

Special Needs Education:  
The Investigation of Perceptions of Parents  
with Special Needs Children and their  
Experiences of the Mainstream School System.

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this research project is to investigate the perceptions of parents with special needs children and their experiences of the mainstream school system. This study was carried out using qualitative methods, and adopted thematic analysis. The researcher used semi-structure interviews. A Small sample size of 5 participants were involved in total.

The results found five key areas of commonality experienced by the participants. These included issues around access to schools, SNA, curriculum, fighting for resources and sub-themes of each. These results found that attitudes from schools concluded that the system is a one size fits all approach and parents overall experience was one of 'pushing and fighting' to acquire the resources they felt should be easily accessible. Conclusively it is felt that there is a discrepancy between what is legislated and the reality of what the participant's experiences are, this became evident in individual attitudinal disclosures and the difficulties in accessing mainstream school.

# **Introduction**

The aim of this research project is to investigate the perceptions of parents with special needs children and their experiences of the mainstream school system. The literature review primary focus will be in the area of special needs education. The area of special needs education is a vast area. Parents are faced with many decisions regarding education and even more so with parents of children with special needs. Parents of children with special educational needs face many issues and meet many challenges when entering into the world of special needs education in Ireland. Cole (2008), refer to significant challenges in making decisions on how to incorporate special needs children in mainstream schools.

This section will focus on the meaning of education, specifically with regards to special needs education in Ireland. It will examine special needs legislation and how this impacts on provision of special needs education in Ireland. Within the existing literature five main areas emerged: the relationship between school and parent: the issues of access to mainstream education: the area of inclusion in special education: evaluation process and finally the role of SNA in mainstream education.

## **Education and Ireland**

Education is an important part of a society's attainment to modernity and to social and economic progress for the human race (Clancy, Drudy, Lynch and O'Dowd, 1995).

Education is defined as a tool to improve the lives of people and society in many ways. It is considered to hold a central role in the economic, social and culture development of Ireland. It is viewed at state level as an important part of national planning.

Tovey & Share (2003) explain that there are two ways education is measured; by literacy numbers and how many schools a country has, Ireland has an insufficient primary education system with big class sizes and inadequate facilities in comparison to other European

countries. In spite of this Ireland achieves well on the international league tables of academic attainment. Ireland was rated 8th in the UNICEF report on education achievement (Tovey & Share 2003, p.189).

The individuals concerned in education range from children, parents, teachers, lecturers and pupils. The department of education and science is Ireland's formal institution that provides for provision and policy for education.

The Department of Education and Science comprises of school inspectors, boards of management, teachers, principals and parents (Tovey & Share 2003).

Education is a tree with many branches; it includes primary school, secondary school, third level education, adult education and special needs education (Department of Education and Science, 2004).

The length of Compulsory schooling in Ireland is 8 to 10 years and a total of 13 years is generally expected by society (Macionis & Plumber, 2002, p.493). It is compulsory in Ireland to attend school from age 6 to 16 however pupils are accepted from their fourth birthday (Department of Education and Science, 2004). As stated in the Irish constitution parents may provide education in the home or in private institutions along with the state acting as a guardian to see that they fulfil an adequate level of education (Coolahan, J.1981, p.156).

Primary education as set out in article 42.2 of the constitution (as cited in Coolahan, 1981) is fully funded by the state. The Catholic orders have been the main provider in Ireland in the school system and only in the 1970s was this arrangement slowly taken over by teachers and parents. In 1999 the move away from the church to the state was put into action and the government announced that the state would fully fund capital development of primary

schools, and not depend on the church and parish resources for provision and aid (Tovey and Share, 2003, p.194).

Primary school ranges from junior infants through to 6<sup>th</sup> class from age 4 to 12 years. The teaching style comprises of the national curriculum set out by the Department of Education and Science, it is one which focuses on a child centre approach and one that tolerates flexibly (Department of Education and Science, 2004).

This moves on to secondary education which Tovey and Share (2003, p.194) confirm was free from 1967 and gave rise to a significant increase in participation rates and meant that secondary education was not just for the privileged. Secondary school commences at age 12 to 18 and includes vocational, community and comprehensive schools. There are two main forms of public examination which pupils take part in, the junior cert and the leaving certificate which are put in place by the State Examination Commission. Much emphasis is placed on the leaving certificate as results are a means of entry to third level education (Department of Education and Science, 2004).

Third level education consists of seven main universities, five college in education and institutes of technology. Most apart from private institutions are sustained mostly by the state. Universities in Ireland have a range of courses these comprise of degree at Bachelor, Master and Doctorate level in many different areas. The technology section has the duty of technology of third level. They offer course in areas such as business, engineering, science to name a few. Colleges in education look after the training of teachers they have two programmes a Bachelors of Education Degree and a Post Graduate Diploma (Department of Education and Science, 2004).

Irish Education also offers further Adult education which encompasses many courses from Post Leaving Certificate programmes, Adult literacy to Community Education. The key element to further education and adult education is its diverseness in provision (Department of Education and Science, 2004).

### Terminology in area of special needs

SEN refers to special educational needs and means when a child needs extra support or help in learning. The term as Fredrickson & Cline (2002, p.340) points out is a legal term to describe if a person is eligible for special educational support and services. Special needs is not a legal term and can be confused with SEN in the school context. A special need describes those who are from a different background from the majority of students in the school. It can cause confusion in this context because not all special needs students need special educational support. Many different types of disabilities can be included in SEN (Fredrickson & Cline, 2002).

