REACH

JOURNAL OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN IRELAND

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working together effectively

- Getting Special Class Inclusion on the Agenda
- Toileting Differences Experienced by Children and Adolescents on the Autism Spectrum
- Using the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework to Support Inclusion for Autistic Pupils within Irish Mainstream Primary Schools
- The Special Education Teacher Allocation Model within the Context of Leadership and Teacher Professional Learning

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Contents

Editorial

The publication of *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland 35.2* comes at the end of a landmark year in Ireland's decade of centenaries with 2022 marking the centenary of the State and the adoption of the first Irish Constitution which asserted that "All citizens of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Eireann) have the right to free elementary education" (Saorstát Eireann, 1922, Article 10). Since then, the impact of key legislation including the Education Act (Ireland, 1998) and education policy initiatives such as the introduction of free post primary education (O'Malley, 1966) have been widely acknowledged as pivotal in removing barriers and increasing access to education for all.

In relation to inclusive and special education, the 30 years since the publication of the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Department of Education and Science, 1993) has been marked by significant policy developments most recently the introduction of the special education teacher allocation model (SETAM) (DES, 2017). Writing in this journal six years ago, Travers (2017) posed several important questions relating to the need to evaluate SETAM including highlighting the need to consider the interrelationships with special class and special schools and school access to support services. Five years on, it is timely to reflect on the overarching question posed by Travers namely "Will the model lead to a reduction in practices that can act as barriers to inclusive education?" (2017, p. 104). Each of the articles published in this issue of REACH sheds light on diverse aspects of this key concern for all who are involved or interested in inclusive and special education.

Writing in this journal six years ago Travers (2017) posed several important questions relating to the need to evaluate SETAM including highlighting the need to consider the interrelationships with special class and special schools and school access to support services. Five years on from the implementation it is timely to reflect on the overarching question posed by Travers namely "Will the model lead to a reduction in practices that can act as barriers to inclusive education?" (2017, p. 104). Each of the articles published in this issue of REACH sheds light on diverse aspects of this key concern for all who are involved or interested in inclusive and special education.

Notably, this issue features four articles focusing on key dimensions of inclusive education across the continuum of education provision originally proposed by SERC in the context of provision in special classes, special schools and in mainstream classes. In the first of these Flanagan highlights key considerations

relating to the inclusion of pupils in special classes offering insights in relation to the role of school leaders in establishing a culture of inclusion. Flanagan also offers critical analyses of how schools and school leaders might use frameworks such as the Inclusive Education Framework (NCSE, 2011), or the recently published Looking at our schools (DE, 2022a) and Autism Good Practice Indicators (DE, 2022b) to audit inclusive practice. Skehan and O'Mahony turn the spotlight on a highly sensitive yet critically important and under researched aspect of inclusive and special education namely toileting differences experienced by children and young people on the autism spectrum. In this study the perspectives of special class and special school teachers was explored and the authors present key insights relating to the factors which help teachers to support learners who present with toileting differences.

McGrath and Kenny present findings relating to the experiences of teachers using the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) with autistic pupils in early intervention settings, and in special and mainstream classes, to highlight the importance of collaborative whole-school approaches in supporting inclusion and transition within schools. In the final article, Green critically analyses the SETAM in the context of leadership and professional learning. This consideration of the barriers and solutions leads to a presentation of an action plan to support the future development of the model in schools.

It is noteworthy that the author or first author of each of the articles above is a teacher. Moreover, all the research published in this issue was conducted by teachers as part of their postgraduate studies evidencing a snapshot of the commitment and investment of so many teachers to their own professional learning relating to inclusive and special education. Amid calls from many quarters for system reform (AsIam, 2022; Children's Rights Alliance, 2022; Inclusion Ireland, 2022), with the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* currently under review (Department of Education, 2021), and the ongoing expansion of special class provision, we once again face a watershed moment in inclusive education in Ireland. It is imperative that in this context policy makers invest in supporting professional learning for all involved in inclusive education. As articulated by Páid McGee almost 20 years ago

> *Through bad times and good, whether the system moves at a headlong pace, progresses sedately or stalls, the quality of teaching remains, for the child with special educational needs more than for any other child, the pre-eminent influence on the educational outcom*e (2004, p. 69).

Reach Journal aims to act as a resource for teachers and other professionals working with learners with a diverse range of abilities along a continuum of need and to provide an opportunity for those involved and interested in inclusive and special education to publish articles based on their research, practice and experience. The Editorial Board of REACH particularly welcomes submissions from education practitioners and contributions reflecting the views and experiences of learners with a diverse range of abilities along a continuum of need. See https://reachjournal.ie for submission guidelines and template, contact the editor reach.editor.iatse@gmail.com) to discuss possible submissions and follow the Journal on Twiter @ReachJournal

ANNA LOGAN
Editor

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Getting Special Class Inclusion on the Agenda: Transformational Leadership and Developing a Whole School Approach to Inclusion

Whole school planning in relation to the inclusion of pupils enrolled in special classes in mainstream schools is critical in ensuring that special classes do not become a unit of segregated provision. An informed understanding of roles and responsibilities and an agreed understanding of what 'inclusion' entails and looks like in context appears to be absent in many schools. This paper is written through the lens of the human rights model of disability through which all pupils irrespective of cognitive ability or other additional needs have the right to access supportive environments where they can reach their own individual capacity for learning and enjoy social interactions with peers. Through this lens, inclusion in mainstream environments should not be hindered by subjective judgements based solely upon an impairment. This paper discusses how special classes were set up to support inclusion and the lack of direct guidance relating to the development of inclusive school policies and practice. It then focusses on the difficulties a transformational leader may encounter in establishing an inclusive culture before exploring the use of auditing frameworks to identify areas for improving policy and practice.

Keywords: *special class, inclusion, leadership, audit, school self-evaluation*

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INTRODUCTION

Special Classes and Inclusion

The establishment of special classes within mainstream schools is rooted in international guidelines for policy and practice with the overarching aim of

developing inclusive education systems. The Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994, p. 11) emphasised that 'inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights'. This marks the beginning of Ireland's journey towards a more inclusive education system, which began with the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998, S6) which explicitly stated that pupils with special educational needs (SEN) should have 'equality of access to and participation in education' and a 'quality education appropriate to meeting their needs and abilities'. The Act placed a statutory duty on Boards of Management 'to make reasonable provision and accommodation for students with a disability' (S15). This was complemented by The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004, S2) which states that children with SEN 'shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs'. Internationally, following on from the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994), The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2006, a rights based treaty, encouraged member states to enact further inclusive laws and policies and Section 24 requires that 'persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability'. This was signed by the Irish government in 2007 although not fully ratified until 2018 through the amended Education (admissions to schools) Act (Government of Ireland, 2018).

In its journey towards becoming more inclusive, Ireland offers a continuum of provision (DES, 2022). Pupils with SEN can be educated in mainstream classes, special classes within mainstream schools, special schools or home-schooled, the former can be perceived as being the most inclusive and the latter perceived as providing the least inclusive placement. There is now an increasing number of pupils with autism enrolling in autism special classes within mainstream schools. Irish special classes are defined as 'classes in mainstream schools intended to cater exclusively for students with SEN, with most special classes admitting only students from a specific category' (Ware *et al*., 2009, p.18) who have a 'professional diagnoses of disability and... an outline of complex needs' (McCoy *et al.,* 2014, p.30). At present, within our Irish system, special classes in local mainstream schools are recommended to be the 'best way forward to maximise inclusion for students' where full time mainstream settings are deemed unsuitable (NCSE, 2019, p. 12).

The guidelines for setting up and organising Irish special classes state that 'students in special classes should be included in mainstream classes to the greatest extent possible, in line with their abilities' (NCSE, 2016, p. 2). Pupils in special classes are counted twice on the school roll and this is clearly expressed to support

inclusion in mainstream classes (NCSE, 2016). The guidelines encourage schools to review and develop their whole school policies to ensure that approaches to inclusion are fully integrated into whole school planning rather than separate. Additionally, they cite that roles, responsibilities, how meaningful inclusion will occur and how peers and teachers engage with the special class, all need to be addressed (NCSE, 2016).

The guidelines, albeit minimal in length and detail, are clear in relation to the expectation that pupils enrolled in special classes should be included alongside mainstream peers, but there is no mention of their actual right to be included. Further information regarding how inclusion should be organised and what specific roles and responsibilities are, in relation to inclusion, are absent. Whilst this gives schools the autonomy to discuss and agree their own inclusive policies and practices, the absence of guidance has resulted in many schools not actively developing inclusive policies and practices, most likely due to an uncertainty of what being inclusive entails.

When schools establish a new special class, they are invited to access a four-day training course primarily aimed at supporting the newly appointed special class teacher, a full day of training for the whole school staff and the principal is encouraged to attend a half day seminar. The content of these courses certainly encourage inclusive practices but predominantly relate to understanding an autism diagnosis, individual planning and assessment, teaching and learning methodologies and managing regulation. All of which is relevant, appropriate and very much needed in relation to developing teacher capacity but does not address staff roles and responsibilities relating to how to develop an inclusive school and how to ensure mainstream inclusion has a purpose and is meaningful. Training has undoubtedly moved away from the medical model of disability to a more biopsychosocial model, but an understanding of the human right to be included has not been fully realised as existing training does not explicitly communicate to schools an autistic pupil's right to access mainstream environments. Furthermore, advising schools in relation to writing inclusive policies falls outside the remit of NCSE advisors and Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO), both of whom have a primary role to directly support schools.

It is no surprise then, that research has shown that inclusion into mainstream classes can be minimal (McCoy *et al*., 2016) and that movement between the two settings is not facilitating increased inclusion. In relation to inclusion, the DES found that the 'current system of special classes appears to be having limited success for many learners who enrol in a special class' and that there is a real danger that 'segregated

provision could expand unintentionally' (DES, 2019, p. 7). The NCSE also reports that pupils enrolled in primary special classes 'generally remain together across school years and spend most, if not all, of their week together' (NCSE, 2019, p. 13). A whole school (WS) approach to inclusion however has the potential to develop a school's capacity to meaningfully include pupils from special classes.

