Exploring Primary Teachers' Attitudes Towards the Inclusion of Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a Mainstream Environment

This article explores teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with ASD, which has been the focus of worldwide debates for decades. Due to an increase in prevalence, more learners with ASD attend mainstream environments, providing opportunities and challenges for teachers. This emphasises the prerequisite of knowledge and understanding of this unique group of learners. Furthermore, teachers are left to interpret inclusion based on individual attitudes in the absence of a unified understanding, meaning all practices could potentially be viewed as inclusive. These elements have definite consequences for teachers who wish to include learners with ASD. Consequently, teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with ASD in a mainstream setting are examined in this article, informed by cognitive, affective, and behavioural factors. The findings represent the views of fifteen teachers from one rural national school, which indicated that inclusion is viewed favourably, and opportunities for further development are identified.

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INTRODUCTION

What is Inclusion? Debates and Contested Understandings

According to Winter & O' Raw (2010), many authors have attempted to define inclusion, thus confirming its complex nature. While a plethora of literature

explores the fundamentals of inclusion from an educational perspective, based on this premise, inclusion may be viewed as how educational settings can accommodate difference, by embracing all learners, irrespective of ability, and treating everyone equally whilst recognising individuality. Therefore, inclusion is not simply physical placement (Keane et al., 2012) or offering separate provision (Day & Prunty, 2015), both of which lead to marginalisation and can promote exclusion (Gabel et al., 2009). Rather, as Booth and Ainscow (2002) maintain, inclusion involves schools adopting cultures, policies, and practices geared toward addressing the diverse student population in their local community. This perspective aligns with UNESCO (2005), indicating inclusion is a process in which diversity is celebrated by altering practice to support all learners learning together to the best of their ability. This interpretation positions inclusion as an ethical issue underpinned by rights ideologies, concerned with foregrounding the self-development of the learner, instead of something done to a discrete population (Allan, 2005). These sentiments capture my view on inclusion, which affirms the needs and rights of learners with disabilities to fully enjoy all their fundamental freedoms and human rights (United Nations 2006) without discrimination (United Nations 1990). From this perspective, for inclusion to occur, all learners need to be exposed to a diverse range of learning opportunities, while acknowledging that various policies and practices are required at national and local level to support this vision of inclusion. Thus, Lisaidou (2012) sums up the beliefs of many on inclusion by describing it as a "semantic chameleon", as its definition varies based on context, interpretation, and location.

This article focuses on a selection of findings from a master's dissertation, exploring how teachers can be supported to adopt pedagogies that promote the inclusion of learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream classes. Teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with ASD are examined while cognisant that this is only part of the wider remit of the study. As an educator for learners with ASD, my priority is their inclusion in a mainstream setting. This can be challenging as learners with ASD present individually due to their unique cognitive, social, and behavioural characteristics (Simpson, 2004). This highlights the need for teachers to respond to these challenges, while also responding to the various needs of all learners, with teacher attitudes significantly impacting this process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Rodriguez et al. (2012), teachers' attitudinal responses are crucial for the successful inclusion of all learners. Attitudes are defined by Gall et al. (1996)

as a view of something particular, while Eagly and Chaiken (1993) state attitudes are "a psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour" (p.1). They explore attitudes by identifying a tripartite classification of cognitive, affective, and behavioural, which I use in my thesis; firstly, 'Cognitive' referring to a belief or knowledge about a concept or idea; secondly, 'Affective' encapsulating feelings about a situation or object; and, thirdly, 'Behavioural' signifying how one responds to the situation or object. As a teacher in a primary school, I view cognitive, affective, and behavioural factors as essential and use this question to inform the research question, which asks: What factors impact teachers' attitudes when attempting to educate learners with ASD in an inclusive environment? However, it must be noted that attitudinal responses are influenced relative to the type and nature of SEN (De Boer et al., 2011). My focus is on learners with ASD specifically, as they are linked to my practice. Consequently, this article examines the impact of attitudes in relation to, firstly, cognition or teachers' knowledge of and understanding of inclusion as a concept and a practice; secondly, affection or teachers' feeling about and understanding of the needs of learners with ASD and thirdly, behaviour or teachers' actions to include learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms.

