An Investigation into the Attitudes of Pre-Service Teachers towards Teaching Children with Special Educational Needs

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Aoife Munroe recently graduated from the Bachelor of Education programme in Mary Immaculate College with a first-class honour's degree. She completed an education specialism in the area of Special Educational Needs and her research interests are firmly embedded in Special Education. Aoife's experiences on school placement working with several children with SEN made her wonder about the experiences of her fellow classmates and how they responded to and supported these pupils to enable them to reach their full potential. Aoife is currently undertaking the Master of Education course while gaining worthwhile experiences in a range of classrooms as a substitute teacher. The working title for her master's thesis is 'Four Legged Friends: How can Assistance Dogs support children with Autism'.

KEYWORDS: Primary Education; Teaching; Special Education; ITE

INTRODUCTION

Important changes have been witnessed in both national and international inclusion policies. Data gathered from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study estimated that 25% of children have a special educational need (SEN) as defined by the EPSEN Act as 'a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition' (DES, 2004: 6). As a result, Ireland has seen a shift towards adopting a more inclusive model of education, whereby the learning environment responds to the needs of all children (UNESCO, 2005; Banks *et al.*, 2011). It is therefore essential that Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes equip pre-service teachers with the skills needed to meet the diverse needs of children in classrooms today.

This article introduces some findings from a larger research project which investigated the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards teaching children with SEN. Understanding the views of pre-service teachers as they

climb onto the first step in their professional career is essential to provide the support required to facilitate progression as they navigate the complexities of teaching. The findings of this study presenting interesting results in terms of beliefs about inclusion, the impact of the type of SEN on a pre-service teacher's attitude and their self-belief. The findings indicated that increased support and knowledge, alongside specific SEN setting placements would be beneficial to prepare teachers for their initial teaching careers. In addition to this, it is crucial to recognise how impactful attitudes can be, with negative attitudes identified as 'a major barrier' to inclusion by a UNESCO report in 2005. While participants in this study were predominantly positive towards teaching children with SEN, it was interesting to learn about the factors that challenged these attitudes.

CONTEXT

The inclusion of children with SEN has dominated the discourse in education in recent times. Today's vision of inclusion for children with SEN is a stark contrast to the earlier models adopted in education. Traditionally, segregation was viewed as the most appropriate approach for educating children with SEN (DESc, 2007; Monsen *et al.*, 2014; Varcoe *et al.*, 2014). In the 1960s, the notion of segregation progressed to integration which focused on the placement of children in mainstream classrooms (Avramidis *et al.*, 2002; Maloney *et al.*, 2010). While integration has been identified as the stepping stone towards inclusion as it is known today, it was flawed in its nature of assimilation whereby the child was required to adapt to the school rather than the school adapting to the child (Maloney *et al.*, 2010).

The World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) paved the way for developments in SEN provision. Ireland demonstrated their commitment to inclusion with the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of a Child in 1992, ultimately recognising the importance of enabling access to and facilitating achievement in 'social integration' and 'individual development' for all children without discrimination (UNESCO, 1989:23; Maloney *et al.*, 2010). The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (Government of Ireland, 1993) sparked the development of Special Education in Ireland, while the release of the Salamanca Statement in 1994 was noted as the most important indicator of commitment to inclusive education acknowledging that 'every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs' and should receive an education appropriate to their needs (UNESCO, 1994: viii; Meegan *et al.*, 2006; Kraska *et al.*, 2014).

Following these developments, Ireland has been proactive in its approach to improve the provision of special education through the passing of crucial acts, the establishment of numerous bodies and the ongoing developments of various initiatives such as the NCSE, the NBSS and the Visiting Teacher Service. It now widely accepted that children with SEN should be educated alongside their peers as active participants in their own learning (UNESCO, 1994; Government of Ireland, 2004; NCSE, 2011).

