

Title page



The perceptions of mainstream teachers, special class teachers and special needs assistants regarding the inclusivity of special classes for children with Autism.

Marino Institute of Education

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Declaration

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10th May 2021

Abstract

Over the last few decades, Inclusive Education has become a prominent topic of discussion in Ireland and around the world. Unfortunately, inclusion remains an ambiguous term and as such, what forms of education provision can be classified as inclusive has been widely debated. In Ireland, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are educated in mainstream classes with the support of a Special Needs Assistant (SNA), in a special class attached to a mainstream school or within a special school itself. Many researchers have questioned the inclusivity of the special class model in Ireland and, in 2019, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) announced a review of special education provision in Ireland, with the suggestion of a possible move towards full inclusion in mainstream for all children with special educational needs (SEN).

The aim of the present study was to investigate the perceptions of mainstream teachers, special class teachers and SNAs in relation to the inclusivity of special classes. A qualitative research paradigm and case study design were chosen for the investigation. Interviews were conducted with seven participants about their perspectives and experiences with Inclusive Education for children with ASD in a primary school.

Findings demonstrated the elusive nature of the term ‘inclusion’ but showed that participants believed inclusion to be a benefit to neurotypical peers in mainstream classes. A number of challenges to inclusion were also highlighted by the participants. The majority of participants felt special classes were beneficial to the children with ASD but a few expressed concerns about the segregated setting and lack of integration. All participants believed that it was imperative to provide a range of options to parents and children to enable them to find the best fit in terms of education setting for their child and their individual needs.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DSM V	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V
EPSEN Act	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
HSE	Health Service Executive
IEP	Individual Education Plan
ID	Intellectual Disabilities
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
PME	Professional Master of Education
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
UDHR	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNCRC	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Chapter 1: Introduction

Context and Rationale for the study

Special education provision for children with additional needs is a significant matter worldwide. The best and most appropriate education setting for children with special educational needs (SEN) is a contentious issue both abroad and in Ireland (Banks & McCoy, 2017). The Irish education system is led by the Continuum of Support framework where needs of children with SEN are on a continuum and thus the support is given on the basis of a continuum (DES, 2007). Those with milder needs are supported mainly in the classroom while those with more complex needs may require individualised support (DES, 2007). At present, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in primary schools in Ireland either receive in-class support or are educated in a special class or special school setting (McCoy et al., 2014). Some researchers have questioned whether this system can be considered Inclusive Education or if the special classes are forms of segregation and containment (Banks & McCoy, 2017; Keon, 2020; O'Síoráin & Shevlin, 2020).

Recently, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE; 2019) declared that they are conducting a tentative inquiry into the future of special education provision and the potential move towards mainstream education for all children, including those with SEN. In light of this, the need to conduct this research is more pressing than ever. What is Inclusive Education? What will become of special classes in the Irish education system in the near future? These are the questions that drive the present study.

Aims and objectives

The aim of this study is to add to the ongoing debate about the nature of Inclusive Education in Ireland. More specifically, the present study aims to examine the perceptions of mainstream teachers, special class teachers and special needs assistants

(SNAs) in relation to the use of special classes for children with ASD. Mainstream teachers teach a single class for the school year and make up the majority of primary school teachers while special class teachers are in charge of small classes comprised of children with special educational needs (DES, n.d.). SNAs on the other hand, support students with additional caring needs in a non-teaching capacity and enable them to participate in school activities (McCoy et al., 2014).

Positionality

As researchers inevitably shape the writing of qualitative research it is important to acknowledge and make clear the positionality of the researcher (Creswell, 2007). I have a background in Psychology and hold a B.A. Honours degree in Psychology. My undergraduate thesis explored the impact of different types of disability language on college students' attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID). I have worked as a volunteer with St. John of God's Carmona services for adults with ID and have also volunteered as an assistant in a special class for children with ASD. For my Special Education placement last year, I spent time at a special school for children with ASD. Given the amount of time I have spent with individuals with additional needs in the community, in a special school and class, I am very eager to explore the debate surrounding the inclusivity of special classes and gather the perceptions of mainstream and special class teachers and special needs assistants.

Chapter outline of the study

Chapter one introduces the rationale and aims for the research study, explains the positionality of the research and outlines the chapters in this study. Chapter two reviews pertinent literature related to Inclusive Education and special education provision in Ireland and concludes with a discussion of ongoing developments in the sector. Chapter three describes the research design and method for data collection and analysis. Chapter four presents and analyses the findings from the data analysis

conducted on the interviews with the participants. The findings are presented thematically in order to discuss the issues that arose. Finally, Chapter five concludes the study with a summary of the findings and recommendations for policy and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, we will first look at the background of the provision of education for children with SEN in Ireland and the development of the Special Class model. A brief explanation of ASD will then be presented, followed by a discussion of the term ‘Inclusive Education’. Special education provision in a number of different countries will then be examined briefly. Next, teacher perceptions of the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream shall be highlighted, followed by a closer look at the varying opinions regarding the use of special classes in Ireland. There is limited literature regarding special education provision in an Irish context so this chapter will include an in-depth look at the available research. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary of current and ongoing developments regarding special education provision in Ireland.

Background

According to recent research, the number of children in Ireland recognised as having SEN has increased exponentially (Rose & Shevlin, 2020). It is now believed that one in four students in the Irish education system have SEN (McCoy et al., 2014). Unfortunately, in the past in Ireland individuals with disabilities were often placed in institutions, away from the public eye, segregated from society (NCSE, 2019). Children with SEN were no different, and those with severe/profound learning difficulties were in fact considered ‘uneducable’ (NCSE, 2019, p. 56). According to Doyle, Muldoon and Murphy (2020), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR; 1948, Article 26) was the first to declare that ‘everyone has the right to education’, with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child further emphasising this (UNCRC; 1989, Articles 28 and 29). It was not until the O’Donoghue v. Minister for Health lawsuit (1993, cited in Kenny, McCoy & Mihut, 2020) however that attitudes in Ireland

began to shift. The parents of an eight-year-old boy, considered uneducable due to his additional needs, argued that the Irish State was failing to provide for an education for their child. The parents' plea was successful, and the court ruled that the education system was discriminatory. (Kenny et al., 2020). As a result, the Irish State was forced to bring about changes that would allow for the provision of accessible and satisfactory education for children with SEN, regardless of the severity of need (Kenny et al., 2020). The report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC; 1993) was issued and recommended that children with SEN be integrated into mainstream settings and interact with other children (McCoy et al., 2014). Similarly, the Education Act (1998) emphasised the importance of providing education and support for *all* children and explicitly referred to children with SEN. It was however, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) that brought about the most change, stressing that children with SEN have the same right to educational opportunities as other children. Section 2 of the Act declared that 'a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs is such that to do so would be inconsistent with the best interests of the child' (EPSEN, 2004, p. 7).

Development of Special Classes

Based on the EPSEN Act (2004), the NCSE proposed the establishment of special classes in mainstream schools in addition to previously established special schools for the provision of education for children with SEN (NCSE, 2011). In addition, under the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act (2018), the Minister for Education was given powers to instruct schools to open special classes and new school buildings were required to include a special class during the construction process (Banks & McCoy, 2017). Consequently, between 2011 and 2019, the number of special schools in

Ireland increased by 13 percent while the number of special classes rose by 196 percent from 550 classes in 2011 to 1,620 classes in 2019 (NCSE, 2019). While the majority of children with SEN are withdrawn from their mainstream class for support, 27 percent of children are instead taught in a special class for some/all of the school day (Rose & Shevlin, 2020). Interestingly, it is evident that 60 percent of these special classes established were specifically for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD; McCoy et al., 2014). Usually in a special class for ASD, children are educated alongside up to five other children with an ASD diagnosis (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018).

Autism Spectrum Disorder

ASD is defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM V; American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013) as a disorder which sees deficits in social communication and interaction combined with restricted, repetitive patterns of interests and behaviours. Once considered to have a number of subcategories, the DSM V revised its definition of ASD as an overarching, umbrella category, recognising the spectrum nature of ASD presentations (APA, 2013). Sensory processing issues are common in individuals with ASD (Kirby, Boyd, Williams, Faldowski & Baranek, 2017; Schulz & Stevenson, 2020). In addition, the acquisition of life skills can be a challenge due to a lack of social understanding and can manifest in a variety of ways such as refusal to engage in eye contact, lack of understanding of the intentions of others and in the case of children, disinterest in playing with other children (Bond et al., 2016; Hyman, Levy & Myers, 2020; Jussila et al., 2020). Increases in the number of ASD diagnoses, due to increased public awareness of the disorder (Hyman et al., 2020), has resulted in greater numbers of children presenting with ASD diagnoses in

the Irish education system. How best to support these children is therefore an important question under consideration.

