

Title Page.



*Including Children with ASD in a Mainstream Setting from the Perspective of
Teachers and SNAS.*

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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.

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Abstract

Over the last few decades there has been more of an emphasis placed upon the importance of including children with special educational needs within the mainstream school setting. Due to the prominence of promoting inclusive educational environments in current policy and legislation, there has been an increase in the number of children with special educational needs, including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) attending mainstream primary school settings. In the past, children with ASD would have been placed in a special school setting but, increasingly, inclusive mainstream settings are seen as the most appropriate environments for these children. In light of this, the aim of this study was to explore the area of including children with ASD in the mainstream setting through the experiences and perspectives of primary school teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). A key objective of this research was to discover whether the reality of including children with ASD in mainstream settings correlated to the literature, policies and legislation associated with inclusion.

A qualitative research design was adopted for the purpose of this study, as the researcher wanted to gain personal insight into the lived experiences of the participants. Individual interviews were carried out with a sample of primary school teachers and SNAs from a mainstream primary school setting. The participants' perspectives and experiences provided realistic insights into both the benefits and the challenges of including children with autism in the mainstream setting.

Findings showed that including children with ASD in the mainstream setting was mostly positive for all involved. However, participants, for the most part believed that the government could do more to support both professionals and children with autism in the mainstream setting.

Furthermore, the teachers and SNAs interviewed felt that access to in-service education in relation to autism was not readily available and in order to ensure that inclusion was practiced meaningfully it needs to be more accessible.

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Introduction

Context and Rationale for the study.

Over the last few decades there has been more of an emphasis placed upon the importance of including children with special educational needs within the mainstream school setting. Indeed, there has been a paradigm shift from education policies promoting exclusion to a complete support of inclusive mainstream education environments. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, for example, stated that primary education should be available, compulsory and “free to all” children, regardless of disability (UNCRC, 1989, p. 27). Like most countries, traditionally Ireland and its education system involved segregation of schooling for pupils that had learning disabilities, and these children were more often than not, sent to special schools (Lodge and Lynch, 2004). However, due to international and national changes in attitude towards the concept of inclusion and its importance, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2013) reports that “fewer than 1 percent of students are educated in special schools in Ireland” (p. 22).

While there have been a number of studies carried out exploring the inclusion of children with special educational needs, in general, there have been very few studies done that focus specifically on including children with ASD in the mainstream primary school setting (McGillicuddy and O'Donnell, 2014). There has been a significant increase in recent years in the number of children with SENs attending mainstream school settings (Department of Education, 2007). The NCSE estimated that in December 2014, there were nearly 14,000 children in the education system with ASD, this accounts for 1.5% of the total school population (2015, p. 20). Most students with ASD attend mainstream schools that do not have a specialised autism unit (NCSE, 2009). Therefore, as there is a moderately high prevalence

of ASD in the mainstream setting, it was deemed to be worthwhile to carry out research on one school and how they include children with autism.

Aims and objectives of this study

This study aims to explore, in-depth, the concept of inclusive education, specifically in relation to educating children with ASD in the mainstream primary school setting. By exploring the attitudes, experiences and perspectives of primary school teachers and SNAs, the researcher hopes to uncover if the reality of including children with autism spectrum disorder in the mainstream setting correlates with the policies of inclusion. Ultimately, both the advantages and challenges of including children with autism in the mainstream classroom will be discussed, with a view to providing a comprehensive piece of research in this area for teachers, SNAs and anyone who may be interested in acquiring more information. Finally, in exploring the perspectives of teachers and SNAs in relation to this topic, one of the objectives of this study is to discover whether the government provides enough support for both professionals and children with autism in the mainstream primary school setting.

Outline of the study.

Chapter One introduces the topic of including children with ASD in a mainstream primary school setting. The context and rationale for this research study is discussed, the main aims and objectives are presented and, finally it briefly outlines the format of the entire study.

Chapter Two reviews the literature pertaining to the education and inclusion of children with autism and other special educational needs. International and national policies relating to the education of children with ASD and other special educational needs in an inclusive mainstream setting are looked at and discussed.

Chapter Three discusses and justifies the chosen research design and the methods employed by the researcher which were deemed most suitable for ensuring that the aims and objectives of the study were met. The chapter outlines the sampling procedure, data collection and analysis methods and also discusses ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

Chapter Four presents and analyses the findings from the interviews carried out with teachers and SNAs for the purpose of the study. The findings are set out thematically in order to highlight the main issues that emerged following the analysis of the data gathered by the researcher. Quotations from all of the participants are used to support the findings.

Chapter Five concludes the study. A summary of the entire body of research is examined. The main conclusions are also drawn and finally recommendations for further areas of research are considered.

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will review the literature relating to the area of educating children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) whilst also referring to inclusive education within the mainstream setting. It must be noted that most research in this area has concerned children with special educational needs (SEN) in general, so the majority of the literature being reviewed relates to SEN in general, rather than ASD, in particular. Firstly, it will explore how ASD is defined and highlight how there has been an increase in the number of children with ASD attending mainstream school settings. Next, an examination of the historical and legal context concerning the issue of inclusive education, will be presented. Following on from this it will show how the concept of inclusion is difficult to define and will discuss the myriad of opinions on this complex topic. Next, it will explore the idea of fully achieving inclusion in the mainstream setting, whilst addressing issues and concerns that arise, that in part, relate to initial and in-service training. Finally, it will briefly look at the benefits of including a child with autism in a mainstream setting and discuss the issue of government funding. Including children with ASD in the mainstream setting is a complex issue which warrants exploration.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

ASD is a lifelong, neurodevelopmental condition that affects approximately 1% of the population (Baird et al., 2006). The term ASD itself is used to describe a set of characteristics that encompass children's patterns of social interaction, communication and thinking (Baron-Cohen, 2008). These set of characteristics make navigating the social environment extremely difficult for someone with ASD and this is seen as one of the biggest challenges associated with the condition (Jones and Frederickson, 2010). Children with ASD may possess a myriad of strengths, such as an excellent memory, creative thought patterns, single-mindedness, extreme determination and possession of a field of narrow interests (Gobbo and Shmulsky,

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2012). However, poor communication skills, a tendency to dislike disruption to routine and restricted interests can impede children with ASD and negatively impact these strengths (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

In Ireland and elsewhere there has been an increase in the enrolment of children with ASD into mainstream school settings (Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley, 2008). In December 2014, of nearly 14,000 children with a diagnosis of ASD, 63% of them were educated in mainstream classes (NCSE, 2015, p. 4). Children with ASD are more likely to experience exclusion than their peers with other special educational needs (Barnard, Prior and Potter, 2000). A study conducted by Elizabeth Cullinan (2017) investigated the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream primary school settings. Taking part in this study were 371 students from first to sixth class, with 25 of these having a diagnosis of ASD. Each participant completed two written surveys, one of which asked them to identify who they liked to play with during yard time. The results of this study suggested that children with ASD tend to have a small number of friends (which is often not reciprocated by the peers they have listed) and that they struggle socially. Furthermore, Cullinan also noted that while the children with ASD that were included in her study all attended mainstream schools, they were not experiencing an entirely inclusive environment. She argues that this is because, in a lot of schools, children with autism are simply placed in a mainstream classroom with their typically developing peers and are left to navigate, in particular, the social environment on their own and thus they find it extremely difficult to fit in and form meaningful friendships (Cullinan, 2017). In light of this, the issue of inclusion and the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream primary school settings is currently extremely topical. McGillicuddy and O'Donnell note that while research has been conducted into the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream settings, there has not been as many studies carried out on the inclusion

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of children with ASD in particular but there has been a rising interest in the area amongst some researchers (2014, p. 325).

