

Special Needs Education

The Investigation of the perceptions and experiences of primary school teachers and SNA's who teach children with special needs in mainstream primary schools.

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Table of contents

Table of Contents	1-3
Acknowledgements	4
Abstract	5
Chapter 1 :Introduction	6
Special needs education in Ireland	7-9
Terminology in the area of special needs	9
Legislation in relation to special needs	10-11
Comparing special schools and mainstream schools	11-12
The role of the SNA	12-14
Inclusion and Integration	14-15
Teacher's attitude to inclusion	15-16
Parent's perspectives to provision	16-17
Conclusion	17
Chapter 2: Methodology	18
Introduction	18
Participants	19
Research design	19-20
Ethical considerations	20-22

Procedure	22-23
Chapter 3: Results	24
Qualitative data analysis background	24
Special needs assistants	24
Special needs assistants-role	24-25
Special needs assistant- reliance	25-26
Special needs assistants –feelings	26
Training in the area of special needs	26-27
Special school versus mainstream school	27-28
Integration	28-29
Parental involvement	29-30
Conflict between adults	30
Chapter 4: Discussion	31
Aim of Research	31
Findings	31
Special needs assistants	31-33
Training in the area of special needs education	33-34
Special school versus mainstream school	34-35
Integration process	36-37

Parental involvement	37-38
Conflict between adults	38-39
Summary of results	39-40
Conclusion	41-42
Limitations	42-43
Recommendations	43
References	44-49
Appendix	50-58
Appendix 1	50-51
Appendix 2	52-53
Appendix 3	54-55
Appendix 4	56-58

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Abstract

In this investigation the aim was to assess what the perceptions and experiences are of SNA's and primary school teachers who teach children with special needs in mainstream primary schools. In order to conduct this study qualitative research methods were used, and the Study adopted thematic analysis. The researcher conducted this study by using a small sample of 8 participants, through semi- structured interviews.

The results found the perceptions of teachers and SNA's were generally quite encouraging, overall they believed that children with special needs should attend mainstream school, but this did not come without its challenges.. It was felt that children received a more rounded education in mainstream schools. The integration process was seen as positive but very case specific. It was also found that parental involvement is important for the child, parent and teacher. The results also suggest there is a severe lack of training in the area of special needs education for both teachers and SNA's .The findings established that the role of the SNA in the mainstream class significantly differed from the role set out by the Department of Education and should be reviewed.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The way we think about special education and how special education should be delivered in our schools has changed in Ireland (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). The aim of this research study is to investigate what the perceptions and experiences are of SNA's and primary school teachers who teach special needs children in disadvantaged Dublin mainstream schools. Special needs Education in Ireland is a vast area to be explored and this topic is very important, as the attitudes that teachers hold concerning special needs children are tactical for good teaching practice and therefore educational results for children (Levins, et al, 2005). The key focal points of this literature review will be special needs education. This section will focus on special needs education in Ireland and the legislation that helped bring about change that took place in Ireland in relation to special needs education. The objectives of this research are as follows:

- Objective one is to search for as much existing material as possible in relation to special needs education. The purpose of this objective is to provide a background of information which will help to decide what areas or topics should be discussed in the interview to provide the best information to answer the research question.
- Objective two is to conduct eight qualitative semi-structured interviews with 8 educational professionals in primary level education, ranging in age, experience levels and teaching roles. The purpose of this objective is to retrieve a varied view of different teacher's perspectives and experiences in order to have a more holistic sample.
- The final objective is to analyse and write up the findings of the research using Nvivo 9, by the thesis submission date in April 2012.

Special Needs Education in Ireland

According to the National Council for Special (National Council for Special Education, 2011) “all children, including children with special educational needs, have a right to an education which is appropriate to their needs”. The aims of education for pupils with special educational needs are the same as the ones that apply to all children. Education should be about enabling all children, in line with their abilities, to live full and independent lives so that they can contribute to their communities, cooperate with other people and continue to learn throughout their lives. Education is about supporting children to develop in all aspects of their lives – spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical (Flood, 2010).

In order to discuss this topic further it is first necessary to define exactly what a special need is, but children with special needs are not an easy group to define, according to The Department of Education, a “Special educational need in relation to a person, refers to a restraint in the ability of the person to partake in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which causes a person to learn differently from a person without that condition” (NESC 2011).

The special needs that children may have can vary to a great extent depending on the disability. What is important to note here is that all children are children, and all children have individual strengths and weaknesses. It is therefore very important not to define a child by their special need or disability but by the holistic child. Children are more alike than they are different, all children have needs e.g. love and physical needs, and children with special needs just have some extra needs (Flood, 2010).

These needs can be classified in different categories, for example high incidence and low incidence. High Incidence needs refer to the more common special needs we see in the general public, for example dyslexia or mild general learning disabilities. Whereas low incidence special needs refer to uncommon special needs in the population, these can be rather severe and can affect a child's overall development, examples include Autism and Cerebral Palsy (Flood, 2010).

In Ireland the progression of special needs education has had three distinct phases: the era of neglect and denial, the era of special school and the era of integration (Swan, 2000). In the late 1800's in Ireland, children with special needs were not considered to be educated as their needs were seen as medical, these children tended to live in hospitals and asylums. According to Flood (2010) it wasn't until 1947 that things began to change. St. Vincents Home for the Mentally Defective Children became known as an official school by the state. Other similar schools were established, but the consensus was that special needs children should not be educated together with their peers. This was very convenient for mainstream schools, as they were not expected to deal with children with special needs (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). In the years between the 1960's and 1980's many special school's opened throughout the state to provide for children with special needs, in Ireland today there are over 107 special schools (Flood, 2010).

