact that CPD is more accessible to younger teachers with less family commitments than an older teacher may have. Participant 4 discussed a large school she had previously worked in where the principal placed a major emphasis on the upskilling and utilising skills of his staff. The research in an Irish context found that the impact of school management facilitating collaboration between teachers and encouraging and facilitating relevant CPD should not be underestimated when assessing the inclusiveness of a school (Day & Prunty, 2015).

Seven out of the eight participants, when asked about consulting academic journals for information to support their teaching practices, replied that they would not refer to academic journals. Two participants regarded academic journals as a resource to engage with during third level study, with one saying she would consult literature if she “was to do a Masters or something”. This lack of referral to evidence based research and academic writings has been explored previously and research has shown that a lack of time and access to academic sources has proven to be a barrier to teachers consulting and using research information (Williams & Coles, 2007). The importance of evidence based

education has been emphasised by the research (Davies, 1999), and Davies considers teachers' ability to source and implement findings from research as being key to future developments in educational thinking and practice.

Challenges Facing Teachers

Resources. All participants interviewed reported on the lack of time and planning obligations having an impact on their teaching. Participant 5 explained that when comparing her experiences in a single grade class and multi-grade, she found that time was a major restriction in a multi-grade setting;

You try your best, but time is a restriction ...in the classroom or in your planning time... You're constantly trying to find loopholes to link the three classes together ... It's really challenging.

This is a factor that is consistently mentioned in Irish research on multi-grade teachers, (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004; Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire, 2018; O'Riordan, 2017). In this research, all participants emphasised the difficulties of teaching mathematics in multi-grade and this was also mentioned in Mulryan-Kyne's research. In this research project, three teachers of 4th, 5th and 6th Class had their 4th Class withdrawn daily during Maths time. Participant 1 outlined in context of mathematics, that "it's the one subject that you have to teach separate curriculums and it can be hard to juggle sometimes". The administrative duties of a teaching principal were also a factor that impacted both Participant 2 and the participants in Mulryan-Kyne's work. Time has also been mentioned as a barrier

to inclusion in single grade classes (Day & Prunty, 2015), proving that it is an issue that any teacher can struggle with, regardless of class size or composition.

Participant 5 discussed the impact of manpower in a multi-grade school. She previously taught in a large school and is now teaching with a total staff of 4 in a multi-grade school. She outlined her previous experience in the SET role, where “there would have been three SET teachers going into the one classroom to help the mainstream classroom teacher”. The lack of manpower as discussed by Participant 5 was noted in research to have an effect on both staff morale, and some teachers felt isolated by during the course of their work (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004).

3 participants viewed funding as a barrier to inclusion in multi-grade schools. Participant 8 discussed Aistear and the fact that there is no specific funding for the provision of this curriculum. Participant 5 and 6 also discussed how in their experience, in a bigger school, as a class teacher, you are less aware of funding issues than in a smaller school. Participant 5 also reported that she found there is less resources in multi-grade due to a lack of funding, and she this as a direct barrier for children with SEN, as often these are the children that need concrete materials and visual aids, and she finds she has to create some resources herself, which impacts on her time to plan. The lack of funding has been highlighted in Irish research (Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire, 2018), which showed that teachers in multi-grade classes are sourcing, creating and modifying resources

in order to ensure inclusive of pupils with SEN. O’Riordan (2017) points out that the notion that inclusion is resource sensitive is supported by international research and notes that government provision of funding plays a major role in the ability of a school to provide an inclusive education. This means policy makers at governmental level must be lobbied and educated about the vital relationship between funding and inclusiveness.

Outside agencies. All participants had some interaction with outside agencies, e.g. NEPS, PDST, HSE Early Intervention Team and School Age Team. Most participants agreed that while all agencies involved in a child’s care are very helpful, unfortunately, they are severely understaffed. Participants, especially those teaching children with severe needs found this extremely frustrating, as described by Participant 3, “there’s no problem with the people, it’s just that there’s not enough of them”. Participant 1 has a child with autism in her class who, after almost two years in primary school has yet to be seen by the NEPS psychologist. He is due to move to the care of School Age Services in September once he turns six, but Participant 1 has been informed that there is no psychologist assigned to the area and no plans to appoint one, so as of now, he will have no psychological support from September.