Powell and Jordan (2002) noted that there appears to be some misconceptions among school staff in relation to certain ASD strategies. One of these misconceptions relates to rigidly adhering to a structure and specific routine: Powell and Jordan note that while structure is important, it should be used to scaffold learning and then faded out as pupils progress. Furthermore, children with ASD should learn to accept change and recognise it as a life skill, rather than adhering to a rigid and specific routine (Lawson, 2011). In mainstream and also special school settings, there is a focus on behavioural intervention strategies (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013 cited in Dunleavy, 2015) such as visual timetables. Arguably, these may help a child to complete and remain on task but, importantly, only in the context of what is being asked of them in said task, the child may not be able to adapt the skill used to relate it to other situations (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013 cited in Dunleavy, 2015; Preis, 2007). The Department of Education and Science Inspectorate Report (DES) (2006) recommended that teachers should receive training in ASD specific approaches such as Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). If this were to happen, perhaps including children with ASD in the mainstream setting would prove to be less challenging, as teachers would feel more confident in providing for their needs.

Historical and legal context concerning inclusive education.

When addressing the historical and legal context concerning inclusive education, I will be focusing more so on special educational needs as a whole, rather than specifically on ASD, as historically, children with ASD would have just been referred to as having SEN.

The educating of all pupils was brought into the public spotlight with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which stated; “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.” (Article 26).

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Never before had it been written down that every person, regardless of their background was entitled to an education. In relation to pupils with special educational needs, the *Warnock Report*, published by the the British Government (Department of Education and Science, 1978) is said to be the catalyst for including children with SEN in the mainstream setting (Dunleavy, 2015). It was stated in the report that “full-time education in an ordinary classroom should be the aim for many children with special educational needs” (Department of Education and Science, 1978, p. 5). However, in introducing the term ‘special educational needs’, the report had the effect of painting children with SEN with one brush. It became a blanket term which was recognised by Warnock herself. In a 2006 interview with The Guardian newspaper (which was later included in the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee document on SEN in 2006) she stated that:

One of the major disasters of the original report was that we introduced the concept of special educational needs to try and show that disabled children were not a race apart and many of these should be educated in the mainstream... but the unforeseen consequence is that SEN has come to be the name of a single category... as if it is the same problem to include a child in a wheelchair and a child with Asperger’s, and that is conspicuously untrue. (Quarmby, 2006)

It was once the accepted international practice to categorise children as either ‘normal’ or ‘handicapped’ within the education system and then place them into the ‘appropriate’ setting (Lodge and Lynch, 2004, p. 79). Of course, this form of segregation seems barbaric now but it was seen as the most appropriate way of meeting the needs of children with SEN while at the same time, albeit controversial, “safeguarding the efficient education of the majority” (NCSE, 2010, p. 5).

In respect of the Irish context, the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) was put together in order to provide education for all people within the system. It stated that it

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was the responsibility of a school to “ensure that the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs, are identified and provided for” (p. 6). The Equal Status Acts 2000 - 2015 prohibit discrimination of any kind in all areas of society, regardless of a person’s situation. In relation to discrimination on the grounds of disability, the Acts reiterate what is stated in the Education Act (1998), that schools must mainstream and reasonably accommodate pupils with disabilities (The Equality Authority, 2005).

Furthermore, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act was published in 2004. Its main focus is on “individual education planning, educating children in inclusive settings and the provision of a range of services including assessments and educational support” (NCSE, 2010). Whilst, the Act has still not been fully embraced or enacted, it essentially promotes and reinforces the notion that all children should be educated within a mainstream school setting as the following is stated in Section Two of the Act:

A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with:

- The best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act.
- The effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.

(Government of Ireland, 2004, p. 7)

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was established under the EPSEN Act in 2004 and it coordinates education services for children with SEN through Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) (Inclusion Ireland, 2014; NCSE; 2010). The Irish

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Government, through the DES has tried to ensure that the education system is set up to be entirely inclusive of all children.

Defining and interpreting inclusion.

It must be noted that while the education system in this country advocates for providing inclusive education for all children, which is written in both the Education Act (1998) and the EPSEN Act (2004), neither document provides a definition of the term inclusion or give guidelines on how to implement it in schools (Dunleavy, 2015). While there are many explanations of inclusion in both documents, Cullinan (2017) argues that these fall short and leave schools in the dark about how to implement inclusive practices adequately. Rose (2005) states that since the early 2000s there has been a huge effort and commitment made by governments to ensure that education systems around Europe are more inclusive. However, he goes on to say that, “it would appear that all efforts made by policymakers, campaigning organisations and teachers to provide fully inclusive schools have failed to achieve that ultimate goal” (p. 3). Dunleavy (2015) argues that having no definitive definition of inclusion is hugely to blame for this failure and that it is a concept that is marred by uncertainty and puzzlement.

Therefore, the term inclusion must be considered carefully, as evidently, there is a recurring theme of confusion in the literature about the actual definition or meaning of inclusion and inclusive education practice (Lodge and Lynch 2004; NCSE 2010; Ainscow 2013; Gordon 2013). Ainscow (2013, p.3) describes the field of inclusion as an elusive concept, “riddled with uncertainties, disputes and contradictions”. Although its principles of tolerance, diversity and equity are certain and uncontested, the challenge lies in how to achieve inclusive education (NCSE, 2010). Ainscow (2013) suggests that the confusion internationally arises, in part, from the fact that inclusive education is defined in a variety of ways. The NCSE Literature Review of the Principles and Practices of Inclusive Education

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(2010), states that while many definitions have been put forward, no single definition has been accepted universally.

Yet, it is important to examine some of these definitions, as perhaps, many schools look to these definitions for guidance on their own inclusion policies. The National Childcare Strategy (2006, p. 46) defines inclusion as “a process involving a programme, curriculum, or educational environment where each child is welcomed and included on equal terms, can feel they belong and can progress to his/her potential in all areas of development”. Yet, at the same time, inclusion cannot be all about, awarding a prize to every student in an attempt to “protect self-esteem, and foster the dogma of fairness” (Asma, 2012, p. 2). Furthermore, it should not be judged on whether a school enrolls a student with SEN but then fails to adjust the curriculum to fully meet their needs (Philips, 2001). Nurse (2001) distinguishes between inclusion and integration, arguing that in relation to integration, while children with SEN are educated within the mainstream setting, they are excluded from some of the activities that other children are able to take part in. Essentially, in regards to ‘integration’ the onus is on the child rather than on the school to assimilate into the community. Inclusion flips this concept on its head; it is the school’s duty to ensure that children with SEN are welcomed and to acknowledge the child’s right to fully engage in all aspects of education (NCSE, 2010).

