Student Article

'An Inclusive Education for All': Challenges Facing Teachers in Supporting Children with SEN in a Multi-Grade Mainstream Classroom

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Amy Quirke graduated from the PME (Primary) in Marino Institute of Education in December 2019. Prior to her time in MIE, she graduated with a BCL (with History) from University College Dublin. Having attended her local 3 teacher multi-grade primary school, it was a natural progression to conduct research in this context. She has an interest in the role research plays in the modern Irish classroom and the area of inclusive education, especially given the changing landscape of the Irish education system. Amy hopes to continue her postgraduate studies in the future. She is currently teaching 5th Class in a primary school in Co. Westmeath.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion, Special Education Needs, Primary Education

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to examine how multi-grade teachers create an inclusive educational experience for all children in their class, with a specific focus on special educational needs (SEN). The primary objective was to gain a knowledge of the teacher's lived experience of the provision of an inclusive education, and the value that is placed on this. In Ireland, research has shown that while teachers are conscious of the importance of inclusion for children with SEN, they struggle to provide it (Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire, 2018). Issues such as time, training and resources have been identified as challenges for teachers (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015), yet there is limited research available in relation to multi-grade schools. This article draws upon findings of a broader study that looked at the barriers, professional development and challenges perceived by multi-grade teachers and addressed the following research questions:

1. What practices do multi-grade teachers consider to be inclusive?
2. What barriers to inclusion do multi-grade teachers face?
3. What are teacher's opinions regarding the education and training they received regarding inclusive practice?

CONTEXT

There has been an increased prevalence of multi-grade classrooms in Ireland. Last year, one quarter of all primary school children were educated in a multi-grade setting (Department of Education & Skills, 2018). This is an area worthy of study, but to date little has been written about the experience of Irish multi-grade teachers.

Simultaneously, there have been trends towards inclusive education both nationally and internationally. The Salamanca Statement (1994), of which the Irish Government is a signatory, is framed by a rights-based perspective on education. It sets out the importance and value of an inclusive education for children with SEN, and places inclusion in a wider social policy context encompassing health, social welfare and employment.

In Ireland, the Salamanca Statement (1994) was followed by the Education for Persons with a Special Educational Need (EPSEN) Act in Ireland in 2004. The aim of the EPSEN Act (2004) was to equip children with SEN with the resources they need in order to lead a fulfilling life, while participating in society on completing their education. The Act states that an inclusive education will provide children with the "skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity, in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives" (Education for Persons with a Special Educational Need Act, 2004).

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

METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative research design to address the overarching research question. Semi-structured interviews were used to gain perspectives from practicing teachers regarding

their attitudes towards inclusion, training and any challenges that may exist. Interviews were the most suitable method for data collection as they allowed the researcher to explore a variety of personal experiences and perceptions (Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018). As with all methods of data collection, there were disadvantages in that interviews are time-consuming, and there was potential for inconsistency (Brown, 2001).

Interviews were conducted with eight practicing teachers, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. Participating teachers were recruited personally by the researcher. Nine participants were approached by the researcher, who taught in five different rural schools and were asked to participate. Snowball sampling was utilised in one school, and all teachers approached agreed to be interviewed. Interviews ranged in duration from 25 minutes to an hour. An interview schedule was used for all participants and there were no questions that the participants did not wish to answer. Some interviewees were personally known to the researcher, complicating the dynamic between the researcher and the interviewees and adding a power dynamic (Hopkins, 2007), of which the researcher was aware.

Methodological rigour was increased by taking field notes to record points of emphasis during the interview, including participant's tone of voice and body language during the interview (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). Field notes were used for immersion purposes during thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a small-scale project with just eight participants, it is not possible to draw generalisations from this study. The value of this research is in better understanding the experiences of individual teachers and this brief article provides some insight into those experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Following a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), three main themes were identified, and codes subsequently generated. The themes listed below will be briefly introduced in the following section:

1. Teacher as a facilitator of an inclusive education
2. Challenges facing teachers
3. Provision of SNA support

TEACHER AS A FACILITATOR OF AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Participants were asked to define inclusive education, and interestingly all participants' definitions differed. Participant 2 regarded it as "providing an education to the best of your ability

with the resources that you have, for each and every child in front of you". Participant 5 outlined that "inclusive for me, is … making sure that the children don't feel different to anybody else, that they are always involved, be it ability based, or racially". These definitions all centre around the concept of equality and include all kinds of diversity, not just SEN. But as identified in other research (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015), it is very difficult to define what exactly an inclusive education is in practice. It does seem to be a "conceptual muddle" (Florian, 2014) and a very subjective term.