A Question of Inclusivity

According to Keon (2020), the education system in Ireland, at first glance, appears to have adapted in response to the need to provide children with Inclusive Educational opportunities, but large parts of the system have remained unchanged with ‘traditional structures, organisation and attitudes’ still in place (p. 160). In recent years, there have been calls for examination of the inclusivity of the Irish education system and the special class system in particular (Banks & McCoy, 2017; Florian, 2014; Keon, 2020). Some researchers have questioned whether special classes do indeed provide Inclusive Education or if they are in fact another form of segregation (Banks & McCoy, 2017). In addition, Ireland’s recent ratification in March 2018, of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), further calls into question what can be deemed Inclusive Education (NCSE, 2019). The Convention calls on the State to ensure that all children have access to Inclusive Education of good quality and standard in the community in which they live (NCSE, 2019). The UNCRPD General Comment No.4 (2016, p. 4) defines inclusion as ‘a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and the environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences’. Inclusion means that schools are expected to change to meet the needs of the child and should not expect the child to try to fit into the mould of the pre-existing structures and routines in the school (Banks & McCoy, 2017). On the other hand, Florian (2014) claims that the definition of inclusion is constantly changing but

acknowledges that the practice of inclusion is often inadequate and not consistent with the current beliefs regarding best practice. For the purpose of the present study, inclusion will be considered as making changes in the education system in order to accommodate a learner and their needs (NCSE, 2018). Although broad, this definition allows for a deeper investigation into participants' experiences with inclusion.

Inclusion Internationally

As aforementioned, special education provision in Ireland is in the form of a combination of special schools, special classes and mainstream support. According to McCoy et al., (2014), this multi-track approach is also apparent in countries such as Austria, Denmark, France and the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, in certain areas of Belgium, a clear preference for educating children with additional needs in special schools is evident (McCoy et al., 2014). Contrastingly, countries such as Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Sweden maintain a one-track approach with almost all students educated in mainstream settings (Riddell et al., 2006). New Brunswick, Canada has however adopted an even stronger stance regarding the inclusion of all children, including those with severe/profound needs, in mainstream, with the closure of existing special schools and classes (NCSE, 2019). Education in Canada comes under provincial jurisdiction (Towle, 2015) and in New Brunswick, it is believed that full inclusion is a basic human right and that all children should be educated in a common learning environment 'where instruction is designed to be delivered to students of mixed ability and of the same age in their neighbourhood school' (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013). While Canada pushes for inclusion in mainstream settings, England is advocating for greater special school provision, which some researchers argue is related to the SEN policy and practice being influenced by political and economic pressure regarding raising school academic

standards (Norwich, 2014; Shaw, 2017). Evidently, inclusion is approached very differently across nations.

Inclusion in Mainstream Settings: Teacher Perceptions of the Benefits and Key Issues

An abundance of research has been conducted into the inclusion of children with SEN into the mainstream classroom, with some teachers suggesting that when children with ASD are educated in mainstream settings, their ‘neurotypical’ peers develop greater understanding and acceptance of difference (Apers, 2016; Cassimos et al., 2015). The teachers also claim that the children with ASD are given the opportunity to learn social skills from their peers in a mainstream class (Apers, 2016). In addition, in a far-reaching study conducted by Banks et al., (2016), participants also emphasised the importance of peers acting as models for children with ASD with regards to social skills.

On the other hand, a number of key issues and challenges in implementing the concept of inclusion in the Irish classroom have been identified (Anglim et al., 2018; Cassady, 2011; Daly et al., 2016; Shevlin, Winter & Flynn, 2013; Young, McNamara & Coughlan, 2017). A number of studies conducted interviews with principals, teachers and resource staff and highlighted perceived constraints to inclusive practice including inadequate teacher training, lack of funding for resources, lack of support from external services such as psychologists and occupational therapists, challenging behaviour and lack of teacher confidence (Anglim et al., 2018; Daly et al., 2016). Some participants even questioned whether they were acting in the best interests of a child by expecting them to adapt to the rules and routines of mainstream (Shevlin et al., 2013). Semi-structured interviews with post-primary teachers revealed similar issues (Young et al., 2017), demonstrating the pervasiveness of the problem across primary and post-primary schools.

In addition, teachers have also called attention to difficulties in differentiating the curriculum, the amount of paperwork involved and the feelings of guilt that result from the amount of time dedicated to the inclusion of one child in comparison to the amount of time devoted to other students (Cassady, 2011; Daly, 2016). Furthermore, researchers have also acknowledged that difficulty with social interactions can be especially challenging to the inclusion of children with ASD, and, due to overwhelming stimuli present in classroom such as loud noises, a large proportion of children with ASD are underachieving academically (Ashburner, Zivian & Rodger, 2010; Leblanc, Richardson & Burns, 2009). Undoubtedly, the suitability of mainstream education for children with SEN, including children with ASD, is a widely debated and contentious issue.

Special Classes: A Form of Segregation?

As previously stated however, a significant number of children with ASD in Ireland are now being educated in special classes rather than mainstream classes (NCSE, 2019). McCoy and colleagues (2014) define special classes as ‘a class formed primarily for pupils with special educational needs which is the main learning environment for those pupils’ (p. 10). Most special classes offer the State curriculum subjects of English, Maths, Social Personal Health Education, Social Environmental and Scientific Education, Physical Education, Visual Art, Music and Drama (McCoy et al., 2014). The only key difference in relation to the curriculum is in relation to Irish where only 17 percent of special classes offer the subject as an option (McCoy et al., 2014). As previously mentioned, there have been intense debates surrounding the use of special classes for children with special educational needs in recent years (Banks & McCoy, 2017; Florian, 2014). Are they simply another form of segregation? The UNCRPD General Comment No.4 (2016, cited in NCSE, 2019) describes segregation

as something which occurs ‘when the education of students with disabilities is provided in separate environments designed or used to respond to a particular impairment or to various impairments, in isolation from students without disabilities’ (p. 16). Under these definitions, the current system of special classes for children with SEN could be viewed as a form of segregation as they are often conducted in separate buildings and away from their neurotypical peers (O’Síoráin & Shevlin, 2020).

Keon (2020) argues that schools present themselves as inclusive because they enrol children with SEN but the segregation of these children from the mainstream classes ‘impacts significantly on the level of genuine inclusion being achieved in schools’ (p. 169). This sentiment is mirrored by Banks and McCoy (2017) who posit that although special classes are located in mainstream environments, the ‘extent to which inclusion is taking place is questionable’ (p. 458). Similarly, O’Síoráin and Shevlin (2020) found that the architecture and design of schools with special classes contributed to the sense of segregation of children with ASD as they reflect ‘a containment approach...maintaining the idea that being a ‘different’ learner requires a ‘special’ approach and environment’ (p. 68). In particular, the researchers took issue with the use of alternative entrances and exits and locked doors. As well as the physical environments of the special classes, O’Síoráin and Shevlin (2020) state that in the majority of classes, limited learning was taking place. The same songs were sung, and the same activities were repeated each day, something which the researchers claim is not conducive in promoting ‘new learning, thinking or understanding of their social worlds’ (p. 74). Given the small sample size however, the generalisability of their findings to the hundreds of other special classes in the country should be considered with caution.

Regarding children's academic performance in special classes, some of the literature reveals that only those with severe/profound needs progress better academically for being in the special class (Anglim et al., 2018; Hegarty, 1993; Jenkinson, 1997). In contrast, other research suggests that being in a special class does not hinder teaching and learning due to the small class sizes, the emphasis on life skills and the individualised instruction which are highly beneficial and being educated alongside peers with similar diagnoses results in increased confidence and self-esteem (Jenkinson, 1997; Kauffman & Hallinan, 2005, cited in Banks & McCoy, 2017; O'Síoráin, Shevlin & McGuckin, 2018). Interestingly, special classes were created with the idea in mind that they would be a stepping- stone to full integration in mainstream classes, children would attend special classes until ready for a mainstream setting (NCSE, 2011). Banks and McCoy (2017) claim that these were unrealistic expectations to have mainstream as the end goal. Based on the responses of a national survey issued to the principals of schools in Ireland, McCoy and colleagues (2014) found that over half of the students attending a special class spend most of the week together as a class, while an additional 21 percent of students spend the full week together in their special class. The researchers discovered that when students from special classes *do* enter into the mainstream setting, it is mostly for brief periods for physical education or extracurricular activities (McCoy et al., 2014).