Then according to Flood (2010) in the mid 1980's the view began to change globally there was a call for integration of children with special needs into mainstream schools. It was at this time that Irish policy began to react and implement changes, teacher training now was to include special education programmes, and special education classes began to emerge in mainstream schools (Flood, 2010).

This initial first integration step has now stretched to further to include special needs children being educated within mainstream classes alongside their peers with the help of Special Needs Assistants (SNA's) and extra resource time from teachers outside the classroom. In 2010 in Ireland over 20,000 pupils with special needs attended public Mainstream primary schools (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2010).

Terminology in the area of Special Needs Education

The term "special needs" was not always used to describe people with special needs, the terms previously used tended to be quite negative, for example people with disabilities were often referred to as being idiot's, imbecile's or spastics. Although this is true at the time they were not negative as they were seen as socially acceptable terms. The term used today is 'special educational need' or SEN, this refers to whether a child needs significant extra help in educational provision compared to their peers (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

The difficulties a child can have that are deemed SEN can vary greatly, for example they can be specific to maths or language, they can be physical i.e. a hearing impairment, or complex disabilities such as autism (Assessment, 1999). It is important to note that a 'special need' is not the same as an SEN in school. The former refers to a special need any child may have and they do not have to be in relation to education, not every child with special needs will need special educational support (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

Legislation regarding Special Needs Education

Traditionally children and people with disabilities have tended to be detached from mainstream society or schools. In children and young adults case legislation often underpinned this (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007), but in recent years legislation has changed and promotes inclusion and equal access to education of all in society.

The Education Act 1998 was the first piece of legislation ever passed in Ireland that outlined the government's rights and legal obligations in relation to education (Department of Education 2011, Circular No. 0006/2011). This Act recognises that children with special needs have the right to partake entirely in school life and they are entitled to the resources needed to do so, but this Act states that these services that children with special needs require can only be provided if there is money to do so. Flood (2010) points out that services should be made available regardless of money as in Part 2, Section 6 b of the Act the government state that they are legally required to provide people with an appropriate quality of education in relation to their needs and abilities.

The next piece of important legislation created was The Education Welfare Act 2000. This Act brought about the creation of the Education Welfare Board, which aims to promote the importance of education in children's lives. Possibly one of the most important pieces of legislation in relation to special needs education is the Education for Persons with Special Needs Act 2004 (EPSN) (Department of Education, 2011). A major focus of this Act is inclusion with regards to children in mainstream schools. It also sets out a range of services that should be provided for children such as assessments and Individual Education Plans (IEP'S) in schools. Flood (2010) notes that this was to be fully implemented in January 2009 but due to budget cuts this very important process has been delayed. In Ireland over the years government policy has moved from denial and exclusion, to segregation and at long last to

inclusion, this process is far from complete but overall the progress has been very positive for children with special needs.

This literature review will now focus and discuss the topics that were concurrent in the literature to the researcher. The following issues are the main areas that emerged, the comparisons and differences between mainstream and special schools, the role of the SNA, inclusion and integration, parents perspectives to SEN provision and teachers attitudes to inclusion and integration.

Comparing special schools and mainstream schools

Many children with special needs attend mainstream schools or special schools in Ireland and numerous children attend special classes within the mainstream school setting. Parents make these choices because it is what they deem best for their child, or in some cases it's down to lack of choice as some mainstream schools may be hesitant about enrolling children with special needs in their school, this can be down to lack of funding and resources.

Most evidence today suggests that inclusive education is preferable for best possible educational development; but the problem is that properly-resourced, high-quality inclusive education placements are not always available in Ireland. Then again as Nugent (2007,p.52) points out, the debate between the two schools often overlooks the fact that all children with special needs are not the same. Also that, although inclusive schools are good for some children, it may be more beneficial for other children to attend special schools.

In a special school staff must concentrate on the child in a holistic way, rather than on their individual disability, as this can constrict their experiences by paying attention to the tasks they find difficult instead of positively promoting confidence about what they are good at, which would most likely be done in a mainstream school (Bruce & Meggit, 2006).

Another way to compare the two is through the curriculum. In special schools it might be more focused on exercises related to the disability rather than promoting overall educational development of a child, Bruce and Meggit (2006) use the example of how hearing impaired schools school's mostly concentrated on language teaching in a very narrow form.

When children are attending a special school it may be hard to organize meetings with children from mainstream schools, this can result in children imitating characteristics from each other, resulting in double delay, not only does the child have the special need they were born with but now they also have a further drawback of being in a unfortunate environment for learning (Bruce 2006, p24).

Another contrast between the two is in relation to expertise and experience of staff. In a mainstream setting there may not be any staff who have wide-ranging knowledge of a child's special need, and even if outside expert teachers do come in to mainstream schools their visits can be infrequent, this can mean that gaining specific information in relation to how to help the child is most difficult which will have a negative impact on that individual child's education.

Role of the Special Needs Assistant (S.N.A)

The role of the S.N.A is a reoccurring theme throughout the literature. The Department of Education state the role of the SNA (Circular 07/02) is to assist in the physical care of pupils with special educational needs, and not in a teaching capacity. All duties should be non-teaching in nature and should only support the child's physical and or care needs. Information gathered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2007) illustrated that a lot of extra support was provided by Special Needs Assistants to children in inclusive settings.