DISCUSSION

Developing a Whole School Inclusive Culture

Setting time aside to create a mutual understanding about what inclusion is, what it looks like and what it entails is the first step towards developing an inclusive vision. When schools have an agreed understanding of inclusion they can then begin the process of reviewing and developing their policies and practices to ensure that each pupil's right to be included is actualised.

Staff who support an inclusive vision that all pupils belong there, as a right, and can learn successfully within the school is paramount in establishing an inclusive culture. Actively involving staff and sharing responsibility for planning is necessary in order to for schools to build and maintain consensus for an inclusive vision (Villa and Thousand, 2012). Culture has an intangible quality (O' Riordan, 2017) which underlies everything that occurs in schools including how staff behave in relation to how changes are brought into a school (Mitchell, 2014) and although school leaders play a critical role in initiating the development of inclusive culture by setting a clear inclusive vision, the journey of developing a culture of inclusion is one which must be shared with all staff (O' Riordan, 2017). Culture and vision setting should be addressed very shortly after a special class is established so that a positive whole school approach to inclusion can be agreed, developed and importantly, owned by staff. Building a strong inclusive culture ensures that it endures regardless of changes that may occur within the school context such as staffing, pupil presentation and internal organisation. Left unaddressed, embedded cultures and attitudes that have developed over time, that are not aligned with a positive inclusive vision, may be very difficult to change for leaders of a school with a special class.

Transformational Leadership

Within this paper, the term transformational leader is used to describe a leader who is able to promote staff commitment to developing the inclusion of pupils enrolled in special classes through the implementation of agreed inclusive policies and practice. A transformational leader, has the ability to lead staff beyond their

immediate self-interests to identify where change is required, and can create a vision to guide changes in policy and practice in order to execute changes. A transformational leader has a focus on the commitments and capacities of staff (Bush and Glover, 2014), can motivate staff by raising consciousness about the importance of organisational goals (Gumus *et al*., 2003, p. 375) and can create a climate where teachers engage and share their professional learning (Hallinger, 2003). As such, a transformational leadership has the most potential for leading significant developments in establishing inclusive environments (Rose and Shevlin, 2021; Mitchell, 2014). For the transformational leader who is able to prioritise the development of a whole school approach to inclusion, in tandem with other demands that the diverse role of leadership entails, the use of auditing tools may be useful in stimulating whole school discussions with the aim of identifying areas for development.

Auditing Tools and Frameworks for Developing Inclusion

Villa and Thousand (2012, p. 203) highlight that developing an inclusive school needs to be set 'in wider issues of overall school effectiveness and school improvement'. Proactive WS planning can help schools manage change and plan a course of action to facilitate inclusion that is pupil based and context specific. For this to occur, it is necessary to allocate time on a regular basis for systematic reflection by all staff in order to execute and evaluate changes that have been put in place so that further appropriate actions can be planned and effected if required (Donnellan *et al*., 2021). However, there are many factors that will influence the success of WS planning for inclusion including the selection of a tool that can be used and setting the audit tool within a more formal evaluation framework. Further challenges upon adopting an audit model include ensuring the validity and reliability of staff responses regarding areas for improvement and the collective ability of staff to meaningfully address areas for development.

The NCSE recommend the use of the 'Inclusive Education Framework' (IEF) (NCSE, 2011) to schools who wish to reflect upon their inclusivity with an intention to making targeted plans to develop inclusive policy and practice. The framework encourages schools to 'show what they are doing well; identify areas they need to improve; and put plans in place to address areas for improvement' (NCSE, 2011, p. 5). To use the IEF as an audit, staff collectively use the framework as a planning tool. Information is gathered under ten themes and a plan is formulated that will enable them to progress further towards implementing the principles of inclusion. However, published in 2011, it is over eleven years old and the implementation guidance and certification that originally accompanied the framework is no longer available.

Newly published and recommended on all NCSE autism specific based seminars are the Autism Good Practice Indicators (AGPI) (DES, 2022) which highlights eight key principles related to WS inclusive practice, in relation to pupils with autism. This publication encourages schools to identify what inclusive practices are developed and developing so that areas can be identified as priorities for further development. This audit is more specific to autism special classes than the IEF and within the first principle, 'positive inclusive ethos', the AGPI directly references roles and responsibilities within the school community, the adjustment of existing structures and systems and promotes individual pupil centred planning for inclusion (DES, 2022).

However, the usefulness of these frameworks is of course, dependent on the level of school engagement with the content as it is not mandatory for schools with special classes to engage with informal audits. A transformational leader may bring tools to audit inclusivity to staff but the overall school community will influence the extent of real engagement in self-reflection in relation to inclusivity, bearing in mind there is no specific guidance for staff in relation to auditing whole school inclusive practice through SSE.

A more formalised and mandatory framework to use could be the Looking at our Schools (LAOS) publication (Department of Education and Skills, 2022) as this was designed to underpin both school self-evaluation and school inspections. LAOS promotes a commitment to inclusion and clearly emphasises 'the need for all pupils to be meaningfully included in their school community…in accordance with their abilities, strengths, stages of development and identified learning needs' (DES, 2022, p. 8). Significantly, LAOS states that 'specific school contexts will determine which statements of practice can be used meaningfully' and that the 'emphasis should be on the relevance of the statement to the school and its usefulness in bringing about school improvement' (DES, 2022, p. 17). If a school has a special class and thus has a responsibility to include pupils in the mainstream class, then this specific context clearly should warrant inclusive practice standards to be identified as particularly relevant. Also significant is that LAOS (2022) emphasises the principles of distributed leadership. Under LAOS, distributed leaders, have a responsibility to 'foster a commitment to inclusion' (2022, p. 15) which entails ensuring policies are 'inclusive and implemented accordingly' (2022, p. 34). For the transformational leader, a supportive, knowledgeable distributed leadership team who share and promote an inclusive vision may be key to successfully developing an inclusive culture by determining it as priority.

The LAOS framework could be used as an audit framework by itself, but is recommended to be used to guide school self-evaluation (SSE), formally introduced

in 2012. SSE is mandatory and using SSE to document areas for development can formalise WS approaches to inclusion. Schools have autonomy to identify the areas of practice where they feel improvement is needed. Where a transformational leader and the distributed leadership team share and promote an inclusive vision, the development of inclusive policy and practice for pupils enrolled in special classes has the potential to become an official formalised priority. Using the AGPI of WS inclusive policy and practices and placing these indicators within a more formal school evaluation framework leading to a mandatory three-year improvement plan may be the best way to ensure that WS inclusion for pupils in a special class is developed in schools.

Ensuring Reliability and Validity of Responses

Following the identification of an auditing tool and a framework to situate the development of inclusive practices, school leaders need to consider how to ensure the validity and reliability of their audit. Obtaining the viewpoints from different people within the school community is important in evaluating the school in context as 'various stakeholder perspectives provide a more comprehensive picture of issues being investigated' (O'Brien*, et al.,* 2019, p. 11). However, the extent to which stakeholders cognitively process, understand and agree upon the terms and language used in the tool 'determines the cognitive validity of SSE' (Faddar *et al.,* 2016, p. 397). With regard to the elusive term 'inclusive education', the viewpoint of what this means may differ between a parent, student, mainstream classroom teacher, a special class teacher and the chairperson of the board of management. Individual responses to the auditing process may be affected by each person's underlying assumptions and knowledge. A mainstream teacher may consider themselves an inclusive teacher if there are diverse needs within the class, whereas a special class teacher may relate inclusion to the extent that the pupils enrolled in the special class access a mainstream class or to the extent to which specific planning and adaptations are made for individual pupils. Further, the chairperson of the board of management may feel a school is inclusive purely because there is class-based provision for autistic pupils on site. Staff with various positions and roles in schools will have different perspectives based on their background and expertise that influence their point of reference (Fadder *et al.,* 2017, p. 400). The audit may be distorted by a tendency to give 'socially desirable responses, a phenomenon where individuals give over favourably self-descriptions' to the extent they are 'faking good' (Fadder *et al.,* 2018, p. 660) rather than basing their reflections on inclusivity on real facts and experiences. This reinforces the importance of an agreed consensus amongst staff about what inclusion entails in addition to evidential examples of developed inclusive practices to be documented as part of the auditing process.

Collaboration

After a school has navigated itself through the auditing process and identified what areas require development in policy and practice in order to include all pupils enrolled in special classes, collaboration must be prioritised. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018, p. 3) highlight the benefits of collaborative professionalism are 'irrefutable' in enhancing 'the implementation of innovation and change'. Collaboration can take different forms. It may entail teacher-to-teacher joint planning meetings, individual educational planning meetings, school team meetings, links with a nearby special school where expertise can be sought or networking with other local schools where practices can be shared. Ainscow and Sandhill (2010, p. 402) discuss that instrumental to developing inclusive practice is the 'processes of social learning within organisational contexts'. This entails increasing capacity and accountability by seeking ways to overcome barriers to inclusion by challenging existing ways of working. Opportunities for consistent self-reflection, team-reflection and evaluation in relation to provision for individual pupils will enhance inclusion (Donnellan *et al.,* 2021). Finding time to collaborate during the school day has been frequently cited one of the main barriers to inclusion. (O' Riordan, 2017) and so to ensure that planning for inclusion occurs, time and dedicated spaces must be timetabled in for staff to collaborate across the different settings.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the importance of a transformational leader in addressing school culture and setting an inclusive vision. It has explored the collaborative use of an autism specific audit tool, used within an evaluation framework, to identify areas for development. It has also highlighted the complexities involved for leaders navigating through the process of developing whole school approaches to inclusion. Ultimately, understanding the intentions of special class establishment and the right of an autistic pupil to be included is crucial and this needs to be communicated more explicitly by relevant supporting bodies in their publications and training. The lack of policy guidance to direct schools in relation to inclusion, in addition to the absence of a mandatory requirement for schools to consciously develop WS approaches to inclusion may well be the main barriers to developing WS approaches. The result of which being that many pupils enrolled in special classes are spending their time in school segregated from the rest of the school community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of what has been explored throughout this paper, the following recommendations may be useful starting points for future discussions relating to autistic pupils enrolled in special classes and enacting their right to be included in mainstream environments.