Special Classes: Teacher Perceptions

In a smaller follow up study of McCoy et al., (2014), Banks and colleagues (2016) conducted questionnaires, interviews and focus groups with principals, teachers and students, with the findings also suggesting a lack of integration between special classes and mainstream classes. In addition, the special class teachers interviewed felt ill-equipped to teach in a special class and highlighted the intense environment and

range of challenging, difficult behaviours they faced in special classes (Banks et al., 2016). Contrastingly, three-quarters of the teachers believed that the needs of the students were being met in special classes (Banks et al., 2016). Some teachers argue that special classes support the children academically through one-on-one instruction methods and use of Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) and provide the children with a safe haven away from mainstream, the opportunity to develop their social skills and the freedom to express themselves (Banks & McCoy, 2017; Banks et al., 2016). On an international level, pre-service teachers in Hong-Kong and Singapore demonstrate a preference for the education of children with SEN in separate environments from mainstream such as special classes, while participants from Canada and Australia were more in favour of mainstream education for all (Forlin, Sharma & Loreman, 2007).

Current and Ongoing Developments

From the previous discussion, it is clear that the issue of Inclusive Education provision for children with SEN is a contentious issue. Some researchers and countries argue that mainstream classrooms are the best place to educate all children, while others claim that mainstream is not always an appropriate setting for children with SEN. Likewise, some researchers support the use of special classes for children with additional needs, such as those with ASD, while others are thoroughly against the concept. On foot of these debates, and in light of Ireland's ratification of the UNCRPD, the Minister for Education of 2019 announced the trial of a new School Inclusion Model, a collaboration of the NCSE, Health Service Executive (HSE) and Departments of Education and Skills, Health and Children and Youth Affairs, supported by €4.75m in funding, which aims to increase schools' abilities to include children with SEN in mainstream classrooms (DES, 2019a). Under this model, regional support teams of occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and behaviour support

practitioners will be established and provide in-school support for children with SEN and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) will be expanded to increase its level of support (DES, 2019a). SNAs will also be offered a new National Training Programme which will equip them with skills and knowledge to support students to become independent and resilient (DES, 2019b).

In addition, the NCSE (2019) has commenced a review into ‘whether special schools and classes should continue to be offered as part of the continuum of educational provision for students with more complex special educational needs or whether greater inclusion in mainstream classes offers a better way forward’ (p. 4). As part of this review, the NCSE are conducting literature analyses, examining educational systems in other jurisdictions, and evaluating various reports (NCSE, 2019). In a progress report describing their initial findings, the NSCE claimed that the research appears to ‘indicate that students with special educational needs who are educated in mainstream settings have better short- and long-term outcomes than those who were in special education placements’ (NCSE, 2019, p. 5). The NCSE (2019) states that consultation groups agree that educating children in mainstream classrooms is the ideal but acknowledges that the feasibility of doing so is still under review. The proposals have received a cautious welcome with significant outstanding issues to be addressed (DES, 2019b; Kenny, McCoy & Mihut, 2020).

Furthermore, the present study is being undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Ireland, following months of school closures and remote learning, which were particularly challenging for families and children with SEN (Dempsey & Burke, 2021), a fierce debate ensued about the nature of the reopening of education settings for children with SEN. Many individuals questioned why special schools were given priority in opening over special classes and why children with SEN who attend

mainstream were left without much support (DES, 2021; O'Brien, 2021). The mixed responses and opinions highlight the following question- is inclusion about treating all children the same or is it about recognising the need to make accommodations for some children?

Conclusion

To conclude, in this chapter we examined the origins of special education provision in Ireland and explored the nature of this education provision in the present. A range of teacher perceptions and study findings were presented, demonstrating the division of opinions in relation to the 'best' form of education for children with SEN in Ireland.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter initially discusses the chosen research design for this qualitative study, explaining the use of a case study design and semi-structured interviews. The chapter then describes the nature of the participants in the study and outlines the procedures taken during the data collection for the study. Data analysis techniques are described, and the validity and reliability of the research are discussed. Potential limitations of the research are then addressed and finally, the chapter concludes with a statement about the ethical considerations taken in relation to the study.

Research Design

Qualitative research allows for the understanding that there are multiple realities and enables researchers to ask questions that are meaningful to participants and allows the respondents to answer in their own words (Creswell, 2007; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). The researcher wanted to examine different perspectives and experiences of individuals about Inclusive Education for children with ASD and as such, a qualitative paradigm was considered to be the most appropriate. In agreeing with the belief of many qualitative researchers that ‘knowledge is constructed rather than discovered’ (Stake, 1995, p. 99), and the theory that ‘people perceive and so construe the world in ways which are often similar but not necessarily the same’ (Bassey, 1999, p. 43), the epistemology that the researcher subscribes to is one of constructivism/interpretivism. In espousing this philosophical assumption, the aim of the current research is to understand the way in which people make sense of Inclusive Education for children with ASD and the way in which their beliefs are shaped by their previous experiences and learning (Merriam, 1998). In light of this, as this study is based in a single school, and using the in-depth mindset advocated in the qualitative tradition, a case study design, one of the most common methodologies in educational

research (Yazan, 2015), was chosen for the research. It is evident that seminal researchers, such as Yin and Stake, view case studies in contrasting manners (Yazan, 2015). Yin (2002) argues that a case study should investigate the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a phenomenon and argues for the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative data in the design. On the other hand, from Stake’s (1995) point of view, a case study is a study of ‘the particularity and complexity of a single case’ (p. xi). It is however, the definitions of case and case study design of Merriam (1998) that best describe the nature of the present study. A case is defined as ‘a unit around which there are boundaries’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 27) such as a person, a group or programme. She argues that a qualitative case study is one which comprises of an ‘intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon, such as a programme, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit’ (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). Interviews with experienced individuals regarding the education of children with ASD and thematic analysis of these interviews were conducted in order to build a case study of inclusion and perceptions of Inclusive Education in one school in Dublin. Interviews were used as the sole source of data generation, something which is widely done by qualitative researchers and is not problematic in a constructivist orientation where researchers intend to represent the participants’ world (Roulston & Choi, 2018). More specifically, semi-structured interviews were employed which allowed the researcher flexibility to ask follow-up questions, to press for complete answers and to control the order of the interview (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

Participants

A school with three special classes in South Dublin was chosen for the case study. In the mainstream section of the school, established in 1967, there are sixteen mainstream teachers, five special education teachers, a deputy principal, principal and

over 400 pupils. The special classes were established ten years ago in 2011 and are designated classes for children with ASD. There are six children in each class, one special class teacher for each class and 2-3 SNA's per classroom. Of these, eight individuals acted as participants in the study (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Participant details

Participant	Job Position	Years of Experience	Gender
MT1	Mainstream Teacher	25 years	Female
MT2	Mainstream Teacher	12 years	Female
MT3	Mainstream Teacher	1 year	Female
SCT1	Special Class Teacher	7 years	Male
SCT2	Special Class Teacher	15 years	Female
SNA1	Special Needs Assistant	6 years	Female
SNA2	Special Needs Assistant	17 years	Female

Procedure

The researcher made contact with the principal of the chosen school and requested permission to conduct research with staff members regarding Inclusive Education for children with ASD. Once access was permitted, the researcher used purposive sampling to identify participants for the research. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to select knowledgeable individuals for the study who had an in-depth understanding and experience with the education of children with ASD (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2007). As the researcher was not looking to make generalisations to the wider population, purposive sampling and a small sample size were adequate (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The researcher contacted prospective participants via email with information sheets about the nature of the study (see Appendix A). Interested individuals responded to the researcher through email and were sent consent forms to ensure that the participants had the chance to give voluntary,

informed consent (see Appendix B). Once the consent forms had been returned, an interview was scheduled with each participant.

Due to the school closures related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews had to be conducted online using Zoom, a cloud-based videoconferencing service (for the interview questions, see Appendix C). Benefits of using Zoom included the real-time interaction involving both sound and video and security features of the service, such as user-specific authentication, encryption and secure recording of sessions (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016). In addition, recent research found that participants interviewed over Zoom found the experience ‘highly satisfactory’ (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 1). While the researchers noted that their participants’ satisfaction with Zoom could reflect their prior familiarity with the platform (Archibald et al., 2019), the participants in the present study used Zoom during the school closure period and consequently, Zoom was deemed suitable for the interview process. In conducting the interviews, the researcher ensured adherence to best practice guidelines. The researcher informed the participants of the nature of the study, sought permission for the session to be audio recorded and explained that the data would be transcribed and stored securely (Tuckman, 1972, cited in Roulston & Choi, 2018). The participants were reminded that the data would be de-identified to ensure confidentiality. The researcher also followed the guidance of Arksey and Knight (1999, cited in Roulston & Choi, 2018) in giving the respondent time to answer questions, avoiding giving signs of approval or disapproval and in seeking clarification from the participants if necessary. The researcher also maintained an openness to the data at all times (Kvale, 1996, cited in Roulston & Choi, 2018). Following data collection, the audio from the interviews was transcribed verbatim using the transcription feature on Word Online. The recordings were then listened back through and checked for errors. This was done in a careful manner to

ensure no data loss or distortion of the data. Data was then analysed using thematic analysis.