While the Department of Education and Skills play a pivotal role in providing guidance on the implementation of inclusive education, it is essentially the responsibility of the school and the teachers within the

school to translate this policy into practice. As a result of this, the teacher's role in the primary classroom has evolved significantly (Heinz *et al.*, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected using a researcher designed survey that facilitated both quantitative and qualitative data to be gathered. The three-part survey followed the structure of demographic information, a response pair section and finally a five-point Likert scale assessing opinions with additional open-ended responses facilitated. A combination of convenience and volunteer sampling methods were utilised to recruit student teachers to participate. In total, 137 students interacted with the research. The demographics of the sample varied in terms of age, gender, stage in course, placements completed, specialism in SEN and experience working with children with SEN. A sample limitation existed in terms of gender, with only 13% of participants identifying as male. Numerous methods were used to examine the data; quantitative data was analysed using both Microsoft Excel and various functions on Survey Monkey. Following the analysis of the data, three key themes emerged; beliefs about inclusion, type of SEN and teacher's self-belief.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The three-part survey provided a clear structure in the data analysis stage of the study. A sample of the demographic information of participants elicited in part one is displayed below.

|		Frequency	
Variable	Groups	n	%
Gender	Male	18	13.1
	Female	119	86.9
School Placements Completed	0 – 3	64	46.7
	4 – 7	73	53.3
Total Sample		137	

Figure 1 Participant Information

The second section of the survey presented participants with eight bi-polar adjective pairs, influenced by Osgood's (1952) semantic differential scale, in the personal response pair section. Participants had to select the most appropriate word to best describe their initial reaction to teaching a child with SEN from contrasting adjectives pairs such as comfortable/uncomfortable, positive/negative and prepared/unprepared. Unsurprisingly, fourth-year pre-service teachers presented more positive attitudes which can be accounted for by the increased knowledge and experience. The researcher decided to code all the adjectives into two categories; positive and

negative to reveal implicit attitudes. Following analysis, the implicit attitudes revealed a 60% positive and 40% negative portrayal of attitudes. This presented an interesting finding as the analysis exposed stark differences between the implicit and explicit portrayal of attitudes.
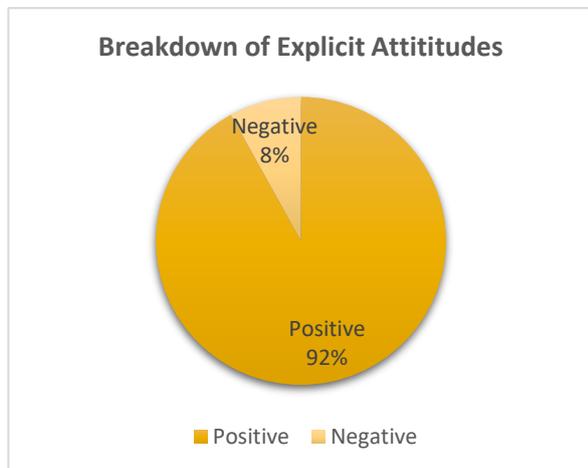
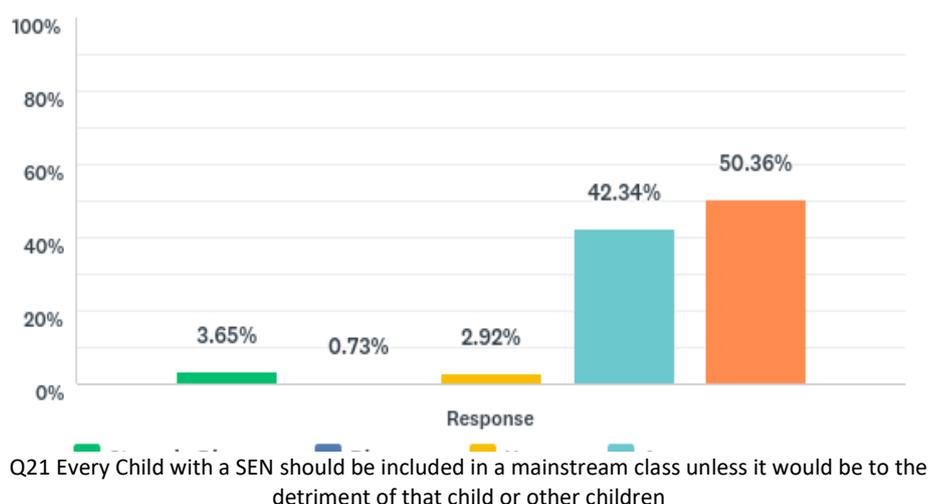Explicit Positive v Negative Attitudes
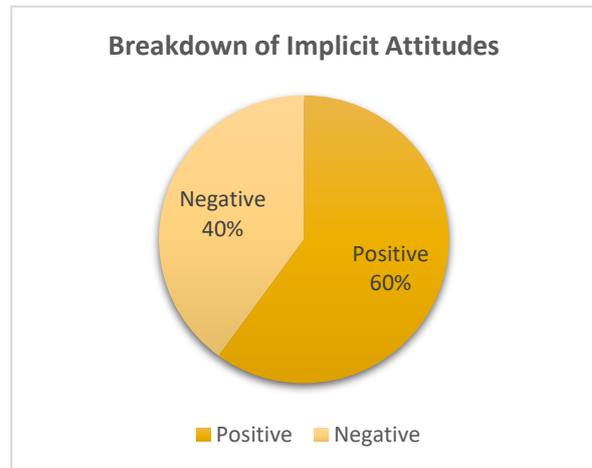
Implicit Positive v Negative Attitudes