Firstly, a consideration as to whether mandatory guidelines should be published that require schools with special classes to reflect upon inclusive policy and practice during the SSE process. A mandatory requirement would ensure that standards of inclusive practice are consciously developed within set time frames. Supporting guidelines in relation to developing inclusive policies, in addition to the use of a trained facilitator to assist schools in objectively auditing their policies and practice would be hugely beneficial to schools.

Secondly, prior to establishing a special class in a school, additional preparatory seminars for leadership teams in relation to their roles and responsibilities relating to inclusion would support the development of WS policy and practice. Whole school training in relation to inclusion would further reinforce an agreed understanding of inclusion. This would result in an increased ability to put into place a three-year inclusion development plan with manageable targets to be set, implemented and accomplished. This, in addition to regular allocated time for collaboration would get inclusion firmly on the agenda in schools and ensure all pupils, irrespective of cognitive ability and difference, have their right to be included alongside their peers realised.

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An Irish Study of the Perspectives of Special Class Teachers and Special School Teachers of Toileting Differences Experienced by Children and Adolescents on the Autism Spectrum

Toileting is a critical life skill essential for day-to-day independent living. It is not uncommon for children on the autism spectrum to begin the process of toilet training later than their peers. Children on the autism spectrum may continue to have challenges with toileting throughout their childhood and into the adolescent and adult years. Although often referred to as a skill deficit, the terminology used in this study will be toileting differences. Examples of toileting differences include an extended length of time to acquire toileting skills, an inability to generalise the skill and significant sensory sensitivities in the bathroom itself. While toileting differences have been recognised as a frequent area for development in individuals on the autism spectrum, it is unclear how this impacts children on the autism spectrum in a school setting and if these differences are recognised amongst the teaching profession. With an increase in the number of children being diagnosed with autism and a move towards total inclusion i.e. more learners with autism attending mainstream schools, it is important to explore teachers' perspectives on this topic. At present there are no studies available relating to autism and toileting differences in an Irish school setting. This article focuses on a number of findings from a master's dissertation, exploring the perspectives of both special class teachers and special school teachers regarding toileting differences experienced by children and adolescents on the autism spectrum. The factors that aid teachers in supporting children when they present with toileting differences in the school setting were also examined.

Keywords: *Autism, ASD, special education teacher, toileting, self-help skills, daily living skills, life skills*

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INTRODUCTION

Children who are being educated in autism spectrum classes either within a special school setting or mainstream school have individual additional needs that often require specific supports. Children with autism can present with a large array of complex strengths and needs and display a diverse range of abilities in terms of adaptive function, cognitive and language abilities and neurological co-morbidities (Jeste and Geschwind, 2014). Skill differences in the area of life-skill and self-care activities such as toileting has been identified as a significant challenge (Cocchiola *et al.*, 2012). This is not a new phenomenon; researchers 30 years ago realised the significant impact this was having on both children with autism and their parents. In 1992, a survey of toileting, drawn from a population of parents with children nine years of age or older, reported that five percent of the sample (N= 100) with a mean age of 23.8 years were not toilet trained (Dalrymple and Ruble, 1992). In an Irish study of 127 children and adolescents with autism (age five - 17 years), 81% of the sample presented with at least one gastrointestinal symptom i.e., constipation or diarrhoea, within the previous three months (Leader *et al.*, 2018). The most common toileting problems reported in the study were, "Does not independently perform most self-help tasks", "Has toilet accidents during the day", and "Parent/caregiver notices smears in underwear". Significant predictors of these toileting problems included gender, presence of intellectual disability, gastrointestinal symptoms and comorbid psychopathology.

In the current study, variations in toileting were not considered or referred to as a skill deficit or disorder but acknowledged and referred to as "toileting differences". Terminology regarding autism is also a widely debated issue. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fifth Edition (DSM-5), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are diagnosed on two domains: persistent deficits in social communication/interaction; and stereotyped or restricted, repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). To help categorise the level of support required by individuals on the autism spectrum, severity level descriptors are provided by the DSM-5 ranging from level 1 ("requiring support") to level 3 ("requiring very substantial support") (Weitlauf *et al.*, 2014). Even though the diagnostic criteria of autism refer to it as a disordered way of being, many professionals, researchers and settings see autism as a difference and refuse to use the word disorder (Guldberg, Bradley and Wittemeyer, 2019). Additionally, there are ongoing debates whether to use 'person first' language or the term autistic, with some individuals seeing autism as a core part of their identity. In a large scale survey with members of the autism community (N=3470) in the United Kingdom, the terms 'autism' and 'on the autism spectrum' were the most highly

endorsed terms (Kenny *et al.*, 2016). Thus, individuals on the autism spectrum is the terminology used predominantly throughout this article. However, other terms such as individuals with autism or ASD may be used when reviewing literature or other reports where this was the terminology used.

Although one accepts that toileting may be a sensitive or difficult topic, adaptive life skills such as toileting are associated with positive quality of life outcomes and need addressing (Francis, Mannion and Leader, 2017). It is central to supporting inclusion for students on the autism spectrum as research has shown that improving adaptive life skills help to facilitate and support community inclusion (Gray *et al.*, 2014). Aspirations of full inclusion in the education system and in the community is possible if we give the children the tools necessary to live a life of dignity. At the time of the research there were no studies available relating to autism and toileting differences in an Irish school context.

Reports have outlined that special school and special class teachers focus on addressing children's holistic development through the provision of a wide range of learning areas and experiences, listing toileting programmes as one of those areas of learning (Daly *et al.*, 2016). The focus of the study being reported was the exploration of teachers' experiences of teaching children on the autism spectrum who present with toileting differences in the school setting. By recording the perspectives of teachers in mainstream special class settings and special school settings the aim was to develop a greater understanding of the nature of their experiences.

BACKGROUND

In the last three decades, within the Republic of Ireland, significant change has been made regarding the educational provision for pupils with special educational needs (National Council for Special Education, 2019). A number of inter-related developments resulted in a policy shift from parallel systems of mainstream and special education towards an inclusive education system. The publication of the report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC 1993) was the first significant milestone. It advocated a continuum of educational provision for students with educational needs favouring 'as much integration as is appropriate and feasible with as little segregation as is necessary' (Department of Education and Skills, 1993, p.22). There has been a gradual transition towards inclusion since the publication of the SERC in 1993. In line with the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, the National Council of

Special Education (NCSE) advised that the best way forward was the provision of special classes in mainstream schools or special schools situated on mainstream campuses. Furthermore, in a recent policy advice report, 'Progress Report – Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes' the NCSE revealed their vision for 'Total Inclusion' within mainstream school classes for children with additional needs (National Council for Special Education, 2019). The inclusive school reflects a shift in educational practices from a medical model to a biopsychosocial model, where teaching is differentiated for all students as opposed to teaching to the "normative centre" (Howe and Griffin, 2020).

The Irish education system currently has a multi-track approach regarding the provision for children on the autism spectrum, providing education in either special autism classes in mainstream schools or otherwise special schools and autism specific schools (Kenny and McCoy, 2020). In 2016, the NCSE published a report on supporting students with autism in schools and noted that 1 in 65 or 1.5% of the school going population in Ireland had a diagnosis of autism (Daly *et al.*, 2016). At that time provision included 19 dedicated special schools for students with autism, 95 special classes at pre-primary level, 378 special classes at primary, 152 special classes at post-primary and multiple special schools with classes for students with autism. The figures have increased significantly since this report, with Máirín Ní Chéileachair, Director of Education, Research & Learning, stating that in the 2022-2023 school year there are 1,548 classes for autism across all primary schools (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2022). Given the rapid pace of demographic change within the education system in Ireland, teachers undoubtedly have a key role in ensuring the experience of children on the autism spectrum is both successful and inclusive.

A strong link between teacher expertise and a positive experience in special classes for children has been highlighted in research (Banks *et al.*, 2016). There has been contradictions between studies with regards teacher allocation, with one study reporting excellent commitment by principals to recruit experienced staff to teach children with autism (Daly *et al.*, 2016). This was compared to a more recent study which highlighted that the majority of special class teachers (n=50) within the study had "little or no training" before beginning their role as a special class teacher (Horan and Merrigan, 2019). Continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers has been emphasized as a means for improving teacher expertise and competency (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010). However, access to CPD for teachers either taking up new positions in special classes or accessing CPD has been highlighted as a major area of concern (Daly *et al.*, 2016). Teachers have consistently emphasized the requirement for CPD that is accessible as specific

needs arise (Corkum *et al.*, 2014). In the area of adaptive and daily living skills, CPD courses and access to resources for teachers would therefore be necessary.

METHODOLOGY

From an initial literature review, it was found that much of the research regarding children on the autism spectrum and toileting had been conducted using quantitative research. It was reported that 82% of children on the autism spectrum experienced toileting challenges, as identified through parent report (Szyndler, 1996). Furthermore, the frequency of toileting problems in individuals on the autism spectrum from a number of countries (e.g. Ireland, United Kingdom, Australia, United States and Canada) ranging from 5 to 17 years reported that 53.54% (n=68), had challenging behaviours when toileting (Leader *et al.*, 2018). However, the view and voice of teachers had not yet been given consideration. Qualitative exploration would enable the teacher's perspective to inform the study. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with special class and special school teachers, both primary and post primary, who had experience of working with children on the autism spectrum. This allowed for deep, contextual understanding and incorporation of multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2009). Criteria of selection of teachers were that they were teaching children on the autism spectrum at the time of the interview, that those children were in the age range 3-18 years and that the teachers would have a minimum of five years' experience in this role. While teachers were not required to be educating students with toileting differences at the time of the study, teachers with a minimum of 5 years' experience were recruited with the aim of capturing a particular level of insight into the topic. The following research questions were explored in the study:

1. What are the perspectives of special class teachers and special school teachers regarding toileting differences experienced by children on the autism spectrum?