Thematic Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data’ (p. 79). A theoretically flexible and accessible approach to data analysis, it can ‘provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Thematic analysis seeks to highlight key themes in a qualitative data set and represent the experiences of people in different situations (Elliot, Fisher & Rennie, 1999; King & Brooks, 2018). A theme can be defined as ‘something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82) but does not have to be identified across all cases (King & Brooks, 2018). Themes are developed from a process of coding, a ‘subjective and interpretive process’ (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 20) where relevant data is summarised with a few words or a phrase that captures the meaning of that segment, a ‘code’ (Terry et al., 2017). Inductive coding for semantic level themes was chosen for the present study, using the data as the starting point for the development of themes that are explicit in what the participant has said (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017).

The researcher used Braun & Clarke’s (2006) procedure for thematic analysis to guide this stage of the research process and while these researchers have recently announced changes to the names of their six stages (Braun & Clarke, in press), the researcher chose to use the previously published, widely-known stages (see Table 2). Additionally, the researcher consistently used Braun & Clarke’s (2006) checklist of criteria for thematic analysis during the process (see Appendix D for a sample of thematic analysis).

Table 2 - Braun and Clarke (2006) stages of thematic analysis

Stage	Process
1	Familiarising yourself with the data
2	Generating initial codes
3	Searching for themes
4	Reviewing themes
5	Defining and naming themes
6	Producing the report

As with all research, the question of the reliability and validity of the data is paramount (King & Brooks, 2018). In qualitative analysis however, the validity (often referred to as credibility in qualitative research) outweighs the reliability in terms of importance as the nature of qualitative inquiry and semi-structured interviews means that each data set will be unique (Guest et al., 2012). The credibility refers to the ‘confidence in the truth of the findings, including an accurate understanding of the context’ (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005, p. 25, cited in Guest et al., 2012), how well the account reflects the phenomena it is trying to describe. In order to ensure credibility of findings, the researcher employed a variety of strategies. Multiple participants ensured multiple data sources thus allowing the data to be compared and triangulated, data was transcribed verbatim, an audit trail of changes made to themes during the analysis process was kept (see Appendix E) and final themes and interpretations were supported using quotes in the report (Creswell, 2007; Guest et al., 2012).

Limitations

In order to avoid the possibility of researcher bias (see Introduction for more detail), the researcher presented the interview questions to a supervisor prior to conducting any interviews (Creswell, 2007). In addition, the researcher audio recorded the data and listened to it a number of times to ensure the interpretations of the data reflected what

the participants actually said (Creswell, 2007). A possible limitation associated with this case study research is the small-scale nature of the study due to time constraints (Peel, 2020). While it could be argued that a smaller sample size can result in a less representative sample and can hinder the generalisability of the findings (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2015), the aim of the present research was an in-depth exploration of the perceptions of individuals in one school and not an attempt to generalise their constructions of Inclusive Education to the wider population of staff in primary schools in Ireland. By providing a 'thick description' of the participants and research process however, the reader can assess 'whether the findings are transferable to their own setting' (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 122).

Ethics

In line with the Hippocratic oath, the principle of *primum non nocere* (first of all, do no harm) and the suggestion that most educational research be considered sensitive in nature (Cohen et al., 2007), the costs/benefits of the research were scrutinised. Open-ended questions were posed to the participants, enabling them to answer in their own words, thus reducing any concern surrounding the issue of Inclusive Education of children with ASD. In addition, an information sheet was emailed to the participants explaining the purpose and nature of the study. If the participants were interested in partaking in the research, voluntary, informed consent was sought through a consent form. Participants had the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any stage of the research. Given the face-to-face nature of the Zoom interviews, anonymity could not be promised to the participants (Cohen et al., 2007) but rather confidentiality and an assertion that any identifiers in the data transcriptions would be deleted and all data securely stored. The study was approved by the Students Ethics in Research Committee in Marino Institute of Education.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the chosen research design and data collection and data analysis procedures undertaken. The ethical considerations adopted for the study concluded the chapter. The following chapter will involve an in-depth analysis and discussion of the interview data.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Introduction

This chapter will outline the findings from the data analysis of the individual interviews carried out with mainstream teachers, special class teachers and SNAs. Based on the researcher's interpretations, two main themes with three subthemes each were drawn from the data. The first theme, 'Perceptions of Inclusion', encompasses the theoretical aspects and teachers' understanding of inclusion and shall be discussed first. The second theme, 'Inclusion in Practice: The Special Class', shall then be discussed in the chapter.

Perceptions of Inclusion

Findings in the area of perceptions of inclusion will be discussed under the sub-themes of Inclusion- an elusive concept, the challenges to Inclusive Education and the impact on neurotypical peers.

Inclusion- an elusive concept.

In keeping with the findings in the literature, the participants in this study demonstrated a range of different views regarding the meaning of the word inclusion (Florian, 2014). Some participants believed inclusion to be the bringing together of different abilities under the one roof where "all different abilities have been thought about" (MT2). Meanwhile, other participants, MT3 and SCT1, referred to inclusion in the physical sense, in terms of environment and materials used. MT3 believed that "inclusion looks like every child being challenged and every child having the materials that they need, whether that's like a human resource or physical resources." These references to the physical layout of the classroom and the resources employed are aligned with the 'good environment' requirement of Inclusive Education as suggested by the UNCRPD (General Comment No. 4, 2016, p. 4). It is imperative that the classroom environment is suited to the needs of the children. If a child requires a special

chair or table in the classroom then these should be provided to ensure the inclusion of said child in every lesson.

On the other hand, for some participants, inclusion is seen as a social and emotional concept, something which is achieved when the children feel accepted and happy in their school environment. Inclusion in their eyes occurs when “everybody can be themselves in the classroom and there’s a great sense of fun and a celebration of being unique” (SCT2), where “respect is shown to all and all are valued for their participation” (MT1) and “each child’s achievements are celebrated” (SNA2). In contrast with the previous definitions of inclusion as a physical concept, this form of social and emotional inclusion takes a more individual approach to differences and considers the needs of each child separately rather than viewing inclusion solely as a contextual issue related to the school structure (Florian, 2014).

As aforementioned, the divergence in the participants’ understanding of inclusion is reflected in the literature which indicates that inclusion is an ever-changing definition (Florian, 2014). Interestingly, while the definitions are all unique, they can be said to fit within the chosen broad definition for this study where inclusion refers to necessary changes in the education system and the school to accommodate a learner and adapt to meet their needs (NCSE, 2018). One of the special class teachers captured this consensus in her following remark “I think that some people think that all children should be treated the same, but we have to think about the child” (SCT2). Despite different interpretations of inclusion, the participants suggest indirectly that inclusion is doing whatever is necessary for each individual child. To guarantee the holistic development of a child with ASD, they must be physically, emotionally and socially included in school life. The current ambiguity surrounding the term ‘inclusion’ however has hindered the creation of a set of defined goals for the education of children with

ASD. Perhaps one clear definition of inclusion, one that references both the adaptation of the physical learning environment and the conviction that all children must be treated individually in terms of needs, is required for the education system in Ireland.

Challenges to Inclusive Education.

Throughout the data, a series of concerns regarding Inclusive Education in general emerged. More specifically, the data suggests issues relating to training are pervasive. Many participants expressed concerns that there is a lack of training for teachers during their Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for working with children with additional needs. One special class teacher claimed that “half the reason people don’t want to go into special classes is because they’re scared because they don’t know what it’s going to be like” (SCT1), a sentiment which was shared by one of the mainstream teachers who acknowledged that their training “particularly for children on the spectrum, is minimal” (MT3). Furthermore, it was not just the teachers who recognised the shortcomings in relation to training but also the SNAs who felt that teachers could benefit from detailed instruction on differentiation during ITE.

The data highlights a need for increased mandatory training and awareness during ITE regarding special education provision and perhaps, as one participant suggested, training for teaching specifically in special classes or special school settings. This is corroborated by other research which similarly emphasises the requirement for more training for teachers to prevent feelings of inadequacy (Leblanc et al., 2009; Shevlin et al., 2013). My own experience of ITE is aligned with those of the participants in this study as, throughout the duration of the Professional Master of Education (PME), only one module about Inclusive Education was delivered to students. Undoubtedly due to the time constraints of the course, student teachers were briefly educated about a wide variety of SEN such as ASD, dyslexia and dyspraxia.

Unfortunately, these broad, sweeping overviews have not sufficiently prepared me for educating children with SEN, let alone to teach in an ASD special class. The lack of training is undoubtedly a pressing issue as one cannot be expected to confidently, and successfully, educate children with SEN if they are not adequately prepared to do so.