Long waiting lists dominated all participants views on outside agencies, particularly waiting lists to see an educational psychologist, often who’s report is contingent on the child accessing other services. Participant 6 also highlighted the

need for prioritising children with the most severe needs in schools to be seen for assessment, to the detriment of a child with less severe needs. She also mentioned the need to gently encourage certain parents to get a private assessment, while conscious of the cost, but also conscious of the fact that certain children who need an assessment would not get it during their time in primary school.

Participant 2 outlined the inequalities in the system, saying that “it’s those that shout the loudest that get the most”. She discussed the ways she has had to advocate for pupils in the past,

You’re asking parents to rattle cans ... Principals rattle cans, politicians rattle cans, sometimes we have to contact them as well. I hate to say it but sometimes it works ... probably less now, but in the past it has.

While there is a lack of research carried out on Irish school’s access to outside agency support, the IRIS report (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O’Raw, 2015) outlined the concerns of parents, principals and teachers regarding access to therapeutic services. This report highlighted the long waiting lists and staff shortages across the public healthcare sector, and some parents reported paying privately for therapy sessions in order to support their child in mainstream school. This research was conducted in 2015 and four years on, it seems from this research project that the issues regarding access to outside agency support remains unchanged.

Labelling and parents. The importance of parental relationships was discussed by four participants in this study, with Participant 1 emphasising the importance of the relationship she had with the parents of one child with autism. Participant 1 explained the relationship with the child's parents calling it, a "co-operative relationship" and one she feels is hugely beneficial to the child. This participant discussed communicating with parents through a messaging application outside of school hours. While the research is clear about the vital role the teacher – parent relationship plays in meeting the needs of the child (Day, Prunty, & Dupont, 2012), one must consider the impact of this on the professional role of the teacher, work life balance and the sensitivity and confidentiality implications of communicating in this manner.

Two participants discussed the merits of assessing children. Participant 2 outlined her view on the issue of diagnosing and labelling children in primary school. She her view on the issue saying that because of direction SEN allocation from the DES is taking currently, she foresees that there will be less assessment of children. She sees the individual school being given a freer reign as a step away from assessment, which Participant 2 sees as a positive move. Participant 4 however discussed the implications of labels. She spoke in the context of a child in Senior Infants who is having difficulties socially. While the SET and class teacher are monitoring the child, they believe that he will need an assessment in a year's time. When asked about the implications of labelling for this child, she replied that an assessment by a professional would give her an indicator of what to expect of

the child in certain situations, both socially and in the classrooms and advice on how this child could be supported. She reported that without a proper diagnosis, teachers are feeling their way in the dark and cannot provide a differentiated education to the child.

While two participants disagreed on the issue of labelling children, there is research that supports both sides. Participant 2 believes that the move away from labelling is a positive one, starting with the move to a General Allocation Model, and there is Irish research to support this (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015). This study found that by allocating individual funding based on the severity of the child's need, it "locates the problem within the child", and is thought to encourage labelling which is not seen as inclusive. Assessments therefore can become "thwarted" and not fit for purpose. While Participant 2 welcomes the autonomy given to principals in the new model of allocation, Banks Frawley and McCoy are cautious about this. They outline that while the move is positive, there is a lack of consensus on the definition of inclusion between stakeholders which may mean a discrepancy may exist between 'policy intentions and school practices on the ground'.

Contrastingly, there is also research that supports the importance of labelling children, as was described by Participant 4 (Gul & Vuran, 2015). They argue that the success of an inclusive education is dependent on the exact identification of an individual's need, and then the organisation of resources with

input from all stakeholders; the child, parents, teacher, SET and outside agency support.

Participant 1 and 4 spoke about the importance of a of being able to offer the diagnosis to other children to explain behaviours. Both considered it important for other children in order to understand why a certain child is behaving in a way that may seem unacceptable. This is supported by research (Gus, 2000) which found that as a result of specific information about autism being delivered to a class, their understanding, behaviour and attitude towards a child with autism in their class improved.