2. What factors aid teachers in supporting children on the autism spectrum that present with toileting differences in the school setting?

Data was collected from five special class teachers and nine special school teachers in Ireland. Ethical issues were given appropriate consideration from the outset of the study and approval was received from DCU's Faculty Ethic Review Panel (FERP). Pseudonyms were used to identify the participants. Teachers were referred to as Teacher A, B, C etc. The interview schedule for semi-structured interviews contained approximately eight questions. The questions were a guide as

the interview was designed for open dialogue on the topic of toileting differences in children on the autism spectrum. The interviews were approximately thirty to sixty minutes. Each of the individual semi-structured interviews was conducted using the online platform, Zoom adhering to DCU data protection protocols. All interviews were transcribed and sent to the participants for member checking. Data analysis of the interviews was a continuous, iterative process, which followed a data-led thematic analysis approach based on six phases according to Braun and Clarke. This six-step framework offers a systematic, yet flexible approach enabling researchers to identify patterns and themes when analysing qualitative date (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process began by transcribing data and reading this data repeatedly, followed by coding, searching and reviewing themes, providing definitions, and finally naming the themes which will be discussed in the findings and discussion section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Following analysis of the data, one of the core themes uncovered was: teaching and learning in the inclusive school. The subthemes within this theme of "teaching and learning in the inclusive school" were roles and responsibilities, teachers' awareness, training and self-efficacy, and building the foundations. According to AsIAm, inclusion is not solely about the school in which the child attends, it is about the child being accepted, valued and able to completely participate in their learning environment (Inclusion in Our Special Classes and Special Schools, 2020). The inclusive school environment and factors which enable the group of teachers interviewed to support children with toileting differences was a topic that was discussed frequently.

Roles and Responsibilities

Within this study there was a vast discrepancy between teachers regarding whose role and responsibility it is to assist a child on the autism spectrum when toileting differences are apparent. Interestingly, there were no patterns evident in any particular setting. Several teachers understood it to be the responsibility of the teacher to put the plans in place for the child, but it was ultimately the SNAs who assist the child one-to-one in the bathroom "The buck stops with the teacher but from what I have seen in early intervention in school, it's the SNA with that child, I would give 99% of the credit to," (Teacher D). In 2014 a circular entitled, *The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Scheme to Support Teachers in Meeting the Care Needs of Some Children with Special Educational Needs, Arising from a Disability* (DES, 2014), the Department of Education and Skills recognises that the classroom

teacher is responsible for educating all pupils in his/her class and the work of the SNAs should be focused on supporting the particular care needs of the children with special educational needs at the principal or teachers direction. Within this circular, assistance with toileting and general hygiene where the children with special needs cannot independently self-toilet was given as an example of a care need which might require SNA support. However, the inconsistent practice and the lack of clarity around roles reported within the study being reported here was concerning.

There was a varied response regarding the support available from external support personnel i.e., psychologists, occupational therapists, and other members of the multidisciplinary team. "The OTs were a very big help and obviously as well, speech and language has been really important, just around getting the visuals right" (Teacher E). However, the inconsistent practice and the lack of clarity around roles reported within the current study was concerning. "I've looked for help from the OT and been given the generic stuff that I've tried, like the playdough, the sensory stuff" (Teacher C). Consequently, if support from services is poor or non-existent and the responsibility is ultimately lying with the teacher, it would be critical that teachers working in an autistic spectrum (AS) classroom are aware of the differences that the children may be faced with.

Teachers' Awareness, Training and Self-Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy refers to the beliefs teachers hold regarding their capability to bring about desired instructional outcomes (Ruble, Usher and McGrew, 2011). When questioned on their self-efficacy regarding working with children on the autism spectrum facing toileting differences many of the teachers spoke about their lack of awareness when first working in the field. "Being trained as a mainstream teacher, it has taken me a while to realise the importance of targeting toileting in school. It's only now that I'm in this school that I see that it is actually part of the one two threes and the ABCs of this child, this is a child's learning" (Teacher L). Teachers alluded to the importance of gaining practical experience: "I would feel reasonably confident that I have a few things to try. I would know where to go and who to ask. But that comes with experience," (Teacher K).

Teachers noted that training was inadequate despite toileting having huge implications for children on the autism spectrum. They reported receiving little autism related content during their initial teacher training. Furthermore, they acknowledged the absence of CPD courses or specific training, recognising the need for courses which focused on information for all adaptive life skills including,

the management and support of toileting differences. Teacher C noted that they just "get this generic template that's been sent out to all of us. We need courses, even for Croke Park hours. I know a lot of children in our school have toileting issues. CPD courses, anything at all. There is nothing.". Although it appears awareness in the area is poor and CPD courses in the area of adaptive life skills are virtually non-existent, teachers discussed ways in which they ensure that the children on the autism spectrum who experience toileting differences can be supported.

Building the Foundations

Teachers referred to the importance of collaboration within schools and furthermore between schools when a child is transitioning to a new setting. Connecting with teachers who had worked with the children previously was commonly alluded to across several interviews. For some teachers, connection with the previous teacher was particularly important and proved to be beneficial for the student. Teacher K detailed the difficulties that may arise if the communication between teachers fail or a smooth handover does not arise. One example given was sharing information on the use of existing reward schemes for toileting as discontinuation of this in a new class would be very challenging for pupils. According to this teacher "I can understand what she was trying to communicate. Where is the treat that I used to get for behaving myself? And if I'm not going to get it, I won't comply." Furthermore, building a a relationship of trust with the child was an essential component before strategies were implemented.

Teachers were adamant in their beliefs that at any of the stages of toileting there should be a foundation built prior to interventions or strategies being implemented. These foundations included the teacher's development of a positive relationship with the child, understanding the needs of the child and ultimately knowing each individual child's personality. Teacher E, an early intervention teacher in a special school, described it as the ability to get the balance right when implementing strategies "Some kids, maybe I pushed a little bit too much. We did have to pull back because they started getting nervous of going to the toilet. It's like everything in special ed. It's the balance of push and pull". Teachers, more so those working with adolescents, considered the importance of having a good rapport with the child for any interventions regarding toileting to succeed. A special class teacher in a mainstream secondary school briefly mentioned that when implementing any strategies, the teacher should be aware of the age of the child and their needs. "It's how it's very discreetly done, I suppose, from a teacher's perspective. To be very cognizant of their needs."

CONCLUSION

The perspectives of special class teachers and special school teachers regarding the toileting differences experienced by students on the autism spectrum was explored and the factors that can aid teachers to support children were uncovered. According to research, "toileting problems" have been recognised as an area for development that affect those with autism (Mannion and Leader, 2013). Moreover, it is regarded as a critical life skill for independent living (Leader *et al.*, 2018). In both the special school and mainstream school setting, teachers are often required to provide specialised educational provisions for children including the provisions for self-care skills; toileting being one of these. However, whose role and responsibility this is, is regularly questioned, in addition to the lack of support from external agencies. Overall teachers voiced a huge level of disappointment regarding the resources, training, and awareness in the area, given that it is such a huge area of need for the children they teach. With the imminent move towards 'Total Inclusion' for all children within the education system including those on the autism spectrum, it is essential that teachers have the knowledge, skills and confidence to support all children within their class.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings from this study have implications for practices within the inclusive school and provide several practical suggestions to support children on the AS with toileting differences.

1. The roles and responsibilities that lie with the teacher, and the support received from SNAs, external supports and colleagues were discussed. Some schools adopt an intimate care policy in respect of students who require care such as toileting, however this is not mandatory. Further clarity in school policy and familiarisation of these policies for all staff is required. Good communication between the SNAs and teacher is also key to determine the support role of the SNA under the guidance of the teacher.

2. This study questions the awareness, knowledge and training of teachers with regards the necessary skills when working with children on the autism spectrum. Prior to taking up roles in special classes or special schools, it would be beneficial for teachers to have access to appropriate training and CPD programmes. This would help raise awareness of differences experienced by children on the autism spectrum and deliver appropriate teacher education. This may ensure that teachers

beginning their work in autism specific classes come to the role with a stronger knowledge base, more awareness of differences children on the autism spectrum experience and improved confidence to support the children in their care.

3. Teachers in this study highlighted the importance of a foundation or relationship being built with a child when toileting differences arise, and additional supports are required. In the literature, teacher aides in preschools in Israel, working with children with developmental difficulties, highlighted the efforts required to create a supportive and close atmosphere during the toilet training process e.g. reading stories and remaining physically close to them (Shoshani and Schreuer, 2019). In the Irish context, the NCSE has acknowledged the significance of building relationships with children on the autism spectrum (Daly *et al.*, 2016). A relationship of trust between the child and teacher or SNA is therefore of fundamental significance and strategies to build these relationships as well as the time required need to be encouraged.

The findings of this study generate several questions for further research. Future recommended quantitative and qualitative studies should incorporate the views of the students themselves, SNAs and parents. Future research is also required to investigate which strategies are most effective for supporting specific stages of toileting. While understanding the individual learners and building relationships was a clear focus for teachers, broadly there is still a medical model based approach to implementing supports for learners on the autism spectrum – training must include autism affirmative approaches building on teachers' knowledge and relationships with the learner.