That said, the participants described a range of optional courses that have been made available to them in relation to ASD, and SEN in general, while employed in their school. The staff underwent training when the ASD special classes were first established in the school and since then, they have had the option of attending numerous Continual Professional Development (CPD) courses. This would suggest that CPD could fill in the gaps where ITE falls short. One participant (MT2) however, believed strongly that CPD is not accessible to all staff members due to the fact that courses scheduled outside of school hours may not suit those with other commitments- such as looking after their children- leading to a lack of training and a “limited” understanding of ASD (MT2). Similarly, MT3 highlighted the expense of these courses that teachers are required to fund themselves as a barrier to accessing CPD. Consequently, it can be said that while the concept of CPD courses is good in theory, in practice many teachers experience obstacles when accessing this avenue for their professional development.

In contrast, the researcher found that both of the special class teachers interviewed were highly qualified and had undergone additional training at their own instigation. Both teachers referred to courses by the NCSE and the Post Graduate Level 9 diplomas in Special Education and Inclusive Education they had been awarded. The data demonstrates that optional training *is* available to teachers to support them with educating children with ASD *but* requires time and commitment and is therefore not feasible for all. Therefore, the reliance on CPD courses to provide teachers with

necessary training in relation to SEN should be recognised as problematic and steps should be taken to address this issue by increasing the accessibility of CPD courses or by providing better ITE for student teachers. For example, one extra hour a week of Inclusive Education during the PME would be extremely beneficial to student teachers in their future careers.

In addition to training qualms, the interviewees highlighted the serious time constraints they felt were in place in relation to planning and collaborating with colleagues to support each other when educating children with SEN. One participant wanted time for planning to be built into the school term (MT1) while one of the SNAs summed up the feelings of all of the participants by simply stating that “it would be better if there was more collaboration between all professionals working with the child with ASD to ensure the best possible outcome for the child” (SNA2). These concerns are reflected in the findings of studies with school staff members which posit that there is a great need for increased training, time for planning and collaboration, time to liaise with parents and professionals and time for administration (Mulholland & O’Connor, 2016; Shevlin et al., 2013). Perhaps if these issues were addressed, teachers would feel less ill-equipped and more confident when educating children with ASD (Cassady, 2011). Furthermore, the SNA quoted above raises the important point of the need for support from all professionals working with the child with ASD. This issue was also emphasised by SCT2 who remarked that “one of the areas that is lacking would be the support from the services that the children are in.” Unfortunately, this appears to be a common issue, with schools describing the level of support received from professionals as ‘unacceptable’ (Daly et al., 2016, p.11). This special class teacher, among other participants, calls for better access to a multi-disciplinary team of psychologists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists to support the teachers in doing

their job. From this, it is evident that the school system is crying out for the transformation of planning, collaboration and multidisciplinary support for the education of children with SEN.

Finally, the size of classes in Ireland were mentioned by a significant number of the participants as a challenge to Inclusive Education, something which has also been found in largescale research in Ireland (Banks et al., 2016; McCoy et al., 2014). One of the mainstream teachers described accurately the dilemma of the large class sizes that many of the participants referenced throughout the interviews: “You can’t split yourself into 20 different pieces in a classroom, so you can’t look after everybody’s needs all the time” (MT2). In addition, another participant went even further, mentioning the difficulties that the large class sizes bring for the children with ASD, “you can’t possibly include the children, it becomes more integration which is just allowing the child to join in a lesson, to sit in, but it’s not properly including the child, not supporting the child” (MT1).

With the large class sizes which are prevalent across the country, teachers are forced to spread themselves thinly across the classroom in an attempt to support each child. Often, children with ASD require additional attention from the teacher and with the current system, this child will not receive adequate support and therefore the rest of the children in the class may also suffer (Banks et al., 2016; McCoy et al., 2014). Teachers cannot be expected to operate successfully in such crowded classrooms and support all children under their care. It is not fair to the teacher, the neurotypical children or the children with ASD.

Impact on neurotypical peers.

Despite these challenges with inclusion, the participants overwhelmingly agreed that the inclusion of a child with ASD in a mainstream setting has a positive impact on

their neurotypical peers. Their peers “develop empathy and understanding” (SCT2) and “they might learn a lot from the child with ASD” (MT1). One participant expressed the change in the peers as they open their eyes to difference and accept diversity, “kids will be kids. They’re going to stare if somebody’s different...but now [as a result of inclusion] it’s not like, ‘oh they’re different they’re weird’, it’s ‘oh they’re different, that’s cool’” (SCT2). In addition, the majority of participants felt that the inclusion of children with ASD would prepare their peers for life in their community as they encounter individuals with different needs and unique abilities. This sentiment was best described by MT3 who had this to say: “we do live in a world with people who are different to ourselves. And so, it’s really important that they learn from a young age that you have to learn how to communicate in different ways with some people”. These positive effects reported by the participants reflect the findings of studies that suggest that neurotypical peers learn to accept different behaviours, become more understanding, develop positive attitudes and create friendships when exposed to children with ASD in school (Anglim et al., 2018; Banks et al., 2016; Cassimos et al., 2015).

In contrast, two of the participants felt that having a child with ASD in the classroom is not simply plain sailing and requires adjustment by the peers and, if not managed well, “the disruption can be very unsettling for the children” (MT2). These findings contrast with most of the research that suggests that neurotypical peers can build positive interactions with children with ASD (Hunt & Goetz, 1997) and importantly, does not disrupt their academic learning and performance (Dugan et al., 1995; Farrell, Dyson, Polat, Hutcheson & Gallannaugh, 2007).

Given that the aim of special classes is for the children with ASD to be included and integrated into the mainstream classes where possible, it is noteworthy that the

majority of participants are supportive of this inclusion in relation to the rest of the children under their care and charge. The development of acceptance, empathy and the preparation for the diverse world that we live in cannot be underestimated.

Consequently, it can be concluded that including children with ASD in mainstream greatly benefits the neurotypical children. If the NCSE were to consider a move towards 'total inclusion' of children with SEN however, work would have to be done to ensure a smooth transition for their neurotypical peers to avoid the potential of upset and disruption which a minority of participants referred to.

Inclusion in Practice: The Special Class

Findings in the domain of the special class will be discussed under the sub-themes of prevailing issues, the benefits and the need for educational options.

Special classes- prevailing issues.

Given the proposals of the NCSE (2019) to reduce or abolish special classes in favour of full inclusion in mainstream, it was pertinent to establish the views of participants in relation to the special classes in the school. Are special classes inclusive? Some researchers (Keon, 2020; O'Síoráin & Shevlin, 2020) argue that separate buildings perpetuate an attitude of containment and segregation towards individuals with disabilities. Participants agree that the location of the special classes in this school's grounds physically isolates the children from mainstream, citing "locks", "closed doors" and "geography" as physical barriers to inclusion in mainstream school, rendering the special classes "exclusive" (SCT1; SNA1).

Furthermore, the extent to which the children with ASD in the special classes integrate with the mainstream setting has been highlighted as an ongoing issue in the literature (Banks & McCoy, 2017; McCoy et al., 2014; O'Síoráin & Shevlin, 2020). According to the special class and mainstream teachers' interviews, there is limited

time spent in mainstream, with twelve out of eighteen children spending up to an hour a day integrating into mainstream for a limited range of subjects such as PE and Art. Meanwhile, only “a handful, two or three, maybe” are expected to transition permanently into mainstream settings (SCT1). These findings also support the limited literature regarding special classes which reveal that the time spent integrating into the mainstream classroom is minimal and restricted to certain predefined activities only (McCoy et al., 2014). This lack of integration hinders the amount of time that children with ASD spend with their neurotypical peers and as previously discussed, this time spent together is incredibly beneficial to all children involved (Banks et al., 2016). Special classes were established with the idea of them being a stepping-stone to mainstream (NCSE, 2011). If the classes are isolated from the main school building and the contact between the children is restricted as described, special classes cannot be said to be fulfilling their defined purpose as a preparation for mainstream. It appears that special classes are not fully facilitating inclusion but rather allowing for segregationist practices to ensue.

Special classes- the benefits.

While some participants questioned the overall inclusivity of the special classes, a lot of support for the special classes was voiced. The small class sizes and levels of support are key benefits of special classes because, as SCT2 says, the children are “getting what they need individually but they’re also being exposed to a group setting”. The children receive the best of both worlds with increased adult support combined with the experience of being around other students. These positive perspectives of the special classes reinforce previous research which has found that the favourable pupil-teacher ratio and use of IEPs are key advantages of special classes (Banks et al., 2016).

