

Exploring Teachers' Experiences of Inclusion Strategies for Deaf Children in Mainstream Primary Schools

Holly Cunneen

Bachelor of Education



Holly Cunneen, from Limerick, graduated from the Bachelor of Education programme in Mary Immaculate College in October 2018. Within the four years, she undertook a specialism in Special Educational Needs (SEN). Her interest in this field and more specifically in the education of deaf children has stemmed from both personal and professional experience.

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INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that 90-95% of deaf children in Ireland attend mainstream schools (Mathews 2011) rather than special deaf schools and units, therefore, understanding how these deaf children are taught and included in the mainstream setting is very important. This paper is a snapshot of a larger piece of research conducted as part of a final year dissertation which investigated teachers' experience of challenges faced by both the deaf children and the teachers themselves. The importance of aiming 'to cater for [a child's] needs and potential' is embedded in the primary school curriculum (NCCA 1999, p. 6).

This study aimed to shed light on the strategies used to meet the needs of the deaf children in their class. By doing so, teachers' competencies in teaching deaf children in mainstream schools, alongside their views of the possible link between a deaf child's level of hearing and their level of inclusion in the mainstream class will be briefly discussed. From this investigation, it was found that there are whole class benefits to using inclusion strategies for deaf children. The lack of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and insight into deaf education in initial teacher education and a relationship between a deaf child's level of hearing and their level of inclusion they experience in mainstream classes also came to light.

For the purpose of this research the term 'deaf' is used to describe a child with any degree of hearing loss or impairment. In specific cases, the terms 'mild', 'moderate' or 'severe' hearing loss may also be used as

some teachers may refer to the deaf children in this study in this way as their level of hearing may be a significant factor in some inclusion strategies used.

CONTEXT

In the Irish context, deafness is categorised as a sensory disability. It is defined as a special educational need (SEN) which is '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' (NCSE 2014, p.10). This research draws heavily on two main policies, the Education Act (1998) and the EPSEN Act (2004), which officially designate deafness as a SEN. These policies influence the education of deaf children in mainstream schools as the Education Act (1998, p. 13) states that a school must 'ensure that the educational needs of students, including those with a disability or SEN are identified and provided for', which also mirrors one of the central aims of the primary school curriculum (NCCA 1999), 'to cater for the needs of individual children'. In order to comply with legislation, it is essential that adequate resources and teacher training is put in place to ensure that each deaf child receives a quality education.

Due to the recent recognition of Irish Sign Language (ISL) as an official language of Ireland (Irish Sign Language Act 2017), this research is particularly timely. The ISL Act (2017, p. 5) enacts that 'ISL training for teachers of children who are deaf' will be provided and 'the provision of education and support services' for deaf children will be ensured. Whether or not teachers use ISL and feel equipped to teach deaf children will be explored in this paper. Although the importance of inclusive education is clear from the above legislation in Ireland, the IDS (Irish Deaf Society, 2018) maintain that 'teachers in mainstream schools may not be qualified to teach children who are deaf or hard of hearing'. This can be described as contradictory of what current policy of inclusive education claims to provide.

Upon reviewing previous research conducted in this area, many findings based on international research coincide with the findings in this particular study. For example, Marschark and Hauser (2012) outline that if one has full access to language (hearing), they possess flexible cognitive skills and yearn a great potential for learning. In other words, a profoundly deaf child does not have full access to learning and more strategies for inclusion are necessary. This idea can also be compared to O'Neill *et al* (2014) as they state that a profoundly deaf child has more difficulties in participation. As deaf children's access to language is compromised, teachers of deaf children in Ireland perspectives on this topic are important in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The decision to carry out qualitative research was determined by the research and embedded questions of this study. More specifically, semi-structured interviews were used to 'probe in more detail the actual day-to-day

practices' (Creswell *et al* 2007, p. 258). This method was deemed the most appropriate as the participants were able to express their experiences.

Five mainstream primary school teachers who teach/have taught deaf children in a mainstream setting in the region of Munster were invited to participate. The data gathered was then analysed thematically through the method of coding as it will allow various categories of data to arise with respect to each participant (Flick 2009). From this point, various themes such as challenges, inclusion strategies and teacher competencies were compared and contrasted and hence, analysed thematically based on their context. Upon reflection on the research process, a number of limitations became apparent. Gill *et al* (2008) suggest that the longer the interview, the more data can be collected. However, in terms of this research, the duration of the interviews can be considered quite short and therefore, yielding less data. Although the sample size of five teachers was deemed appropriate for this research, it can be seen as a rather small- scale study means the results are reflective of the sample included and not the general population.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Upon analysis of the data gathered, several themes and sub-themes came to light. The participants outlined various needs and challenges faced by the deaf children and the teachers and in turn, how these needs were met. As Teachers 1, 2 and 5 taught the deaf child in the infant classes, they found phonological/ phonemic awareness to be the main challenge faced by the deaf child in their class. Teacher 1 states: "*they can't hear the same sounds so they are behind*". This can be directly linked to Lederberg *et al* (2012 p. 1) as they acknowledge the language difficulties, especially phonics, in deaf children as they 'do not perceive speech in the same way as hearing people'. The difficulties these children experienced with phonics could've been more obvious to the teachers as children were at a young age.