As discussed by Woods (2006) over the years these terms have progressed from terms such as handicap and mentally handicap to special needs and learning disability. These changes were influence from labelling theory as some theorist felt these labels were vulnerable to the attachment of stereotypes. Woods (2006) argues that these changes in definitions can have both positive and negative implications. A positive meaning can bring about changes in attitudes and empower people with disabilities and their families and give understanding to people, but negatively it can imply that the disability is gone or lessened and therefore render support and services (Woods,2006)

## Special Needs Education

The issues of special needs education (SNE) provision is not as easily translated as the provision of mainstream education. In the past there has been disregard for those with special needs education and thus have been largely excluded from the education system (Macionis & Plumber, 2002, p.497). While individual rights to education is set out clearly in the constitution, the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) has pointed out “Ireland has a conspicuous lack of legislation governing much of education but particularly covering education provision for students with special needs”(A chance to learn booklet introduction,2005,unpaginated)

The 1990s saw changes in legislation taking place in the area around SNE. The famous case of O’Donoghue (1993) were the parents of a child with SEN ( special educational needs) had to go to court to fight the state to provide the right kind of education for their child. This case resulted in the government legislating the right for every special needs child to have access to the provision of special education.

Legislation such as the Education Act of 1998 and the Equal Status Act 2000 are examples of the legislation introduced by the state to provide provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities (A chance to learn booklet introduction, 2005,unpaginated). The Education Act of 1998 which was drafted by the minister for Education and Science, clearly states the duty of provision of the state in education, including a person with a disability or who have special educational needs to provide “support services at a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person” (Department of Education and Science, 2004, p.27).

The Special Education Needs Act 2004 (ESPEN) was a powerful piece of legislation that gave parents the ability to seek provision it requires, by law that schools have in place a

distinct programme for pupils with SEN. The emphasis within this legislation is on including the parents in this process and that they could be actively involved in the educational plan for the child. Furthermore, it gives parents the right to appeal if a child is refused access to a school. This act is seen as an effort by the government to empower and involve parents thus giving them the right to make decisions in the process of education (Griffin & Shelvin, 2007, p.227).

All legislation provides a framework for provision and inclusion for children with or without special education needs.

### Provision for SEN

A brief introduction to SNE in Ireland consists of both schools that cater for children with SEN and mainstream schools with additional support. In the mainstream setting in both primary and secondary school, SNE is provided by the mainstream teacher and of additional support. This additional support entails learning support by a resource teacher. The hours a child spends with a resource teacher is varied and depends on the child's needs and is dependent on the resource capacity of the school. This provision of the resources teacher is available in schools that cater solely for SEN and in mainstream clothes. Those schools which cater for children with SEN look after pupils with mild to severe/profound learning disabilities and for emotionally disturbed pupils, as well as a range of physical disabilities. The prevalence of special needs children was reported by the Department of Education and Science in 2003-2004 to have a total of 6,621 pupils were attending 108 special schools for pupils with disabilities (European Agency for development for special needs education, 2009).

The challenges or obstacles facing parents are reduced provisions in relation to prevalence, problematic access to special education and not reduced availability of teachers and resource

hours. A new curriculum needs to be developed to include all types of learning abilities (A chance to learn booklet introduction, 2005, unpaginated).

### Models of approach

There are two main approaches when it comes to children who have a learning disability.,the medical model and social model. The medical model involves viewing learning disability as a person's personal tragedy. People with learning disability from this perspective are seen as having some kind of deficit. The emphasis is on treatment and cure. The social model stresses the lack of inclusion and difficulty in society that create barriers for people with a learning disability. This model focuses on the idea that society, because it creates these obstacles for people with learning difficulties, must subsequently provide support and services.

This social model has prompted change in attitudes and empowered families and people with learning disabilities. (Health Policy and Practice in Ireland, 2006). Cole (2008) would suggest that a parent who adapts either a social or medical model will affect how they perceive mainstream school.

### Areas of Concern

Five main areas of concern from parents have emerged from the current literature. These are: The first part involves the difficulties of accessing mainstream education for children with SEN. The second area is around inclusion such as the inclusive learning model not being adopted and evidence of the withdrawal method of students with behavioural difficulties. This has also been prominent in the existing literature (Shevlin,2008).

The next issue is the quality of parent and school relationship, the partnership between the school and the parent.

The fourth issue is evaluation process. The fifth issue is the job of special needs assistants and their role in supporting children in mainstream school (Logan, 2006).

### Access

Shelvin et al (2008) noted that access to schools is problematic in the area of special needs, for example parents having to travel to schools that are not in their communities. The reasons provided for these occurrences are a lack of resources and attitudes to SNE in certain schools. Watson (2005) argues that if a child's SEN is associated with behavioural problems, gaining access becomes more problematic, Watson (2005, p.20) states that schools make generalizations on certain types SEN.

In relation to schools favouring physical disabilities over intellectual disabilities, there are some findings to suggest this and this is evidenced in the need for structural arrangements, however Shelvin et al (2008) found that some physical disabilities need more than structural arrangements and that space continued to be an issue also.

Parents felt that access and acceptance was always conditional: dependant on the goodwill of the principal, teachers and other parents (Shelvin, Walsh, Kenny, McNeela and Molloy, 2003, p.6). Watson (2009) argues that some principals did not follow the guidelines set out in the Education Act (1998) when enrolling children with SEN in their schools. Watson (2009, p.4) quotes that many principal "cherry picked" when it came to choosing what type of SEN they wanted.

The main explanations given for denial of access were noted by Watson (2005,p.20), special needs are not catered for, quota reached or no places available, a lack of limited personal transport /accessibility and particular programme not available. Schools must have sufficient amount of hours [each child when assessed by education psychologist is allocated a certain number of hours] (Department of Education and Science, Circular, 24/03) to justify of

learning support and resource hours, a quota must be reached by the school in order to allocate resource hours to acquire funding by the Department of Education and Science. Each learning support teacher is employed based on a minimum of hours (Department of Education and Science, 0034/2007). If the quota is reached access for new students can be problematic. In Watsons (2005p.20) a total of 54% of the participants had problems with access.

Although legislation has stated that all children have the right to education, this includes children with special needs, this is not evident in all schools. The Discrimination Act 2003 states that schools and education institutions must apply a fair enrolment policy (National Disability Authority n.d). However schools argue that they do not have resources and therefore cannot cater for children with SNE.

### Inclusion

The issue of inclusion of children with special educational needs was also concurrent in the existing literature. The Warnock report (1978) outlines that the government had to address the need to improve law and policy on SNE. O'Connor (2007) points out that there has been a significant amount of time and effort spent on the legal process of inclusion but not so much on the efficiency (O'Connor, 2007).

