

“A Different World” - Supporting Self-Efficacy Among Teachers Working in Special Classes for Autistic Pupils in Irish Primary Schools

Education provision for autistic pupils within the Irish education system has changed radically in recent decades. Autistic pupils now comprise 1.5% of the current Irish pupil population and the number of autistic pupils in receipt of Special Needs Assistance (SNA) support in mainstream schools increased by 83% in the five-year period between 2011 and 2016 (Campbell et al. 2017). This small-scale qualitative study seeks to examine the experiences and perspectives of principals and teachers working in special classes for autistic pupils across a range of Irish primary schools. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 10 participants, 4 principals and 6 special class teachers, were conducted, facilitating a nuanced understanding of how autism classes operate across a sample of six Irish primary schools. In doing so, it seeks to identify some factors perceived to impact efficacy among teachers working in autism classes, as well as explore potential avenues that may support schools in building teacher capacity to foster inclusive provision. The findings of the study may have relevance in identifying the challenges faced by teachers working in autism classes in Ireland, signposting some avenues for addressing such challenges and building capacity within schools to ensure quality educational outcomes for autistic pupils.

Keywords: Inclusive education, special classes, autism, teacher isolation, teacher wellbeing, self-efficacy

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INTRODUCTION

Special classes form a significant part of the continuum of provision in Ireland, facilitating autistic pupils¹ to be educated alongside peers in their local mainstream schools (McCoy, Banks, Frawley, Watson, Shevlin, and Smyth, 2014; NCSE, 2011; Ware, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont, Harten, Farrell, McDaid, O' Riordan, Prunty, and Travers, 2009). Given the reality that special education developed over recent decades in Ireland largely in parallel to general education provision (Kenny, Mihut and McCoy, 2020, Shevlin and Banks, 2021), the use of special class provision for autistic learners has been centrally important in increasing their inclusion in mainstream schools (NCSE, 2016a andb; DES, 2020). This has aligned with the policy agenda since the 1990s, of movement from a largely segregated model for provision for autistic pupils to an inclusive model of education (NCSE, 2016b, Shevlin & Banks, 2021). A range of governmentally commissioned reports, from the Special Education Review Commission (SERC: 1993) report through to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) funded reviews, such as the comprehensive review of special education supports in schools (NCSE, 2013) and the international reviews of the literature relevant to provision for autistic pupils (2009, 2016) have guided national policy increasingly towards inclusive provision. This movement has mirrored the international policy movement towards increasing education inclusion which has been greatly influenced by the UNCRC (1989) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994). In contrast to deliberate and clear policy movement towards greater inclusion, there remains less detailed guidance regarding how schools are to operationalise inclusive modes of provision in practice (DES, 2020, Banks and McCoy, 2016). It has been suggested by some that, once opened, there is significant levels of diversity in how autism classes are incorporated within mainstream schools (Shevlin and Banks, 2021), with a traditional high level of autonomy in terms of how school govern such classes impacting levels of subsequent oversight from the DES (Marcus-Quinn, et al., 2019). While this autonomy may support a high level of flexibility and opportunities for differentiation of policy implementation in schools to meet pupil cohort needs, it may also lead to a lack of consistency or accountability (See DES, 2020 for example). A simultaneous lack of support or guidance for

¹ Within Irish educational research and practice, there is considerable debate around appropriate language. The prevalent diagnostic terminology of 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' may be perceived to carry negative implications of deficit labelling (Bottema-Beutel, Kapp, Lester, Sasson, & Hand, 2021). In the autism community, many self-advocates prefer the language of 'autism' or 'autistic person', understanding autism as an inherent and empowered part of one's unique identity (AsIAM, 2021). For this reason, this study has opted to utilize the terms 'autism classes' and 'autistic person', whilst recognising the discussion and sensitivity around the choice of language.

principals or teachers working in autism classes can exacerbate challenges for teachers working in such settings (Kenny, Mihut and McCoy, 2020). Indeed, little attention has been given to the experiences of teachers working in these settings or how such provision is implemented across schools within the Irish education system (Horan and Merrigan, 2019; Parsons et al., 2009). This is surprising given the emerging consensus on the importance of teacher characteristics, such as attitudes, wellbeing and self-efficacy, in supporting inclusive practice in schools (Hattie, 2009; Saloviita, 2015; Leyser, Zeiger, and Romi, 2015). Additionally, teachers working in autism classes are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion, low confidence, job disengagement, and personal failure for unsuccessful outcomes (Langher, Caputo, and Ricci, 2017). Current research exposes certain barriers that can impede practice within special classes, including perceptions of self-efficacy (Hosford and O’Sullivan, 2016; Horan and Merrigan, 2019; Shevlin, Winter and Flynn, 2012); teacher stress and isolation (Banks et al., 2016; Shevlin et al., 2012); access to training (Banks and McCoy., 2016; Dunleavy, 2015); insufficient supports for schools (NCSE, 2011; Parsons et al., 2009; Ware et al., 2009), and school leadership and culture (Dunleavy, 2015; Hosford and O’ Sullivan, 2016).