Teachers' Knowledge and Understanding of Inclusion
As indicated earlier, the inclusion of learners with ASD is reliant on several factors, which may include the lack of a clear definition and varying interpretations of what constitutes inclusion (Messiou, 2017), based on placement (Nilholm and Grranasson, 2017), location (Forlin et al., 2013) and/or practices (Amor et al., 2019). Furthermore, Hastings and Logan (2013) identified a lack of time for preparation and the expansive curriculum as possible contributing factors to this apprehension. In retort, Slee (2013) argues that smaller classes would support successful inclusion. While attitudes towards the principle of inclusion in Ireland have been generally positive, according to Shevlin et al. (2013), there is evidence of apprehension towards implementation. The following section unpacks the factors which may contribute to this apprehension.

It is accepted that teachers are competent agents with the necessary knowledge and skills to teach all learners (Dally et al., 2019). They maintain that mainstream class teachers have specific knowledge and skills about curriculum but add Special Educational Teachers (SETs) have additional knowledge and skills to cater specifically to learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Therefore, SETs could be perceived as content-knowledge "experts" (Dally et al., 2019), which may lead to an added sense of responsibility for the education of these learners (Busby et al., 2012). Dunleavy (2015) acknowledges this may occur but

emphasises that the inclusion of learners with ASD is a shared responsibility, signifying the requirement of policy at school level to indicate responsibility and support implementation. Such policy development supports the enactment of inclusion, allowing it to become a reality (United Nations, 2006). However, Roberts & Simpson (2016), maintain that policies are not automatically translated into practice due to a lack of shared understanding of inclusion (Florian & Spratt, 2013). This supports the argument that more than policy alone is required to ensure the principles of inclusion inform practices. Ultimately, in the context of the Republic of Ireland, the class teacher has primary responsibility for the education of all learners, including learners with SEN (The Education Act 1998).

Teachers' Feelings About and Understanding of the Needs of Learners with ASD

It is important to examine how teachers' feelings about and their familiarity with the needs of learners with ASD impact inclusive practice, as the inclusion of learners with ASD has been the focus of many debates worldwide for the last thirty years (Amor et al., 2019). Humphrey & Symes (2013) maintain that teachers tend to view the inclusion of learners with ASD positively. However, Oliver-Kerrigan et al. (2021) maintain inclusion is not a reality for all learners with ASD, as teachers often view them as challenging to include (Thomas et al., 2019) due to their unique characteristics (Cassidy, 2011) which require specialist pedagogies (Lindsay et al., 2013).

The inclusion of learners with ASD is crucial, as according to Ravet (2018), the prevalence of ASD is increasing globally. In Ireland, Parson et al. (2009) state there were 1,625 learners with ASD in mainstream in 2006/2007, and The Department of Health (2018) indicated there were 6,487 in 2015/2016. Furthermore, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2016) maintain that they found that one in every 65 learners or 1.5% of school-aged learners, have a diagnosis of ASD, which equates to roughly 14,000 learners, which is more than previous approximations, which signifies more than a four-fold increase. This increase means that teachers will have learners with ASD in their class at some point and will have to teach them to the best of their ability (Ravet, 2011). Despite the growing numbers, Garrad et al. (2019) maintain that teachers feel they have a limited understanding of the needs of learners with ASD, resulting in teachers feeling unprepared to meet the needs of learners with ASD (Majoko, 2016). Barnhill (2014) adds that teachers who know about ASD and the needs of the ASD learner, are better equipped to understand the unique difficulties these learners experience. This indicates that knowledge of ASD and of the needs of the ASD learner are essential (Srivastava et

al., 2017) in enabling teachers to address the core conditions that impact learners with ASD, which may require input at initial teacher education and/or through continual professional development. This knowledge will ultimately impact pedagogical choices (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012) and how teachers facilitate inclusion (Florian & Linklater, 2010) by altering practice to accommodate all learners learning together.