It is important to acknowledge that while there is no definitive definition of inclusion, the literature on the topic does agree on its overarching aim; to enable all children to participate in an educational setting that values and encourages their uniqueness (Knight, 1999). While the aim is to promote an entirely inclusive environment the reality of doing so can be challenging (NCSE, 2010; McGillicuddy and O’Donnell, 2014). Mousley, Rice and Tregenza (1993) argue that by continuously trying to provide additional resources for children with disabilities, education systems fail to tweak the curriculum itself to be inclusive

of all abilities. Boutot (2007) notes that while there has been an increase in the number of children with SEN attending mainstream schools, this does not guarantee inclusion. In addition, schools are enrolling all children, with their policies stating that no child will be refused admission to the school based on their disability and that the child's needs will be paramount (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013 cited in Dunleavy, 2015). While this is admirable, and the right thing to do, problems do arise when trying to provide for the needs of every child individually (Dunleavy, 2015).

Accomplishing inclusion.

The Irish Primary School Curriculum (1999) adopts a 'whole child' approach to the educating of pupils. It aims to recognise and embrace diversity and differences amongst pupils. While key legislation under the EPSEN Act 2004 remains postponed (Travers, 2013), its contents are promising. The Act stipulates that every child with SEN has the right to receive an individual educational plan (IEP) and specific learning targets to be reviewed at the beginning of every year. Many schools provide IEPs for their pupils with SEN despite the EPSEN Act not being ratified into law which is extremely encouraging. Furthermore, in 2017 the DES amended and revised the process for allocating special education teachers in mainstream schools. Now, this allocation is based on the educational needs of the school as a whole, enabling them more scope to provide resources for all students with SEN (DES, 2017). This has given schools more autonomy in deciding where SEN resources should be utilised. A fundamental principle of the Salamanca Statement is that mainstream schools must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, "while also having a continuum of support and services to match these needs" (UNESCO, 1994). With the revised process for allocating special education teachers in mainstream schools being enforced the ability to achieve this principle in Ireland may finally be realised.

Of course, there are still countless issues within the education system that thwart the universal strive towards achieving inclusion. For example, class size, resources, happiness of the child and social inclusion of the child are all issues. However, one issue that is raised by many researchers is the need for teachers to receive adequate training and preparation for attending to children with SEN in mainstream classes (Purdy and McGuckin, 2013; NCSE, 2013; Cumming and Wong, 2010). Many teachers report feelings of being incapable of fully meeting the specific needs of every child and also admit to having low levels of knowledge in relation to special education (Cummings and Wong, 2010; Mousley et al., 1993). Swain et al. (2012) found that a lack of training and experience in special education within teacher preparation courses can have a profoundly negative effect on teachers perceived ability to support the inclusion of students with disabilities.

In relation to SNAs, currently, there is no obligation for them to seek out specialist training relevant to their role (Kerins, Casserly et al., 2015). The issue of training was addressed in a study by Keating and O'Connor (2012). The findings of their study of 55 mainstream primary schools highlighted the range of qualifications held by SNAs. While almost half the SNAs in these schools reported having a Leaving Certificate qualification, only 6% held a qualification at degree level. Limited access to training courses and lack of funding were cited as concerns amongst SNAs. Participants in the study noted that they would benefit greatly from further training in relation to specific learning difficulties and behaviour management.

Benefits of mainstreaming children with ASD

Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) discuss the proven benefits of children being educated together, arguing that children with disabilities benefit greatly from being in a mainstream setting as their ability to enhance their social skills is increased and they tend to be more accepted by their peers. Wang agrees, stating that, "inclusion aims to benefit special

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children through improvements in their learning outcomes, including their social skills, academic achievement and personal development” (2009, p. 155).

This view is supported by Westwood and Graham (2003) who agree that only a mainstream setting can give these students the opportunities to share in the same range and quality of educational and social experiences enjoyed by all other students. In their own research, they found that 34% of the forty-one teachers interviewed stated that, having a child with a special educational need in their classroom encouraged the other children to become more tolerant, supportive and understanding (2003). Cigman also believes that within the mainstream setting, both the child with SEN and their peers benefit as “children belong together” and together they learn to build meaningful relationships (2006, p. 4). In essence, inclusion often improves development, increases acceptance, and reduces negative stereotypes (Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009).

Government Funding

It has been difficult to find literature in relation to government funding for students with ASD, teachers and SNAs. However, according to ‘Project Iris’ report (2015), which was commissioned by the NCSE, staff in mainstream schools are encouraged to seek out additional training as much as possible and “additional funding is available... including enhanced capitation grants for schools, a transport scheme to enable attendance at school, grants for special equipment and funding for assistive technology to support access to the curriculum” (p. 20). Of course, as it has been mentioned already, the revised process of allocating SEN teachers in mainstream schools is a positive step that the government has taken. Furthermore, during the academic year 2018/19, the DES created a graduate certificate in the education of pupils with ASD for teachers which was fully funded by the Department (DES, 2018). The programme aimed “to provide substantial theoretical and practical professional development for teachers working with pupils on the AS [Autistic Spectrum]...

thereby, [they] will be in a position to contribute to the school's overall capacity in this area”
(2018, p.1)

Conclusion

This chapter has examined what Autistic Spectrum Disorder is and how it may present itself, the historical and legal context concerning inclusive education, both internationally and nationally. It has also tried to highlight the difficulties in defining what inclusion is and also the potential for fully achieving inclusion. Furthermore, it has looked at some of the benefits associated with mainstreaming children with ASD and has briefly touched upon the topic of government funding. Inclusion is a complex issue and this chapter has also tried to show the gap that exists between policy and provision. In order to gain a deeper insight into the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream primary school settings, this study will investigate the experiences and perspectives of teachers, SNAs and parents of children with ASD currently attending mainstream schools.

Research Methodology

Introduction

The main aim of this research is to investigate the experiences and perspectives of teachers and SNAs regarding the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream primary school classroom. The reason why the research focuses on the inclusion of children with ASD specifically is because, as the literature review suggests, while there has been research conducted on the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream setting, little has been carried out concerning the inclusion of children with ASD. (Barnard, Prior and Potter, 2000; McGillicuddy and O'Donnell, 2014; Cullinan, 2017).

This chapter describes the chosen research design and the methodology employed and why it was decided as the most suitable. The different types of research methods that could have been utilised will also be discussed, noting their advantages and disadvantages. Details of how sampling was carried out and what data collection instruments were used were considered. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the ethical considerations and limitations of this study.

Qualitative Research

According to Hancock and Algozzine (2006), when selecting a research design one must pay particular attention to how well it allows for the full investigation of the research question. For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research design was chosen. The main objective of qualitative research is to gain the perspectives of participants on the research question at hand rather than focusing on the researcher's perspective, this is referred to as the insider's perspective (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006). Thus, this study adopted a qualitative approach as it best supported the aim of gaining a greater understanding of including children with ASD in a mainstream primary school setting from the perspectives and experiences of teachers and SNAs.

While questionnaires are a common data collection tool in qualitative research, the researcher felt, from personal experience, that oftentimes, people fill them out too quickly without giving their answers much thought or, conversely, people spend too much time focusing on writing the ‘perfect’ answer, disregarding what they actually believe in relation to the topic (Birmingham and Wilkinson, 2003). Similarly, with focus groups, which is another qualitative research data collection tool, members may not articulate their honest opinion due to being influenced by other members. This is particularly true if their honest opinion differs from those opinions of other group members (Wilkinson, 2016). As the sample size of this study was so small and intimate, the researcher felt that the most appropriate data collection instrument to use would be individual interviews as they would allow for honest and insightful responses to the questions.