Before 1993 in Ireland there were less than 300 special needs assistants, S.N.A's were formally known as Childcare Assistants at this time (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007,p.250), but then in 1993 the report of the Special Education Review Committee put forward seven principles to aid future progress of education in Ireland. This report stated that in order for children to be integrated successfully they needed Special Needs Assistants in both mainstream and special schools (Logan, 2006), and it is because of this we have about 10,000 S.N.A's in schools throughout Ireland. The provision of support for children with special needs has been highly prioritised for example expenditure on the SNA scheme has increased by 922% from 2001-2009 (Department of Education 2011, Circular No. 0006/2011). Due to the present financial situation Ireland is currently in, it has been necessary to cap the number of SNA's at 10,575 as part of the National Recovery Programme.

Special needs assistants can feel unsure of their role and as they can often feel unsure of teacher's expectations of them, and sometimes feel under used (Jerwood, 1999). It can be hard for an S.N.A to work with other adults in a classroom as some teachers may feel their autonomy is being threatened (Thomas, 1992) and as Jerwood (1999) also points out teachers may feel anxious or that their competence is under question. Teachers may not want the SNA to have a lot of influence with regards to the education of the child as some teachers may feel they are the teacher and they will teach the child, and as it is the policy of the Department of Education and Science (DES) that the class teacher has overall accountability for children's educational needs, including children with special needs (Flood, 2010, p.31). In the U.K Teaching Assistants are provided for children with special needs.

Although the role of teaching assistants in the UK is not the same as SNA's in Ireland, children do spend a lot of time with their SNA. Teaching Assistants (TAs) role varies their duties can include anything from supporting and individual child or a group of children, or supporting the class teacher. They are not required to lead lessons, but they are very involved educationally. In the case of a teacher's brief absence, TAs can take the class for a period of time (Training and Development Agency, 2012) According to Griffin and Shevlin (2007,p.251), the role of the SNA is broadening and expanding away from these traditional boundaries, SNA's are now becoming more involved in aiding the learning needs of students.

Inclusion and integration

In the past in Ireland the integration of pupils with learning difficulties into mainstream schools has been recommended by government policies (Shevlin, 2003). The terms integration and inclusion are often used interchangeably, but there are significant differences between the two (Griffin &Shevlin, 2007). Integration refers to making a limited amount of extra arrangements for SEN pupils in schools, though there is actually minimal change to the school organisation. Inclusion refers to a more radical set of changes to the educational system, which embraces all children and permits all children to partake in mainstream schooling (Frederickson, 2002).

Special needs children face many barriers to inclusion in mainstream schools, for example the lack of resources available, i.e. SNA's. Until recently these barriers had been removed to a certain extent, but now due to the recession in Ireland, many teaching and SNA positions have been cut, this has had a very negative impact on special needs children in Ireland.

Another obstacle to inclusion lies in the lack of knowledge or competence some teachers may have about special needs education. Teachers in mainstream classes generally know very little about precise learning disabilities, Autism, ADHD, or Hydrocephalus for example. As very little of their teaching practice placement is in a special school, 2 weeks in 3 years to be precise (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2001). Even though Atta (2002) indicates that in order to be a successful inclusion teacher, teachers must be equipped with general and special educational methods through in service and pre service training programmes, as the more training and experience teachers have in special needs educational training the better the chances are for success when it comes to inclusion for special needs children.

Teacher's attitudes to inclusion

Teachers attitudes to children with special needs may be one of the most crucial components of inclusive education, as according to Atta (2002), teachers attitudes not only affect what goes on in the classroom but also the instructional opinion that's chosen for children. It is therefore vital that teachers have positive attitudes towards children with special needs. A study on the subject of integration carried out by Bennet, Gash and O'Reilly (1998) stated that teacher's comments provided evidence that concern and kindness is present towards the concept of inclusion, but that some teachers feel that structure and procedures are not in place to facilitate successful inclusion.

However according to Avramidis and Norwich (2002) in a comprehensive literature review of the subject, negative teacher attitudes are extensively cited in research literature as an obstacle that children with special needs face in relation to inclusion and are mostly affected depending on the type of disability the child has.

Ring and Travers (2005) point out that teacher's perspectives from their study suggest that unanimity among teacher's concerning the needs of different methods for special needs pupils can represent an obstacle to inclusion of pupils with SEN, if mainstream teachers believe they lack the capability to educate these children. In another study carried out in Ireland, mainstream primary school teachers stated that their initial teacher training qualifications were deficient in SEN elements, and they felt that this had a striking impact on teachers' ability to provide appropriate learning environments for children with SEN and promote inclusion (National Council for Special Education, 2011).

Parents Perspectives of Provision

Generally investigations into parents overall happiness with special education services point out that they are by and large satisfied with the services their children receive. Parents commonly consider their child's happiness of paramount importance, and then educational success (Nugent, 2007). Another important issue for parents is not whether their child accesses mainstream education, but whether the school which they attend assists them to achieve their potential (Taylor, 2009). A report carried out by the National Council of Special Needs in Ireland in 1998 and published in 2010 also found that parents of SEN children were mostly satisfied with the educational provision they received.

Conclusion

This literature review has reviewed relevant reoccurring issues that materialized in relation to special needs education, from specific books, reports and journal articles which were investigated by the researcher.

The five main areas explored was, the differences between special and mainstream schools, the role of the SNA, inclusion, parents attitudes towards provision and teachers attitudes to inclusion, these were discussed and supported by the current and past literature.