The Role of Teachers

Studies identify the teacher as the key agent in ensuring quality educational outcomes for pupils with SEN (Forlin, Loreman, Sharma, and Earle, 2009; Shevlin, Winter, and Flynn, 2012; Ware, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont, Harten, Farrell, McDaid, O’ Riordan, Prunty, and Travers, 2009). Teacher attitudes have been shown to be heavily influenced by self-evaluated levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006; Hattie, 2009; Salovitta, 2015). Self-efficacy can be defined as the judgment of one’s capability to execute a given type of performance (Bandura, 2006). A growing body of research emphasises the critical importance of teacher efficacy for inclusive education across settings (e.g. Almog and Shechtman, 2007; Leyser, Zeiger, and Romi, 2011; Malinen, Savolainen, and Xu, 2012; Romi and Leyser, 2006; Soodak, Podell, and Lehman, 1998). International studies investigate the relationship between teacher isolation and burnout (Kaff, 2004; Langher, Caputo, and Ricci, 2017; Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler, 2010). In Ireland, Ware et al. (2009) argue that special class teachers can experience isolation from the wider school, as they feel solely responsible for pupils with the most significant levels of need. The complex and multifaceted nature of the special class setting, accompanied by the perception of isolation (Banks et al., 2016; Shevlin et al., 2012) and a lack of support reported by teachers (Banks et al., 2016; Dunleavy, 2015), can contribute to emotional exhaustion and low perceptions of self-efficacy (Anglim, Prendeville, and Kinsella, 2018; Langher, Caputo, and Ricci, 2017).

In addition, the perceived absence of adequate training and collegial support exacerbate experiences of stress and fatigue (Banks et al., 2016; Finlay, Kinsella, and Prendeville, 2019; Goodall, 2015; Shevlin et al., 2012). Such barriers can impact upon the wellbeing and capacity of teachers working in special classes, highlighting a disparity between principles of inclusion and enactment in practice (Day and Prunty, 2015; Dunleavy, 2015; Shevlin et al., 2012).

Teacher Education for Inclusive Practice

In response to prior concerns regarding limited appropriate content within preservice teacher education (Ware, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont, Harten, Farrell, McDaid, O' Riordan, Prunty, and Travers, 2009), Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes in Ireland were re-accredited in 2012, with the addition of mandatory content on inclusive education and a wider range of school placement experiences (NCSE, 2019). Newly qualified teachers (NQTs) who selected placements in a special school, special class, or special education role reported feeling better equipped to respond to diverse learners (NCSE, 2019). Nevertheless, Banks et al. (2016) report teacher dissatisfaction regarding the level of preparation prior to commencing work in special classes settings. Teachers highlight a lack of training for a multiplicity of responsibilities, including managing challenging behaviours, supporting pupils with complex needs, collaborating with parents, leading a team approach, and liaising with external professionals (Banks et al., 2016; Goodall, 2015; Kaff, 2015). One significant issue reported is the necessity for continued opportunities for professional development in inclusive education (NCSE, 2019).

Access to Continuous Professional Development

Irish and international studies advocate professional development in autism-specific methodologies (Banks et al., 2016; Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson and Scott, 2014; Ravet, 2011; Shevlin et al., 2012). Teachers need knowledge of autism to build trust and rapport with pupils, engage greater focus in lessons, reduce sensory and environmental triggers, effectively use visual supports, and minimise challenging behaviours (Goodall, 2015; Lindsay et al., 2014; Ravet, 2011). A number of Higher Education Institutions offer a range of specialist post-graduate programmes subsidized by the Department of Education for teachers working in situ as Special Education Teachers (SET) in different settings in Ireland. These more formal Continuous Professional Development (CPD) options offer detailed access to specialised teaching and planning approaches over year-long programmes. Further short courses and consultative support are available through the National Council of Special Education (NCSE), Cosán, and Middletown Centre for Autism.