There are other research designs that could have been chosen for this research study had they allowed for the full investigation of the question at hand. These are as follows:

Quantitative Research - quantitative data is mainly comprised of numbers and is usually collected using methods such as questionnaires and surveys (Denscombe, 2010). Quantitative research is usually mathematical and scientific in nature and while it is argued that “every researcher can and should use numbers in their research” (Gorard, 2006, p. 2) it was decided that since the researcher wanted to focus on the personal and lived experiences of the participants it would be too clinical to gather data using the more impersonal quantitative research methods as mentioned previously.

Action Research - this form of research is usually concerned with making changes to systems or coming up with solutions to existing problems within said systems (Denscombe, 2010). While this study aimed to understand the experiences of the participants regarding the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream setting, it did not set out to alter the

systems in place. Therefore, the researcher decided that action research was not a suitable design to employ for this study.

Mixed Methods - the term ‘mixed methods’ refers to research that applies the use of different strategies within the same study (Denscombe, 2010). If time constraints were not an issue, the researcher would have employed this design framework for the study. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection would have allowed for a more in-depth and conclusive study.

Planning

Contact was made with the school in person. The researcher gave the principal of the school a letter and an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study. The Board of Management and the principal gave approval for the study to be carried out in the school, however, they decided that they wanted the researcher to focus only on the perspectives of teachers and SNAs and not include the views of parents of children with ASD, thus the research question was changed to reflect the school’s wishes. The researcher asked the principal to communicate the information about this study to members of the teaching staff and SNAs. The reason why this technique was chosen is because it is believed to be the most appropriate for recruiting participants, as the school principal would be “known to potential respondents and trusted by them” (Lee, 1993, p. 67).

Four teachers and four SNAs were interviewed for this research. The reason why teachers and SNAs were selected to partake in this study, was because the researcher endeavoured to highlight the experiences of both groups in order to give a broader perspective on the issue at hand. As stated previously, the researcher originally wanted to also interview parents of children with ASD in order to get the perspective of someone not on the staff, which could have resulted in more expansive and in-depth viewpoints. In light of this, it could be argued that losing the perspectives of parents of children with ASD from the study, is a limitation.

Data Collection (Methodology)

Data was gathered using the method of ‘Individual Interviews’, as it was believed to be the most valid and viable means of collecting the data for this study. In order to gain an honest and deeper understanding of the reality of including children with ASD in a mainstream primary school setting, it was essential and imperative to obtain personal insight. “Interviews yield rich insights into people’s biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings” (May, 2001, p. 120). A semi-structured rather than structured interview was used by the researcher. While a semi-structured interview is still formal in nature, the researcher followed an ‘interview guide’ that contained the list of questions and topics that needed to be addressed during the interview but it allowed the researcher to “follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide” (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). Furthermore, the participants were only interviewed once and therefore it was important to get as much information as possible. The researcher based the interview question guide on information deduced from the literature review. In the early stages of the dissertation, the researcher made note of the possible themes on which questions will be based, these were as follows; participants’ definition of inclusion, inclusion versus integration the matter of maintaining structure and routine, training and preparation, social and academic development, the needs of children with ASD versus other children, benefits of having children with ASD in the mainstream classroom, government funding for children with SEN/ASD and the availability and accessibility of in-service education. The researcher had a guide of twelve interview questions.

Individual interviews were carried out with all participants of the study: four teachers and four SNAs [eight interviews in total]. The duration of each interview was approximately forty minutes and took place on school grounds after school hours and for two of the participants, the researcher interviewed them over the phone. Confidentiality was reiterated to

all participants before the interviews commenced and they were reminded that they can withdraw from the study at any time they wish.

All interviews were voice recorded using a dictaphone, with permission to record sought from participants. Recordings were then carefully transcribed by the researcher for subsequent data analysis. The use of a recording device ensured accuracy of the data analysed and allowed the researcher the freedom to focus on the interview and what the interviewee was saying (Biggam, 2009).

Pilot Interview

In order to ensure that the researcher's questions were appropriate and non-invasive, a pilot interview was used. A pilot interview is:

Intended, not for data collection as such, but as an aid to the design of later research... it is an initial attempt to see if the subject being investigated is adequately captured by the proposed interview procedure and schedule of questions.

(Harvey, 2012)

In addition, through conducting a pilot interview with a friend, the researcher was able to hone and refine their questions upon the advice of the participant, thus this strengthened the protocol of the actual interviews (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews was transcribed by the researcher and collated and analysed thematically. In order to organise the data thematically, the transcripts were investigated thoroughly to gain a deeper understanding of the common themes that emerged. Hence, it was decided that the data would be coded by topic or question, rather than coding it by participant as this allowed the researcher to identify the common themes that arose more efficiently. The main findings obtained through the data analysis were then discussed in the 'Data Analysis' chapter of the dissertation.

Ethical considerations

In relation to carrying out research, the term ‘ethics’ “usually refers to the moral principle and guiding conduct” (Wellington, 2015, p. 44) that underlies the study. When carrying out research that involves social interaction, researchers have a responsibility to ensure that ethical guidelines are created and strictly adhered to (May, 2001). They should employ accurate methods of data collection and analysis; make use of recent and relevant research material and methodology; record and report data accurately and truthfully, ensuring to avoid falsification, which is considered to be misconduct (Sarantakos, 2005). This study has conformed to all ethical guidelines as set out by Marino Institute of Education (MIE).

Consent from all participants was obtained in order to carry out interviews; a sample of this consent form will be attached in Appendices (Appendix D). The interviews were recorded using a personal recording device (Dictaphone) and transcribed onto a password-protected laptop. It was imperative that all the information that was collected throughout this study was handled with integrity and respect, and that the confidentiality of all participants remained paramount in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the research (Merriam, 2009). This dissertation used primary data - information collected directly from people. As stated in the revised *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA, 2011), some of the ethical considerations that relate to this type of research study, are as follows:

Lack of harm or detriment - all participants of this study were notified of any predictable detriment that could arise from the findings of the research. If any unexpected detriment to participants arose during the research they would have been notified immediately. The participants were made fully aware of what they were partaking in and were told why it was necessary, how their data would be used, where it would be stored and how it would be recorded. The contact details of the researcher were also given to them in case they had any further questions.

Voluntary Informed Consent - the participants were fully informed about the research taking place and it was reiterated to them that they were under no pressure to consent to taking part and were free to withdraw their contribution at any stage of the study without providing a reason.

Confidentiality and Anonymity - All data collected remained confidential and was anonymised in accordance with the Data Protection Act (Government of Ireland, 2018). The data was not disclosed to any third party and participants had access to data collected from them at any time if they so wished.

When researching the experiences of children it is extremely important to recognise that “every child has an individual and unique experience of his or her childhood” (Greene and Hogan, 2005, p. xi). While no children were interviewed for this study it was important to adopt a sensitive and respectful approach when speaking with teachers and SNAs, especially where children may have been in a vulnerable position.

Limitations

As the sample size was small in nature it was not possible to deduce from the findings that opinions voiced were representative of the experiences of all teachers and SNAs who encounter children with ASD in the mainstream setting. Furthermore, it was not representative of every mainstream primary school and their inclusion practices concerning children with ASD. Therefore, the researcher needed to ensure not to make any generalisations about the findings.

It is also important to note the issue of positionality. Positionality in qualitative research is defined as:

the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study... the position adopted by a researcher affects every phase of the research process, from the way the question or problem is initially constructed... and, finally, the ways in which outcomes are disseminated and published.