Participant 1 described using a specialised children's picture book in order to explain autism to the children in his class. She outlined the importance of being "upfront to explain about his (the child) autism" and she discussed the sense of inclusion she fostered in her Infant classroom;

it just helps them understand and then they're not as nervous around him and they know what he likes and what he doesn't like, and how to respond to him if he doesn't use language. We know how to tell if he's frustrated or if he wants something, he uses gestures and we use that back and that's how they communicate with him and build relationships with him.

Provision of SNA Support

Role of SNA. All participants in the study reported that without SNA's in their schools and classroom, they would be unable to provide the inclusive education that currently exists, as surmised by Participant 2, "if we haven't SNA's, I don't think we will be able to provide the level of inclusive education that we are". This concurs with current research, Project IRIS, which was carried out on behalf of the NCSE, where SNA support was highly valued by all stakeholders (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2015) .

Importance of fostering independence. Four participants in this research project emphasized the vital role of the SNA in fostering a sense of independence in the child. Participant 1 outlined how "it's important for them (the SNA) to know when they are helping the child when needed or being too helpful and not letting the child learn independently when they are able". Participant 2 highlighted how SNA support must be varied during the child's time, with the ultimate aim being that the SNA is eventually dispensable;

if that (SNA support) doesn't change or vary in the time that a child spends in school, then you're doing something wrong. It should always be the aim of a school, and for an SNA, that they make themselves dispensable.

This is supported by Irish research where children with SEN were interviewed, and a desire to work independently was expressed (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012), which shows that independence is valued by both teachers and

children. There has not been a significant amount of research carried out on SNA's, and this is something that is lacking in Ireland. While the value of SNA's is clear, so too should the value of their input into research.

Barrier to inclusion. While all participants in this study clearly valued the support of SNA's, 4 participants were keen to elaborate on the specifics of SNA support. When asked about the whether they perceive the role of an SNA as being a barrier to inclusion, Participant 2 replied that it "depends on the SNA, of course". Participant 5, while acknowledging she had not experienced SNA support in an Irish context, explained that her experience teaching in the UK exposed her to TA support in that context. She outlined that although the TA had more responsibility for the "teaching aspects of things", she was teaching a younger class in the UK than she was during interviewing. Placing her current class of 4th, 5th and 6th Class into this context of support staff in the classroom, she agreed that from a child's perspective, SNA's did represent a barrier to inclusion, saying:

I don't know how they would react to having an SNA. I think they would feel very self- conscious ... I think the older the children get, the more aware of these things they are, and they just want to fit in ... a child just wants to fit in. Even though you know it is in their best interest.

Participant 5 did however qualify this by saying, "I think for a teacher they're great". However, Participant 2 and 6 did not agree that SNA's were a barrier to inclusion, but both mentioned the need for progression in terms of the

child's independence throughout the year. Both participants were clear that all parties must agree about the exact parameters of the role of the SNA, as evidenced by Participant 2 saying, "The SNA's role is not to teach the child, the SNA's role is to support the child in their learning".

Conclusion

It is clear that the participants in this study, all multi-grade teachers, do not feel supported in providing an inclusive education by policy makers. Cuts to funding, difficulties in accessing outside agency supports such as HSE multi-disciplinary teams and a lack of time were all mentioned as part of the challenges in providing an inclusive education in a multi-grade class. The diversity of definitions of an inclusive education is evidence that there is no one agreed method of providing an inclusive education in Ireland, which may be problematic. The differing opinion of participants and the also literature regarding labelling of children was significant in that educational policy in Ireland is clearly moving towards less labelling of children and more school autonomy with regards the provision of resources.

The provision of SNA support is at a critical stage in Ireland. UK research as part of the DISS project has shown the potential pitfalls of SNA support in a pedagogical context, and this is an aspect of inclusion that must be reviewed in Ireland. While the research found little research in an Irish context on the role of an SNA from a teacher's perspective, this research study has shown that the grey area around an SNA fostering independence and acting as a barrier to inclusion is something that must be considered by policymakers as part of Ireland's responsibilities as set out in the Salamanca Statement.