Teachers' Actions/Strategies to Include Learners with ASD
Knowledge About and How to Implement Specific Pedagogies
Specific pedagogies, methodologies or strategies have benefits for all learners due to the diversity of needs in any classroom, so knowledge about which pedagogy best matches specific needs or learners is a prerequisite for inclusion. As previously stated, learners with ASD are perceived to require a specialist pedagogy. Fredrickson and Cline (2009) maintain that pedagogies and strategies that work for most learners appear to fail learners with ASD. This may be due to individual learning characteristics (Elmaci & Karaaslan 2021), including sensory reactions for example (Ravet 2015). Rodden et al. (2019) imply mainstream teachers lack knowledge of specific pedagogies which address individual learners' needs, including the sensory needs of learners with ASD. Therefore, to facilitate the inclusion of learners with ASD, adaptations to the curriculum and teaching methods are required (Ravet 2018), such as including visual schedules and work systems which have transferability (Macdonald et al., 2018). This, in conjunction with the employment of specific interventions, which are central to enacting inclusion (Lindsay et al., 2013), requires an acknowledgement of all learners' individual learning preferences (Majoko, 2013). Due to the uniqueness of ASD, general strategies such as active learning, direct teaching, cooperative learning, and independent learning cannot be overlooked, as they could provide an important starting point, although they may prove insufficient (Anglim, Prendeville, & Kinsella, 2018). This indicates the requirement of multiple strategies in a teacher's repertoire (Lindsay et al., 2013), enabling teachers to employ appropriate pedagogies to accommodate all learners, differentiating when required (Day & Prunty, 2015). However, Black-Hawkins & Florian (2012) state employing "something different" for individuals is a challenging and multifaceted pedagogical endeavour. This lack of knowledge about specific pedagogical approaches has definite consequences for teachers who wish to include learners with ASD in mainstream classes (Humphrey and Symes, 2013). This signifies the importance of ongoing upskilling to offer a range of pedagogical strategies (Striekera et al., 2011) as it is not a "one size fits all" (Young et al., 2017) and applies to all learners.

Upskilling Opportunities

For teachers to include all learners and meet the specific needs of learners with ASD, teachers require a wide range of skills and strategies (Morina 2020), signalling the requirement for continuous upskilling. The NCSE (2015) maintains that it continues to support appropriate educational interventions. This action is significant, as Lindsay et al. (2014) maintain that teachers require successful skills to employ strategies such as schedules, offering choice, visual supports and transition supports to include learners with ASD, due to the dyad of characteristics. Similarly, Oliver-Kerrigan et al. (2021) state that teachers require support with designing and implementing interventions to facilitate learning opportunities for learners with ASD. A coordinated approach by various agencies such as Education Centres, The NCSE, PDST and universities could address this by providing accredited online modules, open lectures and creating mentoring opportunities to support upskilling. While the NCSE (2019) provides upskilling opportunities for teachers aimed at learners with ASD, there appears to be a lack of awareness of or communication about the availability of courses or prioritising of such courses by teachers (Young et al., 2017). They maintain that while some teachers may be unaware of the availability of courses, the apparent lack of engagement may be due to competing priorities concerning upskilling such as new and modified curricula, addressing challenging behaviour, sensitivity towards gender, English as an additional language and the diversity of learners' needs in the classroom. Availing of targeted professional development could enable them to engage with an inclusive pedagogical approach, to develop skills and establish new practices (Lindsay et al., 2014).

Inclusive Pedagogy

This raises the question of what inclusive pedagogy looks like? According to Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), inclusive pedagogy is an approach to teaching which accommodates all abilities in an inclusive classroom, that is not based on the choice of intervention but on how it supports all learners. They further maintain that when including everyone, it should be comparable to a learning community catering to all; the focus should be on what is taught instead of who. To achieve this Humphrey and Symes (2013) indicate a unified shared commitment from all school personnel is required, providing continuity when teaching all learners and, ultimately, removing variation in practice (Florian 2015). Some examples of such are providing a variety of avenues for learning, such as a structured routine, incorporation of visual supports, incorporating the child's interest to promote participation, whole class schedules, incorporating workstations and voice recordings, giving advance notice before transitions occur and utilising a total

communication approach, thus embodying an inclusive pedagogical approach to accommodate all learners (Morina, 2020).

