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Providing “Good Day” Physical Education Experiences for Children with SEN in Mainstream Irish Primary Schools

This article reports on findings from a qualitative study with preservice teachers following their autumn school placement. Participants were invited to reflect on and discuss their views and experiences relating to the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in their physical education lessons while on school placement. The findings report on preservice teachers’ reflections on inclusion within physical education, the supports for involvement of children with SEN in physical education lessons and finally the extent of these children’s participation in physical education lessons. The study recommends that teachers and preservice teachers be supported in providing meaningful “good day” experiences for children with SEN. This support should include specific mentoring of preservice teachers related to physical education as they work with children with SEN on school placements.



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INTRODUCTION

Children report that “playing games together” makes them feel included in their schools (Balfe and Travers, 2011). Block and Obrušnikova (2007, p. 114) observed that children with special educational needs (SEN) had “good days” and “bad days” related to their experience of physical education. “Good days” resulted in the children feeling that they were accommodated and had a sense of belonging as they were able to participate in activities. “Bad days” occurred when the teacher did not accommodate the child with SEN resulting in them sitting out or taking “menial roles” in activities like keeping the score. “Bad days” left feelings of social isolation where children with SEN questioned their ability. The focus of this paper is to examine how preservice primary teachers can provide “good days” and positive and meaningful physical education experiences for children with SEN. These preservice teachers worked alongside teachers and had the added support of special needs assistants (SNAs) while on placement.





Context of the Study

The Primary Physical Education Curriculum (Ireland, 1999) requires that teachers consider planning for the needs of all children within their class regardless of their ability. The curriculum recommends that a safe and secure environment should be provided for physical education appropriate to the child with SEN. This may require the teacher to modify the skills, activities or equipment used. In some cases specialist advice may be sought to identify appropriate activities (Ireland). Florian and Rouse (2009) recommend the broad principle that the teachers take difference into account from the outset considering it a “central concept” when selecting a pedagogy that is inclusive of all learners. This would appear to underpin the approach recommended in the physical education curriculum. Meegan and MacPhail (2006) reported that in Ireland developments in physical education for children with SEN had been “extremely limited”. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2007) produced guidelines for teachers of students with general learning disabilities. Sections in the guidelines related to the teaching of physical education to pupils with mild, moderate and severe general learning disabilities.

More recent supports include the production of guidelines for inclusive practice for children with disabilities in sport and physical activity in schools; ‘The Inclusive Schools Project’ (Irish Wheelchair Association, 2010). To mark the 2012 Olympic Games, Paralympics Ireland launched its ‘Follow Your Star Programme’; a free online initiative aimed at developing an understanding of Paralympic sport among Irish primary school children and teachers. Another positive initiative was the establishment of the CARA Adapted Physical Activity Centre based in the Institute of Technology, Tralee, Co. Kerry. It works at a strategic level to influence and support the policies and programmes of agencies involved in the provision of sport, physical activity and physical education for people with disabilities. Crawford (2011) concludes that teachers benefit from the assistance offered by agencies to provide quality physical education experiences in their lessons.

The purpose of this study was to inform teacher educators in initial teacher education with regard to inclusion in physical education and ultimately to enhance physical education experiences for children with SEN. The study aimed to explore the perspectives and practices of preservice teachers on school placement relating to the inclusion of children with SEN in physical education lessons. It hoped to ascertain the supports preservice teachers identify that can help them to teach physical education to children with SEN.

Inclusion goes beyond providing access to mainstream schools and making adjustments and assumptions about abilities (Florian and Rouse, 2009; Fitzgerald,





2011). It is a means of increasing participation in learning by all children in order that their educational needs can be met. It refers to a process that must remove all forms of exclusionary practice. Within physical education “a range of contexts and practices are seen as fostering inclusive experiences” (Fitzgerald, 2011, p. 4). Practices include, for example, modifying sports skills and the composition of groups within lessons. Fitzgerald cautions that these may be “cosmetic” strategies and that strategies must be supported by positive attitudes and meaning. While recognising the importance of listening to the voices of all stakeholders in the inclusion process, Fitzgerald calls in particular for the views and reflections of children with SEN to be heard. Vickerman and Coates (2009) suggest listening to the voice of preservice and newly qualified teachers. This study focuses on the voices of preservice teachers. The issue of the voices of children with SEN will be discussed later in the article.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology was adopted and deemed the best means to ascertain preservice teachers’ perspectives and practices related to teaching physical education to children with SEN in Irish primary schools. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the College of Education where the study was undertaken. All participants were informed as to the nature and purpose of the study and consented to participate.