Numerous limitations have, however, been identified regarding current CPD options available for teachers working with autistic pupils. With regards to formal, subsidized CPD, limited spaces on courses and availability of substitute cover can complicate access to training for teachers working in autism classes. For example, only 18 such places are available in the greater Dublin region. In the case of the more numerous short-course CPD, the short duration and content overload of day seminars can leave teachers feeling overwhelmed and disempowered. In the absence of sufficient training opportunities, teachers rely on a ‘trial and error’ approach, with commendable and flexible approaches in response to individual pupil needs (Anglim, Prendeville, and Kinsella, 2018). This can lead to uncertainty and self-doubt however, as decision-making is informed by experience rather than knowledge acquired from training and professional support (Anglim, Prendeville, and Kinsella, 2018; Finlay, Kinsella, and Prendeville, 2019). Recent Irish reports call for improved access to professional development and consultative support to alleviate experiences of stress and isolation in autism-class settings (Finlay, Kinsella, and Prendeville, 2019; NCSE, 2019). Consultation approaches and practical workshops are advocated, facilitating teachers to adapt strategies for their context (Dunleavy, 2015). According to Lindsay et al. (2014), optimal learning occurs through formal training and informal collaboration with experienced colleagues.

Collegial School Culture

Teachers’ perception of collegial support can enhance confidence to enact meaningful pupil outcomes (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Hosford and O’ Sullivan, 2016; King, 2011). Supportive school cultures are characterised by positive leadership and collaborative practice (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010; Hosford and O’ Sullivan, 2016). Wider systemic factors can impede the realisation of inclusive practices however (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010). Irish reports highlight the need for ongoing professional development for principals to lead effective whole-school approaches and special class provision (Banks et al., 2016; Ware et al., 2009). Dunleavy (2015) argues that collaborative practice in schools can be perfunctory and reactive, rather than planned and coordinated. Such arguments preclude any naïve interpretation of developing collaborative cultures within schools, raising pertinent questions about current provision and support for teachers in special class settings. (Dunleavy, 2015; Shevlin et al., 2012).

This small-scale study sought to elicit the perspectives of principals and teachers working in special classes for autistic pupils across a range of Irish primary schools. It aimed to explore factors that may impact upon the wellbeing and efficacy of teachers working in autism classes, as well as avenues that might support schools

in building teacher capacity within autism classes. The study may have relevance in addressing such barriers, thereby strengthening teacher efficacy and enhancing positive outcomes for autistic pupils.

METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative design was adopted for this study, facilitating a context-driven and nuanced understanding of how autism classes operate across a sample of six Irish primary schools from the perspectives of those involved (Cresswell, 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Seidman, 2006). Face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 10 participants, 4 principals and 6 special class teachers, were conducted.

Participants and Procedures

Purposive sampling (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006) was utilized, and criteria for inclusion were principals of mainstream primary schools with autism classes, and primary teachers currently working in autism classes. A representative cross-section of schools was selected, taking account of demographic variables of school patronage (1 Community National School/ 3 Roman Catholic National Schools/ 2 Educate Together National Schools), economic status (2 DEIS/ 4 non-DEIS), and gender profile (1 single sex/ 5 co-educational). Schools were recruited on a first-come, first-served basis. The size of the sample was determined by the scope of the study, time limitations, and estimated data saturation (Dworkin, 2012; Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 2000). The interviews were conducted in the participants' place of work and at a time that suited their schedules. Interviews were approximately 40 minutes in duration and were audio recorded using a dictaphone.

A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the interview data was conducted. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and manually coded by the researcher. Coded data extracts were categorised within primary themes and sub-themes. The validity of each theme was reviewed to ascertain if themes accurately reflected aspects of the full data set, and a coherent story of the data was generated. Vivid vignettes were selected to illustrate findings in relation to the central research inquiry (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty Ethics Review Panel for the Higher Education Institution. Schools were contacted by email, informing them of the research and inviting them to participate using a Plain Language Statement. Prior to each interview, informed written consent was obtained. Numerical codes and pseudonyms were employed to protect participant anonymity (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Small sample size may impact the

generalisability of the research findings. This study seeks to give voice to the experiences of participating teachers and principals, but such context-driven perspectives may not be representative of all Irish primary schools.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three themes emerged from the data within this study: Teacher wellbeing and role, Isolation and whole school approaches, and Lack of adequate preparation. The findings for each of these themes will now be discussed.

Teacher Wellbeing and Role

A complex picture emerged whereby the distinct challenges faced by teachers working in autism classes had potential negative impacts upon teacher wellbeing. Participants identified multiple demands, including supporting pupils with challenging behaviour, differentiating the curriculum, planning for inclusion, managing a team, continuous problem-solving, and collaborating with parents. Although teachers acknowledged the process of *'learning as you go'*, consistent with international and Irish research, risks of isolation and emotional exhaustion among special educators were reinforced by the findings of this study (Banks et al., 2016; Kaff, 2004; Langher, Caputo, and Ricci, 2017; Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler, 2010; Ware et al., 2009).