THE RESEARCH STUDY

The research study explored, "How can teachers be supported to adopt an inclusive pedagogy for the education of pupils with ASD in a mainstream setting"? A single case study was employed to examine or confirm a theory or represent a case (Yin 2003), with the school in question constituting the case in this context. The case involved one rural primary school, accommodating 23 learners with ASD, 18 of whom attend three ASD-specific classes. The sample included all members of the teaching staff of 15, including an administrative principal. School policy indicates that teachers are rotated every three years, which means they may be placed in either a special class or a SET teaching position at some point in their careers.

An interpretivist perspective supported the research design, facilitating the participants to express individual viewpoints, opinions, and experiences. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches enabled the expression of alternative perspectives, gaining a more detailed overview (Denscombe 2010).

Structured interviews were utilised with the 15 participants, initially incorporating closed questions requiring numerical responses, which gleaned information such as age, experience and number of learners in their class. Participants were then asked a series of pre-prepared questions with pre-set response modes such as yes/no (Punch 2005). While open questions provided the space for knowledge, feelings, and actions to be detailed. The interview schedule incorporated 41 questions divided into three sections: section one incorporated dichotomous questions focusing on knowledge of inclusion. Section two included questions to gain participants' views and feelings on inclusion. Section three incorporated questions covering actions, upskilling, specific interventions, and differentiation. Each interview lasted twenty minutes and were audio-recorded to allow transcription at a later stage.

Ethical approval was sought and granted from a college ethics committee, and ethical considerations were adhered to throughout while informing participants of the aims and objectives of the study. Before commencing the study, approval was sought and granted from the Board of Management, and a formal letter was then given to the participants outlining ethical considerations and explaining what was

required of them. Explicit reference to voluntary participation was outlined and based on informed consent. On obtaining consent, participants were reminded that withdrawal at any stage was permissible.

Data received was analysed using two means: Quantitative data was coded to translate data into specific categories using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) programme. Qualitative data was obtained from all questions. An option for elaboration allowed participants to expand on their views if they wished, and data was analysed using thematic analysis. The transcripts were interpreted utilising Braun and Clarke's (2012) concept of thematic analysis. The data analysis was carried out in an inducive manner whereby objectives guide the analysis to allow research findings to emerge from different themes within the data (Azungah, 2018). The themes were formulated in conjunction with the themes which emerged from the review of literature and with participants' answers, which generated the findings.

A limitation of the study was the small sample. Due to this, the results could not be generalised to larger populations.

FINDINGS

Teachers' Understanding of the Concept and Practice of Inclusion

It was clear from the responses that inclusion as a concept lacked clarity, although participants viewed the principle of inclusion favourably, aligning with Shevlin et al. (2013). Participant H substantiated this view by indicating that "*every child learns at their own pace and style, and a separate education is not an equal education*". While participants indicated that inclusive practice was central in their classrooms, all practices could be considered inclusive due to individual interpretation (Messiou, 2017). Time and smaller classes were mitigating factors expressed by participants [n=12] impacting the enactment of successful inclusion, confirming the views Hastings and Logan's (2013) and Slee (2013). The impact of time and class constraints were outlined by Participant N, stating, "*You have to think of every child and tailor what you are doing to include everyone, and this can be challenging due to paperwork, workload and class size*". Interestingly, SETs, in this case, were not viewed as responsible for the education of learners with ASD, with mainstream teachers recognising their responsibility, which aligns with the views of Dunleavy (2015). This view was corroborated by Participant N, who indicated, *"if a child is in an inclusive setting, the class teacher is responsible for their education regardless of ability"*. While this view is encouraging, a unified understanding of inclusion was not evident,

and the need for school policy which values all learners' abilities and promotes inclusive practice.