The researcher's current study aims to discover teachers and SNA's perceptions and experiences of having special needs children in their mainstream classroom. There is very little Irish research on this issue. Teachers have previously discussed their attitudes towards inclusion and problems of the curriculum in Ireland, but even this has been very small scale.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

This study aims to explore what the perceptions are of primary school teachers and SNA's who teach special needs children in Dublin mainstream primary school settings. There are two main ways of carrying out social research, qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretive approach concerned with understanding the meanings that people attach to phenomena i.e., actions and beliefs within their own social world (Richie & Lewis, 2003), many of the methods in use in qualitative research attempt to capture the perceptions and understandings of the participants from the inside so as to better understand how they make sense of, act in and manage their daily work and situations. Whereas quantitative research is a way to describe phenomena by gathering numerical data which is then analysed by mathematically based methods (Gunderson, 2002), it looks past words and actions, which are important features of qualitative research. It is important to note that in actual research a mixture of styles or approaches can complement each other such as survey and case study work, using both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods (Wellington, 2007).

A Qualitative method approach was chosen for this research as it was best suited to the question. The research was conducted through open ended interviews which are outlined below. Enlisting the project participants was achieved through contacting informants and using purposive sampling. As required for any research study ethical issues will be addressed, the limitations of the study clarified and the methods of collecting and analysing data will also be outlined.

Participants

Choosing, contacting and organising candidates for data collection play a significant role in the success of the interview processes (Punch, 2005). It is crucial to ensure, that participants were selected on the basis that they themselves were relevant to the research topic and the information they provided was related to the questions being posed (Bryman 2008, p.334). In order to achieve this purposive sampling was selected. Therefore the researcher interviewed eight participants aged between twenty-five and fifty-five. This was to gain perspectives from a variety of age groups. In addition both male and female educational professionals were interviewed to obtain cross-gender accounts. These samples were chosen on the basis of their knowledge and experience on the subject of children with special needs. The informants chosen by the researcher had different roles and had different levels of teaching experience. Eight candidates were selected for individual interviews. Five of these were female and three were male, providing a good gender balance across the sample. The first four participants (three female and one male) were obtained through word of mouth in a disadvantaged Dublin primary school in which the researcher was employed. The remaining four participants (two male and two female) were also obtained by word of mouth from another disadvantaged primary school in Dublin.

Research Design

A research design refers to the framework put forward for the analysis and collection of data. Choosing a research design reflects decisions concerning the priority that's given to a variety of dimensions of the research process (Bryman, 2008, p29). For the purpose of this study a qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable. This is due to the genuine interest of the researcher in listening, speaking to and recording first-hand, SNA's and teachers lived experiences with Special needs children.

As according to Richie and Lewis (2003) qualitative research aims to present an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material situation, their perspectives, theories and experiences. This project focussed on a small sample with a view to obtaining in-depth insights into SNA's and primary school teacher's experiences, through the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Semi structured in -depth interviews give researchers the chance to examine the perspectives of the participants in detail, they are a very useful way to gather data where the perspectives heard of experience or personal history are important (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p.58). An advantage of these interviews is that the use of open-ended questions and probing allows the participants to answer in their own words instead of choosing set replies as quantitative methods do. They provide very detailed subject coverage and allow both the researcher and the participant to engage in conversation. This in turn means that the researcher can change initial questions according to the information being disclosed by participants. This can result in important and interesting areas for the researcher to explore that would not have come up using quantitative methods. One key features of the semi-structured interview is the capacity to amalgamate structure with flexibility. An additional key feature is that the interview is interactive in nature, the information collected is created through the conversation between the researcher and the interviewee. (Richie & Lewis, 2003, p.141).

Ethical Considerations

Any research study raises ethical consideration, regardless of the approach however as Richie and Lewis point out (2003,p 66) the unstructured, in-depth nature of qualitative research can raise issues that are not always expected by the researcher.

It's therefore a crucial part of this and any study to consider ethical issues. This is reiterated by Bryman (2008, p.113) as he states that 'ethical issues cannot be ignored as they relate directly to the integrity of a piece of research and of the disciplines that are involved. Conducting qualitative research requires the willingness of participants to give in-depth accounts of their life experiences. In order to do so they need to feel at ease and trust the researcher and his/her methods. The ethical issues identified by the researcher include informed consent, confidentiality and protecting both the participants and researcher from harm.

All participants in this study were informed that participation was voluntary, and were provided with details regarding the purpose of the study, the method of data collection that would be used, exactly what the participation will involve and how much time would be required, as according to Ritchie and Lewis (2003) ill-informed participants will lead to negative outcomes for the research process. For the purpose of this study consent was sought from the school principals as well as each individual teacher. Confidentiality issues were overcome by ensuring all participants that everything they say is 100% confidential and that their actual name is not required as part of the study, and if a direct quote is used from their interview a pseudo name will be used to protect their identity and preserve anonymity.

Another issue faced is protection of participants and the researcher from harm. In order to protect participants from harm the researcher must not abuse the power they hold, they must provide them with information so they will have a clear understanding of the issues the study will address before it starts. The researcher must only ask questions that are relevant and must be aware of signs of discomfort from the participants and be willing to stop the interview at any time. It can also be helpful if the researcher has some information or leaflets about organisations that can help regarding certain issues that may arise in the interviews.

An additional ethical consideration of this study lies in the fact that the researcher is an insider in the organisation they intend to collect their data from, as it is the researcher's workplace and has been for the last five years. There are both potential benefits and hazards of deep insider research, such benefits include the researcher's knowledge in relation to history, cultures, the awareness of body language and slogan systems operation within the cultural norms of the organisation. The knowledge held by the researcher also acts as an aid to validity (Edwards, 2002,p.72), as the interviewee is less likely to exaggerate behaviour or information to either impress or deceive the researcher .