The deciding factor for many parents to send their children to special school or mainstream was inclusion. Shevlin et al (2003) in a study of parents of children with Down syndrome found that mainstream school offered social skills that could not be gained from special schools. Parents felt that given these skills offered their child had more opportunities in life as a consequence.

Shevlin et al (2008) report that inclusive learning in Ireland was very poor and argues that inclusive learning is only possible when teachers and schools have the skills to include this model. It was noted that teachers lacked skills in this area. Issues arise when a child with

behavioural problems is taken out of the class as these compounds the problems of alienation and does not promote inclusion. In this study parents noted that teachers have negative attitudes to inclusive learning and class size was highlighted as a barrier. Teachers and professionals favouring the withdrawal method of children with SNE does not promote inclusion. A dual approach to special education is proposed by the author.

Whitaker (2007) suggests that even though positive inclusion of children with SNE was seen as a problem it is especially problematic when it came to making friends in the school yard. A total 70 % of parents reported that their SNE children had issues around inclusion with their peers (Whitaker, 2007,p.175).

Furthermore noted in Whitaker (2007) the main top priority for parents in school was their childrens development of social skills, the school understanding the child's issues, how the school manages their child's behaviour and how happy the child is in school not how well educational they were doing, demonstrating that mainstreaming children with SEN is more about inclusion rather than learning.

### Parent and school relationship

The ESPEN 2004 act emphasised the inclusion of parents in the process of SNE of their child. The perception is that parents and schools work together for the child's benefit, and this is vitally important when a child has a special educational need.

The ESPEN Act 2004 outlines as follow: (Education for Persons with Special educational needs Act 2004)

### **3.3 Preparation of education plan by school (including steps preliminary to such preparation).**

*Having taken such measures, if the student continues not to benefit, because of their SEN, the principal will arrange for the student to be assessed. The principal must consult the parents prior to making this arrangement.*

*The participation of parents should be facilitated by, 'as appropriate', the health board, Council or principal. A statement of the findings of the assessment is to be made available immediately to the parents.*

Shevlin et al (2008) found that getting the correct provision from the school was a constant battle, it found schools did not value proactive parents. It noted that working with parents and not seeing them as a threat would be a better approach. On the other hand Shevlin et al (2008, p.148) found that schools had to 'coax parents along' when they were not accepting their child's difficulties. Griffin & Shelvin (2007, p.235) argues that many parents feel that the school's first responses to their worries about the child's needs are conflicting. Parents that show concern for their child are viewed as overbearing and overprotected. A proportion of guardians felt that when a child with SEN presents behavioural problems prior to diagnosis that the consensus of the school is that parents lack parenting skills, and are to blame for the difficulties the children present within school. A sense of relief is felt by the parents when the child is diagnosed with a condition that explains the behaviour. This relief means now that help and support can be offered and professionals will take parents worries seriously (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

Cole (2008) noted attitudes of principals and teachers and their perception of inclusion in mainstream was less progressive than legislation, it found that from the participants surveyed a total of 98% of principals felt there was a continued role for special schools and only 8% felt that less children should attend special school, meaning 92% felt more children should attend special school. Expressed was conflicting attitudes of what legislation points out and what actually goes on in school (Cole, 2008).

### Evaluation process

The current literature suggests that parents also feel detached from the evaluation process of the educational psychologists, which is a core part of diagnosing which may influence the outcome provision for that child with SEN. Many parents feel that they have to agree with the professional opinion otherwise it may impinge negatively on the consequential allocated

provision. Griffin & Shelvin (2007, p.236) noted that the majority of parents request to be part of the process but find that it takes place without them. As a consequence parents are left confused about the process. Reasons given for confusion include the use of academic language in the reports (Griffin & Shevlin,2007,p.227-236). A study by Watson (2009) found similar issues, parents in this study experienced alienation from the evaluation process and felt unsupported, however those that did receive good support were ones that got private assessments. It argues that parents need schools to promote positive partnerships. Schools also illustrated the need for more support for parents in the understanding of the child's needs in areas of education (Shevlin et al, 2008, p.147-148).

These concerns are not unique to parents in the republic of Ireland, parents in Northern Ireland face similar problems. In a study by O'Connor, McConkey and Hartop (2005) parents recommended that language in reports should be comprehensible and clear-cut. Furthermore for professionals to be more aware of parents feelings in the process. Suggested was a system that is design for both professionals and parents (O'Connor et al 2005,p.67-266). Hess, Molina and Kozleski (2006) suggest that inclusive partnership between parents and school is vital and one that is not isolated to Europe. Hess et al (2006) states that's little attention is paid to families in the process of SNE. Legislation provides a framework for provision however from the review of the literature many obstacles still prevail.

In contradiction positive research has emerged from Northamptonshire, where a survey (Whitaker ,2007) found that 80% of the participants were satisfied with the parent school relationship. A total of 4 out of 5 parents' in this study felt that the schools kept them well informed with any issues and problems that transpired .This study illustrates how school and

parent partnership is achievable in mainstream schools and the outcomes of parents satisfaction (Whitaker 2007, p.175).

### Special Needs Assistants

Because of the increase model of inclusion set out by the legislation bodies this has led to the increase deployment of special needs assistants (SNA) in Ireland and elsewhere. The information received from the Organisation for Economic and Cooperation and Development (OECD) outlined that SNA provide much value and support to children with SEN. This enacted the special education review committee to proposed seven principals to guide special needs provision “except where there is individual circumstances make this impractical, appropriate education for all children with special education needs should be provided in ordinary schools”(logan,2006,p.92). It also noted that with SNA’s students with SEN would not integrate into mainstream schools. Another important piece of legislation that influence the role of SNA was the Education Act 1998, it outlined the provision for SNA to help students reach their full potential. All this led to the employment of a huge number of SNAs. Their role is to support a child’s physical or care needs. Logan (2006) argues that this restricted role is questioned. Logan (2006) notes that other countries have a more educational role for SNA’s, and supports this role with attitudes of schools in her study. In Shevlin et al (2008) he notes that teachers saw SNA’s as very helpful in supporting a child with SEN. On the other hand SNA’s felt that their role was one that was confusing and the job they did was not the job description and that schools seemed to “make it up as they go along” Shevlin et al (2008, p.147). The SNA’s response to the role of just meeting the care needs was limited and viewed their roles as more educational in nature. Jerwood (1999, p.127) also supports the view that SNA’s are limited in their roles and thus are a “wasted resource”

Shevlin et al (2008) suggests a more educational role that supports the teacher and child is preferred and training to facilitate this model was propose.