Finally, the third section on the survey was used to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the attitudes. For the purpose of this article, only three of the key findings will be discussed; *beliefs about inclusion, type of SEN* and *teacher's self-belief.*

BELIEFS ABOUT INCLUSION

A generally positive attitude towards inclusion emerged from the data surrounding this topic, correlating with the literature pertaining to this theme (Avramidis *et al.*, 2000; O'Toole *et al.*, 2013; Young *et al.*, 2017). The first statement presented was based on the underpinning of the EPSEN Act 2004. As shown below, over 90% of participants agreed with the statement with the accompanying qualitative data emphasising that all children have the right to a fair education and the opportunity to receive their education alongside their peers.


Q21 Every Child with a SEN should be included in a mainstream class unless it would be to the detriment of that child or other children

One respondent claimed that inclusion "is undoubtedly the best option for the child – socially, academically and otherwise". Participants also cited the benefit of the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) in another statement, claiming that they shouldn't have negative connotations for the child and should be viewed as an approach to facilitate success in education; "An IEP is a form of differentiation in the mainstream class". Full inclusion was challenged however, as participants, in line with Young *et al.* (2017) and Shevlin *et al.* (2013), acknowledged that the inclusion into mainstream is not always practical and is dependent on the individual.

TYPE OF SEN

The findings of this study correlated to an extent with previous research in that the type of SEN influences teachers' attitudes (Avramidis *et al.*, 2000; MacFarlane *et al.*, 2013; Shevlin *et al.* 2013; Hassanein, 2015).
While the quantitative data indicated that the type of SEN impacted approximately 33% of participants' attitudes, in analysing the open-ended responses participants identified the 'severity' of the SEN as a factor that influences their attitude. Further analysis of the data presented an emerging theme that students with behavioural difficulties were a concern for pre-service teachers.
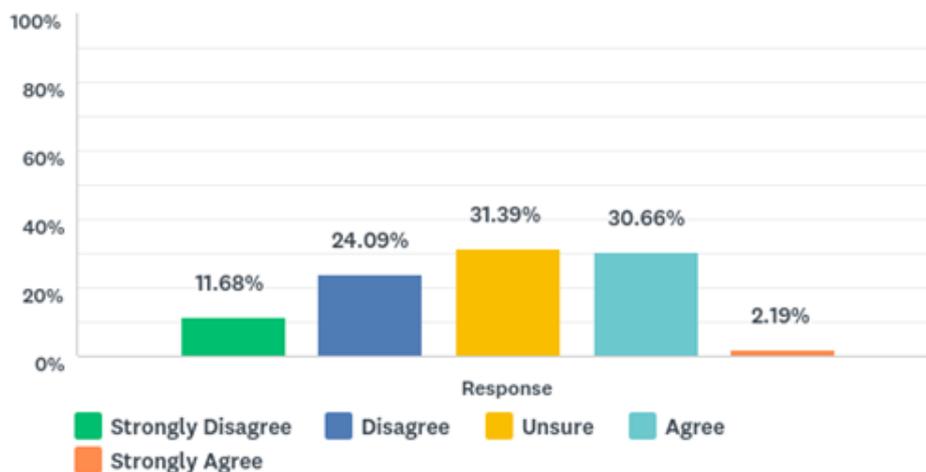
Q38 - The Type of SEN impacts my attitude towards inclusive education

One participant stated; "I would feel most confident about dealing with SEN such as ASD or physical needs, I wouldn't feel as confident about EBD as I have had little experience of it" while another participant said "If behavioural issues are a factor as well it would definitely impact my attitude (much more difficult)". These findings are consistent with Avramidis *et al.* (2000) and emphasises that experience definitely plays a huge role in teacher confidence.