Data Collection

An e-mail was sent to all first and second year Bachelor of Education (n=800) and first year Graduate Diploma in Education (n=60) preservice teachers prior to their September 2011 three-week school placement, outlining the focus of the study and inviting those who would have children with SEN in their classes to participate. Graduate Diploma students already have an undergraduate degree and are undertaking an eighteen month course to qualify as primary teachers.

The preservice teachers were invited to be interviewed in focus groups by the first author immediately after their school placement. These preservice teachers would have completed at least one teaching placement in advance of this placement and twenty of them volunteered to be interviewed. Subsequently, ten preservice teachers were randomly selected for three semi-structured focus group interviews (i.e. two groups of four and one group of two) which took place in the College of Education two weeks following their return from school placement. Each interview lasted approximately forty minutes. Probes were used to deepen the response to questions and to give cues to the interviewees about the level of response desired.



The questions ascertained background information. They explored preservice teachers' experiences of having a child with SEN in their class on school placement, their perceptions of the physical education experience for this child and supports used to cater for the child's needs during the lesson. Participants also suggested supports that could be provided to teach physical education to children with SEN on future school placements.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the first author and member checks assisted in verifying their accuracy. No edits were suggested and permission was granted by each participant to use the transcripts. Focus group data were organised and analysed qualitatively through reading and re-reading using constant comparison (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As a first step, the first author individually read through the interviews and noted the main ideas being discussed and emphasised by participants (Creswell, 2009). By unitising the data through an initial coding process (Charmaz, 2006) chunks or units of meaning began to emerge (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Following more focused incident coding, codes were combined and compared and a list of main categories was compiled (Charmaz). Categories included resources, personnel supports and the involvement in activities of children with SEN. Each transcript was re-examined against these categories and compared across transcripts to examine similarities and differences. Key ideas within each of these categories were aligned with the research questions to support construction of the argument. Themes emerged drawn from the initial analysis of data to help construct an argument that was balanced and robust and that made sense (Richards, 2005). The initials 'PST', with a number, were used to identify preservice teachers' contributions (e.g. PST 3) during data analysis and reporting.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Main findings will be reported under the following headings: preservice teachers' reflections on inclusion within physical education lessons, school supports for involvement by children with SEN in physical education lessons and the extent of children's participation in physical education lessons.

Preservice Teachers' Reflections on Inclusion within Physical Education Lessons

Attitudes of teachers are considered crucial to the process of inclusion (Sherrill, 1998; Fitzgerald, 2011). Many preservice teachers attending this College of Education would have attended primary and secondary schools in Ireland where



SNAs and children with SEN were part of their school environment. This would appear to have a positive impact on the attitudes and perspectives as well as the autobiographies of these preservice teachers. Preservice teachers appeared to display positive attitudes towards inclusion in physical education lessons and never questioned the place of children with SEN in their lessons. Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) revealed that preservice teachers held positive attitudes toward the general concept of inclusion but perceived competence dropped significantly depending on the severity of the children's needs.

Rovegno and Dolly (2006) highlight the importance of culture in how we approach, present and interpret new knowledge. They write that, "Both teacher and student bring their own cultural beliefs and expectations to the classroom, both impact children's success" (p. 245). It is suggested that the preservice teachers in this study had positive beliefs and expectations in relation to the inclusion of children with SEN in their lessons. The findings from the interviews indicated that these preservice teachers believed that the principle of inclusion underpinned their teaching. One participant claimed that "The child with spina bifida was very much included" (PST 5). Another teacher stated that she was really afraid of marginalising a student. She commented that "If you are teaching maths there are different people of different abilities but it's kind of more hidden, whereas in PE its more [public], I was really afraid, like I felt guilty" (PST 4).

The preservice teachers questioned their ability to include rather than the practice of inclusion and some stated this in terms of worries. LaMaster, Gall, Kinchin and Siedentop (1998) highlighted similar feelings of wanting to include all children yet feeling inadequate to facilitate inclusion. Equally, preservice teachers' positive attitudes were highlighted in their willingness to try to ensure that the child with SEN was included in their lesson, "I found myself really conscious trying to make sure that she [the child with SEN] got to mix with other people" (PST 6). The importance of teaching children to accept and respect their peers with SEN in physical education lessons was notable in the following quotation, "They [some children in the class] were shouting an awful lot at this particular child and I remember thinking I will have to talk now about respect" (PST 8).