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Teacher experiences of using the Aistear early childhood curriculum framework to support inclusion for autistic pupils within Irish mainstream primary schools

This study explores the experiences of primary teachers utilising the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009) to support inclusive education for autistic children within mainstream primary schools. Ireland has moved increasingly in recent decades towards providing education for autistic pupils within mainstream school settings, with 86% of such students being enrolled in mainstream schools and classes in 2016 according to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2016, p.5). Autistic pupils enrolled in early intervention classes are commonly supported using Aistear, a holistic play focused early childhood education curriculum. However, there is little research exploring the experiences of primary teachers with implementing this curriculum to support inclusion within mainstream classes for autistic children, nor what supports or access to professional development are available. Interviews were conducted with 10 primary school teachers who have worked with autistic pupils using the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). The interviews were conducted using Zoom and were between 30 and 60 minutes in duration. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data, with two themes emerging. The first was "Using Aistear to Support Inclusion" which had two sub-themes, "Tailoring the Curriculum" and "Tailoring the Environment". The second theme was "Aistear and Whole School Approaches". Findings show that, while participating teachers were often positive about using the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) to inform their lesson planning and practice, they pointed to the lack of support and guidance within Aistear to inform their approach to differentiating to support inclusion. This had implications for teacher collaboration and use of the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) in primary school settings.

Keywords: *Autism; Aistear, early intervention, whole school inclusion*

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INTRODUCTION

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition which can be characterised by repetitive and restricted interests/behaviours and differences in communication and social interaction (American Psychiatric Association; DSM-5, 2013). However, more recently understandings of autism have emphasised the level of diversity and heterogeneous presentations within the autism spectrum (Norwich & Lewis, 2005) and doubts have emerged regarding models that emphasise deficit or commonality of impairment ascribed to autistic children. For example, 70% of young people diagnosed with autism were also diagnosed with at least one comorbid condition, while 41% were diagnosed with two, leading to significant diversity of presentation within the autism diagnosis (Green et al., 2018). In addition, differences in reported prevalence rates of autism across jurisdiction also emphasises differing understandings of its presentation, with prevalence in the Republic of Ireland reported to be 1.5% (Boilson et al., 2016) while its prevalence in Northern Ireland is stated as being 4.5% (Rogers & McCluney, 2020).

In Ireland, as has been the case in many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Education systems (Kenny, McCoy, & Mihut, 2020), there has been a growing trend towards inclusive education leading to schools in Ireland experiencing a substantial increase in the number of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) receiving education in mainstream classroom settings (Anglim, Prenderville & Kinsella, 2018). The NCSE (2016, p.5) reported that "86% of students on the autism spectrum are enrolled in mainstream schools, of which 63% attend mainstream classes and 23% attend special classes in mainstream schools". Figures from 2019 show 1067 special classes and 131 early intervention classes for autistic pupils in primary and post-primary schools (Department of Education and Science (DES) Inspectorate, 2020). However, research has shown significant diversity in how provision for autistic students is organised across schools (DES Inspectorate, 2020; Banks et al., 2016), with some authors suggesting the fragmented development of specialist provision for autistic pupils has led to inconsistent implementation of inclusive policy (Shevlin

& Banks, 2021). Additionally, inconsistent planning for inclusion and a lack of teacher continuous professional development in schools has also been highlighted (Government of Ireland (GOI), 2004).

Autistic pupils enrolled in early intervention classes are commonly supported using the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) which adopts a play focused approach that strategically forgoes the use of more traditional models of teaching, aiming to support individualised holistic development in younger pupils in early education class settings (Woods, 2019). However, given the differences in how autistic pupils engage in play, it is unclear how teachers utilise and adapt the Aistear Curriculum Framework to support educational inclusion for autistic pupils in these classes. The purpose of this research study is to explore the perspectives and experiences among both mainstream class and autism special class primary teachers regarding implementing the Aistear Curriculum Framework to support educational inclusion of autistic pupils within mainstream settings. Participants' views regarding the availability of training and continuous professional development (CPD) relevant to the Aistear framework were also sought.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) (which will be referred to as Aistear hereafter in this article) was launched in 2009 and sought to extend and complement the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (1999) at infant class level in Ireland. Aistear is modelled on the New Zealand Curriculum of Te Whariki (Churchill Dower, French, Rogers & Sandbrook, 2013) and advocates the important role of play in early childhood. Aistear comprises a framework of four interconnected themes that overlap with each other to shape children's learning and development; well-being, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring and thinking (NCCA, 2009). Aistear, therefore, provides a reference point for teachers to implement a holistic curriculum that is child-centred and values sustained and meaningful interactions for the developing child (NCCA, 2009). Teachers may provide multiple opportunities for autistic pupils to access the PSC using play-based lessons in Aistear to further develop and enhance learning. Play is used within Aistear to address a whole spectrum of cross-curricular objectives outlined in the PSC (1999) in the areas of Social, Personal and Health Education and well-being, literacy, communication and language, mathematics, art and social skills. Within this context, it is imperative that a holistic approach to play is embraced by teachers in Early Childhood Education classrooms (French, 2019) and should consider the child's emotional, social, physical and spiritual well-

being. Play has been acknowledged as a valuable method to improve children's communication and language skills (Papacek, Chai & Green, 2016).

Approaches and Strategies to Support Autistic Pupils in Play in Mainstream Settings

Given the increasing inclusion of autistic children within mainstream early childhood and early primary class settings, they are more often accessing opportunities to inclusively participate in play with non-autistic peers. The use of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) in early childhood or early primary class settings therefore provides autistic children with access to child-led, play-based learning settings. Play may provide positive opportunities for autistic children to learn about their world through different relationships, developing skills such as co-operation, problem-solving and conflict resolution. Therefore, it is hoped that autistic children may benefit from positive early experiences of play to enhance and develop their physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language development (French, 2019). These early play interactions may offer these children opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills which may provide the foundation for later learning (NCCA, 2009).

Similarly, Lieberman and Yoder (2012) documented the positive relationship between communication and play in young autistic children. Play can be used as a method to bridge communication and social skills differences between autistic children and their peers in an inclusive environment (Wolfberg, 2015). O'Keefe and McNally (2021) highlighted the importance of play in intellectual development and in assisting children's achievement of learning objectives outlined within the curriculum. Research has shown that the naturalistic teaching of social interaction skills through play has been effective when teaching young autistic children (Wong & Kasari, 2012). In addition, according to Wolfberg et al. (2015), it is fundamental to maximise the developmental potential of autistic pupils by supporting their inclusion in play with typical peers. Facilitating interactive activities with a more socially able peer provides autistic children with an opportunity to improve their social interaction and communication skills within the classroom environment (Papacek, Chai & Green, 2016). Furthermore, by utilising suitable peer groupings and buddy systems within play-based lessons in Aistear, positive interactions with other peers can promote the development of peer relationships (Bierman, 2004).

However, due to often common characteristics of presentations of autism, autistic children often present with differences in their social interaction and approaches to social play activities relative to their non-autistic peers (Hobson, Lee and Hobson, 2009; Rutherford, Young, Hepburn and Rogers, 2007; Williams, Reddy

and Costall, 2001). Additionally, differences in social presentation are common among autistic children which can frequently impact the creation and maintenance of peer relationships (Milton, 2012; Sigman et al. 1999:). In addition, Conn (2014, p.143) noted that, while autistic children do engage in play similar to their peers, their play differs, showing "less sophistication" and "playing at a slower rate". Autistic children show a preference for engagement with sensory-motor physical play but are also less likely to engage the playful interest of their non-autistic peers (Conn, 2014). There is a strong evidence base showing autistic pupils in schools experience very high levels of social isolation, bullying and social rejection (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). Based on understandings of the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012), there is an emerging literature of evidence suggesting that relational interactions can present challenges for groups comprising mixed autistic and non-autistic individuals (Crompton et. al., 2020). In the context of lessons which involve peer play, autistic pupils can find play settings involving groups of non-autistic children a challenge. Due to these complexities and commonly noted differences in social and communication abilities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), teachers may often be faced with increasing challenges in adopting play-based approaches to learning. This is particularly important to enable autistic pupils to access Aistear within mainstream settings to support their educational inclusion. Learning the social skills required to initiate, join or maintain social play successfully may support an autistic child's engagement in this form of play (Carter, Davis, Klin & Volkmar, 2005; Matson & Wilkins, 2007). This is, however, both complex and often involves challenges for both autistic and non-autistic pupils within the group.

If autistic pupils are to gain access to both Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the PSC (1999) to support successful inclusion within classes, teachers play a vital role in the educational and social inclusion of these pupils. In this context, it is perhaps unfortunate that there is limited research in Ireland regarding the use of play-based approaches by teachers to support the educational inclusion of autistic pupils. Previous international studies investigating the opinions of teachers regarding the teaching of play skills have indicated that autistic children need to be supported in play skills and that the teaching of these skills support a range of developmental areas (Cesur & Odluyurt, 2019). Teachers need to actively scaffold play if children are to develop and enhance their play skills. A study conducted by Chang and Shire (2019) concluded that teachers are essential agents who have a pivotal role in facilitating and promoting skill development in the play of autistic children. A study investigating the area of play for autistic children in autism special classes reported that teachers felt worried and concerned about what they should teach and how they should teach it through play (Corbett, 2017).

Using a play-based approach benefits teaching and learning and additionally, promotes inclusion. However, teachers working with autistic pupils are required to use methodologies based on the characteristics of autism, the individual strengths and areas for development of each autistic child and recommendations made by the DES (Corbett, 2017). This further emphasises the need for adequate teacher training to meet the needs of autistic children within inclusive school environments. Kenny, McCoy & Mihut (2020) highlighted concerns about teachers' engagement with and availability of professional development opportunities as teachers' roles have been impacted significantly by the move towards fostering more inclusion within mainstream class settings.