(Rowe, 2014, p. 2)

In light of the above definition, as the researcher has a personal interest in the topic being explored, it was important that they remain unbiased and did not try to manipulate the data in order to fit in with any preconceived ideas of how the outcomes of the research should appear.

As the topic of inclusive education is quite sensitive, the researcher was aware that some participants might refrain from being entirely truthful in their answers. This could have ultimately impacted the findings as it could have caused the researcher difficulty in trying to come up with a valid conclusion and meaningful recommendations. In order to try and reduce the chances of this occurring, the researcher ensured that the questions asked put the interviewee at ease and were non-judgemental in every way. Of course, deciding to conduct a pilot interview before interviewing actual participants also helped to ensure that questions asked were appropriate.

Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the chosen research design and provided justification for the methods employed by the researcher in order to carry out this study. The researcher has outlined how they collected their data, what data collection instruments were used and how the data was stored and analysed. The researcher also provided an ethical framework for the reader, and acknowledged the limitations of the study. The following chapter will present the findings from individual interviews, using direct quotations from participants.

Data Analysis

Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings which emerged from the data analysis of the individual interviews that were carried out with primary school teachers and special needs assistants. The main themes that emerged from the findings of the study will be discussed throughout the chapter and commonalities and contradictions will be drawn in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

Participants definition of inclusion.

All teachers and SNAs who were interviewed shared many of the same views on what the term ‘inclusion’ and inclusive education means for children with special education needs, including autism. Participants saw it as involving all children in all aspects of school and classroom life, regardless of ability:

“I would define it [inclusion] as education where all pupils, so regardless of their special educational need, regardless of whether they have English as an additional language or regardless of their background are kind of all accommodated in the same or like, in a common learning environment.”

(Teacher A)

“Ehm, what I think inclusion and inclusive education is, is including the children with special needs in the mainstream classes, where the children feel welcome and experience a sense of belonging and where there’s equal opportunities for the child and where we remove any obstacles so that the child is enabled in every way to reach his full potential.”

(SNA 3)

This corresponds with the definition of inclusion proposed by The National Childcare Strategy (2006), which suggests that children with additional needs have the right to and should be welcomed into an environment that allows them to interact with, on an equal level with their peers.

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Cullinan (2017) noted in her investigation on the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream primary school settings that, for the most part, these children were not experiencing an entirely inclusive environment. The reason for this is due in part to the idea that merely placing a child with autism in a mainstream setting amongst their typically developing peers does not guarantee inclusion and friendship (Cullinan, 2017). Yet, from being immersed in the school where I carried out my investigation and from speaking with teachers and SNAs in particular, my research would suggest that there are schools that are fully inclusive, *“that as far as other children are concerned and they’re concerned, they’re doing what everybody else is”* (SNA 2). Of course, a more valuable insight could be gained from exploring some of the children with autism’s views. However, it was not possible to interview children due to ethical considerations. The findings of this research would suggest that the children in this school engaged in an entirely inclusive environment, where they were accepted by their peers. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) stated that, “schools have to find ways of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities” and this is the attitude that this school has adopted.

Inclusion versus integration.

All participants recognised that there was a very distinct difference between inclusion and integration; *“integration, it’s kind of the difference between just being there and actually taking part”* (Teacher A). Their ability to differentiate between merely being present in the classroom and being actively involved is reflective of the literature in which Nurse (2001) draws a distinction between the terms inclusion, where children socialise and learn alongside their peers, and integration, where children are physically in the mainstream setting but are not necessarily given access to all activities available to other children in the class. One of the participants I interviewed had a lovely way of explaining the differences between inclusion and integration, she stated that she looked it up and found:

“A diagram which showed a lot of coloured dots in a circle, or sorry... all green dots in a circle and segregation was where the coloured dots were outside the circle with the green dots and inclusion was where the coloured dots were in the circle with the green dots and integration was the coloured dots but they were in a little circle within the circle with the green dots. So that really does sort of signify to me what it is.”

(SNA 1)

Routine and structure.

Most participants that I interviewed disagreed with Powell and Jordan's (2002) suggestion that adherence to a strict structure and specific routine, while beneficial, should ultimately be faded out as a child with autism progresses. Most stated that structure and routine ranged from “very,” “hugely” and “vitality” (Teachers B, C and D) important for children with autism. Some SNAs noted, how being made aware of changes to average daily timetables in advance made their roles much more straightforward as they are able to give the child “a warning or just, you know, an indication” which in turn can avoid some of the “anxiety” that certain changes might induce (SNA 1). However, Teacher 1 did state that “they [children with autism] shouldn't rely too much on a routine and the routine shouldn't become too rigid.” When the teacher made this statement, I referenced Powell and Jordan's view on structure and routine and she agreed with them as she noted that “if there is a deviation from the routine where there is an unexpected change that could cause enormous anxiety for a child with autism.” Furthermore, SNA 2, while believing implementing a strict structure and routine were incredibly important and beneficial when working with a child with autism, she did note that changes to ‘the normal’ allowed children to experience the reality of life. The school has a monthly assembly where prizes are given out to different students. The child that this SNA works with has a very difficult time dealing with losing and not receiving a prize, so she states:

“It’s building blocks in terms of that routine and structure, so that they have some idea of what... of coping strategies and then, the day before and on the day, if assembly is happening, ‘now this is happening after and this is what will be happening at it’ and give him again, some idea so he’s not going to win, because he has meltdowns at it, that’s not good for him or for other children and it happens and you deal with it, but it is so much better if you can avoid them.”

In light of this, this SNA recognises that, just as Lawson suggests, changes to routine ultimately can have a positive effect on children with autism as they can accept adjustments and recognise this acceptance as a life skill (Lawson, 2011). Yet, ultimately, all participants felt that withdrawing a specific structure and routine for children with ASD as suggested by Powell and Jordan (2002) was an ill-informed piece of advice and they believed that children with autism thrive best, both academically and socially when structure and routine is adhered to. It must be noted, that Powell and Jordan’s (2002) viewpoint on the issue of structure and routine was not an isolated one from other literature reviewed for this study, therefore, the researcher thought it was an interesting one to gain perspective on from trained professionals.

Training, preparation and accessibility to in-service training.

The issue of preparation and appropriate training was cited in the literature review, and studies by Cumming and Wong (2010) and Mousley (1993) noted that many teachers tended to doubt their professional competency when it came to teaching children with special educational needs. In relation to the training that SNAs receive, Kerins, Casserly et al. (2015), note that there is no stipulation for them to extend their learning; they obtain a basic level of information about common special educational needs and that is seen to suffice. Keating and O’Connor (2012) noted, in their study, that only 6% of the SNAs that they interviewed had a third level qualification. According to the teachers and SNAs interviewed for the purpose of this study, however, the general opinion was that, in terms of theory, their training was adequate, but in reality, no course or no amount of training can ultimately

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prepare someone for the realities of the classroom. As Teacher C notes, *“I feel there should have been a much bigger emphasis on practical advice and strategies in helping children with autism”* and this sentiment is further supported by SNA 3, who states, *“It gave me an understanding, but I’ve got to say that, I suppose, you learn more about autism through my experience of working with children.”*

Of course, this study is limited by the fact that only eight participants were interviewed, which is further broken down to four teachers and four SNAs, thus, it cannot be categorically stated that teachers and SNAs in general, feel that what they learnt in college did not prepare them for the classroom environment.