You're trying to learn each of the children, so you can best help them [...] And then you're also trying to help the adults [...] You're teaching kids, teaching adults, teaching yourself, and it's overwhelming (Sinéad Teacher A, Sch 5)

Despite evidence of experiential learning and reflective practice in response to pupil needs, participants expressed feelings of self-questioning and doubt (Anglim, Prendeville, and Kinsella, 2018; Finlay, Kinsella, and Prendeville, 2019), with one teacher commenting *"it was so new to me, I didn't really know what to expect [...] What you're supposed to do."*, and another emphasising the impact upon her emotional and physical wellbeing. *"You learn as you go along. I came home most nights and I was [...] a skeleton or as grey as could be."*

While principals acknowledged the key role of the teacher in ensuring successful outcomes for the autism class, one principal also noted, *"the isolation of staff teaching and working in the ASD class is something that really came to my attention early on, because it's a completely different job"*. School leaders clearly found judging how to support SET staff working within autism classes a challenge, with some teachers commenting that their principal *"...was nearly down daily, because I*

was having such a hard time". A participating principal highlighted the limitations of such a role saying "it's very difficult for school management to direct a teacher in what to do when they haven't been trained themselves". This limitation was also echoed by a participating teacher who noted their school management were "...very supportive on an emotional basis and on a resourcing basis. But .. they've never taught a class like this [...] Whereas the experience that we need and the support that we need is coming from a background in special ed" (Kate, Teacher, School 1). In contrast, and consistent with Irish research, the findings of the current study emphasised the central role principals played in leading inclusive cultures (Ware et al., 2009; Banks and McCoy, 2016; DES, 2020). The necessity for provision of appropriate CPD opportunities related to whole school inclusion for principals is also clear in the current findings (Ware et al., 2009).

As the impact of teacher self-efficacy upon pupil outcomes has been well established (Hattie, 2009; Saloviita, 2015), it becomes paramount to investigate factors that impact upon teacher wellbeing in autism classes. In order to alleviate experiences of isolation and stress, barriers must be addressed and appropriate supports enhanced (Finlay, Kinsella, and Prendeville, 2019).

Isolation and Whole School Approaches

As indicated in the extant literature (DES, 2020; Kenny, Mihut and McCoy, 2019), school autonomy and the diversity in how schools operated special classes appeared to impact upon the perception of isolation among participating teachers in the current study. A recent Irish study highlights the wide disparity in how the curriculum is delivered across autism class settings, and challenges to mainstream access for pupils with greater need (Finlay, Kinsella, and Prendeville, 2019). Factors such as the complexity of needs within the class and the level of teacher experience were identified as being influential. In the current study, experiences of teacher isolation were more pronounced when working with pupils with more complex profiles, where individualised provision diverged significantly from the curriculum-led approach of mainstream settings. Indeed, Kate, a participating teacher in School One who had moved from a special school setting to teaching in an autism class in a mainstream school, said the emotional support from colleagues "...was one of the biggest things I missed from moving from a special school," where colleagues would "know exactly what was going on" if she was having a bad day, an understanding that may not be shared by colleagues in mainstream settings.

Echoing recent studies on the emotional experiences of teachers working in autism classes (Anglim, Prendeville, and Kinsella, 2018; Langher, Caputo, and

Ricci, 2017), teachers emphasised the importance of emotional support from colleagues, stating “*You’re going to need to off-load [...] to talk to people about things that happen during your day*”. Teachers perceived that colleagues lacked an understanding of the work of autism classes and all reported experiences of isolation. One teacher commented that mainstream colleagues are “*unaware of what you have to do, because it’s a totally different world*” (Helen, Teacher B, School 5). This concept of a “*different world*” impacted upon two fundamental aspects of collegial support—emotional support and collaborative planning. Langher, Caputo, and Ricci (2017) argue that feelings of isolation are reduced when teachers perceive to be supported by colleagues. One teacher commented on feeling “*isolated when you’re the only ASD class teacher [...] you’re the only one who’s completely different from the rest*”.