Teaching Education and Professional Development

Research has shown the positive impact of teacher engagement with autism specific training to further enhance and develop inclusive practices. This may be important regarding implementing Aistear, given a recent study of primary teachers in supporting the inclusion of autistic pupils reported that the majority of teachers were anxious and lacked confidence at the prospect of teaching an autistic child (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018). Another study reported that teaching and support staff had little or no training in understanding the needs of autistic children (Reed, 2019). Indeed, given how complex the area of play can be and the diversity of social skills, interests, and communication profiles among autistic pupils, differentiation of lessons by teachers will be vital to support inclusion (Ravet, 2009). Similarly, the lack of understanding of the needs of these pupils can have a major impact on teachers' abilities to use and implement effective strategies to support inclusion within play using Aistear. While the Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning (Teaching Council, 2016), recognises the professional growth of teachers through reflection, collaboration and learning, there is little research exploring the impact of CPD on teacher practices in using Aistear to support inclusive educational provision for autistic pupils in Ireland.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study utilised detailed semi-structured interviews with a participant sample of primary school teachers to address the following research questions:

1) What are the experiences and views of primary teachers regarding using the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework to support educational access for autistic pupils?
2) What are the views of primary teachers regarding the availability of supports and opportunities for continuous professional development

relevant to using the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework with autistic pupils?

Participants and Recruitment

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit ten primary teachers from a range of rural and urban mainstream primary school settings who had experience using the Aistear curriculum framework with autistic pupils. Emails were sent to principals which requested the study recruitment letter be shared across their school staff to participate in interviews. Nine of the ten participants had completed the Aistear introductory course while two participants had received some form of CPD in the area of autism.

Procedures

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Each interview was conducted using an encrypted password protected Zoom account from the researchers' host higher education institution which allowed for face-to-face interviews to occur using the video option. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour approximately and were recorded via Zoom. The interviews were anonymised during transcription with the transcript being sent to the participant inviting them to read and review the data for accuracy as part of a process of member checking to support data credibility (Tracy, 2010). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.314) suggest member checks are one of "the most crucial techniques for establishing credibility" in qualitative research. Participants were given pseudonyms from this point forward to protect their identity.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data which sought to "identify some level of patterned response or meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). The data was analysed using the Braun and Clarke (2006) 6-step framework and the 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis was utilised to support rigour. The analysis was supported with reference to a detailed audit trail of field notes, minutes and reflections maintained by the principal researcher across the duration of the data collection. Akkermman, Admiral, Brekelmans and Oost (2006) suggest audit trails represent a means of assuring design quality and methodological rigour in qualitative research studies. The field notes enabled the research team to monitor feelings and allowed for personal reflection to ensure accurate collection of data to further enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the higher education Institutions the researchers were affiliated with. The research also

adhered to the British Educational Research Association guidelines of the Code of Good Research Practice (BERA, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study will be presented according to two themes, one of which had two sub-themes.

Table 1: Outline of Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Using Aistear to support inclusion	1.1. Tailoring Aistear
	1.2. Tailoring the Environment
2. Aistear and Whole School Approaches	

1. Using Aistear to support inclusion

A complex and nuanced picture emerged from across participants regarding the use of Aistear within mainstream school settings to support inclusion for autistic pupils, with acknowledgment of both the benefits and challenges of implementing Aistear. Some participants regard Aistear as foundational to their approach to inclusive education for their autistic pupils, with Ann remarking that Aistear *"underpins"* a lot of what she does. She stated that she wouldn't know how to "*operate without it"*. Additionally, some teachers also noted improvements in the social and interaction skills of their autistic pupils as a result of frequent engagement in play-based lessons. Jill viewed Aistear as an effective way for all children to interact with their fellow pupils and also noted that they *"learn very well from their peers"*.

While some participant teachers in the current study expressed positive views regarding Aistear, its successful implementation was noted as a challenge. While Aistear was developed to conform to international recommendations regarding supporting children to develop and learn holistically, the available literature suggests its implementation is an area of potential weakness (French, 2013). Echoing this dissonance, Michelle stated that while *"the framework is great"*, she was unsure of the efficacy of the implementation of Aistear in mainstream class settings. She spoke about Aistear being *"too structured"* and children with

additional needs *"can't access that"*. Two other participants, Eileen and Ellen, were of the opinion that autistic pupils need a *"certain level of skills"* in order to engage and benefit from Aistear. For example, Eileen spoke about autistic pupils needing play skills and without these play skills, it can make *"Aistear very inaccessible for them"*. Ellen agreed with these concerns, stating that she found it both *"inaccessible and impractical"* and further commented that *"Aistear is definitely not suited for all children with ASD"***.** Similar views were expressed by Michelle who remarked that Aistear has not supported her planning for *"teaching the children the skills they need for Aistear"*. Ellen echoed this point, remarking that *"there is little to no guidance"* within the Aistear framework, in her view, regarding how it can be applied for children with SEN. Indeed, she had to research her "*own materials in order to inform*" her teaching, she reported.

The participants commented on important common features of how their autistic pupils presented which needed careful consideration in planning for the differentiation of Aistear-informed education. All ten participant teachers acknowledged that social communication differences among autistic pupils can make cooperative play challenging, specifically during *"simple game playing, pretend play and role play"* (Jill and Michelle). There is an existing research literature outlining how autistic children exhibit differences in their social play development (Beyer & Gammeltoft, 2000). Wolfberg et al. (2015) suggest that "social communication, as the foundation that allows for peer interaction and building relationships" (p. 843) is a key area of difference between autistic children and their non-autistic peers. Equally importantly, teachers noted such communication and language differences or challenges often functioned as a barrier to the inclusion of autistic children in play and impacted on creating and developing friendships with peers. Some participants in the current study highlighted the importance of assessment to ensure that teachers "*are targeting at the right level"* and have *"an awareness of the developmental milestones"* in order to start autistic pupils at the appropriate level in play.

1.1. Tailoring Aistear

Several teachers highlighted the importance of tailoring Aistear to meet the individual needs of autistic pupils (n=7). Bridget commented that there is no *"set program that you can use with every child with ASD"* and that no *"one magic program is going to fit everyone"*. Five participants discussed the essential role of assessment in planning for and tailoring the Aistear framework to support autistic pupils in play. Formal and informal observation was reported as the main assessment tool used by all participant teachers when planning for the inclusion of autistic pupils in Aistear. For example, Jill spoke about her use of the Assessment

of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS) (Partington, 2010) and the Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP) (Sundberg, 2008) to assess autistic pupils' basic language, learning and play skills. However, she commented that even if those *"autism-specific assessments' '* aren't available, *"observation will tell you a lot"* and felt that observation was a valuable assessment tool.

Teachers acknowledged their crucial role in planning for and tailoring Aistear to support inclusion and meet the needs of autistic pupils. Through the use of observation and other aforementioned assessment tools, teachers discussed a range of strategies and approaches that they have implemented to tailor the curriculum to support the individual needs of their autistic pupils. The use of visual supports was reported by the majority of teachers as a beneficial approach in supporting the inclusion of autistic pupils during play-based lessons (n=9). Examples were displaying *"vocabulary"* and *"pictures"* in the role play area, using visual *"scheduling"* and *"timetables"* to establish a set routine, or visual storybooks. In addition, "*buddy systems"* and peer modelling were also used as a strategy to include autistic pupils, as participants found autistic pupils *"actually learn very well from their peers"* and noted this as being an *"advantage of Aistear"*. Giving a central role to the preferred interests of pupils in planning was also essential.

1.2. Tailoring the Environment

The majority of teachers highlighted the significance of adapting the environment during play-based lessons in Aistear to reduce pupil distress and support the inclusion of autistic pupils (n=7). It was clear from the findings that teachers acknowledged their role in adapting the environment to suit the individual needs of autistic pupils rather than the autistic pupils adapting to suit the environment. Some felt this was essential as they said that *"Aistear could be such a noisy time"* and that was a huge problem for autistic pupils with sensory sensitivity to noise. Bridget explains that having structure in the room and the *"access to sensory stuff"* benefitted the autistic children during Aistear and reiterated the importance of thinking about the *"classroom environment"* and *"how you can adapt it"*. Jill spoke about the fact that *"even though there's structure within Aistear, it's a very unstructured environment"*. Adapting the environment to the profile of the pupils involved was seen as important to avoid autistic pupils becoming *"totally overwhelmed"* and support inclusiveness in lessons.

2. Aistear and Whole School Approaches

Participating teachers felt that the implementation of Aistear is heavily dependent on whether the school wishes to incorporate the framework and encourage teachers

to avail of the introductory training. However, there are barriers, such as Aistear not being underpinned by any legislation, viewed as *"actually not compulsory"* (Jane) by teachers or principals, nor allocated funding being available for the training of educators to "translate Aistear into everyday practice, planning and supervision" (French, 2013, p.4). Perhaps unsurprisingly, some participants in the current study noted segregation still exists within mainstream settings for autistic pupils, with some suggesting autistic pupils would still struggle to cope within the mainstream class setting without effectively informed staff or appropriate supports.

Four teachers expressed the view that Aistear worked more effectively within the autism special class setting due to adaptations of the environment and additional supports available. Jill was of the opinion that reverse integration whereby the mainstream children joined the autism class setting "*can be better in a sense*" to effectively target individual needs due to the fact that it is a "*smaller environment*" and has a higher staff pupil ratio which may be more suitable for the autistic child. Other participants stressed the importance of collaboration in planning for the successful inclusion of autistic pupils in play-based lessons in Aistear. Mary remarked that "*collaborating with the learning support teacher is essential*" along with Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) who "*know the intimate needs of the child*". Time to collaborate was identified as a challenging factor, along with training in working collaboratively with peers.

Lack of sufficient training and CPD in the use and implementation of Aistear with autistic pupils was also identified by primary teachers within this study as one of the main barriers to the successful inclusion of these pupils. This resulted in teachers lacking the confidence to provide sufficient and meaningful experiences for autistic pupils within the mainstream play environment.