According to the literature, the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate Report (2006) recommended that all teachers should receive training in ASD specific approaches in order to make promoting an inclusive environment easier. However, through talking to the participants of this study, it has been brought to light that they do not believe that in-service education is readily available and easily accessible to them. For example, Teacher A remarked that, *“I don’t think it is very accessible and I think the onus is actually on you to go out looking for it and trying to find what you can do.”* Even more illuminating was what Teacher C stated, *“I have never been offered any training or in-service in relation to this area. I have done Summer courses on autism but haven’t heard of any courses during the year. They would be very beneficial.”* Yet, it would appear that teachers do have access to additional training in this area, but it is not available during school hours. In 2018, the DES released Circular 0005/2018, which informed teaching staff that they were funding a graduate certificate in teaching children with autism. Therefore, it is pertinent to note that it could be seen as a limitation that the researcher only asked participants about access to in-service education, on reflection it would have been more balanced to ask them about access to additional training, in general. Furthermore, it must be noted that there might be in-service

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education available relating to SEN in general, as the researcher only focused on questions about ASD.

One of the most illuminating issues that the findings brought to light, was the fact that the SNAs interviewed all supported what the literature said; that SNAs are not expected or encouraged to seek additional training of any kind. All of the SNAs interviewed held the same view, that in-service education was not easily accessible or readily available to them:

“No, in-service education is not readily available” (SNA 1), “I think the Croke Park hours should be used more so for training and at the moment that’s not there for us” (SNA 3).

Unlike teachers, SNAs are not entitled to take course days, so therefore, it would prove difficult for them to partake in in-service education even if it was available, *“if there was, if a course was available we would not be able to attend during the week because we can’t take time off” (SNA 1).* However, interestingly, they all stated that they would really appreciate it if they were able to avail of more education and training in relation to autism and other disabilities: *“I would love if there was more, I know I’m not on my own, certainly in this school I think everybody would love to avail of it, all of the SNAs” (SNA 4).*

Social and academic development of children with autism.

The American Psychiatric Association (2013) note that children with autism tend to have poor communication skills and struggle in social situations. Therefore, in light of this, one of the things I wanted to look at was if teachers and SNAs put more of an emphasis on the social development of children with autism. For the most part, participants stated that they believed that there was an overall balance between the social and academic development of children with autism but that oftentimes, because of the difficulties they face in social situations, one has to do more explicit work on the social development of the child. All teachers interviewed believed that in the early years of school, the social development of the child takes precedence over their academic development *“mainly because they cannot learn if they are unhappy or don’t understand the rules of school or have good relationships with*

staff and peers” (Teacher C). Interestingly, however, the SNAs ultimately felt that one of their main roles was to develop the social skills of the children they worked with, *“from my point of view the social would be more important because that’s what I’m dealing with... the social is more important because the teacher looks after the academic end”* (SNA 4). I thought this perspective was really interesting, that this SNA felt that she was required to develop the child’s social skills and the teacher was required to develop the child, academically. In this way, both factors could be seen to be balanced, as in this case both are being refined. Furthermore, SNA 2 noted, like Gobbo and Shmulsky (2012) that a lot of children with autism are academic and do well in intellectual pursuits in school:

“Some children with autism are very intelligent which actually makes it a little bit easier then because it means then that you can shift the balance more to the social.”

Of course, in making reference to this SNA’s comments, I am not trying to be reductive and nor was she, or any of the participants for that matter. Throughout every interview that took place, each participant stressed that every child with autism is different and they all have various, unique needs. Thus, the findings from this question, in particular, highlighted to me that it was quite a closed and restrictive question as it did not take into account the intricacies and complexities of autism.

Needs of Child with ASD vs. other children.

Not surprisingly, all participants believed that the needs of a child with autism are comparable to the needs of other mainstream children as, and this was a running sentiment with all participants, *“all children need to feel safe and they need encouragement and praise and they thrive on that and a lot of children need assistance from time to time”* (SNA 3). I think on a more analytical level this further highlights how this mainstream school has fully embraced an inclusive environment, that does not reduce children to their diagnoses. This attitude is reflected in the literature review as Knight (1999) noted that one of the overarching aims of inclusive education is to value and encourage the uniqueness of every child,

supporting them in every way. By recognising that the needs of mainstream children and children with autism are comparable, this school has ensured that it adopts an entirely inclusive policy which is no easy feat to accomplish, as shown in the different literature (McGillicuddy and O'Donnell, 2014; Boutot, 2007; Nurse, 2001).

Benefits of mainstreaming children with ASD

All participants agreed with the literature relating to this topic. Westwood and Graham (2003) noted that some of the teachers that they interviewed for their study believed that having a child with SEN in the classroom encouraged other children to be more tolerant and accepting. Teacher C echoed this sentiment stating, *“it makes them more patient and understanding and accepting of difference, definitely it's a positive thing.”* In relation, to the benefits that the child with ASD experiences, SNA 2 noted that *“they don't have the social niceties that a lot of the other kids learn just by watching other people, ehm, so, school, or the yard, is a great place for them [children with ASD] to pick up on some of these social cues, and if they were in a, like a, special setting they might not be exposed to these things.”*

Yet, some participants, while acknowledging that there were more benefits to including children with autism in mainstream, they did recognise that there can also be challenges, *“I think in a small number of cases... the child with autism may be disruptive and this can be stressful for other children”* (SNA 3) and *“someone with additional needs can be challenging for them, as they can see the child with ASD getting different treatment or rules”* (Teacher C). Their noting of these challenges went against anything that was discussed in the literature I read, so in this way their views add another dimension to the conversation about including children with autism in the mainstream classroom.

Government Funding

As mentioned in the review of the literature, it proved challenging to find a lot of up to date information in relation to government funding. However, from the literature that I did read, most of the participants of my study disagreed with the sentiment that the government

openly and willingly tried to give as much funding as possible to schools for SEN children. For example, according to 'Project Iris' which was published by the NCSE (2015b), schools are encouraged to seek out additional funding from the government to further support children with SEN. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the government also funded a graduate certificate in teaching children on the autistic spectrum in 2018 for teachers. So, from the literature it appears that funding is readily and openly available to schools and teaching professionals. Yet, the most common sentiment amongst the participants of this study was that not enough was done by the government to support children with special educational needs in the mainstream setting. Teacher B commented that, *"It's a great idea to include children into the mainstream setting... well in most cases anyway, but, ehm, nowhere near enough is done to make this happen effectively."* SNA 2 was more animated and vocal about their views stating that, *"the government doesn't provide enough funding, at all. They could definitely do more I think that they could do more as far as SNAs go in supporting these children with training, with all of that."*

Of course, the limitations of this study must be noted again, these viewpoints cannot be seen as representative of all teachers and SNAs, undoubtedly, as it is a controversial topic, many differing views exist and thus, this must be mentioned and recognised.

Conclusion

It is evident that a number of issues that emerged from the findings of this study correspond with literature reviewed in chapter one. Correlation exists in terms of the social benefits of an inclusive education system for all children for example, and the concept of what inclusion should mean for children with autism and other disabilities attending mainstream school. On the other hand, it was interesting that discrepancies can be identified in terms of how much support the government provides to mainstream schools and the availability of in-service education for teachers and SNAs. The next and final chapter will

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conclude this research study and will make some brief recommendations based on the findings that were analysed throughout this chapter.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This study sought to investigate the personal experiences relating to the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream education settings, from the perspectives of primary school teachers and SNAs. Following analysis and discussion of the findings, the final conclusions and recommendations of the study will now be presented.