In addition, the adapted curriculum allows teachers to spend time designing a curriculum to suit each child, which as SCT1 explains “generally includes some more language communication and social skills and life skills which you probably don’t get the time to do in a mainstream class”. The benefits of the adapted curriculum were also reflected in the findings of Ware et al., (2009), with many teachers describing the importance of matching the curriculum to the needs of the child.

Finally, while children with ASD can sometimes suffer academically in mainstream and may struggle to regulate their emotions and behaviours in a busy classroom (Ashburner et al., 2010), the participants in this study do not feel as though this is the case in special classes. Special classes were in fact found to have a positive social and emotional impact, with MT2 feeling that in the class, the children “feel more accepted” and do not “stick out like a sore thumb because they’re so different”. Similarly, SCT2 and SNA2 agree that allowing the children to “be themselves” is a huge social and emotional benefit of the classes. The social and emotional outcomes described by the participants are also supported by the literature which argues that special classes facilitate the development of social skills and increase confidence and self-esteem (Banks et al., 2016; Jenkinson, 1997; Kauffman & Hallinan, 2005, cited in Banks & McCoy, 2017). These are clear benefits of special classes.

Many participants referenced the parents of the children with ASD, with the satisfaction of the parents clearly contributing to the participants’ positive perceptions of the special classes. They believed most parents to be very satisfied with the special classes attended by their children, with SNA2 mentioning the parents’ recognition of the benefit to their children’s “holistic development” and SCT2 going even further in suggesting that the parents:

see the special class as a total lifeline...There's a big support network amongst the parents, and the relationship between the parents and teachers is really evident...[they're] somewhere where their child's strengths are focused on rather than just their needs.

There have been no studies conducted thus far in Ireland of the perceptions of parents regarding the use of special classes for children with ASD. The NCSE (2019) have acknowledged the need to consult parents before it issues policy advice about the future of SEN provision in Ireland. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of parents' views will be vital in this process as the data from this study suggests that parents are in fact delighted with special classes, a perspective which must be considered in the decision-making process as, evidently, their views have an impact on the teachers' own perceptions. Similarly, in relation to the children themselves, research in this area has been quite limited due to feasibility constraints of interviewing children with ASD (Banks et al., 2016). Participants in this study believed that a key benefit of the special classes is that children are "happy and safe" (SCT1), positive feelings that are reflected in the findings of Banks et al., (2016), with children describing the special classes as places where they can express themselves. Going forward, in order to truly assess the benefits of special classes, children with ASD who have been educated in special classes should be consulted about the future of this education model. If these classes are indeed safe havens for the children, the abolishment of them would be nothing short of a calamity.

A need for educational options.

As aforementioned, with the NCSE (2019) questioning the best way forward for special education provision in Ireland and the continuation of special schools and classes under scrutiny in the literature (Banks & McCoy, 2017), the researcher wanted to explore what the participants perceive to be the ideal education setting for children

with ASD. While some of the participants expressed a preference for educating the children in a mainstream setting if major changes were implemented, other participants suggested fluid movement between the special class and mainstream class setting as the best option. No participant believed that special classes should be abolished altogether. The participants slightly differ in their views but overall seem to have a preference for an increased emphasis on the mainstream setting with the option of special classes for those who require them. This sentiment is best captured by two mainstream teachers, MT2 and MT3. MT2 states that:

It totally depends on the child. There isn't an ideal place for a child with Autism to be educated because all children with Autism are different...I think they should have the opportunity to do what works best for them...one size doesn't fit all.

Similarly, MT3 argues that:

[children should be educated] wherever is most comfortable to them, so if that meant they are in a special school or special class, then that's what suits them...It's all about having those choices and having those options for children and their parents to make.

In recognising that all children with a diagnosis of ASD, and potential additional comorbid diagnoses, are unique (APA, 2013), it is apparent that a range of educational options should be advocated for. According to the data, if mainstream classes undergo some necessary changes, then these would be the most favourable settings for the children. That does not mean however, that all children with ASD will thrive in mainstream and the data shows that in these cases, a special class or school may be the best fit for their needs. Indeed, children with ASD should be educated in an

environment ‘that best responds to their requirements and preferences’ (UNCRPD, 2016, p. 4). A range of educational options for children with ASD appears to be the optimum way forward for the education system in Ireland. Children who are capable of attending the mainstream classroom should be enabled to do so, while those who would benefit from a more individualised approach in a special class or school should equally be provided with this opportunity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the two major themes that emerged from the data- the Perception of Inclusion and Inclusion in Practice: The Special Class- along with their sub-themes were discussed and compared to findings in key literature. The next and final chapter will conclude the research study and make recommendations based on the findings referenced in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter begins with a short summary of the findings of the study and then suggests a number of recommendations for practice and policy based on these findings. The chapter concludes with ideas for future research.

Summary of findings

The aim of the present study was to investigate the perceptions of mainstream teachers, special class teachers and SNAs in relation to the inclusivity of special classes in Ireland. A number of key findings emerged from the data. It is apparent that there is no one agreed upon definition of inclusion or Inclusive Education which has led to much confusion. Schools are encouraged to aspire for Inclusive Education but what this actually entails remains ambiguous. In relation to this specific case study school with three special classes, the staff members voiced concerns regarding the separate physical environment and the lack of integration and time spent in the mainstream school for children with ASD. The participants did however describe the academic and social benefits that the children receive from their placement in a special class due to the individualised support and feelings of belonging. Importantly, the participants felt that overall, both parents and children were delighted with the classes. Another key finding that emerged was the recognition of the uniqueness of each child with ASD and an understanding that one size does not fit all in terms of preferential educational settings. In addition, the benefits of including children with ASD in a mainstream setting for both themselves and their peers presented as an important concept. On the other hand, the challenges of attempting inclusion within mainstream featured heavily, with the large class sizes, lack of teacher training and time constraints for planning appearing to be the deterrents.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, a number of recommendations for practice can be made.

- Teachers in mainstream classes should work with SNAs to increase the time a child with ASD spends integrating into the class for a variety of different activities and subjects, allowing for increased time spent with their neurotypical peers.
- School staff members should all recognise and understand that the needs of each child with ASD will differ and should adjust their practice accordingly to suit the children in their care.

Furthermore, several recommendations can be made regarding Inclusive Education policies.

- In order to improve the mainstream setting for children with ASD when they are integrating, class sizes need to be significantly reduced to enable the class teacher to cater for the needs of all pupils.
- Increase experience and preparation for teaching children with ASD during ITE and prepare teachers in college for working in a special class or special school.
- Make CPD more accessible to teachers and SNAs, offering courses of various lengths, both in person and online.
- Build time into the school calendar to allow teachers to spend time collaborating with each other for the benefit of children with SEN.
- Decide upon a precise definition of inclusion so that schools may work towards a clear goal.
- Ensure there is a range of choice for the educational provision for children with SEN. Undoubtedly, the mainstream setting requires a number of improvements which in turn will enable an increased number of children with ASD to either be educated in mainstream full time or spend more time integrating there. The

findings also suggest that while mainstream should be reconfigured, special classes and special schools should not be abolished. To this end, the NCSE should not move forwards with their suggestion of full inclusion in mainstream for all children with SEN. A range of options including mainstream classes, special classes and special schools should continue to be presented to parents to allow them to find the most appropriate setting for their child's education based on their own individual needs.

Future research

Future research is required to investigate the perceptions of a greater number of individuals in relation to the future of education provision for children with ASD. As the literature regarding special classes is limited, more research should focus on this model of education provision and examine the impact on the children with ASD. It is imperative that future research should include the voice of both parents and children in the debate surrounding the inclusivity of special classes, something which was beyond the scale of the present study. As the NCSE are currently developing their policy plans for the future of Inclusive Education, this research is more prevalent and pressing than ever. I personally hope to see a future where all children with SEN, including those with ASD, have access to a full, inclusive education that is tailored to their own individual needs and that one day, researchers will not have to question whether these children are receiving the education that they deserve. I believe that my feelings are best captured by the following quote:

“We will know that Inclusive Education has really become embedded in our culture when the term becomes obsolete.”

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Letters



Dear [REDACTED],

My name is [REDACTED] and I am a final year student on the Professional Masters of Education course in Marino Institute of Education. I am required to conduct a research study in partial fulfilment of my Professional Masters of Education and I am writing to you to request permission to approach the staff in [REDACTED] and invite them to participate in my study.

What is this research about?

This research study intends to investigate the inclusive nature of special classes for children with Autism. The National Council for Special Education is currently conducting a review of special education in Ireland and is examining whether a move towards educating all children regardless of additional needs in mainstream classes is the best way forward. I am interested in examining the perceptions of mainstream teachers, special class teachers and special needs assistants in relation to the special classes in your school. I hope that the findings of my study will add to the debate surrounding Inclusive Education for children with special educational needs in Ireland.

What will the research entail?