## Conclusion

Conclusively the literature review focused on perceptions of parents with special needs children and their experiences of mainstream school system. It outlined the education system in Ireland for both mainstream and special education provision. The five main areas of interest that emerged was access, inclusion, parent school relationship, evaluation process and special needs assistance, each area was discussed in detail and support by current literature. These areas of interest have prompted this research study to examine the experience of parents with children with special education needs and their attitudes of the mainstream school system in Ireland.

## **Method**

The aim of this current research project is to examine the experiences of parents with special needs children in mainstream school.

### *Apparatus:*

For this research only one piece of apparatus was needed and that was a Dictaphone.

(Sony clear voice plus). A number of tapes were used for each interview to be recorded and used to transcribe. The software used was Nivio 7.

### *Participants:*

The total number of participants that were used in the study was 5.

Four of the participants were obtained from a request posted on parenting web sites, [www.rollercoaster.ie](http://www.rollercoaster.ie) and [www.magicmum.com](http://www.magicmum.com), asking for parents of children with special educational needs to partake in a research study for the purpose of a thesis. One participant was obtained through word of mouth. The participants were all unintentionally female, mothers of children with special educational needs. These needs varied and included two parents with children with Downs syndrome, one with a child with a spinal cord injury who is supported by a wheelchair, one with suspected Aspergers and one with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD) and Dyslexia. They all reside in the Dublin region.

### *Ethic consideration:*

All aspects of the research that was conducted were cleared by the Dublin Business School Arts department ethics committee prior to conducting the research. It was explained to every participant that no names and places would be mentioned in the study that would identify them. Furthermore prior to interviews each participant was informed that they did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage before it was submitted in April.

### Design:

The research carried out using qualitative methods, and adopting thematic analysis. This was the most effective method to create the richness of the information the researcher found and bring the best results (Boyatzis, p.5, 1998). The interviews that were conducted were semi-structured which allowed for the participants to give their experience, questions were asked only as a guide. A basic set of 26 questions with 3 main areas were followed which allowed the ideas related to special educational needs in mainstream to be explored.

### Procedure:

The interviews were carried out on a one to one basis in a location that suited the participant this was mainly the participant's home. Before the interview was conducted each participant was briefed on the study and why the study was being done. Only a minimum of information was divulged as not to sway participant to answer in a particular way on the interview. The flow of the interview was very dependent on the way that the interviewee wanted to answer in regards to their experience of mainstream school and their child with special educational needs. Questions were asked in relation to the narrative told. The questions (see appendix) which were constructed were asked if the participant did not cover the area in their interview. At the end of the interview the participants were asked if they had any questions in relation to the research study. Some issues did arise with the tape recording equipment (the Dictaphone) where by it broke and in this case recording took place on my mobile phone where the interviewee disclosed they were happy with this and transferred to the Dictaphone at a later stage when it was replaced. This did not impair the interview in any way.

# Results

## Qualitative Data Analysis Background

The researcher was interested in examining the perceptions of parents with special needs children and their experiences of mainstream school system. The interviewed focused on parents with special needs children in exploring their experiences of access, their relationship with the school and inclusion of their children in mainstream school.

## School

From the data analysis and coding a number of themes were found .The first main theme which emerged was THE school, and parent's perceptions of school. It found that perceptions varied and one common sub-theme of perceptions of schools was that the attitudes of principals of children with special needs, their attitudes had a huge effect on the provision for special needs children. The second sub-theme was pushing and parents noted that they had to push to get resources for their children. The third and last sub-theme that emerged from the theme school is the difference in provision for children with physical disabilities and intellectual disabilities.

## School - Principal attitudes:

Some participants found that the whole attitude of teachers and resource teachers were affected by the attitudes of the principal.

*On one occasion when a meeting with psychiatrist and behavioural therapist with the teachers in the school, we weren't to be brought up but we went up anyway and they were still having the meeting when the principal came in and said "we've had enough talk now,*

*the meeting over”, so.. Well he wasn’t in on the meeting but he just decided oh you have wasted enough of my teacher’s time.*

This principal attitude of children with special needs had a huge impact on the strain of parents.

*So I mean we were brought up for nothing like after the meeting my husband spotted the resource teacher in the corridor and he went up to talk him to see if he could but it seemed like they were all under the control of the.*

~

*Whatever their personal views were they had to dance to the principal’s tune (pause) you know it was very difficult at times for both my husband (long pause) we even ended up n medication result of it.*

Other parents felt that decisions about attending certain schools were based on the principal’s attitudes and one participant felt that because she knew the system being a teacher in special needs that this was a advantage to knowing her rights and entitlements and felt lucky she has this knowledge, but at the same time felt sorry for those who don’t.

*There’s parents out there that are not half as informed as me, ten percent as I am like you know and I’m lucky like that. One man in our local school has his children there and he knows the scène like. What the principal is like and management and he told them he has a little girl with down’s syndrome coming up for school and I said “how did you get on” and he said “to summarise they’re better off with their own”*

### School - Pushing

There was also a sense of having to push in order to receive the resources a child with special needs requires.

*Yeah I have to push the occupational therapist came in and advise me to get a bean bag for his hand because he kept getting down and fidget (pause) also mala for his grip, there was no problem getting these things but I felt I had to push for them.*

There was an attitude if you don't ask you don't get and once asked then the schools response in some participants is more than helpful. However it was noted that if the parents involved themselves too much the school response was to put a wall up. Only a certain level of involvement is accepted from parents. School and parent boundaries were blurred somewhat.