CONCLUSION

Participating teachers in this study were often positive about using Aistear to support using play as a pedagogy for autistic pupils in early class settings. However, they pointed to the lack of support and guidance provided within the Aistear curriculum to inform their teaching and differentiation to support inclusion. An individualised approach to using Aistear and planning to differentiate the lesson, the teaching approach, and the learning environment were viewed by participants as very important. This was reported to have significant impact on levels of collaboration with colleagues, whole-school planning, and the transitions of pupils from early intervention class settings, or autism class settings to mainstream inclusive provision.

The results of the current study emphasises a number of key implications for practitioners using Aistear to support inclusion and access for autistic children within school settings. The provision of sufficient focus on the use of Aistear within pre-service teacher education and access to appropriate applied CPD for practicing teachers is vital. In addition, it is important teachers are supported in recognising that, while providing a rich, child-led environment that fosters learning, individualised planning is essential to ensure participation and access with Aistear-informed lessons. Access to CPD for teachers in how to assess autistic children holistically to inform appropriate individualised planning and differentiation of teaching would support teachers in using Aistear effectively with this peer group. Finally, the role of collaboration and whole-school planning in sharing an understanding of how Aistear can be used to support inclusion for autistic children across schools is important. This is particularly the case in supporting transitions for autistic children across classes within schools.

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A Critical Interrogation of the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model within the Context of Leadership and Teacher Professional Learning

This paper seeks to critically interrogate the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) within the context of Leadership and Teacher Professional Learning (TPL). Following an analysis of SETAM within this context, a summary of the identified barriers and solutions will be presented. Finally an action plan to support the development of SETAM within the school context will be outlined.

Keywords: *inclusion, special educational needs, special education teacher allocation model, leadership, teacher professional learning*

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) was communicated to schools in 2017 in circular 0013/2017 (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017) after a pilot of the model had been undertaken in a sample of schools (NCSE, 2016). Under this revised model the DES provides supports to schools based on the educational profiles of each individual school (DES, 2017). The model uses a three-step process to guide the identification of needs, the interventions required and the outcomes of such interventions for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (DES, 2017). A Continuum of Support framework enables schools to identify and respond to student needs and recognises that support needs occur along a continuum and range from mild to severe. This continuum also takes into account that some supports are transient while others may be more long term. The allocation of resources occurs at three levels: (1) whole school and classroom support for all, (2) school support for some and (3) school support plus for a few (DES, 2017).

The influence and consequences of this model still have to be fully explored and further analysis of the model is necessary to appropriately understand its efficacy (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020). Inclusive education should always be concerned with equity, however it is worth considering that the manner in which policy is implemented on the ground very much depends on the management and teachers in any particular school (McCoy, 2016; Avramidis et al., 2019; Webster & Roberts, 2020). The next section will consider the context of SETAM.

CONTEXT

The ratification by Ireland of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), in 1992 resulted in far reaching changes in policy and legislation that spotlighted a rights-based approach to provision for children with SEN in the Republic of Ireland (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020) legal actions by parents seeking educational rights for children with severe disabilities prompted appropriate provision for these students and a shift towards inclusive schools. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN. This was followed a year later by the publication of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (DES, 1993), recommending that students with SEN be educated in mainstream schools with their typically developing peers (DES, 1993). Ireland then adopted the principles of the Salamanca Statement and the Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs (UNESCO, 1994).

Further change was brought about through high-profile legal cases, such as the O'Donoghue Case, taken against the state based on Article 42 of the Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1937), which states that all children have a right to appropriate primary education in Ireland. Subsequently the Education Act 1998 (Oireachtas, 1998), explicitly mentioned the provision of supports for children with SEN, and this was followed and bolstered by the Equal Status Act (Oireachtas, 2000 - 2015) requiring schools to provide reasonable accommodations for students with SEN to enable access to an appropriate education. A pivotal moment in the Irish policy landscape followed with the publication of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, (Oireachtas, 2004). Certain sections of EPSEN were however deferred following the recession in 2008 (Rose and Shevlin, 2020) and remain in-enacted, this is however currently under review (DES, 2022). These shifts in policy largely support the view that educational needs do not lie within the child, rather they lie within the readiness of the school to support the child from an infrastructural, resource and cultural perspective (Rose & Shevlin, 2017).

The manner in which supports for children with SEN can be provided effectively has been a point of debate in Ireland for decades (Travers et al., 2018; Rose and Shevlin, 2020) and has been heavily influenced by international policy and policy borrowing (Banks, 2017). Internationally inclusion is recognised as welcoming learners of all educational abilities backgrounds and ethnicities, who have historically experienced exclusion, and ensuring that they are educated together in an inclusive system (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2001; 15).

The Irish government currently spends 25% of its annual education and training budget on the area of SEN, this represents a 60% increase since 2011 (Oireachtas, 2022). Special Needs Assistants (SNA) have been increased by 81% since 2011 and Special Education Teachers (SET), formerly known as Learning Support (LS) and Resource Teachers (RT), have been increased by 48% within the same timeframe (Oireachtas, 2022). This represents a significant financial investment in SEN resourcing in the Republic of Ireland.

Ireland has developed policy over recent decades to reflect international debate about the importance of inclusive education (Ainscow, 2020). It is apparent that the government of Ireland have shifted their focus from segregated education to inclusion (Florian, 2014; Nes, Demo and Ianes, 2018; Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2019; Howe and Griffin, 2020; Leonard and Smyth, 2020) first through the SET allocation model (DES, 2017) and then the School Inclusion Model (SIM), (NCSE, 2019).

In 2012 the DES requested policy advice from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) relating to the provision of supports for students with SEN in schools. In a report published by the NCSE in 2013 the development of a new model of allocation for mainstream schools was recommended. This model would be based on the profiled needs of each school individually and would negate the need for a diagnosis of disability (NCSE, 2013).

Based on this advice it was recognised that there was potential to improve the system of allocating resources to schools for students with SEN. In 2017, Minister Richard Bruton instituted the Action Plan for Education (DES, 2017). The action plan had a pivotal ambition for Ireland, of providing the best training and education system in Europe. The second goal of the action plan was to improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with SEN (DES, 2017). One of the targets outlined in this goal included a move away from ‘a deficit model of resource allocation to one requiring a social, collective response from schools’

(Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017, p. 453). This led to the inception and development of the SETAM (DES, 2017). Bolstered by the principle of developing 'truly inclusive schools' (DES, 2017, p.5), SETAM was introduced in the hope that it would provide a more equitable and rights based approach to the provision of supports for students with SEN without the requirement for a diagnosis (NCSE, 2013). The next section will focus on leadership in relation to SETAM.

LEADERSHIP

The principal of any school has overall responsibility for all of the children enrolled in their school and it is well recognised that the existence of inclusive schools largely depends on the commitment of the principal to inclusion (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010). This includes the education of children with SEN (Special Education Support Service (SESS), 2000). The SETAM identified the principal's role with regard to its implementation as 'central' (DES, 2017, p. 23). The principal has the responsibility for the allocation of teachers and resources to students based on need and must ensure that effective systems are in place for the identification of need and for the monitoring of progress .

Prior to the advent of the SETAM, two types of teaching roles existed in addition to the mainstream teaching role, these were LS and RT roles. The general allocation model (GAM) allowed schools to meet both the needs of those students with high incidence SEN and those students with additional learning needs. Resource hours were allocated based on the assessed SEN of each individual student. Research purports that this model of resource allocation was inequitable in a myriad of ways (Travers et al., 2010; NCSE 2014). Critics noted that it was in many ways unbalanced and inequitable, that it reinforced social disadvantage and possibly further marginalised students who were already facing disadvantage, such as those students whose parents could not afford private assessment or private support from agencies outside of the school setting (NCSE, 2014; DES, 2016). This model of allocation focused heavily on the identification of deficits, with a requirement for a diagnosis placed on pupils in order to access resources and supports (Banks, Frawley & McCoy, 2015; Ní Bhroin & King, 2020).

Research found that, under the old model, schools felt they did not have enough professional autonomy with regard to the allocation of supports and resources for pupils with SEN (Kinsella, et al., 2014). The SETAM provides professional autonomy to principals and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO) to allocate resources appropriately to students based on the needs of the school

(Howe & Griffin, 2020). Some school leaders have however commented that the previous model of LS and RT allocation provided more clarity in relation to the manner in which supports could be disseminated within the school (Raftery & Brennan, 2021). The use of standardised testing, which has been compulsory in Ireland since 2007, also raised concerns for some principals, as they identified that if schools improve their standardised test scores then they face the risk of having their SET allocation reduced (Banks, 2021).

Principals also have the responsibility for facilitating professional development opportunities for staff. This training can be arranged during Croke Park hours or by facilitating staff attendance training seminars provided by the NCSE and other agencies, however this isn't always possible as principals face challenges in relation to procuring substitute cover (O'Doherty & Harford, 2018; Raftery & Brennan, 2021) and this is perhaps further exacerbated by the current substitute teacher crisis.

By placing the responsibility for the allocation of teachers and resources to students based on needs, it is presupposed that all principals across the board have the knowledge and skills to effectively identify those staff best placed to work in SET roles. It also assumes that principals, or those on the in-school management team, to whom responsibilities are delegated, are knowledgeable or have received training in the diverse area of SEN, this is not always the case (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Kendall, 2019; Leonard & Smyth, 2020; McDougal, Riby & Hanley, 2020). Whilst the SET model is underpinned by the principles of equitable provision for all (DES, 2016), it could be argued that given the challenges faced by principals in relation to the procurement of substitute teachers (O'Doherty & Harford, 2018; Raftery & Brennan, 2021), SETs may not be able to attend training seminars to support them in adequately meeting the particular needs of students to whom resources are allocated.