The findings highlighted preservice teachers' reflections on the importance of inclusion within physical education lessons. They appear to grapple with providing meaningful positive physical education experiences for children with SEN. In this context school supports for involvement by children with SEN in physical education lessons will be discussed.





School Supports for Involvement by Children with SEN in Physical Education Lessons

Seven key supports, identified by the preservice teachers, for the involvement of children with SEN in physical education lessons on school placements emerged. The main support identified was the presence of the SNA. Views were expressed by the participants in terms of the information SNAs provided about children and their capacity to engage. SNAs also assisted in explaining tasks to children and grouping them in a supportive way. However, it was apparent that the timing of the physical education lesson in the school day could mean that the support of the SNA was not available. It would appear that school practices varied with one participant stating that “Every time that we went to do physical education his SNA went on her lunch” (PST 2). Another participant suggested “When the SNA was not there [at the physical education lesson] it was hard to control him [the child with SEN]” (PST 9).

Research on the crucial role of the SNA in Irish schools has been documented by Logan, (2006) and O’Keeffe, Ware and Porter (2009). Carrig (2004) recognised the broadening of the role of the SNA in practices which extended beyond their job description. SNAs are employed to care for the physical needs of children with SEN. The preservice teacher needs to understand clearly the particular role of the SNA and where that role is different to that of the preservice teacher and the class teacher. In the US the role of the carer or the paraeducator as identified by Lieberman (2007) is broader than the role identified for the SNA in Ireland. The paraeducator works alongside and under the supervision of a qualified educator to support and assist in providing educational and other services to children, hence contributing to their total education programme.

Knowledge of the child with SEN was considered a further support to planning and teaching. However, a factor impeding the involvement of children with SEN in physical education would appear to be the timing of the school placement at the start of the school academic year. As it is September, the class teacher is new to the class and may not be fully aware of the educational implications associated with certain SENs. A participant reported the class teacher learning about the child with SEN as she was learning. The preservice teachers in this study appeared to depend on the SNA to gain more knowledge of the child’s needs.

A third support was that of the teacher’s “physical” support during the physical education lesson. A participant commented that, “When it came to skipping myself and the class teacher had to come up and hold the rope to let her skip” (PST 7).





While two participants noted that the SNA was not present with the child for physical education lessons the preservice teachers identified the crucial role of class support personnel in supporting them on school placements to help achieve positive physical education experiences. Crawford (2011) and Florian and Rouse (2009) recognised the critical source of social interactions that daily life in schools provides for preservice teachers to challenge assumptions and pedagogical thinking. Inclusive practices should reflect actions that are collaborative, “drawing on the expertise of specialists without relinquishing responsibility for teaching all learners” (Florian and Rouse, p. 600). Crawford maintained that schools should be encouraged to access the support of specialist services such as Disability Sports Officers, often employed by sport’s national governing bodies, to further enhance the provision and practice of supporting physical education for children with physical disabilities.

One preservice teacher commented on the help of a visiting school placement supervisor who was a physical education lecturer in the College of Education. This again highlights the importance of the support of specialist advisors. Other supports included the use of a recommended website which was helpful when planning work. The internet was reported as an informative resource to gain knowledge on some disabilities.

A preservice teacher discovered how useful it was to ask the child with SEN herself what she was able to do. Meaningful communication with the child with SEN was a finding reported by Rust and Sinelnikov (2010). The sociocultural element, as the preservice teacher interacted with the child, is evident here. The child with SEN can be an expert in the field to help the preservice teacher learn, “The child could tell me what he could and could not do” (PST 1).

Finally, one preservice teacher recalled the usefulness of group/station teaching as a method to cater for all children’s needs. This teaching methodology is explained and experienced by preservice teachers in the physical education seminars as part of their college course. “Hands on experience” was considered crucial in literature identified earlier (Hardin, 2005; Meegan and MacPhail, 2006; Crawford, 2011). These preservice teachers remarked on the key messages highlighted in physical education seminars at the college as they related to differentiation and inclusion but reported that, “Until you actually are in the scenario where you have a child in the class you just don’t take it in” (PST 2).