Conclusions.

The main objective of this piece of research was to investigate the personal experiences of primary school teachers and SNAs in order to explore the reality of including children with ASD in the mainstream school setting. The study aimed to examine if how one school's inclusion policy correlated with contemporary legislation on inclusive education. It also aimed to explore if the needs of children with autism and the professional development of both teachers and SNAs are supported by the government through funding. In essence, the study aimed to investigate the positive aspects of including children with autism in the mainstream setting on all children while, at the same time, highlight the challenges that exist for, not only the child with ASD and the professionals involved in their education but also the other children in the setting.

Literature relating to the inclusion of children with special educational needs within a mainstream school setting was reviewed and analysed. Furthermore, legislation and policies concerning inclusive education were also critiqued. Theoretically, for the most part, the literature and the findings of this research study were in agreement; that including children with ASD and other special educational needs in the mainstream school setting was positive and wholly practical, for not only the SEN child but also for other children and staff. There are discrepancies, however, and these relate to the mainstream setting's ability to fully implement an entirely inclusive environment as the participants' believed that the government does not provide enough support for professionals and children with ASD.

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The area of inclusion is complex. As is stated by the NCSE (2010), it's principles of "tolerance, diversity and equity" go uncontested, "the challenge lies in how to achieve inclusive education" (p. 3).

Although the sample for this research was very small in scale, the researcher is confident that the aims and objectives of the study have been successfully achieved, and that the findings presented to the reader are representative of the positive aspects of including children with ASD in mainstream and inclusive education as a whole. Furthermore, the perspectives of the teachers and SNAs that participated in this study highlighted some of the challenges that professionals face in relation to inclusive education.

However, the limitations of having such a small sample must be reiterated once again, views expressed cannot be said to be representative of primary school teachers and SNAs in any way. All participants were from the same school, so, they are all experiencing the same working environment, which of course could lead to some bias within their statements. The school was in an urban area, thus, views expressed might not relate to staff working in a rural mainstream school. The researcher's positionality, of course, is another limitation. While it could be unknowingly, they had certain thoughts in relation to the research that perhaps could have influenced findings and recommendations. Of course, every effort is made by a researcher to ignore their own positionality, it ultimately can create bias.

Recommendations

All participants in the study stated that they would benefit greatly from additional training and education in the area of including children with autism in the mainstream setting. The researcher focused on the topic of availability of in-service education, thus, it might be pertinent to put on more courses related to ASD management in the mainstream setting for teachers.

As discovered during this research, SNAs do not have access to in-service education and they are not entitled to course days, like teachers. As SNAs are responsible for the

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primary care needs of a child with autism in the classroom, it would make sense to offer at least one day of training during the academic year to them. One participant mentioned that Croke Park hours could be used for training purposes, and perhaps this could be a viable solution.

Of course, in-service education for SNAs might be difficult to offer, so, if there was more courses available outside of the academic timetable, it would appear that SNAs would be willing to engage with this type of training.

Although every case is different, findings show that there is a danger in following the literature relating to the issue of structure and routine. The literature recommends that rigid routine be gradually removed for children with autism, however most participants in this study stressed that routine and structure were paramount in ensuring that children with ASD get the most out of the mainstream setting, both academically and socially. Thus, the researcher recommends that professionals not rely wholly on what the literature states, but rather addresses this issue based on the case that they are presented with.

While it is incredibly difficult to manipulate the curriculum to suit every child, in order to address inclusive policy on a deeper level, it would prove to be interesting to see how the curriculum could be adapted to include an adapted set of guidelines, aims and objectives for children with autism. The researcher believes that this would help both teachers and SNAs to ensure that children with ASD are fully included in all classroom activities. It would also allow the child to access the curriculum at their level and could lead to less frustration.

In conclusion, and to reiterate, the researcher believes that the aims and objectives set out at the beginning of this study have been met. Furthermore, the researcher considers that the above recommendations warrant further examination, thus highlighting the merit in exploring the topic of including children with ASD in the mainstream setting.

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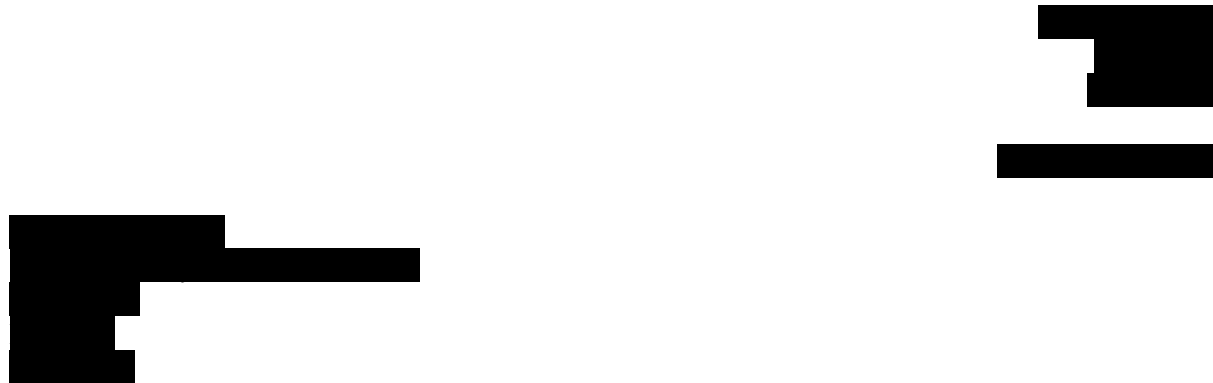
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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter to Principal



Dear Principal,

My name is Rachael Crowe and I am currently in my final year of the Professional Masters in Education in Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year coursework, I am conducting a research project entitled, "What are the experiences of teachers and SNAs regarding the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream classroom?" This study seeks to explore the experiences of teachers and SNAs in your school of including children with autism spectrum disorder and to share their experiences in the context of the mainstream setting.

I am writing to you to ask your permission to conduct my research in your school. This would involve a series of short interviews. The purpose of these interviews is to ascertain a broad scope of opinions and views and to ensure that the teachers and SNAs have the opportunity to share their experiences. Each interview will take approximately 40 minutes and will be audio recorded. This audio recording will then be safely stored on a password protected laptop.

Strict confidentiality is paramount to my research and in order to protect participant anonymity, I will ensure that no identifying features will be revealed in my project. Neither the name of the school or any geographical details will be disclosed. You will reserve the right to remove yourself and your school from the research at any time throughout the investigation if you so wish and no reason will be required from you. All data collected related to your contributions will be removed from the research immediately.

I would be very grateful if you could consent to my conducting research in your school. Should you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED], or my supervisor, Ann Molumby, who can be contacted by email at [REDACTED]. A consent form is also enclosed, should you wish to accept this invitation to participate in the study.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Yours faithfully,

Rachael Crowe

Appendix B: Letter to Teachers

Dear Teacher,

My name is Rachael Crowe and I am currently in my final year of the Professional Masters in Education in Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year coursework, I am conducting a research project entitled, "What are the experiences of teachers and SNAs regarding the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream classroom?" This study seeks to explore the experiences of teachers and SNAs in your school of including children with autism spectrum disorder and to share their experiences in the context of the mainstream setting.