WHOLE-CLASS BENEFITS OF INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Through discussing the inclusion strategies used by the participants, the benefit for the whole class was highlighted. For example, the use of a visual timetable was initially used for a deaf child however, the teacher discovered that the whole class benefitted from it as "*they knew what was coming next*" (Teacher 5). Similarly, one of the participants who taught a deaf child in infants used a hand-held microphone to amplify the sound through speakers in the room for this deaf child. This participant also concluded that "*every child in the class benefitted from it*" (Teacher 2) in terms of their confidence as "*they became a little bit more aware of themselves*" (Teacher 2). What at first can be considered a rather positive finding, more individualised support rather than a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach (Westwood 2011), is needed for a deaf child as their needs go beyond their hearing (Marshark and Hauser 2012).

INCLUSION STRATEGIES FOR THE DEAF CHILD

Teachers 2 and 5 noted that both the child's and the teacher's position in the classroom was important. They said that it was essential that the deaf child *"could always see my lips"* (Teacher 2) and *"don't stand in front of the window while you're teaching him because he can't see your lips"* (Teacher 5), this was to enable the child to lip-read. *"Taking cues from others"* (Teacher 1), *"ensuring teachers on yard duty are aware"* (Teacher 2) and *"small group work"* (Teacher 5) were amongst the other inclusion strategies found to be beneficial by the teachers.

Pre-teaching is an inclusion strategy outlined by Teacher 5 as "definitely" the most useful. According to Berg and Wehby (2012, p. 15), pre-teaching can be defined as 'the advance introduction of information that prepares students for upcoming instruction'. As well as pre-teaching information with the special education teacher, the participant outlined that *"if there was a poem or a rhyme, or if we were talking about the milk man or whatever it was, they would talk about that at home"* (Teacher 5). It was essential to have the learning constantly reinforced for this child both in school and at home.

As the challenge of the deaf child's acquisition of phonological/phonemic awareness was outlined earlier, Teacher 2 described the strategies they used for the deaf child's difficulty with acquiring sounds: *"to differentiate between the hard 'c' and plosive 'p', I would have had him put his hand on my throat or in front of my mouth... and on his mouth for syllable"* (Teacher 2). According to the same participant, the tactile movements of *"clapping it out on your body, making out the sounds on your arm, using different parts of your body to make the sounds"* also benefitted the whole class. This mirrors the UDL approach discussed earlier however, it is clear this participant also had individualised strategies for that child.

TEACHER CONFIDENCE

Although many inclusion strategies were shared by the teachers, all teachers interviewed said that they feel unequipped to teach and include deaf children in the mainstream classroom. The lack of competence in teaching deaf children may stem from the participants' initial teacher education and/or scarcity of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). According to one of the participants, initial teacher education *"does not prepare you"* and that *"there's not a lot of CPD courses"* (Teacher 1). This shed light on how the teachers used their prior knowledge and experience of other special educational needs to meet the needs of a deaf child as one of the participants admitted they were *"winging it"* (Teacher 2). Although not yet in place, the recent passing of the ISL Act (2017) could mean that more CPD courses will be made available for teachers of deaf children to comply with this policy going forward.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEVEL OF DEAFNESS AND LEVEL OF INCLUSION OF A DEAF CHILD

These teachers' self-proclaimed incompetence can also be linked with the correlation between a deaf child's level of hearing and their level of inclusion. Three out of the five teachers instantly considered there to be a correlation between deaf children's level of hearing and their level of inclusion in the class. One participant considered themselves "lucky" (Teacher 4) that the deaf child in their class had a very mild hearing loss while another stated that if the deaf child had a more severe hearing loss, there would be more "acute problems". This suggests that the more severe a child's hearing loss, the more severe the problems they will encounter in terms of their learning, socialisation and inclusion. This again suggests their lack of confidence in teaching deaf children in the mainstream class.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that many challenges exist in teaching and including deaf children. The main challenge encountered by the deaf children was that of language needs. Although Webster and Ellwood (1985, p. 81) recognise language as the 'vehicle' for communication, the children in this research did not prove to have any difficulties in terms of communication, which can be considered surprising. This shows that in this research, the challenges remained academic due to their mild hearing loss. Most teachers appeared to utilize the UDL approach (Westwood 2011) in their classrooms as the strategies used benefitted the whole class and not solely the deaf child. Therefore, it can be concluded that many general strategies can be adopted for all deaf children however, more specific strategies are still required to be implemented.

In terms of the correlation between the deaf child's level of hearing and their level of inclusion, participants appeared grateful that the deaf child in their class had a mild hearing loss. If the child had a more severe hearing loss, the teachers would have to go to considerable measures to ensure the child is appropriately included e.g. learning ISL, which none of them did. Therefore, it can be concluded that the more severe a child's hearing loss, more complex challenges to teaching and including them will be faced. This research can be considered beneficial to a classroom or special education teacher teaching a deaf child as various inclusion strategies used by primary school teachers in mainstream schools were outlined. However, this study can be considered rather general as it did not focus on any specific age group or level of hearing.

As the findings of this research suggest that teachers feel unequipped, this means the teachers' skills do not conform to current policy due to lack of initial teacher training and CPD. Ultimately, there is a mismatch between policy and practice. To satisfy the current policy in relation to inclusive education, perhaps more specific CPD courses in the area of deaf education would be beneficial for current primary school teachers in order for them to provide quality education for deaf children. In terms of further

research, perhaps a study that focuses solely on a particular age group or level of hearing would contribute to a better understanding of how deaf children can be successfully included in the Irish mainstream primary school.

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