By identifying barriers to emotional and practical support with schools, these findings foreclose any simplistic interpretation of how whole-school collaborative practices can be established and maintained (Dunleavy, 2015; Shevlin et al., 2012). Within this study, teachers echoed the necessity of consultation approaches, facilitating learning that is contextual, meaningful and practical (Dunleavy, 2015; Lindsay et al., 2014; Ware et al., 2009). However, while most participants reported being aware of strong collaborative cultures within their school, all participating teachers reported working in isolation to plan for their autistic pupils. This finding echoes recent research exploring the imbalance in inclusive collaboration within schools, with SET or teachers in special roles often taking significant burdens of planning to support inclusion for pupils with additional needs (Ni Bhroin and King, 2020). Half of the participants attended planning meetings with mainstream colleagues, but reported that such sessions were not beneficial due to the highly differentiated planning for a diversity of ages, levels, and needs within the autism class.

They’re all working off the same curriculum and off the same book, so they can work together and they can problem-solve there [...]it’s down to me in my class to plan for our kids, and no amount of collaboration can solve that (Kate, Teacher, School 1).

All principals expressed the importance of supporting teachers in autism classes, identifying whole school approaches to enhance collegial support and problem-solving with one school implementing a ‘*consultation*’ or ‘*referral*’ procedure to flag concerns with a SEN team, and another utilising a ‘*debriefing*’ procedure following challenging incidents, facilitating access to immediate support with a designated person. As advocated by Lindsay et al. (2014), this emphasizes formal professional CPD and ongoing informal collegial support for teachers in special

classes. Most teachers acknowledged the value of emotional support and expertise from experienced colleagues, yet described the challenges of developing whole-school approaches in the absence of autism-specific knowledge across the school. Teachers reported that they relied upon colleagues in other autism classes for collaborative problem-solving, practical strategies, and personal support.

Lack of Adequate Preparation

The findings of this study emphasised the perception of special classes as a “*different world*”, necessitating preparation in autism-specific knowledge and approaches (Banks et al., 2016; Lindsay et al., 2014; Ravet, 2011; Shevlin et al., 2012). Consistent with Irish reports, teachers highlighted the importance of autism-specific methodologies in responding to pupil needs (Daly et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2009). Teachers argued that such knowledge is essential to reduce triggers in the environment, to ensure the emotional wellbeing of pupils, and to tailor provision (Dunleavy, 2015; Ravet, 2011). These findings denote the need for specialised preparation and ongoing access to appropriate professional development for teachers working in autism classes (Finlay, Kinsella, and Prendeville, 2019; Dunleavy, 2015; Lindsay et al., 2014).

In the absence of autism-specific CPD prior to transitioning to special classes, many participants perceived an over-reliance on “*learning on site*.” This finding echoes the findings of the recent DES Inspectorate report that was critical of the appointment of newly qualified teachers to posts in autism classes without additional CPD (DES, 2020). One newly appointed teacher expressed feelings of inadequacy over her ‘*failure*’ to achieve curricular outcomes. Another teacher recalled her realisation that her expectation of implementing a mainstream curriculum did not correspond to the developmental level of her pupils at this time. Teachers reported greater confidence in meeting the demands of the role as their experience of working in the autism class developed. Teachers adopted “*a more relaxed approach*”, learning to “*go with what’s a priority*” in setting pupil-centred targets rather than striving to meet the demands of a mainstream curriculum. This echoes recent Irish reports on the admirable use of creative approaches gleaned from experiential learning in response to individual pupil needs (NCSE, 2016; DES, 2020; Anglim, Prendeville, and Kinsella, 2018). Participants advocated for the necessity for distinct curricula and individualised targets in response to learner needs. The importance of individualised planning, alongside the over-reliance on ‘*learning as you go*’ however, can further distance teachers from mainstream colleagues and exacerbate experiences of isolation and stress (Finlay, Kinsella, and Prendeville, 2019).

These findings have implications for how supports might be enhanced to foster teacher capacity within autism classes. Participants recommended an “*ongoing consultation approach in schools*”, facilitating focused training to address specific needs in context. Emergent collaborative practices were in evidence in this study, providing avenues of support for teachers in autism class settings. Pertinent challenges in establishing collaborative practice within schools were raised however, highlighting the need for increased attention in addressing challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study identified some factors that can impact upon teacher wellbeing and signposted some potential avenues to enhance supports for teachers working in autism classes. The wellbeing of teachers working in specialised settings is paramount to ensure successful outcomes for autistic pupils. Factors contributing to teacher isolation and stress must be investigated and urgently addressed. Internal school factors such as leadership and the development of collaborative learning communities within schools can facilitate greater access to practical and emotional supports for teachers. Access to pre-service and ongoing professional development for special class teachers, principals, and mainstream colleagues can empower schools to develop such professional learning communities enabling the emergence of supportive whole-school environments. However, such professional development must be coordinated in consultation with schools to best support teachers within special classes and ensure optimal provision for autistic pupils.

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