There was also a divergence of views in relation to supporting children with SEN in the classroom. In line with research by Tiernan, Casserly and Maguire (2018) two participants in this study acknowledged that withdrawal of children from the mainstream class is not seen as best practice, mentioning the perceived stigma around withdrawal. However, in their view, children need one to one support outside the classroom to consolidate their learning. In this study, three teachers had full classes withdrawn for mathematics, and all acknowledged that while it wasn't ideal, it was necessary.

In the UK, Norwich and Kelly (2004) found that 40% of the children interviewed preferred withdrawal to in-class support for a multitude of reasons; most commonly cited was less noise, less distraction and better work. It is interesting that despite a national policy moving towards in class support, one wonders if children have been consulted. Children's voice in as a factor in policy making that has been examined by in an Irish context, with one study (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012) highlighting that in Ireland, "children's views are neither consistently nor reliably incorporated into educational decision making". Tiernan, Casserly and Maguire (2018) also outlined that co-teaching was highlighted in their research as a key approach to facilitating an inclusive education. In this study, no participant mentioned team teaching as something they engaged with in the classroom.

CHALLENGES FACING MULTI-GRADE TEACHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SEN

The importance of evidence-based education has been emphasised by the research (Davies, 1999), and Davies considers teachers' ability to source and implement findings from research as being key to future developments in educational thinking and practice. When asked about consulting academic journals for information to support their teaching practices, seven out of the eight participants replied that they would not refer to academic journals. Two participants regarded academic journals as a resource to engage with during third level study, with one saying she would consult literature if she "was to do a Masters or something" (Participant 1).

The lack of referral to evidence-based research has been explored in previous research, which has shown that a lack of time and access to academic sources has proven to be a barrier to teachers consulting and using research information (Williams & Coles, 2007). Although the Teaching Council of Ireland give their members access to academic journals, no participant in this research mentioned this which may suggest a lack of awareness among practitioners. Other research has suggested that there must be link between research and practice during a teacher's ITE, creating a capacity to research during the teacher's professional career (Willemse & Boei, 2013). One Irish study noted that CPD take-up was found to relate to the specific children in a teacher's class (Banks & Smyth, 2011) and that teachers working in multi-grade schools had a higher uptake of CPD than those in single grade classes, perhaps highlighting teachers' awareness of the challenges in multi-grades classrooms and their desire to improve practice.

When exploring participants views on outside supports and agencies, long waiting lists dominated all participants views. Participants discussed waiting lists to see an educational psychologist, often who's report is contingent on the child accessing other services. Participant 6 highlighted the need for prioritising children with the most severe needs in schools to be seen for assessment, to the detriment of a child with less severe needs. She also mentioned the need to gently encourage certain parents to get a private assessment, despite the cost, conscious of the fact that certain children who need an assessment would not get it during their time in primary school. Inequalities in the system were highlighted, "it's those that shout the loudest that get the most" (Participant 2), and that teachers often have to help advocate for pupils; "You're asking parents to rattle cans … Principals rattle cans, politicians rattle cans, sometimes we have to contact them as well. I hate to say it but sometimes it works … probably less now, but in the past it has" (Participant 2).

PROVISION OF SNA SUPPORT

All participants in the study reported that without special needs assistants (SNAs) in their schools and classroom, they would be unable to provide the inclusive education that currently exists. Participant 2 said, "if we haven't SNAs, I don't think we will be able to provide the level of inclusive education that we are". This concurs with findings arising from project IRIS, which was carried out on behalf of the NCSE, where SNA support was highly valued by all stakeholders (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2015). Participant 6 highlighted that SNA support must be focused on the child's independence, with the ultimate aim of eventually dispensing with the SNA support. She spoke about the delicate working relationship that must exist between the teacher and SNA,

saying "the SNA's can be fantastic, but ... we do need to let the kids off by themselves, to stand back a little bit". Children with SEN have a desire to work independently (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012), and independence is valued by both teachers and children. There has not been a significant amount of international research carried out on the work of SNAs, but this is something that is lacking in Ireland.