*So, we might be able to manage for Sean but at least there is a certain level of pro-activeness. But you do have to push .They have been very helpful and very supportive and then in other things they have been well the shutters come down when I was trying to do other things.*

### School -Physical versus Intellectual

There was a overall feeling from parents that the schools response to special needs children seemed to vary depending a the needs of the child, as noted in the literature review, parents of children with physical disabilities were very much accommodated, but it seemed to differ with children with intellectual disabilities. A parent with a child with physical disabilities notes her experience.

*They were very helpful; to accommodate his stander they could have refused and left him in his wheelchair and that would mean he cannot stretch (pause), they were very helpful in that. Also the principal got involved in his care needs and the SNA which had years of experiences said "I have never seen a principal walk into a toilet to take care of a child's care needs before"*

Parents of children who have intellectual disabilities were very much aware of the support for psychical and the support for intellectual. Again it comes down to the school perception of children with special needs.

*I am not being bad but in my school if you have a physical disability you get all the resources as in adjusted furniture, chairs and desks, they can't do enough but when it come to intellectual disorders you have to fight tooth and nail to get resources*

#### Special school versus mainstream school

Overall parents felt that the benefits of mainstream far outweigh the benefits of special school. They believed that special school was an easier option but mainstream was the only way their child would progress socially and educationally.

*And I Just think it will keeper her sharper and push her along a little bit(pause) okay the choice is the special school where you get your bus from your door very morning, you get dinner every day in school .It's a whole, you know, you don't have to provide for anything. You just go there and it's a much easier option.*

The perceptions of other people views in any way did not seem to sway parents in sending their child to special school. Parents felt they knew their Childs abilities well enough to know how mainstream the best option was.

*Yeah. Like there is an awful lot of my friends were saying, "Would you not send him to a special school?" I just thought he is good at his maths and his English so I keep saying if he goes to a special school he will go backwards*

### Access

The second theme that emerged was access and this had a number of sub-themes. These included the element of choice a parent has in accessing schools. The next sub-theme was a sense of 'pot luck' when it came to accessing a school. Following came the issues of physical disability and the area that it is easier to access schools if a child has a physical disability. The last sub-theme of access was the allocation of SNAs and accessing a school, parents found that if a child was not allocated hours for a SNA then access was a factor in getting a child enrolled in a school or not.

### Access – Choice

The second theme that emerged was access and again the variation of perceptions was very much based on the child's needs. The mother of the children with Down's syndrome found it the most difficult to access schools and choice was not optional.

*We have his name down for one school (pause) a special school it is huge and out of our area but he would get all the resources there. My hope is mainstream(pause) they are cutting resources, SNAs and stuff then that might not be a possibility. If you were to ask me my*

*utopia I would send him to mainstream with a special class but those type of schools are near impossible to get into.*

There was a limited number of places available in schools with the best facilities to cater for children with Down's syndrome, especially schools with special units attached to them.

*Well they aren't many schools with units attached in our area .It's a huge area and has had a population explosion in recent years and very few places in the ones that are over here. I mean it would be a handy option but we are not going to get in.*

#### Access –Pot luck

The parents with children with intellectual disabilities found that accessing schools of their choice was a mixture of luck and pleading your case.

*So it's the luck of the schools you know(laugh). What I am saying is that it's our local school and naturally our son is part of this community and we felt that the local national school should be able to accommodate him.*

One parent felt that you had to plead your case to get the school of choice and fight. Access to school was not possible if parents are not willing to fight.

*I was deferred initially to another school but you have to fight .Flog it more like(laugh) They have the exact same stuff in the local school as they had in the other one and my daughter was in that one so it made no sense to go to another school.*

### Access – Physical disability

The parent of the child with a physical disability had no issues with access. Physical access is a concern when a child has a wheelchair; structural adjustments have to be made. The reaction the parent in this case received was no issues at all, they felt they were very accommodating. The school in particular that this child attends was an old school and would not have had the structural adjustments that modern schools have.

*Now the school took him on and they never had any issues (pause) they have been really really good about that ,they never said no.*

~

*When the NRH finally went out to assess the school, they could not believe what the school had done. They said “if only all schools were this proactive as this school”(laugh) they had a bench put in toilet and ramps put in.*

### Access and SNAs

The results showed a common theme amongst all the participants and that was the vital need for SNAs in schools. Provision for SNA was not always a certainty, and accessing schools can be based on the allocation of a SNA.

*So that’s the big thing for us .So you’re looking for okay what fault can we find, we needs faults, we needs problems, you know ,to get an SNA because if you don’t get one you don’t get in.*

## SNA

The next theme that became known was SNA. It included a number of sub-themes which are SNA and the sense felt by parents that they had to fight to get an SNA for their child. The final sub-theme of SNA is the feelings expressed by parents that SNA are a vital resource one which is the core element of success of mainstreaming for children with SEN.

## SNA and Fighting

The result show that fighting for a SNA was something that one had to endured in order to access this resource. One parent in particular noted that her son was quite and because he was not disrupting the class in any way he was forgotten. He struggled to understand what the teacher was saying. A SNA help would be the only way this parent could see her child progress and had to fight very hard to get one in order to facilitate communication for her child.

*If a child is causing disruption they say “well we will get an SNA for this child” but if your child is not causing any disruption then you have to fight harder to get one, and I had to fight hard for that.*

## SNA a vital resource

From all the participants it was noted that that SNA were very important part of life in mainstream school. Having a SNA was paramount; parents felt that securing the provision for a SNA meant their child getting the best support in order for them to progress in mainstream school to the best of their ability.

*Yeah well she as attentive from a distance at times which suited us as well but she wouldn't have got on well without the SNA.*

A parent of a child with Down syndrome noted that they could secure an SNA in playschool because she was not toilet trained but that this would not be issues when she goes to school, and it will be harder. She expressed how helpful this SNA was in many issues such as communication and integration for her child.