I would like to invite the participants to take part in a Zoom interview with me. With permission from the participants, the interviews will be audio recorded. The data will be transcribed and analysed. All data will be stored in compliance with GDPR guidelines and any identifying materials will not be disclosed to anyone and will be removed from the transcriptions.

What will happen with this study?

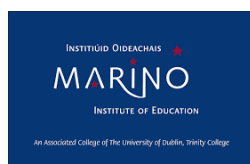
The research study will be submitted to MIE and examined by supervisors. The study may be published on the MIE Library website or stored in hard copy in the library where it may be accessed by Marino staff or students.

Contact Details:

If you have any further questions about the research, please contact my supervisor Richard Coady at Richard.Coady@mie.ie.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]



Dear SNA,

My name is [REDACTED] and I am currently conducting a postgraduate research study in partial fulfilment of my Professional Masters of Education in Marino Institute of Education. I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

What is this research about?

This research study investigates the inclusive nature of special classes for children with Autism. I am interested in gaining your perceptions in relation to the special classes in your school. I hope that the findings of my study will add to the debate surrounding means of Inclusive Education for children with special educational needs in Ireland.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in my study because you are either a mainstream teacher, a special class teacher or a special needs assistant in a school with a special class for children with Autism.

What will happen if you decide to take part in this research study?

I would like to interview you for a duration of 20 minutes or less about your thoughts, opinions and experiences of the special class in your school. If you agree to participate, a date and time of your choosing will be organised for the interview. With your consent, the audio of the interview will be recorded on a device.

How will your data be used? How will my privacy be protected?

Your data from the interview will be transcribed and de-identified. Any information that might identify you will not be disclosed. The data will be stored on a password-protected laptop in compliance with GDPR guidelines. Furthermore, all data will be deleted at 13 months in compliance with MIE guidelines, at which point it will be deleted permanently.

What will happen with this study?

The research study will be submitted to MIE and examined by supervisors. The study may be published on the MIE Library website or stored in hard copy in the library where it may be accessed by Marino staff or students.

What are the benefits of taking part in this study?

While there are no direct benefits of taking part in this research study, studies like this may contribute to the understanding and debate of the inclusive nature of special classes for children with Autism in Ireland. There are no perceived risks of taking part in this study. If you wish to gain more information about education for children with special educational needs in Ireland, you are advised to visit the website of the National Council for Special Education in Ireland (<https://ncse.ie/>).

Can you change your mind at any stage and withdraw from the study?

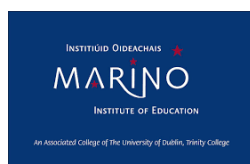
Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your data at any point. You do not have to participate in this study.

Contact Details:

If you have any further questions about the research, please contact my supervisor Richard Coady at Richard.Coady@mie.ie

Yours faithfully,





Dear Teacher,

My name is [REDACTED] and I am currently conducting a postgraduate research study in partial fulfilment of my Professional Masters of Education in Marino Institute of Education. I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

What is this research about?

This research study investigates the inclusive nature of special classes for children with Autism. I am interested in gaining your perceptions in relation to the special classes in your school. I hope that the findings of my study will add to the debate surrounding means of Inclusive Education for children with special educational needs in Ireland.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in my study because you are either a mainstream teacher, a special class teacher or a special needs assistant in a school with a special class for children with Autism.

What will happen if you decide to take part in this research study?

I would like to interview you for a duration of 20 minutes or less about your thoughts, opinions and experiences of the special class in your school. If you agree to participate, a date and time of your choosing will be organised for the interview. With your consent, the audio of the interview will be recorded on a device.

How will your data be used? How will my privacy be protected?

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What will happen with this study?

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What are the benefits of taking part in this study?

While there are no direct benefits of taking part in this research study, studies like this may contribute to the understanding and debate of the inclusive nature of special classes for children with Autism in Ireland. There are no perceived risks of taking part in this study. If you wish to gain more information about education for children with special educational needs in Ireland, you are advised to visit the website of the National Council for Special Education in Ireland (<https://ncse.ie/>).

Can you change your mind at any stage and withdraw from the study?

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your data at any point. You do not have to participate in this study.

Contact Details:

If you have any further questions about the research, please contact my supervisor Richard Coady at Richard.Coady@mie.ie

Yours faithfully,



Appendix B: Statement of Consent Form



Statement of Consent:

Please read the questions below and indicate whether or not you would be willing to participate in the study as described.

Do you consent to participate in the study by completing an interview with the researcher? Yes No

Do you consent to the interview being recorded on an audio device? Yes No

Do you understand and consent to the findings of the study being shared with Marino staff? Yes No

Signature: _____

Date:

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: -

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview questions for SNAs.

1. What do you see the role of the SNA to be in facilitating inclusion?
2. If a stranger came into the classroom, how would they know it is inclusive?
3. What would the children and their parents say about their special class?
4. On a spectrum ranging from segregated to inclusive, where would you rate the special class?
5. What strategies do you use to support inclusion?
6. Have you experienced any additional training or CPD courses related to special educational needs? What were the central aims/objectives of this training? Was it mandatory/optional?
7. Will any of the children move permanently into mainstream in your opinion? Where does this sit with your own sense of what special education/inclusion is?
8. What activities do children take part in when they are within a mainstream setting?
9. What supports are available to you as an SNA for supporting inclusion?
10. In an ideal world, where would children with Autism be educated? If you had one wish to improve the inclusion of children with ASD in Ireland, what would it be?
11. What are the benefits of special classes?
1. If all special schools and classes were to close in Ireland, how would children with ASD fare in mainstream? What are your thoughts on the new proposals regarding the reduction of special classes/schools in Ireland?
12. What impact does the inclusion of a child with ASD in mainstream settings have on their neurotypical peers?
13. How has Covid-19 impacted inclusion of children with ASD?

Interview questions for mainstream teachers.

1. What does an inclusive lesson look like?
2. What strategies do you use in your classroom to support inclusion?
3. What activities do children with ASD take part in when they are within a mainstream setting?
4. What supports are available to you as a mainstream teacher for supporting inclusion?
5. Have you experienced any additional training or CPD courses related to special educational needs? What were the central aims/objectives of this training? Was it mandatory/optional?
6. In an ideal world, where would children with Autism be educated? If you had one wish to improve the inclusion of children with ASD in Ireland, what would it be?
7. What are the benefits of special classes?
8. If all special schools and classes were to close in Ireland, how would children with ASD fare in mainstream? What are your thoughts on the new proposals regarding the reduction of special classes/schools in Ireland?
9. What impact does the inclusion of a child with ASD in mainstream settings have on their neurotypical peers?

10. How has Covid-19 impacted inclusion of children with ASD?

Interview questions for special class teachers.

1. If a stranger came into your classroom, how would they know it is inclusive?
2. What would the children and their parents say about their special class?
3. On a spectrum ranging from segregated to inclusive, where would you rate your special class?
4. What strategies do you use in your classroom to support inclusion?
5. How much time do children from your special class spend integrating with mainstream classes?
6. Will any of the children move permanently into mainstream in your opinion? Where does this sit with your own sense of what special education/inclusion is?
7. What supports are available to you as a special class teacher for supporting inclusion?
8. Have you experienced any additional training or CPD courses related to special educational needs? What were the central aims/objectives of this training? Was it mandatory/optional?
9. In an ideal world, where would children with Autism be educated? If you had one wish to improve the inclusion of children with ASD in Ireland, what would it be?
10. What are the benefits of special classes?
11. If all special schools and classes were to close in Ireland, how would children with ASD fare in mainstream? What are your thoughts on the new proposals regarding the reduction of special classes/schools in Ireland?
12. What impact does the inclusion of a child with ASD in mainstream settings have on their neurotypical peers?
13. How has Covid-19 impacted inclusion of children with ASD?

Appendix D: Interview excerpt with coding example.

20 [Interviewer] What would children and their parents say about their special
21 class?

22 [Interviewee] Yeah, I love this question, it kind of makes me reflect on what
23 they actually think. But you know, I kind of thought I'd look different from
24 the child and then the parents. So I, I think the children I suppose because I
25 have the senior class their older obviously and they're very in touch with
26 the fact that they have autism themselves, so they would all know and they
27 would speak about it. So I think if you actually ask them they would
28 probably be able to actually say how they felt. So I would think that they
29 would say it's somewhere that they can be themselves and somewhere
30 people understand them and give them breaks when they need it. So not
31 pushing them all the time, kind of saying okay look, I realise you need a
32 break. Right now. I'm going to give you that. And somewhere they can feel
33 happy and safe. I think a lot of them would say that they feel happy and
34 safe. Somewhere they're listened to. I try my best, but I think they know
35 that you know that we do have their best interests at heart and
36 somewhere where they can learn at their own pace. I think that's kind of
37 important for them here and a lot of the girls that would have come from
38 the mainstream would say to me, you know, say they would find
39 maths difficult and they were like I much prefer doing my maths out
40 here because I can go at my own pace. So that would be a really big thing.
41

42 And the parents, I think the parents see the special class as a total
43 lifeline. Ehm I mean there's a big support network amongst, amongst the
44 parents and the relationship between the parents and the teachers are
45 really, is really evident, especially during the school closure.