Hazards related to this form of research include, overlooking the familiar, this refers to the fact that the territory, characters, body languages and understandings are familiar to the researcher. The material is so normal for the inside researcher that the obvious can escape observations. Another ethical hazard lies in exactly how much information does the researcher reveal in writing up the results, as Edwards (2002,p.78) points out that the information retrieved was privileged and based upon long resting relationships often outside the workplace.

Procedure

A week before the interviews were due to be carried out the researcher conducted a pilot interview. The outcome of this was that the initial questions that the researcher had chosen to use were too academic in nature and were not open ended enough which gave rise to a lot of yes/no answers and needed rephrasing. As a result changes were made so subsequent interviews were less official and more fluid. (Bryman, 2008).

The interviews were conducted in a location and at a time that suited the participant's. They were usually conducted in the participant's place of employment when the children went home. Beforehand each participant was asked to sign a consent form and they were briefed on the study and the main reasons behind it. The least possible amount of information was given so as not to influence the participant's answers in any way. Participants were also informed that everything they said was confidential and a pseudo nom would be used if any information they supplied was being used directly in the study.

The interview plan made out by the researcher stated that each interview would last approximately 45 minutes but most of the interviews came to a natural conclusion after 30-35 minutes, in that time a lot of rich information was gathered. Each interview began with the same question which asked the participant to talk a little bit about themselves, this was used as an ice-breaker question to make the participant more relaxed, comfortable and at ease. Also so they would see it as more of a chat rather than an interview. After the initial question the flow of the interview varied in accordance to what the participant said. Topics chosen by the researcher were covered by asking questions in relation to the narrative told.

The constructed questions (see appendix) were asked if a certain topic or issue was not covered throughout the interview. At the end of each interview each participant was asked if they had any questions in relation to the research.

Chapter 3: Results

Qualitative data analysis background

The researcher was interested in discovering exactly what the perceptions of primary school teachers and SNA's are in relation to having special needs children in mainstream primary classes. Each interview focused on teachers and SNA's who had different roles throughout the school and different levels of experience working with special needs children. The interviews explored their experiences and perceptions in areas such as daily challenges within the class and the integration process for special needs children in mainstream education. During the analysis six themes were identified, which will be discussed below.

Special needs assistants

From the data that was analysed and coded a number of themes were found. The first main theme that emerged was special needs assistants, in particular their role, workload and the reliance that some children had on them.

Special needs assistants- role

Most participants agreed that the role of the SNA was not adequately reflected in the role provided by Department of Education and skills. The Department states that the role of the SNA must be non-teaching in nature and simply just caring for the physical needs of the child. Both teachers and SNA's agreed that SNA's went above and beyond their role.

We probably do the opposite, especially in our school anyway, we do the opposite of what is laid out for us. You know we go above and beyond the call of duty in many ways(Tom, age 25, SNA)

...The Department states that the tasks should be non-teaching, so under no circumstances should you be teaching the class or teaching the child and they're all about the physical needs of the child. But sometimes the needs of the child are educational (Amanda, 26, SNA)

Some people went so far to say the role supplied by the department did not correspond at all to what their job actually entails for instance:

In my six years there I'd say I've taken a class – full class, for more than six months. Maybe even close to a year. I've been in a class for a week at a time teaching myself (Tom, 25, SNA).

It was also felt that the role was open to interpretation to some extent and that people should just do what they see fit and provide help wherever its needed for each special needs child for example

I think any adult in the classroom should be there to act in loco parentis and in the place, as a prudent parent would (Mr Brennan, 30, mainstream class teacher)

At the end of the day you're there to assist that child, to get the best out of the child and to help him reach his full potential, you know. If you were to sit there and not do anything you wouldn't be doing yourself justice, you wouldn't be – more importantly – doing the kid any justice (Tom, 25, SNA).

Special needs assistants- reliance

Some participants had issues around the fact that some children can often become too reliant on their SNA's.

I have seen other SNAs that have children that are very dependent on them, and if the SNA is out for the day or anything they find it really hard, and especially if the SNA is with them a few years, it's more of a friend thing they've going on (Carol, 42, SNA)

...Particular students can become very reliant on an SNA. Even just to be putting their homework in their bag and just organisation, like their jacket, the SNA will hang it up for them (Mr Arthur, 28, Mainstream class teacher).

Special needs assistants- feelings

This sub theme is in relation to how the special needs assistants felt about their job, Tom, Brenda and Amanda all said that they often felt a certain amount of guilt, and burnout as well as being overstretched.

when working with more than one child, sometimes you do feel guilty that you're not doing all you can for one child because you have to leave at a certain time to go to another you may feel overstretched(Amanda, 26, SNA)

Sometimes you'd be sitting down with a particular child helping them and as soon as they start to understand, it's time for you to go and you feel guilty because you can't stay (Carol, 42, SNA).

There can be a high burnout rate. It can be really full on. There was one child I worked with who was quite violent she just kicked off for the littlest things and she would kick you and punch you, everything you can think of (Brenda, 45, SNA).

Training in the area of special needs

The next theme refers to training and courses. There issues around training and lack of it was discussed, not only the training received prior to getting a job but also the lack of training and courses available to SNA's and teachers throughout the year in special needs education for instance

...Courses are very limited. I've had my name down now with Pat's Education Centre in Drumcondra for three years to go on a course and not once have I been called for (Amanda, 26, SNA).

No I didn't really receive any training as such prior to employment. It was really just hands on as such and learn as you go (Tom, 25, SNA).

It was felt that the training received was too much theory and not enough hands on practical work that actually prepared you to deal with special needs children.

...And it was kind of like you were learning off theory without having any practical basis for it in college, in Pat's (Mr Brennan, 30, Class teacher).