*But like her speech, she (the SNA) always stayed beside her because she can't talk to them. Like you know there from talking to her like that it's very limited, the SNA even did a course in Lámh(pause) it has been great for her to communicate with her and through her to the other kids.*

#### Assessment process – public private

The results showed some worries from parents in the area of special education assessment. Parents felt that not enough resources was out in to the assessment process and waiting times meant they had to go private in order for them to get the correct provision.

*They have a quota every year and they decide who they're going to assess and like I mean we were in the position to pay but I mean four reports at five hundred a go is a bit much.*

#### Assessment process-Not good enough

The results show also that parents with children with Down syndrome don't get enough provision because of the reports in the assessment. The general feeling from one parent was.

*Okay her IQ is obviously not 90 which would be in the average range so my take is that other children with down syndrome as well is we're not worth bothering with, we're not worth giving hours to because we're too thick.*

### Curriculum

There were some concerns about the curriculum in particular with first class onwards; parents felt that after this stage things would get harder for their child. These parents do not expect their children to be top of the class and most were happy if they achieve half of what they are thought. Participating in mainstream with their peers and being involved in the community was the most important aspect for them.

*Yeah well the curriculum takes off in first class an its gets much harder and you know its more difficult for them to learn ,timetables we'll say in maths ,you know .I don't care if she does not learn 100% but if she learns 10% I'll be happy.*

~

*I know he is not going to be a genius but I want him to learn the skills his brother and sisters learn in school and be part of the community.*

Parents were very aware of their child limitations and felt were they were lacking in one area they made up in another.

*He is top of his class in English and Maths but it's the writing that s the problem, most children with this condition go on to secondary school and use a computer to do tests.*

There was some concern about behaviour and curriculum and that when they child did not understand the curriculum that they got board and misbehaved.

*Science was another problem .He just couldn't get it rather than admit that he wasn't able to do it he would be disruptive. If they spent more time explaining maybe he would have got it.*

### Fighting

The major theme that emerge from all participants even the parents of children who had not entered into the school system yet, was the constant element of pushing, fighting, enquiring and pleading their child's case to people involved in the school system. Sending a child with special educational needs to mainstream school was not an easy or straight forward task.

*Oh I could cry .the whole thing about going to school.*

~

*You know sometimes, it's a huge strain.*

~

*And I haven't got a difficult child in that she is a good little thing and she hasn't got any behavioural difficulties or that but I was just so annoyed to have to go out and fight with that department of education.*

~

*I'd been at a conference for ADAH and the children's ombudsman representative was there and he was saying that she gets a lot of complains about schools and how they treat ADAH children.*

## **Discussion**

### Aim of research

The current research study aim was to investigate the perception of parents with special needs children and their experiences of mainstream. The research focused on certain areas of mainstream school that emerged from the literature review in current research studies. These areas are the issues of parent school relation and how parents perceived this relationship. The next aspect was access and what parents experience was of accessing mainstream school. Another element of investigation was inclusion and how parents experienced inclusion of their children in mainstream school. Furthermore the area of special needs assistants was an important focal point; it looked at how parents felt about special needs assistants and what their experience was dealing with them.

### Summary of results

From the analysis of the raw data the results exposed some main elements of parent's experiences. The first themes that emerged was THE school and this had a number of sub-themes attached, they included the principal attitudes, pushing, physical versus intellectual and special versus mainstream school. The next theme that became known was access and the sub -themes associated with this are choice, pot luck and physical disabilities. Another important theme was SNA and the sub-themes belonging to this group were access, fighting and vital resource.

Subsequently the theme that came out of the results was assessment process; it included sub-themes of public private and not good enough. The theme curriculum and theme fighting also materialize from the results.

## Findings

### School

The first theme school, involves what parent's general experience of school was. The data reveal four aspects of school, the first sub-theme is principal attitudes, the findings indicated that parent's negative or positive experience of mainstream school depended very much on the attitude of the principal and how principals perceived children with special needs. Cole (2008) study suggested also that attitudes of principals and teachers were not as progressive as legislation when it came to the inclusion of special needs children, this was the case in this study as one parent stressed there experience when dealing with attitudes of other parents approaching the schools. She found a negative attitude of inclusion of children who had SEN. Another finding expressed was the principal's lack of interest in special needs education.

One participant felt that because the principal had no interest in special needs children, he did whatever he could to make life very unpleasant for the child when parents were looking for resources he was not willing to cooperate in getting these resources. In Cole (2008) study many parents felt strongly about the attitudes that it led them to seek official action.

The other sub-theme of the school was pushing; this theme arose in many areas but particularly in gaining resources from the schools. Participants revealed the attitude of "you don't ask you don't get", parents felt that when they asked the school for anything the school generally reacted with support and willingness. However it was noted that parents felt that there was a line and schools accepted advice and suggestions to a limited and if that line was crossed a stand off reaction was experienced. This would be in line with current research,

Shevlin et al (2008) argues that schools overall do not embrace pro-active parents and see them as a nuisance.

The area of physical disabilities versus intellectual disabilities again was a overarching theme that emerged, in particular parents experiences of school was different if they had a child with a physical disabilities than those with intellectual disabilities. The parent of a child with a physical disabilities found the school very accommodating in regards to adding extra adjustments or equipment needed for her child. Those parents of children with intellectual disabilities were very aware of this dualism in reacting to requests when it came to accommodating their child. This may be a limitation of the study as only one participant had a child with physical disabilities so to make an overall judgement of all parents experience would be generalizing. However Shevlin et al (2008) found that schools were more open in response to enrolling pupils of physical disabilities, this would indicate that they view physical disabilities different than intellectually.

When it comes to accessing a school parents generally want the best school within close distance for their child. It is a decision that acquires a lot of thought and even more so for parents who have children with special educational needs. All the parents in the study felt very strongly that their child would benefit far more in mainstream than in special school even though special school offered much more resources. Parents highly valued their child socializing with their peers and being part of the community. This in concurrent in the research in the area of inclusion, Shevlin et al (2003) points out that parents with children with Down's Syndrome feel that the skills offered by mainstream cannot be accessed in special school.