[Theme: Benefits of special classes- happy children]

Awareness of asking the children with ASD for themselves. Importance of the child's voice.

Children can be themselves.

Working at the child's own pace. Recognising the need for breaks.

A place of safety and happiness.

Explaining they are doing their best for the children.

[Theme: Benefits of special classes- happy parents]

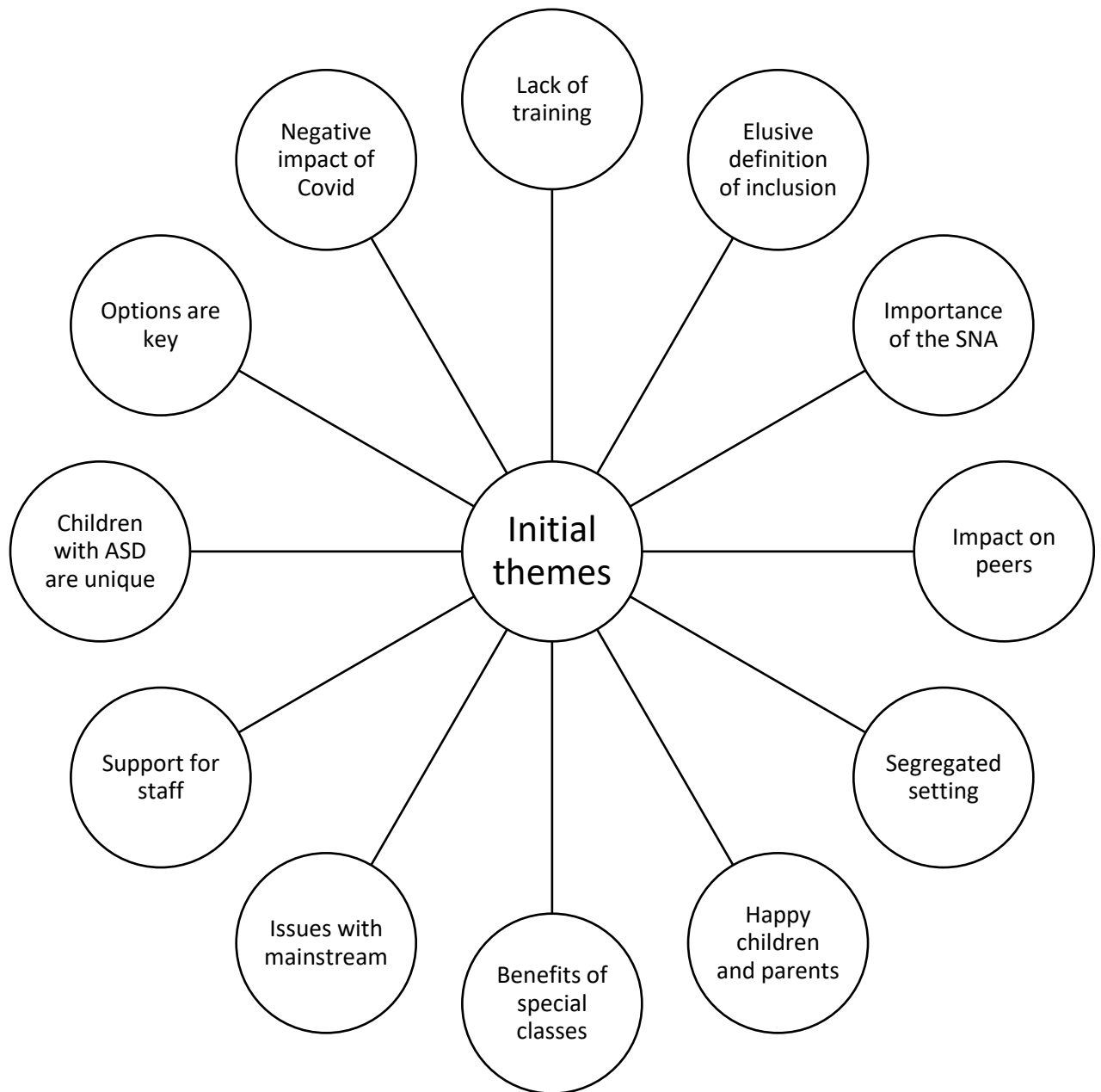
Special classes as a lifeline for parents.

Support network

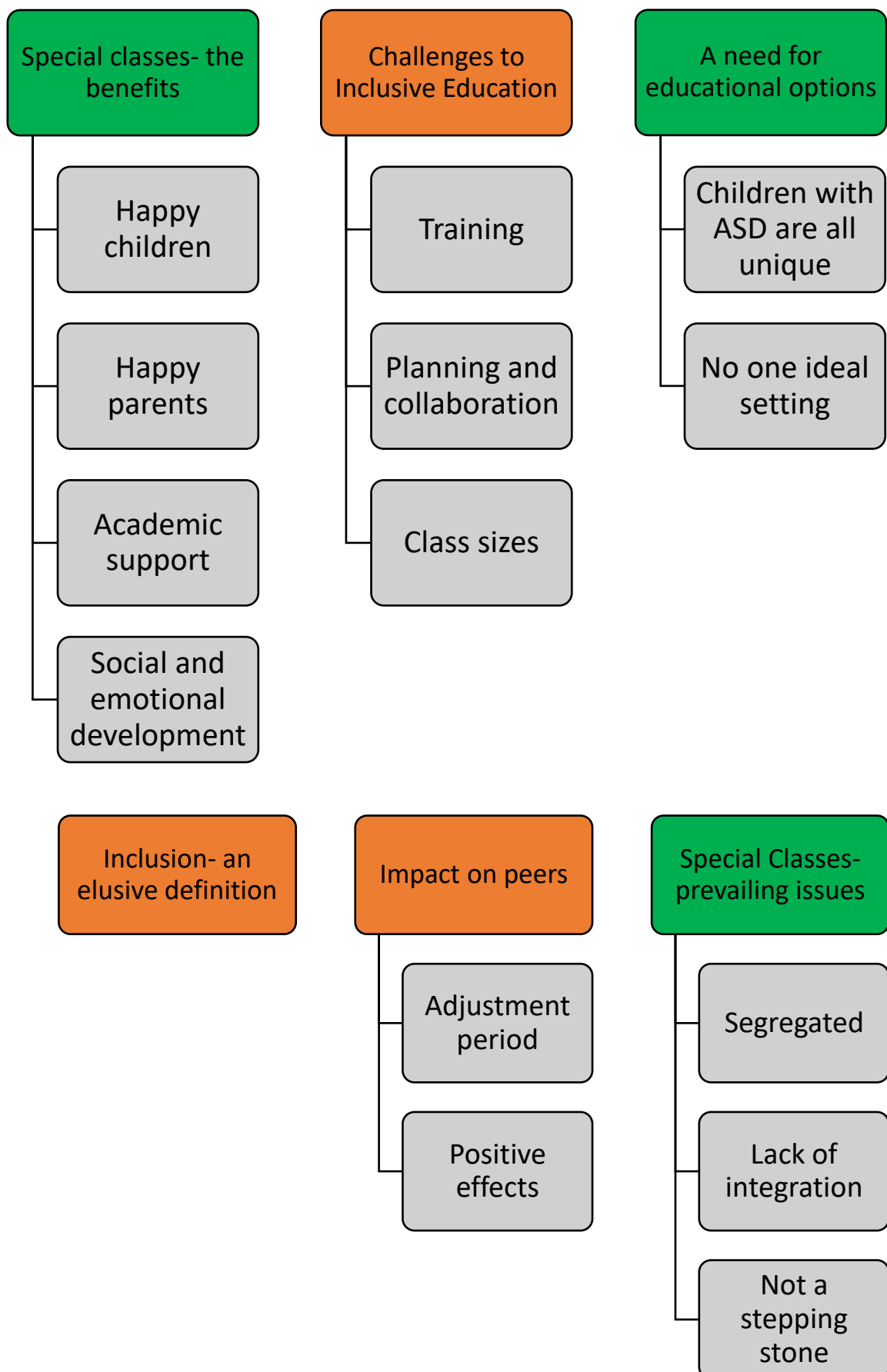
Parent- teacher relationships

Appendix E: The development of initial themes, final themes and subthemes.

Initial themes



Further revision of themes and sub-themes



Final themes and sub-themes