The Extent of Children’s Participation in Physical Education Lessons

Preservice teachers acquire content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (Graber, 1995; Guskey, 2002) and their school placements underpin this process.





However, research has also questioned the level of knowledge, skill development and improvements in fitness gained by children with SEN in physical education (LaMaster et al. 1998; Block and Obrusnikova, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2011). In the current study one preservice teacher, on her second school placement, reported that she was challenged in trying to put her knowledge into practice to include children with SEN in her physical education lessons while attempting to manage the entire class. She was aware that her teaching would have implications for children's experiences and learning. It is clear that this preservice teacher was at the stage of processing and constructing knowledge as identified by Rovegno and Dolly (2006). Rust and Sinelnikov (2010) reported on the progression in the preservice teacher's journey as a result of experiences on school placements from focusing on one's-self, instruction and class management to being able to focus on participation and experiences of children with SEN. Avramidis et al. (2000) and Block and Obrusnikova (2007) pointed out that class size was a reported barrier to accommodating children with SEN - perhaps a factor to be considered.

At times the children identified in this study had "menial roles" (Block and Obrusnikova, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2011) and in the context of the study, a "bad day" physical education experience. This could be explained by preservice teachers' lack of a repertoire of knowledge, skills or even supports to include these children in a meaningful way. A participant commented that the child "just kind of stayed with me, he liked that, he was grand. He stayed with me and helped me a bit... and for the throwing exercises he was able to do that no bother and he enjoyed getting involved" (PST 1). Another participant described a child who asked could he 'do the music' (PST 2) while a third participant described a child who did not like being active with the group. She had the child distribute beanbags in order for him to be active.

Preservice teachers described how they managed to sustain the involvement of the children with SEN in their lessons. Frequently calling the child's name was noted while others described children who did not continue their engagement and who would "drift off and not do anything" (PST 9). It was apparent that the preservice teachers gave increased attention to the child with SEN. LaMaster et al. (1998) commented on teachers feeling like they were teaching two lessons at the same time. In this study the skill level or ability of the child with SEN was not mentioned. Perhaps the generalist preservice teachers were still grappling with content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (Graber, 1995). Their pre-occupation with such knowledge may not have allowed them to focus on the child with SEN at any point of the lesson resulting in "bad day" physical education experiences for the children.





CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to inform the work of teacher educators in initial teacher education related to inclusion in physical education with the aim of enhancing physical education experiences of children with SEN. The study provided an opportunity for preservice teachers to share their school placement experiences, to identify issues, and to reflect on the inclusion of children with SEN in their physical education lessons. These future teachers appeared to understand the importance of teaching physical education to children with SEN. The preservice teachers identified supports that they availed of on their school placements. Furthermore, the study compelled its authors and lecturers at the College of Education to listen to the preservice teachers' experiences and suggestions. The findings can be shared and considered within the physical education unit in which the study took place, the special education department at the college as well as within the wider teaching community.

Limitations

Some limitations of the study should be highlighted: data were collected from only one College of Education; the preservice teachers were interviewed although not observed; this study focused on preservice teachers entering their second or final year only. Vickerman and Coates (2009) suggested that perhaps final-year students are in the best position to evaluate their course as they would have had the opportunity to undertake extensive school placement experiences and engage in lectures on aspects of SEN and inclusive provision. However, recognising these limitations, the investigation does offer several important practical implications for both teachers and teacher educators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommendations emerge from this study. Firstly, teachers should be made aware of the valuable support that they provide for children with SEN and for preservice teachers as they strive to provide meaningful physical education experiences for children with SEN while on school placements. Secondly, the timing of the physical education lesson merits consideration to ensure the support of the teacher by the SNA who cares for the particular needs of the child with SEN in the physical education lesson as well as for the preservice teacher. Thirdly, given that the care of the child within the physical education lesson is linked with ensuring that she or he is safe undertaking all activities it could be argued that physical education merits a particular focus in the training of the SNA. Further recommendations include encouraging the teaching community to access resource



material, sometimes online, and to seek the support of specialist school personnel and/or of outside agencies with an expertise in physical activity for people with SEN. The importance of communication at all times between all the 'stakeholders' (the child with SEN, the teacher, the SNA and the preservice teacher) is crucial in order to provide meaningful and positive physical education experiences resulting in children with SEN feeling that they have consistent "good day" physical education experiences.

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