## Access

In the section that discussed access there were three main aspects that were found, these were choice, pot luck and physical disabilities. On the aspects of choice, parents of children with Down's syndrome found it harder to access school than other parents in the study. Parents with children with Down syndrome preferred school was mainstream school with a special unit attached; however these places were few and far between. Griffin and Shevlin (2007) found that parents with children with behavioural difficulties had the most problems with access, this is not the case in this study, and it was parents with children with Down's syndrome that had the most problems with access. Shevlin et al (2003) found that most children with Down's syndrome attend special schools and it is only down to parents campaigning and lobbying for change to inclusive model of schooling that has allowed for more to participate in mainstream schools, but access in this area is a problem.

The whole issue of pot luck as one participant expressed was another theme of access, when it came to accessing a school of choice the principal attitudes of special needs was a factor. Again the divide between physical and intellectual came up in this area, the parent with the child of a physical disability found no problems at all with access. The conception that indeed schools favour physical disabilities was found in this study, Shevlin et al (2008) notes that this is down to the idea that only structural arrangements are only needed, this was the case for this parent. Not all physical disabilities are as straightforward and Shevlin et al (2008) argues that space can be a problem and other elements of physical disability may need more resources. The researcher would suggest that funding for structural adjustments may be easier to obtain than resources needed for intellectual disabilities.

This brings us to the allocation of hours for resource teachers and SNAs, these resources can be the deciding factor for children with SEN accessing schools. The results of this study found this to be the case. Watson (2005) findings suggest that the problem of accessing schools are down to the allocation of these vital resources for children with SEN and schools cannot meet the needs of these children without such resources. The allocation of these resources is assessed by educational psychologist and the Department of Education and Science, so the decisions lie here and not with the school. If they cannot get into the school without SNAs and resource hours then there is a huge discrepancy here between legislation and reality. The Discrimination Act 2003 outlines a fair enrolment policy that is not being experienced by the parents in this study (National Disability Authority, n.d).

The majority of the participants apart from the parent with a child with a physical disability had problems accessing schools of their choice. This would be in line with current research findings as Watson (2009) suggests in her study 54% had issues with access.

### Special Needs Assistants

The next theme SNA showed results that parents in this study found it hard to access SNA support from the school if their child had no behavioural problem. They sense that by schools only push for one when the behaviour of the child is disruptive. If a child is in need of a SNA but does not have behavioural issues then they had to fight and push because it was not causing a problem for the teacher. On the other hand if they have behavioural problems then the school pushes for one. All parents involved in this study could not speak highly enough about SNA and their vital resource to child with SEN. Logan (2006) suggests that without SNA integration of children with SEN into mainstream was not possible. This is expressed by the parents in this study they feel that it is paramount in integration.

Jerwood (1999,p.127) suggests that they are a “wasted resource” and taking a educational as well and care approach would be beneficially, parents in this study would support such a suggestion.

### Assessment

In the theme assessment it had two sub-themes, private versus public and not good enough. The theme public versus private illustrated the need for parents to go private because of the long waiting list for public appointments with educational psychologist. The area of waiting for assessment was felt by participants along with the need to pay high amounts to go private. Watson (2009) notes that those who did get private assessments felt very happy with the support they received. However waiting list in all the public sector is apparent, this is just another area that waiting times occur, finding the answer to this question lies deep beneath the public service as a whole.

The other sub-theme of the assessment process was not good enough, the feelings expressed by parents of children with Down syndrome, they felt that it was a complex process and what they felt there child needed and what the authorities in the process thought they needed was conflicting and lacked empathy. Shevlin et al (2008) found this also to be the case in his study and felt that the jargon contained in the reports caused confusion. This was not the case in this study as both parents showed immense knowledge and understanding of the jargon contained in the reports.They did feel what they felt was needed in regard to resources was not inline with what reports expressed. This left them feeling frustrated and let down by the system. Conor et al (2005) suggests that assessment should be designed with parent’s requests in mind.

## Curriculum

The theme of curriculum in regards to inclusion and learning needs was found in both the current research and in this study. Some parents in this study were very aware of their child's limited educational abilities and that mainstreaming their child was more about inclusion than academic achievement. Parents were very aware of their child's limits with regard to learning abilities. Whitaker (2007) suggests that parents top priority was inclusion and integration with their peers and not curriculum understanding. It was expressed by parents in the study that lack of curriculum understanding did lead to children misbehaving and this was seen by parents as being down to the lack of skills and resources.

## Fighting

The last theme in the results was fighting and this theme was apparent among all the themes. The constant pushing, fighting and cajoling to get resources and provision for their children resulted in an immense strain for parents. It is a theme that was present in all the themes and sub-themes of the results. Parents felt intimidated by the whole process and in many cases lead to depression and stress at home.

However the strong sense of wiliness to fight and challenge the authorities in these areas was immensely strong among all the participants, they felt their child had the right to education just like children who do not have special needs. They felt that if the various powers that be could not provide provision and resources, than they would fight as much as possible until they exhausted all the routes to get provision.

## Discussion of Theoretical Implications

The results from a theoretical approach show that many parents' experiences of the mainstream school system want their children to be educated through a social perspective. They endeavor to change attitudes and remove as many barriers in order for their child to succeed in mainstream school. In contrast, the school attitudes appear from the parental feedback to support a medical approach to special needs children and is demonstrated in the schools' hesitation in enrolling children with special education needs, especially in the case of children with Down syndrome. Woods (2006) suggest that challenging attitudes and challenging labeling has helped in minimizing negative individual perspectives towards people with learning difficulties however with respect to principals this does not seem to be the case. When it comes to SNA the medical model is indeed the approach schools take. In pathologising these difficulties we assume the position that the individual are disabled rather than enabled. If special needs assistants were to be trained with their core knowledge being social perspective then more emphasis would be placed on challenging the attitudes and thus increasing the chances of the individuals playing a bigger more acknowledged role in society. Choosing to persist with assuming a medicalised attitude towards special needs is evidenced in Jerwood (1999) who also stipulates that when the SNA is present it is a wasted resource.