I am writing to you to ask if you would like to volunteer information on your experiences. This would involve a short interview. The purpose of these interviews is to ascertain a broad scope of opinions and views and to ensure that the teachers and SNAs have the opportunity to share their experiences. Each interview will take approximately 40 minutes and will be audio recorded. This audio recording will then be safely stored on a password protected laptop.

Strict confidentiality is paramount to my research and in order to protect participant anonymity, I will ensure that no identifying features will be revealed in my project. Neither the name of the school or any geographical details will be disclosed. You will reserve the right to remove yourself from the research at any time throughout the investigation if you so wish and no reason will be required from you. All data collected related to your contributions will be removed from the research immediately.

I would be very grateful if you could consent to taking part in my research. Should you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED], or my supervisor, Ann Molumby, who can be contacted by email at [REDACTED]. A consent form is also enclosed, should you wish to accept this invitation to participate in the study.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Yours faithfully,

Rachael Crowe

Appendix C: Letter to SNAs

Dear SNA,

My name is Rachael Crowe and I am currently in my final year of the Professional Masters in Education in Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year coursework, I am conducting a research project entitled, "What are the experiences of teachers and SNAs regarding the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream classroom?" This study seeks to explore the experiences of teachers and SNAs in your school of including children with autism spectrum disorder and to share their experiences in the context of the mainstream setting.

I am writing to you to ask if you would like to volunteer information on your experiences. This would involve a short interview. The purpose of these interviews is to ascertain a broad scope of opinions and views and to ensure that the teachers and SNAs have the opportunity to share their experiences. Each interview will take approximately 40 minutes and will be audio recorded. This audio recording will then be safely stored on a password protected laptop.

Strict confidentiality is paramount to my research and in order to protect participant anonymity, I will ensure that no identifying features will be revealed in my project. Neither the name of the school or any geographical details will be disclosed. You will reserve the right to remove yourself from the research at any time throughout the investigation if you so wish and no reason will be required from you. All data collected related to your contributions will be removed from the research immediately.

I would be very grateful if you could consent to taking part in my research. Should you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED], or my supervisor, Ann Molumby, who can be contacted by email at [REDACTED]. A consent form is also enclosed, should you wish to accept this invitation to participate in the study.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Yours faithfully,

Rachael Crowe

Appendix D: Consent Form

I have read / heard about the study on researching what are the experiences of teachers and SNAs regarding the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream classroom. YES/NO

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? YES/NO

Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? YES/NO

Have you received enough information about this study, and any associated health and safety implications if applicable? YES/NO

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study? • At any time • Without giving a reason for withdrawing YES/NO

Do you agree to take part in this study? YES/NO

Have you been informed that this consent form shall be kept in the confidence of the researcher? YES/NO

I give consent to participate in this study which will be conducted by Rachael Crowe, PME student in Marino Institute of Education.

Signed:

Name:

Date:

Appendix E: Information for Participants

Name of researcher: Rachael Crowe

Contact details: 0867910985/ rcrowepme17@momail.mie.ie

Name of research supervisor: Ann Molumby

Contact details: amolumby@gmail.com

Research Question:

What are the experiences of teachers and SNAs regarding the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream classroom?

Aims of this study:

This study aims to explore the concept of inclusive education in relation to children with ASD, by paying particular attention to attitudes, experiences and perspectives of teachers and SNAs. Ultimately, both the advantages and the obstacles that exist will be identified and explored, with a view to providing an informative platform for both teachers and SNAs who are required to provide an inclusive educational environment within their classrooms.

Individual interviews:

In order to gain an honest and deep understanding of the reality of inclusive education, it is essential to obtain personal insight. I intend to carry out individual interviews with four primary school teachers in order to investigate the experiences, from their perspective, of providing inclusive education to children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. I also intend to interview four SNAs in order to explore their perspectives. I believe it is of valuable importance to obtain the perspectives of teachers and SNAs in order to investigate the concept of inclusive education for children with ASD, and identify the positives and the challenges that it presents.

- This study will conform to all research ethical guidelines as set out by Marino Institute of Education (MIE).

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH ASD

- The individual interviews are expected to last approximately 40 minutes, and will take place in a location that is private and comfortable for participants. That may be on school premises or in an environment that suits participants the best.
- Interviews will be voice recorded. Recordings will be transcribed for subsequent data analysis. Permission to record conversations will be sought from participants.
- Respect is given to participant's rights to anonymity, confidentiality and privacy. The researcher will communicate openly and honestly with all participants in this study, and all information – written and recorded – will be stored securely, with access available only to the researcher. Names will be changed and no information will be presented which would identify any participating individuals.
- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Thus, participants are entitled to withdraw from this study at any time, without any prejudice or negative consequences.

Data from interviews will be collated by the researcher and thematically analysed. A discussion of this data will then be presented in line with a literature review. It is envisaged that the findings produced for this study will be of interest and benefit to educators.

Signed: _____

Rachael Crowe.

Appendix F: List of Interview Questions (Teachers)

Research question: What are the experiences of teachers and SNAs regarding the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream classroom?

1. How do you define inclusion or inclusive education?
2. In your experience, is there a difference between integration and inclusion?
3. How important is structure and daily routine for a child with autism? Is it beneficial?
4. What type of training did you receive in college to prepare you for the needs of all children attending mainstream education? Do you think it was adequate?
5. Could you compare the needs of a child with autism to the needs of a mainstream child? Are they comparable?
6. Is there more of an emphasis and importance placed on the social development rather than the academic development of children with autism? Or is there a balance between these two factors?
7. Are there any benefits for mainstream children associated with having a child with autism in the class? How do other children learn from being in the company of a child with autism? Does it benefit them?
8. Friendships. What are the difficulties that children with autism face? Do you find that children with autism value them? Do you think that they want to make friends? Do they thrive more when they have friends? Does friendship matter to them?
9. Are there any specific teaching methodologies that you use when you have a child with autism in your class?
10. Does the government provide enough funding to fully support a child with autism in the mainstream setting? Is there anything more that could be done?
11. Is the progress of children with autism monitored and recorded differently than mainstream children?
12. Is in-service education readily available and easily accessible concerning autism, if so have you ever availed?

Appendix G: List of Interview Questions (SNAs)

Research question: What are the experiences of teachers and SNAs regarding the inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream classroom?

1. How do you define inclusion or inclusive education?
2. In your experience, is there a difference between integration and inclusion?
3. How important is structure and daily routine for a child with autism? Is it beneficial?
4. What training did you receive during your course that prepared you for meeting the needs of children with autism?
5. How would you describe your role when working with a student with autism?
6. What are the key elements of your role in managing a student's care needs?
7. Could you compare the needs of a child with autism to the needs of a mainstream child? Are they comparable?
8. Is there more of an emphasis and importance placed on the social development rather than the academic development of children with autism? Or is there a balance between these two factors?
9. Are there any benefits for mainstream children associated with having a child with autism in the class? How do other children learn from being in the company of a child with autism? Does it benefit them?
10. Friendships. What are the difficulties that children with autism face? Do you find that children with autism value them? Do you think that they want to make friends? Do they thrive more when they have friends? Does friendship matter to them?
11. Does the government provide enough funding to fully support a child with autism in the mainstream setting? Is there anything more that could be done?
12. Is in-service education readily available and easily accessible concerning autism, if so have you ever availed?