... A lot of the stuff didn't actually come up when you're in the class with a child and it's not actually practical for what you're doing. It didn't help you how to deal with everyday problems, or how much you should help or how much you should stand back (Carol, 42, SNA)

Special school versus mainstream school

Overall it was generally felt that attending a mainstream school was far more beneficial for a special needs child than attending a special school. It was felt that a child may receive a more holistic education by attending a mainstream school.

...they're obviously going to develop more holistically because they're getting a far more rounded education, they're integrated with fellas, as long as socially they are able to interact then they will develop holistically, far more so than in a special school setting (Mr Brennan, 30, Class teacher).

Special needs children need some sort of structure and routine and to learn social skills and just even if it's to line up, to sit at a table, they need those basic skills because Special Needs children are not like normal children that will just pick up

social skills, from being around other kids. They actually need to be taught these skills and that's, I think mainstream school facilitates that (Amanda, 26, SNA).

It was also mentioned that having special needs children in mainstream can be very challenging for the staff members involved.

Sometimes that particular child needed two adults to be there and it needed a double-focus from both of us so I would be taking away from the class. You're trying to cater for them in the actual classwork that you're doing. And you know that can be hard as you're setting work and that takes a lot of preparation and a lot of planning (Ms Reilly, 31, Home school liaison).

When you've a child with physical difficulties, taking them to the toilet takes so much longer and you have to be so careful that the rest of the class are supervised while you are with the special needs child if you are the only adult in the room (Mrs Concarr, 55, class teacher)"

Integration

The results indicated that on a whole the integration process was mostly seen a positive and beneficial process, for all the children in the class.

I think it benefits the children who have not got the same Special Needs and, they all learn from each other. They learn about diversity and they learn about tolerance and they learn about, you know, that everybody is different and that we all have different challenges (Ms Reilly, 31, Home school liaison).

Special needs pupils should be integrated as much as possible because their social skills are developed then, it increases and it boosts their self-confidence (Mr Brennan, 30, class teacher).

It was also found that although the integration process was very positive many of the educational professionals felt that it was very case specific and often depended on the particular special need a child has. It can also be very challenging for the class teacher.

... Well what I find is, children with behavioural problems that have most difficulty in integrating, because children are much more tolerant of children with academic problems or learning difficulties(Mrs Concarr, 55, class teacher)

I've been with a child that had dyspraxia and Tourette's but she's managed to deal with it now and control it and she has no problem at all integrating. I think it depends on the child and their individual needs (Amanda, 26, SNA)

The teacher has to be prepared to take on the responsibility of this child in the mainstream class because the work that they're doing with the rest of the class might be different to the work that specific child is doing so you have to be able to cater for both (Tom, 25, SNA).

Parent's involvement

The final theme that materialized was on the subject of the importance of parent's involvement in their special needs child's education. All educational professionals agreed that involvement was vital and undoubtedly had many advantages to their child, parents and staff.

It's important for parents of any child to be involved in their education but especially if the child has a special need. Because routine is a big thing with Special Needs children and by the parents knowing the routine that's in school they can continue the routine at home (Amanda, 26, SNA)

A lot of parents try to hide or to ignore the fact that their child has special needs. It's important for them to know that the child is going to have difficulties and they'll need a lot of help because they're going to need a lot of help at home as well (Mrs Concarr, 55, class teacher)

Parents can help themselves also by being involved as it can help them understand their child and in some cases come to terms with the fact their child is different.

I did have a few different experiences as well, where one of the parents was still trying to come to terms with the fact that her child had difficulties that other children didn't. She wanted her to fit in, she was telling us 'don't let her do this', don't let her be different basically. It took a lot of work to help her realise that this was her child and that she was very successful in terms of what she was doing to the most of her ability...(Ms Reilly, 31, Home School Liaison)

Conflict between adults

The fifth theme that emerged from the data was about the conflict that arose from having more than one adult in the classroom and although there was obvious benefits from having an extra pair of hands in the classroom there was also some disadvantages.

I've heard of cases of SNAs and teachers having arguments in the middle of the class because an SNA doesn't think what a teacher's doing is right or vice versa. I think that there could nearly be a power struggle between the two (Amanda, 26, SNA).

I had a good few incidents where, let's say there was maybe a conflict between the SNA and teacher, this happened due to a break-down in communications between the SNA and the teacher and you almost had kind of a power-struggle...(Mr Brennan, 30, class teacher).

Chapter 4: Discussion

Aim of research

The aim of this research study was to explore what the perceptions are of SNA's and primary school teachers who teach special needs children in a mainstream primary school setting. The research focused on particular issues that materialized from the literature review in current research studies. These issues included the debate of mainstream school versus special school and the role of a special needs assistant. Other elements of investigation within this study included the integration process into mainstream education for special needs children, the importance of parent's involvement in their child's education. The matter of training in the area of special needs education was also examined. The final topic explored was the issue of conflict caused between adults when there is more than one adult in the classroom.

Findings

Special Needs Assistants

One of the most significant themes to originate from this study is SNA's, this theme represents teachers opinions of SNA's and SNA's experiences and opinions in relation to working with special needs children in a mainstream class. The data exposed three aspects under the term SNA which were then divided into sub themes. The first sub-theme was SNA's role, the findings indicated that the educational professionals interviewed felt the approved role by the Department of Education and Skills was far from adequate. It was the general consensus that SNA's went above and beyond their role and prescribed duties. Jerwood (1999) points out that special needs assistants can feel unsure of their role and as they can often feel unsure of teacher's expectations of them, and sometimes feel under used.