Surprisingly, data obtained indicated inconsistencies on the presence of a policy on inclusion [n=8] were unsure, [n=3] said yes and 4 didn't respond, albeit no policy exists; which contributed to variation in practice. This contradicts the United Nations (2006) suggestion that policies are developed to support the implementation of inclusion. In this case, due to the lack of awareness of school policy on inclusion, there is no shared understanding of the aims and expectations of inclusion as outlined by Florian & Spratt (2013). This highlights the importance of foregrounding school policies in order to support a unified understanding of inclusion and implementation.

Teachers' Understanding of the Needs of Learners with ASD
The importance of knowledge and understanding about the specific needs of learners with ASD in an inclusive setting was overwhelmingly endorsed by participants, including recognising that individual traits impact inclusion. Participant E consolidated this view by indicating, *"I need to be aware of the needs of all learners including those who have ASD … all types of learners to teach them appropriately".* However, a lack of upskilling to cater to the individuality of ASD was evident, confirming the assertions of Srivastava et al. (2017), indicating knowledge and understanding of this cohort is limited. The inclusion of learners with ASD was supported in principle by the majority of participants [n=14] while acknowledging the challenges of accommodating individuality, such as *"providing an appropriate environment to cater to the uniqueness of ASD"* (Participant C), aligning with Majoko (2016). These views, while generally positive, confirm Oliver- Kerrigan et al. (2021) stance that inclusion is not a reality for all learners with ASD due to unique presentation. This highlights the requirement for knowledge of ASD in order to understand the challenges these learners experience in mainstream classes (Barnhill, 2014). The increase in the prevalence of learners with ASD was confirmed in this case, corroborating Ravet's (2011) stance that teachers will have these learners in their class at some point and will have to teach them. This point was corroborated by Participant O *"I assume as the years go by, the number will keep increasing, and mainstream classes will have more learners with ASD".* As school policy indicates staff rotation every three years, teachers will be placed in an SET position or a special class at various stages during their careers, which will involve explicitly teaching learners with ASD. These findings propose that a "specialist" pedagogy is required to teach learners with ASD. This has possible implications as there are 23 learners with ASD in the school, 18 of whom attend an ASD-specific class.

Challenges Identified by Teachers in Including Learners with ASD
Knowledge about Specific Pedagogies
The requirement of specific pedagogies to cater to the individual learning styles of learners with ASD was overwhelmingly acknowledged by participants aligning with Majoko (2013). All participants' views aligned with Lindsay et al. (2014) stance that teachers require multiple strategies in their repertoire to accommodate all learners. Interestingly, all participants stated that every child might require a specific intervention at some point. Although, as previously stated, the absence of upskilling has direct consequences on the employment of specific interventions. Participant C confirmed this point by indicating, *"for it to be successful, it should be seamless and well planned to address individual learners' needs. Therefore, upskilling is a necessity".* Most participants [n=12] identified limitations in employing specific interventions as they have not received specific input. Participant G articulated these limitations stating, *"if you are including a child that, for example, uses TEACCH and you are not upskilled on this approach, everyone is at a disadvantage, especially the children".* Therefore, teachers feel they lack requisite competencies confirming Rodden et al.'s (2019) stance. This has definite consequences for learners with ASD, confirming Humphrey and Symes (2013) view that the inclusion of these learners is complex and poorly understood due to the individuality of ASD. This highlights the necessity of upskilling as this will provide teachers with the knowledge to support learners with ASD.

Upskilling Opportunities
Surprisingly, the majority [n=12] of participants were aware of ASD upskilling opportunities. Participant K outlined the consensus of participants indicating, *"Yes, I am very aware, the principal emails the courses that are available".* These findings contrast Young et al.'s (2017) stance that teachers lacked awareness of upskilling aimed at learners with ASD. To establish if ASD-specific upskilling was availed of, the findings were mixed, with four having none, two having in-service, four had a day course, and five classed their college training as sufficient upskilling. Overall, these findings indicate the lack of ongoing upskilling, illustrated by Participant F, *"by no means am I complete in my studies. I need more training",* despite the NCSE (2019) providing upskilling opportunities explicitly aimed at learners with ASD to support an inclusive pedagogical approach.