Recommendations

The lack of a strict definition of inclusive education is something to be considered by both future research and policymakers. While EPSEN provides the statutory framework for the provision of an inclusive education, it is too vague. Practicing teachers are not clear on what they should be providing, and each used their own professional judgement when making decisions regarding inclusive practices in their classrooms. More CPD with specific inclusion practice instruction should be offered, with substitute cover provided for all teachers, as this mentioned in the research as a barrier to multi-grade teachers accessing CPD. Mathematics was mentioned by all participants as being particularly difficult to teach in multi-grade, and this finding should be taken into account by the teacher training colleges providing the ITE courses in order to support student teachers as future teachers of multi-grade classes.

Also of note was the lack of teacher engagement with academic publications and research. While participants regarded CPD as an essential part of their practice, they did not view academic research as being a part of this. Future research should examine the perceived barriers of access to academic work by practicing teachers. While this research project focused on teacher's perspectives, future research may consider investigating children's perceptions of an inclusive education. Children lack voice in research, which has been mentioned previously in this research, and it is evident that further study is warranted in this area.

The provision of SNA support is an aspect of inclusion in Irish schools that is in need of research. The existing Irish research outlines that SNA's are often acting outside of their official remit but fails to consider the implications of this. The DISS study has suggested that there are serious negative implications for children who are receiving support from TA's both academically and socially. Future research is needed to assess the role of SNA's in Irish schools and how this role can be threaded into the provision of an inclusive education for all children in Ireland today.

The lack of diversity in Irish staffrooms was mentioned in the research (O'Riordan, 2017), outlining that while staffrooms continue to be of a homogenous make-up, schools cannot be truly inclusive environments. While this is being addressed to a degree by the Migrant Teacher Project, who are working with migrants in Ireland who hold international teaching qualifications, it could be argued that the routes of entry into ITE courses must be examined. The traditional Leaving Certificate has not fostered a sense of diversity in the teaching profession to date, which raises doubts regarding the suitability of this method of recruitment.

While this research was limited, the results revealed some interesting findings. Further research is warranted in the areas of staff diversity, SNA support and inclusive practices in an Irish context. It is clear that multi-grade teachers feel challenged by a multi-grade class, and the provision of specific CPD is something

that policymakers should consider in the future. Teaching, regardless of single grade or multi-grade, is a complex, multi-faceted practice and teachers must be facilitated in accessing research in order for it to be implemented in practice.

Reference List

- Abawi, L., & Oliver, M. (2013). Shared pedagogical understandings: Schoolwide inclusion practices supporting learner needs. *Improving Schools*, 16(2), 159-174.
- Adams, A., & Cox, A. L. (2008). Questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus groups. In P. Cairns, & A. L. Cox, *Research Methods for Human Computer Interaction* (pp. 17-34). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Alshenqeeti, H. (2014). Interviewing as a Data Collection Method: A Critical Review . *English Linguistics Research*, 3(1), 39-45.
- Ayiro, L. P. (2012). *A functional approach to educational research methods and statistics: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. New York: The Edwin Mellen.
- Banks, J., & McCoy, S. (2017). An Irish solution...? Questioning the expansion of special classes in an era of inclusive education. *The Economic and Social Review*, 48(4), 441-461.
- Banks, J., & Smyth, E. (2011). *Continuous Professional Development among Primary Teachers in Ireland*. Dublin: The Teaching Council.
- Banks, J., Frawley, D., & McCoy, S. (2015). Achieving inclusion? Effect resourcing of students with special educational needs. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(9), 926-943.

- Barbour, R. (2007). *Doing focus groups*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Bas, G., & Zivlucun, Z. S. (2017). Teachers' views about educational research: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 13(2), 60-75.
- Blum, P. (2014). *How do mainstream teachers make sense of their role in terms of 'every teacher is a teacher of special needs'? What constraints do they face*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrived from University of London (<https://oatd.org/oatd/record?record=oai%5C%3Aethos.bl.uk%5C%3A630852>)
- Bourke, B. (2014). Positionality: reflecting on the research process. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(33), 1-9.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brigham, F. J. (2015). Chapter 1: Quantitative research in education: Impact on evidence-based instruction. *Current Issues and Trends in Special Education: Research, Technology and Teacher Preparation*, 20, 3-17.
- Brown, D. (2001). *Using Surveys in Language Programs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press .