TEACHER SELF-BELIEF

This theme looked at teacher preparedness and self-belief in supporting children with SEN in the mainstream class. Unsurprisingly, first year students felt the least prepared, this finding was expected when the exposure to SEN modules, opportunities for SEN specialisms and the field-experience of fourth year students is taken into consideration. The value of SEN modules was emphasised by participants claiming that the lectures were "very informative". Another pre-service teacher acknowledged that they were "given strategies and places/agencies to turn to" if they required more information.

Linking back to the previous finding, the need for further input on supporting students with behavioural difficulties was acknowledged by participants. Participants often noted that it was their own experiences that had prepared them for this type of SEN rather than direct instruction. However, across numerous other statements, predominantly positive attitudes were recorded in terms of willingness to work with others to support children with SEN in their class.
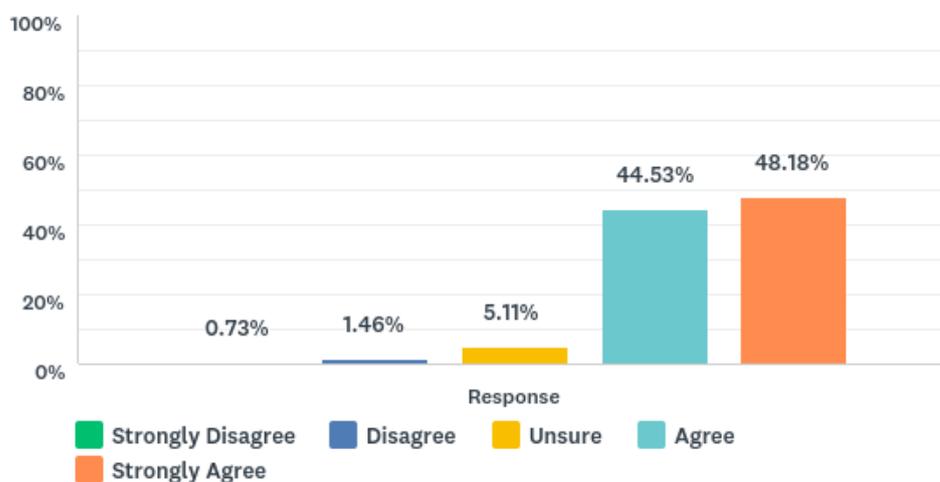

Figure 1 - Q39 I would feel comfortable working collaboratively with special education
teachers if I had a child with SEN in my class

Analysis of the data in this realm conveys high levels of pre-service teacher efficacy as they display an immense willingness to support all students. One response, successfully captures this willingness – "I would want to do the very best that I can for the child". Furthermore, many of the other comments were child-centred, with participants concerned with doing their best for the child, sentiments reflective of Shillingford *et al.* (2014). Conclusively, the pre-service teachers who engaged with this study displayed an overall positive reaction towards inclusion with most of the findings conveying positive attitudes and relevant comments.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim for this research was to investigate the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards teaching children with SEN. The study revealed that the general perceptions of pre-service teachers were primarily positive. These findings correlated with the vision of inclusive education as outlined in Irish educational policy documents. Participants recognised the advantages of inclusion with significant emphasis being placed on the social and emotional benefits of inclusion in the mainstream class for children with SEN. The attitudes and views expressed by pre-service teachers in this study provide an optimistic vision for the future of inclusive education in Ireland.

The most common cause for concern identified by participants related to the inclusion of a child with SEN was a lack of experience and a SEN specific knowledge. However, the willingness displayed by participants to support students with SEN indicates a commitment to inclusion. An increase of SEN modules and support workshops could possibly be an invaluable resource for pre-service teachers as they attempt to respond to the increasingly diverse classrooms which present themselves in Ireland today. Many of the findings correlated with previous research conducted in the area, however, it is important to take the limitations of this study into consideration., the use of a researcher designed survey, albeit influenced by instruments used in other studies, was not psychometrically tested. To summate, the researcher believes that the following quotation encapsulated the realities of inclusion.

> Despite all the ideology, declarations, legislation, circulars, guide-lines and frameworks, inclusive education depends for its success on individual teachers, with individual children, in individual schools (Day and Travers, 2012: 1).

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