The findings indicated that the role of SNA's varied greatly from school to school, this variation was down to individual principals and what they seen fit for example, Tom (25) an SNA spoke of his principal asking him to teach a class for up to a week. Amanda (26) also an SNA spoke of working in a breakfast club for the first hour of every day, feeding the children and washing and cleaning up. Even though the department has clear rules as to what an SNA can do they do leave a lot of power in principal's hands . This can be seen in Appendix 1,circular 07/02 the Department of Education states that SNA's duties are assigned by the Principal Teacher in accordance with Circular 10/76.This can lead to a lot of interpretation on principal's behalf as to what duties to assign.

Tom(25), Brenda (55), and Carol (42) all SNA's believed that the role of the SNA set out by Department of Education should be re-examined and altered to suit the already changing role of SNA's in Ireland. This is in line with findings from the literature review as Lawlor (2002) conducted research on the role of the SNA, the findings showed that the role had changed from that of a care one to a predominately educational one. Lawlor (2002) also found that 84% of SNA's from schools studied reported being involved in mainly a learning support capacity or teaching assistant role. A study conducted by O'Neill and Rose (2008) also indicates inconsistency between developing practice in schools and the role envisaged for SNAs in DES circulars.

The second sub-theme within Special Needs Assistants was reliance. SNA's interviewed revealed that they believed that in some cases a child with special needs in a mainstream class can become too reliant on their SNA. Amanda (26, SNA) expressed that this reliance can even transfer to laziness as the child gets older. As they become to see the SNA as their personal assistant instead of what they are actually there for.

This is another area where the role of the SNA causes confusion. Tom (25, SNA) and Carol (42, SNA) came up with measures to counter act this reliance, these varied from just sheer encouragement towards the child or offering rewards when they do things for themselves. Mr Brennan suggested that no SNA should spend more than two years with a child so that sense of reliance cannot be built up. Idol (2006) backs this up by stating that an SNA should not be assigned to a single student, as this can lead to overreliance and a loss of independence for the student.

The final sub-theme that emerged was SNA's feelings towards working in a mainstream class with a child. The findings from this were as follows: SNA's often feel overstretched in their job as they can often be assigned to more than one child, and can also have extra principal assigned duties to carry out. SNA's expressed a feeling of guilt as they couldn't spend as much time with each child as they would like to. The issue of a high burnout rate also was discussed, it was conveyed that some of the SNA's found their day so stressful that they ended up taking their work home with them. Brenda (55, SNA) spoke of a violent child that she one worked with, she was advised to wear shin guards to avoid the bruising she had previously received. A series of studies have documented higher levels of stress experienced by special education teachers in relation to their job responsibilities (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997).

Training in the area of special needs education

The present study confirms previous findings and contributes additional evidence that suggests that the training received in relation to special needs education was not beneficial at all, which made it very challenging to teach children with special needs in a mainstream

class. It was seen as too much theory and not enough hands on experience. Mr Brennan (30, class teacher) and Ms Reilly (31, Home school Liaison) felt that although books were a great aid they did not help you when you went into a classroom with special needs children, as only experience can help with that. This is in line with literature from the literature review as Hunter and O' Connor (2006) agree that many teachers do not have adequate training and put this lack of knowledge down to inadequate guidance and training for teachers and SNA's, and long waits times when trying to access specialist support to provide the knowledge needed.

Not only was the issue of lack of training in college expressed but also a lack of on-going training from the Department of Education and Skills. Even when courses were run there was huge numbers of people applying to limited courses. Even when teachers/SNA received places on these courses they were not always very relevant. Interviewees discussed how they had to research a lot of issues and special needs they came across themselves, they also felt that they had very little support from the Department of Education .Shevlin et al. (2008, p.146) report that teachers seek information from parents, other teachers and the internet and they argue that "the short courses and in-service days which teachers and some classroom assistants are currently offered, are inadequate". Teachers also expressed that they often felt a lack of confidence due to the fact they lacked training. In the Irish framework, O'Donnell (2009) provides proof that a majority of 244 newly qualified mainstream teachers surveyed did not feel that they have the knowledge and competencies required to include special needs children in their classrooms.

Special school versus mainstream school

The findings from this theme were pretty unanimous. It was agreed that the mainstream school option was a much better choice for children with special needs, which coincided with the literature review.

Teachers felt that attending mainstream school ultimately provided special needs children with a more holistic education, as they could interact socially with their peers. It provided them access to the whole curriculum, instead of just certain parts that were adapted for special schools.

As discussed in the literature review Bruce and Meggit (2006) point out in a mainstream school a child with special needs will be given the chance to access all areas of the curriculum alongside their peers, which will greatly help their socialization skills and open their minds to activities knowledge, and skills they may not have been able to access in a special school. Ms Reilly (31) had the view that not only did it benefit the child with special needs but also the whole class as it's a two way process, we are all different and this diversity can be learned in the class.

Although teachers felt that special needs children attending mainstream school was the best choice, they noted that it did not come without its challenges. Teachers felt that from their experience a child with special needs in a mainstream class often needed a lot of extra attention from the teacher, and often more than one adult so in many cases an SNA would not be enough. Teachers voiced that this often took away from their teaching time with the rest of the class. They also mentioned the extra work that had to be prepared for a special needs child, to make their day run as smoothly as possible and ensure that the child is being adequately catered for educational wise. Teachers in mainstream schools must use different techniques and strategies to differentiate the curriculum for special needs children, by modifying lessons, changing the layout of the classroom and using additional resources (National Council for Special Education, 2011).