- Bryan, A. (2009). The intersectionality of nationalism and multiculturalis in the Irish curriculum: teaching against racism? *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 12(3), 297-317.
- Chenail, R. J. (2011). Interviewing the investigator: Strategies for addressing instrumentation and researcher bias concerns in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(1), 255-262.
- Darmody, M., & Smyth, E. (2011). *Job satisfaction and occupational stress among primary school teachers and school principals in Ireland*. Dublin: The Teaching Council.
- Davies, P. (1999). What is evidence-based education? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 47(2), 108-121.
- Day, T., & Prunty, A. (2015). Responding to the challenges of inclusion in Irish schools. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 30(2), 237-252.
- Day, T., Prunty, A., & Dupont, M. (2012). Responding to students' needs in special schools in Ireland and England: findings from two schools. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 12(3), 141-150.
- Department of Education & Skills. (2018, October 10). *Annual Statistical Report 2017-2018*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.ie>

Department of Education and Skills. (2011). *The special needs assistant scheme:*

A value for money review of expenditure on the special needs assistant scheme. Dublin: DES.

Devine, D. (2005). Welcome to the Celtic Tiger? Teacher responses to

immigration and increasing ethnic diversity in Irish schools. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 15(1), 49-70.

DiCicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. F. (2006). The qualitative research interview.

Medical Education, 40(4), 314-321.

Dilley, P. (2000). Conducting successful interviews: Tips for intrepid research.

Theory Into Practice, 39(3), 131-137.

Doody, O., & Doody, C. M. (2015). Conducting a pilot study: case study of a

novice researcher. *British Journal of Nursing*, 24(21), 1074-1078.

Education for Persons with a Special Educational Need Act 2004. (2019, February 3). Retrieved from

<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2004/act/30/enacted/en/html>

Ellis, S., Tod, J., & Graham-Matheson, L. (2008). *Special Educational Needs and*

Inclusion – Reflection and Renewal. Birmingham: NASUWT.

Flores, J. G., & Alonso, C. G. (1995). Using focus groups in educational research:

exploring teachers' perspectives on educational change. *Evaluation Review*, 19(1), 84-101.

- Florian, L. (2014). What counts as evidence of inclusive education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 29(3), 86-294.
- Fox, N. (2006). *Using Interviews in a Research Project*. Sheffield: Trent RDSU.
- Griffin, S., & Shevlin, M. (2007). *Responding to special educational needs: an Irish perspective*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Gul, S. O., & Vuran, S. (2015). Children with special needs' opinions and problems about inclusive practices. *Education and Science*, 40(180), 169-195 .
- Gus, L. (2000). Autism: Promoting peer understanding. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 16(4), 461-468.
- Hopkins, P. E. (2007). Positionalities and knowledge: Negotiating ethics in practice. *An International E-Journal for critical geographies*, 6(3), 386-394.
- Hopkins, S. L., Round, P. N., & Barley, K. D. (2018). Preparing beginning teachers for inclusion: designing and assessing supplementary fieldwork experiences. *Teachers and Teaching*, 24(8), 915-930.
- James, N. (2007). The use of email interviewing as a qualitative method of inquiry in educational research. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 963-976.
- Keane, E., & Heinz, M. (2016). Excavating an injustice?: nationality/ies, ethnicity/ies and experiences with diversity of initial teacher education

applicants and entrants in Ireland in 2014. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(4), 507-527.

Keating, S., & O'Connor, U. (2012). The shifting role of the special needs assistant in Irish classrooms: a time for change? *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 27(4), 533-544.

Logan, A. (2006). The role of the special needs assistant supporting pupils with special educational needs in Irish mainstream primary schools. *Support for Learning*, 21(2), 92-99.