## Conclusions / Suggestions for further research

This discussion section focused on the main themes that emerged from the raw data analyzed. The themes school, access, SNA, assessment, curriculum and fighting and their sub-themes emerged from the data. These themes were discussed in brief and the researcher will now indicate where further research could benefit in some of these areas.

Taken into account special educational needs is a vast area one with many variables. The opinion that one size fits all is not a statement that fits well in this area; however the school system from this study reflects a very poor attitude in their approach to the broad diversity of SEN. The different experiences of parents with regard to schools varied and although the themes were common among all participants the nature of the results in this section was down to the special educational need of each child. Making the school experience more appealing and positive for parents as suggested by O'Connor et al (2005) is to reflect the child's needs as seen by the parents and school like; this would also be in line with the ESPEN Act 2004 overall consensus.

With regard to the theme access and its sub-themes more research in areas of collaborative relations between the deciding bodies and parents are a suggestion by the researcher. A model of mainstreaming and inclusive learning cannot be adopted if parents are put off by the first hurdle, access. Furthermore the fair enrollment policy set out by the Discrimination Act (2003) is useless if the Department of Education and Science cannot give vital resources to schools so they can apply a fair enrolment policy.

Watson (2005) gave lack of resources as the main issues with regard to denial of access for children with SNE.

The theme SNA was seen by parents as key to mainstreaming their child. If utilized correctly SNA can provide children with SEN with a better future in mainstream. The researcher would suggest more studies in areas of training and compulsory allocation in classes with one or more children with SEN, to benefit all in children in the class. In the case of children with Down syndrome parents expressed the lack of SNA because care needs were lacking but communicative issues were apparent, this indicates that having a SNA trained in integration methods and training in communication techniques such as lámh as suggest by a parent, would be a welcome idea. (What is Lámh? Lámh is a manual sign system used by children

and adults with intellectual disability and communication needs in Ireland) (Lámh,2008). This is in line with the view of Shevlin et al (2008) he suggest this model would support teacher and child alike.

Though more research is needed in certain areas as pointed out, more attention should be paid to the current research, it would benefit authorises to provide for provision according to need as set out in the current research. Further research is needed but in more specific areas of SEN such as Down's Syndrome and the best way to mainstream children with Down syndrome, specifically in areas of access and SNA allocation.

More research is required as one of the most difficult challenges that faced the author during the study was accessing up to date information on the chosen subject. Although it was a distinct challenge the author used this positively to explore her own feelings and thoughts on the subject while this was then supported by the participants own experiences.

Having specific insights into the various compromises experienced by children with special needs might also prove a valuable exercise. The author explored the area of research where the participants were the users of the provision themselves and this area of research is even more depleted than research which focused on the parents. Social inclusion cannot be brought about if the service users themselves (children with special needs) are not consulted about their own experiences of their own education experience. It is difficult to comprehend that the authorities may be utilising the conditions set for them such as resource limits to disguise prejudices and thus resulting in children with special needs acquiring less education than there 'able bodied counterparts'. Combining both the users and the users carers experience may bring about a cohesive and personalised result where consistency in the schools response

would prevent any future experiences of such disguised discrimination or potential perceptions of discriminative behaviours.

Ultimately it is the wish of the author to continue to challenge the barriers faced by both parents and the children because it is in doing this that we bring about more acceptable attitudes which are fair and inclusive of all.

### Limitations

The study included some limits. The first apparent limitations was participant's children had various SEN; this gave a broad outcome of experiences. A study focusing on one particular SEN would have given more insight to experiences of particular SEN. Even though the overall experiences of parents gave good results, their experiences were very much in relation to the type of SNE the child had as noted by parents with children with Down syndrome.

This study included parents of children and their experiences of mainstream school however only one parent had a child in secondary and expressed her experiences of both secondary and primary school. A bigger sample to include both parents of primary school children and secondary and a two phase structure as Shevlin et al (2003) used may have produced different results of experiences of mainstream school system.

Furthermore because of the limitation of time and word limit a bigger sample size that included both qualitative analyses and quantitative would have brought about the rich quality of data analysis but also the usefulness of statistical analysis.

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## **Appendix**

- 1) Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your family?
- 2) Can you tell me a brief history of your child's condition – special education need?
- 3) How / when was your child diagnosed?

### **Access**

- 4) What was your experience of enrolling your child in school?
- 5) Was this your first school of choice? > If No > how many other schools did you apply to?
- 6) Why did you choose this school?
- 7) Is it in your area? > If no> why not?
- 8) What do you think of their enrolment policy?

### **School – parent relationship**

- 9) What assessment (Educational psychologist, ect ) process did your child have if any? Did you feel involved in this process? If yes how if no why? > Did you understand the report sent back from any assessment? Yes / no why
- 10) Did you and the school teacher or principal do a individual educational plan (IEP) If yes, how did you find this was in your experience? If no, do you think it would have benefited if this was done?
- 11) Does your child have any behavioural issues? Related to his /her condition? If so what are they?
- 12) How does it affect his learning and how do the school support this?
- 13) Are there plans/ supports in place in regard to this?
- 14) How does the school handle your child's behaviour?
- 15) Are you comfortable with the way they handle their behaviour?
- 16) Do you receive support for there behaviour if disruptive?
- 17) What other supports could be provided by the school?
- 18) What effect does this support or lack of support have on your child?

- 19) Does the school involve you fully in your child's education?
- 20) Would you offer any advice /support to the school? And if so what has your experience of this been?
- 21) What's your relationship with the school like?

### **Inclusion**

- 22) How involved is your child in his class?

Prompts:

- >Class
- >Friends
- >Yard time

### **Extra questions**

- 23) With regard to resource hours, is there enough allocated to your child?
- 24) Would you say qualified teachers have the ability to teach SNE ?
- 25) What do you think of a new curriculum to suit all types of learning abilities?
- 26) Have you any question you would like to ask me?

### **Transcription symbols**

Natural pause (pause)

Pause that is longer than three second (long pause)

Laughing (laugh)

Word could not be heard on tape during transcription (missing word)

Word(s) not in Italics =voice filled with emotion/warbling voice

Word(s) underlined = Raised voice