When asked whether they perceive the role of an SNA as being a barrier to inclusion, Participant 1 replied that it "depends on the SNA, of course". Participant 5, while acknowledging she had not experienced SNA support in an Irish context, explained that her experience teaching in the UK exposed her to TA support in that context. Placing her current class of 4th, 5th and 6th Class into this context of support staff in the classroom, she agreed that from a child's perspective, SNAs did represent a barrier to inclusion. Participant 2 and 6 did not agree that SNAs were a barrier to inclusion, but both mentioned the need for progression in terms of the child's independence throughout the year. Both participants were clear that all parties must agree about the exact parameters of the role of the SNA. The 'Deployment and Impact of Support Staff' (DISS) study, the largest study of its kind, collected data on TA's and support staff in the UK over a five year period (Webster, et al., 2010). While the study recognised the value of TA support for children, it also highlighted the negative effects of TA support on student's progress. The authors highlighted the inequity of support for students, with students of the highest level of pedagogical need working with those least qualified.

In Ireland, the DES has been very clear about the duties of the SNA and has consistently outlined their care-giving role (Logan, 2006). However, research has consistently suggested that SNAs are often acting beyond their official remit in a teaching and learning capacity (Logan, 2006; Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2015; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). This has been recognised by the DES (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) however this situation is unchanged as of research carried out in 2015 (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2015). While Irish principals have acknowledged the role SNA's play in facilitating group work, particularly in English and Mathematics (Keating & O'Connor, 2012), the authors of the DISS project in the UK emphasize the need for a re-evaluation of this practice (Webster, et al., 2010). From a child's perspective, Irish literature shows that some children are frustrated by SNA support, especially during peer interactions (Logan, 2006). Peer interaction, both in and out of the classroom for children with SEN is recognised in research as being an aspect of school inclusion (Nordstrom, 2011), that is vital for a truly inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

This small-scale research revealed some interesting findings. The lack of a strict definition of inclusive education is something to be considered by both future research and policymakers. While the EPSEN Act (2004) provides the statutory framework for the provision of an inclusive education, a clear definition of inclusion is lacking; inclusion is referenced, but not defined. The participants in this study were not clear on what provisions are essential, and each used their own professional judgement when making decisions regarding inclusive practices in their classrooms. Multi-grade teachers feel challenged, and the provision of specific CPD is something that policymakers should consider. While no participant regarded using their professional judgement to ensure inclusion as negative, participants were not confident imparting their definitions of inclusion. When asked to define an inclusive education, Participant 1 asked if the researcher meant "with special needs or without?" for clarification. More CPD with specific inclusion practice instruction should be offered with substitute cover provided for all teachers, as this was mentioned in the research as a barrier to multi-grade teachers accessing CPD.

The lack of teacher engagement with academic publications and research was noteworthy. While participants regarded CPD as an essential part of their practice, they did not view academic research as being a component of CPD. Future research should examine the perceived barriers in accessing academic work by practicing teachers. While this research project focused on teacher's perspectives, future research may consider investigating children's perceptions on inclusive education. Children lack of voice in research (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012), has been mentioned previously in this research, warrants further study in this area.

The provision of SNA support is an aspect of inclusion in Irish schools that requires research. The existing Irish research outlines that SNAs are often acting outside of their official remit but fails to consider the implications of this. The UK DISS study (2010) has suggested that there are serious negative implications for children who are receiving support from TAs both academically and socially. Future research is needed to assess the role of SNAs in Irish schools and how this role can be threaded into the provision of an inclusive education for all children while reducing the negative implications on social inclusion and/or academic progress.

Teaching, regardless of single grade or multi-grade, is a complex, multi-faceted practice and teachers must be facilitated in accessing research for it to be implemented in practice.

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