Luder, R., Moretti, M., Kunz, A., & Diezi-Duplain, P. (2011). Individual educational planning in inclusive education in Switzerland. *Special Education*, 2(25), 164-170.

McCoy, S., Smyth, E., & Banks, J. (2012). *The primary classroom: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland study*. Dublin: ESRI.

Merrimam, S. B., Johnson-Bailey, J., Lee, M.-Y., Kee, Y., Ntseane, G., & Muhamad, M. (2001). Power and positionality: negotiating insider/outsider status within and across cultures. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20(5), 405-416.

Mulryan-Kyne, C. (2004). Teaching and learning in multigrade classrooms: what teachers say. *The Irish Journal of Education*, 35, 5-19.

- Mulryan-Kyne, C. (2007). The preparation of teachers for multi-grade teaching. *Teacher and Teacher Education*, 23(4), 501-514.
- Nordstrom, I. (2011). Inclusion and participation in peer relations. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 13(1), 71-87.
- Norwegian Educational Research towards 2020. (2012). *Mixed Methods in Educational Research: Report from the March Seminar 2012*. Oslo: The Research Council of Norway.
- Norwich, B., & Kelly, N. (2004). Pupils' view on inclusion: moderate learning difficulties and bullying in mainstream and special schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(1), 43-65.
- O'Driscoll, S. (2015). *The early years in Irish multigrade classes: trajectories of practice and identity*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrived from CORA, University College Cork (<https://cora.ucc.ie/handle/10468/2087>).
- O'Riordan, J. (2017). Inclusion and its implementation in a rural primary school in Ireland. *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland*, 30(1), 345-55.
- Paju, B., Raty, L., Pirttimaa, R., & Kontu, E. (2016). The school staff's perception of their ability to teach special educational needs pupils in inclusive settings in Finland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(8), 801-815.

- Phillippi, J., & Lauderdale, J. (2017). A guide to field notes for qualitative research: context and conversation. *Qualitative Health Research*, 28(3), 381-388.
- Prunty, A., Dupont, M., & McDaid, R. (2012). Voices of students with special educational needs (SEN): views on schooling. *Support for Learning: British Journal of Learning Support*, 27(1), 29-36.
- Quail, A., & Smyth, E. (2014, October 5). Multigrade teaching and age composition of the class: The influence on academic and social outcomes among students. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 80-90. Retrieved from ERSI: http://www.esri.ie/pubs/Session_B_Paper_1_Quail__Smyth.pdf
- Rose, R., Shevlin, M., Winter, E., & O'Raw, P. (2015). *Project IRIS - inclusive research in Irish schools: A longitudinal study of the experiences and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in Irish Schools*. Dublin: NCSE.
- Saloviita, T. (2018). How common are inclusive educational practices among Finnish teachers? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(5), 560-575.
- Sampson, H. (2004). Navigating the waves: the usefulness of a pilot in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 4(3), 383-402.

Shevlin, M., Kenny, M., & Loxley, A. (2008). A time of transition: exploring special educational provision in the Republic of Ireland. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 8(3), 141-152.

Smyth, E. (2015). *Learning in focus - Wellbeing and school experiences among 9 and 13 year olds: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland study*. Dublin: ESRI.

The Editors of Salem Press. (2014). *Education Reference Guide: Educational Research & Evaluation*. Massachusetts: Salem Press.

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education.

(2019, April 15). Retrieved from UNESCO:

http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF

Tiernan, B., Casserly, A., & Maguire, G. (2018). Towards inclusive education: instructional practices to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs in multi-grade settings. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1-21.

Tiwari, A., Das, A., & Sharma, M. (2015). Inclusive education a 'rhetoric' or a 'reality'? Teachers' perspectives and beliefs. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 52, 128-136.

Tuckman, B. W., & Harper, B. E. (2012). *Conducting Educational Research*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.