School leadership is notably influential with regard to successful inclusive practice in the school context (Al-Mahdy & Emam, 2018). Robust, informed leadership is needed to facilitate an innovative (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004), inclusive culture and to create a successful holistic, inclusive experience for students with SEN that will allow them to thrive and to be included meaningfully with their peers (Kendall, 2019). This is highlighted by a recent high court case, which found that a school was in breach of the Equal Status Act (2000-2015) for excluding a child with Down Syndrome from her classroom. The principal was held accountable for removing the child from the classroom rather than using the supports available to the school to meet the child's needs, and in doing so the

court stated that the school had diminished the child's access to a meaningful education with her peers (The Irish Examiner, 2022). While some supports are provided for principals they remain insufficient to meet the many needs that exist within any school population (McKeon, 2020). The SETAM also perhaps assumes that in addition to the already complex, evolving and challenging role principals face (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016), space remains for principals to take on further responsibility within the role with regard to the allocation of supports. Principals have a multi-faceted and vastly intricate role and the resounding silence around the lack of support for this role remains. In order to sustain and deliver a commitment to inclusive educational practice it is imperative that principals are provided with adequate, timely, consistent and appropriate supports to allow them to meaningfully implement all facets of the SETAM effectively.

Within the context of the SETAM the autonomy afforded to schools (DES, 2017) results in different practices being enacted across contexts due to varied interpretation of policy at ground level. This may reflect the skillset of the principals, class teachers and SETs and the commitment of same to the goal of inclusion (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Florian, 2014; Miskolci, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2016). Culture differs from school to school and it is unlikely that ~~the~~ policy is interpreted and enacted identically across all contexts (McKeon, 2020). Principals in some schools may be more experienced or may have trained in the area of SEN (Stephenson et al., 2020; Low, Lee & Ahmad, 2020; Leonard & Smyth, 2020), and therefore may be more proactive in terms of implementing the SET model effectively.

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) is considered important in terms of supporting children with SEN (Leonard & Smyth, 2020). With the advent of the SETAM, the NCSE called upon the Teaching Council (TC) to consider the complex needs of the student populations in mainstream schools and to put in place a framework for teacher education to ensure that teachers had the necessary skills and knowledge to support their students (NCSE, 2016). It is worth noting that under section 38 of the Teaching Council Act it is stated that student teachers in all accredited programmes are required to undertake study in inclusive education, including special education. In Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education (October, 2020) special education is referenced only once under Integration and Application of Knowledge in relation to Planning, Teaching, Learning and Assessment Skills (in Complex and Unpredictable Education Classroom Settings), and indicates that

teachers should collaborate with SETs and refer students for specialised support if required, and they themselves should be involved in the delivery of this support if appropriate. The TC also acknowledge the importance of inclusion within the learning areas in Cosán, Framework for Teachers' Learning (2016).

The DES states that SETs should be knowledgeable in a variety of approaches in relation to supporting students with diverse learning needs and that mainstream class teachers should plan their lessons to meet these needs in their classrooms and make use of strategies and methodologies to promote inclusion (DES, 2017). Assuming that all teachers have received adequate training in the area of SEN to work in an SET role undermines the level of skills needed to appropriately work with and meet the needs of children with SEN, and in doing so may disadvantage children (Kenny, McCoy & Mihut, 2020). It is recognised that classroom teachers do not always have the opportunity to develop expertise in teaching students with SEN in the mainstream setting (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020), yet the SETAM, in many ways presupposes that all teachers are in a position to work effectively with children with SEN. It was identified in the review of the pilot for the SET model that in relation to TPL it would be untenable to provide the necessary levels of support to all schools as the model was rolled out nationally (DES, 2016). This highlighted the inevitable challenges that schools would face, but didn't result in any actions to address them. Any teacher can be placed in an SET role by the principal, but not all schools have teachers with expertise in SEN on their staff (Lyons, Thompson & Timmons, 2016), which perhaps further promotes an inequitable approach as some schools may be disproportionately disadvantaged in this regard.

Training in the area of SEN is specialised and equips teachers with the skills, methodologies and abilities to address the complex needs of the students in their care (Leonard & Smyth, 2020; Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). The recommendations from the pilot of the SET model indicate that further training would be required for class teachers and support teachers to facilitate inclusion. Accessing this training however remains at the discretion of each individual teacher. All student teachers are required to complete study in the area of inclusive and special education during initial teacher training (Teaching Council Act, 2001). The TC also promotes and supports teachers accessing ongoing professional development throughout their careers (Teaching Council, 2015), but there is currently no requirement for teachers to engage in TPL in the area of SEN.

The class-teacher holds the responsibility for the progress and care of all pupils in the classroom, including pupils with SEN (DES, 2016), SETs take a secondary role in this regard which perhaps diminishes the perception of their professional

capacity (Norwich & Lewis, 2007). With the responsibility for all students falling to the class-teacher, it is worth noting that during the Covid-19 pandemic SETs were deemed responsible for coming into schools to work with students with SEN in mainstream settings and not their classroom based colleagues. It may be worth considering a sharing of responsibility between class-teachers and SETs, rather than simply placing the responsibility with the class teacher. The basis of this approach is collaboration and is based on a whole school approach (DES, 2017; Ní Bhroin & King, 2020), making the separation of responsibility between roles contradictory (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018).

By enacting the SETAM the DES signalled that there was a lack of inclusive educational practice and perhaps inadequate provision for children with SEN. The in-enactment of some elements of the EPSEN Act (Oireachtas, 2004) meant that the provision of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for children never became a mandatory practice (Travers et al., 2018), this could be perceived as having weakened Ireland's response and position with regard to inclusion and an adequate and appropriate provision for students with SEN.

The SET model requires a plan to be put in place for individual children or groups of children (DES, 2017). The guidelines for primary schools supporting pupils with SEN (DES, 2017) state that this model is intended to build on established good practice positioned within a whole-school framework with an emphasis on effective teaching and strong collaboration (DES, 2017). This includes putting in place the necessary paperwork to support planning, and this should be done collaboratively with the child, the parents, outside agencies, Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), the class teacher and the SET. All parties working together for the good of the child should underlie all practice with regard to the SETAM.

In the next section an action plan to support the development of the SETAM within the school context will be outlined followed by a conclusion.

ACTION PLAN

Taking school leadership and TPL into account the author has theorised an action plan of the types of actions and supports that could be put in place at DES level and at school level to further support and develop the SETAM in an equitable way.

Leadership

School leadership is an increasingly complex role and school leaders are not

provided with adequate support to fulfil the many responsibilities that fall to them on a daily basis. Regular targeted training should be provided for school leaders, in consultation with school leadership teams, in the area of SEN. This training should be made accessible to busy school leaders by providing regional and hybrid models of onsite and online teaching .

Communities of Practice (CoP) could be instituted to provide further support to school principals in the area of the SETAM. These should be scheduled during the working day, with substitute cover provided for teaching principals. This could be provided in local education centres and facilitators could be provided by the NCSE to institute and maintain these important CoPs.

The mentoring of new principals by experienced principals has been established through the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), however a gap exists for mentoring specific to SEN. It is worth considering if mentoring could be provided for a period of time, in relation to the SETAM specifically through the bespoke option available for mentoring through the CSL. Arrangements for this could be at a local level between BOMs and school leaders.

Teacher Professional Learning

A SET role is a specialised role, requiring the SET to complete significant planning and assessment and to work with the child, the class teacher, the SNAs, the parents and outside agencies. Yet despite the weight of this role, historically classroom teachers have been responsible for all of the students in their care. By reviewing circulars 0013/2017 and 0008/2019 and revising these in relation to the responsibility of SETs, responsibility for children could be shared between the class teacher and the SET supporting the child. A provision could also be added to the Education Act (1998) to take into account the responsibility that SETs take for the students they work with. This could be piloted in a representative sample of schools to ascertain the challenges that may be encountered. It is likely that change could be challenging to initiate initially, but this is an important shift to make in terms of recognising the professionalism of SETs.

Further ongoing access to and involvement in TPL should be provided by the DES and the NCSE to all teachers in SET roles. Accreditation could be considered for those accessing these seminars and an increase in blended or online courses could provide further opportunity for teachers who perhaps can't travel to central locations from more geographically isolated areas of Ireland. The TC could also assess and revise Céim and Cosán to more fully capture the diversity of TPL required to appropriately meet the needs of diverse learners.

The impact that ongoing TPL has on teacher efficacy within SET roles should be monitored and evaluated regularly. This could be done by the NCSE in conjunction with national universities. Involvement in this however, would be dependent on a commitment from teachers at the outset of appointment to be involved in training and also to engage with evaluation protocols following the completion of training courses.

CONCLUSION

In Ireland inclusion based policy change is becoming what Ball described as 'thoroughly embedded in the 'assumptive worlds' of many academic educators' (Ball, 2003, p.215) as the emphasis is placed on problem solving rather than the problem setting (Schön, 1983, p.40). The action plan above attempts to engage in problem solving in relation to the identified challenges presented by SETAM. It is recognised that, although the action plan presented here has theorised a number of different actions, these actions, barriers and strategies are not exhaustive and could be further developed within the context of each individual school.

Leadership as a role is becoming ever more compounded with convoluted processes and procedures. Leaders need clear supports and guidelines and recognition from the DES that this complex role is already overloaded and untenable. By providing leaders with practical resources and solutions within the context of SETAM, this model could be bolstered and further developed. It must however be recognised that by continuing to increase the workload placed on principals without adequate supports, the commitment of equity to all could be diminished.

Teacher professional learning is an area of significant importance in relation to SETAM. The role of the SET is multi-faceted and requires specialist knowledge, skills and approaches in order to be fulfilled appropriately. Ongoing, targeted and reviewed TPL is imperative if the diverse needs of all learners are to be supported meaningfully within the school context. Responsibility for learners should be shared between the SET and the class teacher in order to best meet the needs of each individual student in their care.

Recognising that the development of the role of SETs and inclusion are key areas for development in schools and putting an action plan in place would go some way to supporting the achievement of meaningful inclusive practice. 'Stretching' the responsibility across a number of departments and individuals (Diamond and Spillane, 2016), allows for school communities at a variety of levels to be

involved in decision making and knowledge sharing (Miskolci, Armstrong and Spandagou, 2016), which creates a sense of ownership and a shared building of a more inclusive culture (Harding, 2009).

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