Inclusive Pedagogy
Participants overwhelmingly agreed that an inclusive pedagogical approach should accommodate all abilities (Black-Hawkins and Florian, 2011). This view was substantiated by Participant G, stating, *"it cannot be a one size fits all".* The majority of participants [n=14] acknowledged that a learning environment

should include everyone learning together. Participant N sums up the consensus by indicating, *"I think today that there are so many different learners' styles, conditions that when you are planning a lesson when you are thinking of how you are going to teach. It becomes second nature now that you have to appeal to all learner styles whatever they are in the class"*, aligning with the views of Black-Hawkins and Florian (2012). Various avenues for learning were deemed important by most participants (n=14). These sentiments were further supported by participant I who stated, *"I consider all learners, rather than writing they need to cut and paste. Those who need visuals, those who would be better to touch and feel things. Those who need more time, those who need more support and those who need more challenges"*. These positive views show a commitment to inclusion, and a will to support the development of an inclusive pedagogical approach (Morina, 2020).

CONCLUSION

As previously noted, primary teachers' attitudes were examined, informed by a tripartite classification including cognitive, affective, and behavioural factors. Based on this framework, the following section outlines some of the components necessary to support the inclusion of learners with ASD in the school in question. A larger sample incorporating more geographical areas and settings is required to reflect countrywide teachers' attitudes.

The research supported the assertion that inclusion has different meanings to different people in different contexts, so gaining a unified understanding is challenging due to context, interpretation, and location (Lisaidou 2012). Although the participants' attitudes towards inclusion are encouraging, it could be concluded that for them, all practices could be viewed as inclusive due to varied individual interpretations. A unified interpretation of inclusion from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) could be achieved by providing an online national discussion forum for all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, agencies, academics, etc. As knowledge and understanding of learners with ASD may vary, the forum would require monitoring by DES officials who have expertise in inclusion and ASD. The platform would allow all views to be expressed and ultimately identify the gap between perceived knowledge and the actual knowledge of all, including teachers. These officials could advocate for all learners learning together, supporting implementation leading to a unified understanding of inclusion. Based on this information, in the absence of a unified understanding, the study school needs to adopt a definition of inclusion to support

enactment, identifying what inclusion looks like in their specific context. This should include classroom strategies agreed by all staff to support implementation.

A unified understanding would also support the development of a universal generic policy by the DES that can be amended to cater to each school's cohort. In the case of the school where the research took place, an inclusion policy is not yet in place. In the interim, further collaboration between school staff is required to develop an individual school policy that meets the standard of inclusion, with support from management to address this additional workload. This collaboration would allow all parties to be aware of the aims and expectations of inclusion, removing variation in practice. Participants' efforts to date need to be commended as the foundation of inclusive practice has been established without the guidance of a specific policy. This indicates that inclusion is viewed favourably, and that policy development should incorporate the shared understanding that in turn, could deliver a seamless enactment for all learners.

The absence of upskilling and further educational provision was a prominent feature throughout this study, despite most participants being aware of upskilling opportunities and despite the principal's efforts to communicate these opportunities. In the absence of upskilling, both at individual and whole-school levels, the inclusion of learners with ASD is in jeopardy. This could be addressed for this particular school by the principal sourcing and accessing whole school upskilling opportunities, thus providing continuity and promoting inclusive practice when including learners with ASD. These upskilling opportunities could be accessed from the NCSE and/or outreach courses available from universities to individual schools or school clusters.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge that this article represents part of a larger research project and as such is limited in scope. Through this research, I have gained a deeper insight into the complexity of inclusion. Rights underpin my interpretation of inclusion, as every child has a fundamental right to an appropriate education. However, I believe that small changes to teaching pedagogies and a unified school approach can make a big difference in improving inclusive practices and foregrounding the rights of the child.

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