- Turner, D. W. (2010). Qualitative interview design: A practical guide for novice investigators. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(3), 754-760.
- Webster, R., Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., & Russell, A. (2010). Double standards and first principles: framing teaching assistant support for pupils with special educational needs. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25(4), 319-336.
- Willemse, T. M., & Boei, F. (2013). Teacher educators' research practices: an explorative study of teacher educators' perceptions on research. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 39(4), 354-369.
- Williams, D., & Coles, L. (2007). Teachers' approaches to finding and using research evidence: an information literacy perspective. *Educational Research*, 49(2), 185-206.
- Winn, W. (2003). Research methods and types of evidence for research in educational technology. *Educational Psychology Review*, 15(4), 367-373.
- Xerri, D. (2018). The use of interviews and focus groups in teacher research. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 91(3), 140-146.
- Zohrabi, M. (2013). Mixed method research: Instruments, validity, reliability and reporting findings. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3(2), 354-262.

Appendices

Appendix I: Interview Schedule

Part 1: Background of teacher

1. How many years teaching experience do you have?
2. How many years teaching multi-grade do you have?
3. What would you regard as the advantages and disadvantages of multi-grade classes?
4. Are you currently teaching a multi-grade class?
If so, what classes?
5. Do you have any children with significant needs in your class currently? Are these diagnosed or undiagnosed needs?

Part 2: Inclusive education

6. What do you regard as inclusive education? How does inclusive education manifest itself in an Irish context?
7. What practices do you engage in that you would view as inclusive in your classroom?
8. Would you regard differentiation as a form of inclusive practice?
9. What differences do you think there are, if any, between inclusive practices in a single grade and multi-grade class?
10. Is there any particular need, diagnosed or otherwise you feel is advantaged more by a multi-grade class situation?
11. When, in your opinion does the need for an education in a non-mainstream setting arise in the context of inclusive education?

Part 3: Training, CPD and external agencies

12. Did you receive any training during your ITE regarding inclusive education and inclusive practices?
13. If so, were you satisfied with this?
14. Have you received any CPD regarding inclusive practices?
15. Has there been any multi-grade specific CPD offered? How important do you think is it for multi-grade specific CPD be provided?

16. Do you consider CPD regarding inclusive practices a priority for your own personal development?
17. Have you ever consulted academic journals for information on inclusive practices?
18. What role, if any do you believe academic journals play in the life of a practicing teacher?
19. In your dealings with student teachers from the different colleges of education, what is your opinion on their training regarding inclusive practices?
20. What level of support do you receive from external agencies regarding children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)?
21. Do you find these services are easily accessed?
22. Are you satisfied with this level of support?
23. What is your opinion regarding cohesion between any outside agencies you may be in contact with regarding SEN?

Part 4: Barriers to inclusive education

24. What barriers, in your opinion do you believe exists in the provision of an inclusive education?
25. Do you believe the overall cost of providing an inclusive education, which is mandated for by the State, should be a consideration when providing an inclusive education?
26. A study in the UK has found that teaching assistants negatively affect student's progress and act as a barrier to inclusion. What is your opinion on the role of SNA's in an inclusive context?

Part 5: Conclusion

27. Is there anything you would like to add that has not already been covered?

Appendix II: Extract From Coded Transcript

Participant	Transcript	Coding
5	Am, I suppose inclusive for me, is, just making sure that the children don't feel different to anybody else, that they are always involved, be at ability based, or racially. I suppose in this class context, it would be ability based, I would have quite a different variety of abilities and you know, children are so aware, especially you know, up the senior end, the sixth class, they are so aware of the people around them and conscious, so for me, It's a case of trying to get them to work together and not being left out, you know as I said before about the Irish exemptions for example. Trying not to make them feel different because they don't do Irish. Trying to incorporate different themes that we may be doing in Irish and seeing what they could be doing with the teams in English. Just involving everybody really that nobody is different, we're all working and trying to sing off the same hymn sheet.	Defining inclusive education Challenges for teachers Working with children with SEN Inclusive practices

Appendix III: Codebook

Name	Description
Academic writing and practicing teacher	Teachers' reflect on the role of academic writings in the life of a practicing teacher
Allocation of resources	Teachers opinion on resources that are allocated by school management and DES
Barriers to inclusivity	Teachers discuss what they perceive to be barriers to them providing an inclusive education
Benefits of multi-grade	What teachers see as the benefits to all children of multi-grade
Challenges for teachers	Challenges facing teachers regarding supporting children with SEN, high academic achievers, emotional needs etc.
Multi-grade challenges	Challenges teachers feel are only faced by multi-grade teachers
Parental attitudes	The impact of parental attitudes on the challenges teachers face
Changes in DES	Changes in policy and practice in the DES and how this impacts on practising teachers
Children's academic ability	The practices teachers engage in to ensure they are supporting children of all ability in their class
CPD	Teachers' reflections on continuous professional development and how this reflects on their teaching
Inclusive CPD	Teachers discuss the provision of inclusion CPD
Multi-grade CPD	Teachers discuss the provision of multi-grade specific CPD
Current class make-up	Teachers outline the demographics of their current class
Current role	Teachers discuss both their current and past role

Challenges facing multi-grade teachers supporting children with SEN

Name	Description
Defining inclusive education	Teachers define inclusive education
Differentiation	Teachers discuss how they use differentiation in their class
Disadvantages of multi-grade	Teachers outline what they perceive to be the disadvantages to children in multi-grade classes
High academic achievement	Teachers discuss catering to those with a high academic ability
Inclusive practices	Teachers discuss the ways in which they create an inclusive atmosphere and education in their class
Labelling children	This refers to the practice of assessing children and labelling them with a certain condition
Leadership within schools	Teachers' observations on the importance of leadership within schools
Multi-grade vs single grade	Teachers consider the differences between single grade and multi-grade classes
Non-mainstream setting	Teachers consider the need for non-mainstream settings in Ireland today
Outside agency support	Teachers outline their interactions with outside agencies
Positive aspects for younger students	Aspects of multi-grade that teachers consider positive for younger students in particular
Role of SNA's in an inclusive context	Teacher's discuss the role of SNA's in the context of providing an inclusive education
School ethos	The potential role a school ethos can play in fostering an inclusive atmosphere
SEN allocations	Teachers' discuss SEN allocations
Student teachers	Teachers' reflect on student teachers they have come across regarding their inclusive practices

Name	Description
Teaching experience	Length of time teaching, type of school
Teaching experience in multi-grade	Length of time teacher has taught in multi-grade
Training during ITE	Teachers discuss the training they received about inclusion in their ITE.
Multi-grade training	Teachers discuss the training they received on multi-grade classes in their ITE.
Value of experience	Teachers outline their opinion on the value of experience versus training
Value of working with colleagues	Teachers discuss the value of collegiality
Withdrawal	Teachers discuss the support method of withdrawal

Appendix IV

Research Consent Form

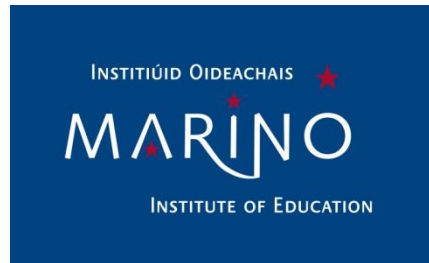
I, _____ give consent for my interview regarding inclusive education in a multi-grade classroom to be used as part of research for a Masters dissertation.

I understand that I am being interviewed on the basis of anonymity about my experiences in a multi-grade classroom and that there will be no details identifying the school or individual teacher published in the final dissertation.

Signed _____

Date _____

Appendix V: Letter to Board of Management



Main St,
Loughrea,
Co. Galway
15/10/2018

Board of Management,
St Mary's BNS,
Tullamore,
Co Offaly

RE: Research

Dear Chairperson,

My name is Amy Quirke and I am a second year Professional Masters of Education student in Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year dissertation investigating inclusive practices in a multi-grade classroom, I am seeking your permission to interview some teachers in St Mary's with their consent.

The participants will be interviewed on the basis of anonymity about their experiences in the classroom, and I will give an undertaking that there will be no details identifying the school or individual teacher published in my final dissertation.

The interviews will be conducted outside of class time, at a time agreeable to the teacher. If you have any questions about any of the details of my research or if you wish to get some clarification about any issues arising from this, please do not hesitate to contact me at 085000000.

Le gach dea ghuí,

Amy Quirke