Integration process

The findings in relation to the integration of special need children into mainstream classes suggested that by and large most educational professionals interviewed agreed that the integration process generally had a very positive and beneficial effect on most special needs children. Teachers believed that when a special needs child is integrated successfully their social skills are developed and this increases and boosts their self-confidence. Nonetheless it was felt that the integration process was very case specific, in accordance to the particular special need each individual child has, and can be challenging for both the child and teacher. Ring (2005) noted in his study that all teachers described the dilemma they faced daily to try and meet individual needs of special needs children within their class and help them integrate into the class, with large adult to child ratio's and in some cases even multi grade classes. Mrs Concarr (55, Class teacher) and Amanda (26, SNA) explained that the type of need the child has will determine how well the integration process will work for them. Many students with special needs have cognitive, sensory and social difficulties which hinder the processes necessary for social interaction. Teachers stated that a child's social skills played a huge role in the integration process, as without good social skills there is risk of loneliness. Carol (42) an SNA described the child she works with who has Asperger's as a "loner" as she has poor social skills and finds it hard to mix with others in her class and make real friends. This can be backed up by evidence that students with particular special needs and/or disabilities and/or characteristics are more at risk of social isolation than others. For example, children with intellectual disabilities often risk being isolated and rejected by peers (Siperstein and Leffert, 1997; Matheson et al. 2007; Mand, 2007; O'Keeffe, 2009). This was an issue teachers worried about as the quality of social inclusion in mainstream classes special needs children encounter in their school years.

As it can act as the basis for their social relationships they have in later life, as exclusion by peers and lack of friendship leads to loneliness, unhappiness and rejection (Chappell, 1994; McVilly, Stancliffe, Paramenter and Burton-Smith, 2006).

Mr Brennan (30, class teacher) spoke of a technique he used to overcome some of the issues with the integration process where special needs students are not integrated into a mainstream class but children from a mainstream class come to the special class and interact socially with special needs children.

So we use reverse integration, I couldn't speak highly enough about it, it worked very well and it's something we're still implementing in the school now. It doesn't have to be necessarily age-specific, there's no reason they couldn't be integrated into a room where they feel more academically at home. I tried as much as possible to integrate my fellas into specific classes where they would be able to relate to the other fellas on a level, and be on an even keel with the other lads as much as possible

Parental Involvement

The theme of parental involvement was an unexpected theme, and was not covered in the literature review. The findings from this theme were quite striking, in that the importance of parental involvement was seen as critical and very valuable by all interviewees. It was also seen as necessary to aid the process of a child with special needs settling into a mainstream class.

Both teachers and SNA's felt that by parents being involved it could make their child's life easier in school and at home. It was felt that if a parent is involved they can find out what their child is doing in school and continue to support and reinforce this at home, this can have a major influence on the child's achievement.

Mr Brennan (30) stated that not only does parental involvement help the child but it also can help the teacher, as after all the parent is the primary care giver, they know their child inside out and may be able to help teachers overcome issues or problems they encounter with the child. As many special needs children cannot easily communicate a problem they may be having, a parent can step in and help the teacher. Mrs Concarr (55, class teacher) revealed that she feels parental involvement can be very beneficial for parents too as it can be very hard for some parents to accept that their child has special needs and they may need a lot of extra help at home as well as in school. Such involvement is beneficial to parents as it builds on their knowledge of child development and helps to support them in their parenting skills (Barnados, 2006, p.5).

Conflict between adults

This was a very interesting and unanticipated theme that arose from the data. This theme emerged from the opinions of teachers and SNA's in relation to working together in the mainstream class, and the issues that may arise between the class teacher and the SNA that is assigned to a child with special needs in the room. It was generally agreed there were many advantages to having an extra pair of hands at times such as art, P.E, going to the toilet, group work within the class ect..., but the findings show that teachers and SNA's both shared the view that there can be disadvantages also. Mr Brennan (30, class teacher) and Ms Reilly (31, Home School Liaison) felt that this conflict can be down to a lack of communication between the SNA and teacher, which can lead to a lot tension. Amanda (26, SNA) felt that this could arise when an SNA is uncertain of what exactly the teacher wants them to do within the class, should they just help one child or all within the class. Jerwood's (1998) study also found that special needs assistants can feel unsure of their role and as they can often feel unsure of teacher's expectations of them, and sometimes feel under used.

Teachers may not want the SNA to have a lot of influence with regards to the education of the child as some teachers may feel they are the teacher and they will teach the child, as it is the policy of the Department of Education and Science (DES) that the class teacher has overall accountability for children's educational needs, including children with special needs (Flood, 2010, p.31).

It was the experience of those interviewed that this conflict can often lead to a power struggle between the two adults as one may think they know better than the other and may be very vocal about this, Jerwood (1998) believes a reason for this could be the fact that teachers may feel anxious or that their competence/ teaching abilities in under question and being scrutinised by the SNA.

Summary of results

When the raw data was analysed using Nvivo 9 a number of themes became evident from the interviews. These themes provided the researcher with the answers to what exactly were teacher's issues and perception and of special needs children attending mainstream primary school. The first theme that emerged was in relation to Special Needs Assistants (SNA), this initial theme had a number of sub themes attached, which included the role of the SNA, the issue of children becoming reliant on their SNA and finally SNA's feelings towards their job in general.

The next theme that materialized was training in the area of special needs education, this referred to the lack of training most interviewees received in the area of special needs education, prior to being employed and throughout their working career. Special school versus mainstream school was the next theme that arose from the data.

Integration was an important theme that derived from the results, as it gave a good insight to teacher's opinions and experiences in relation to the integration process. The fifth theme that was established from the data was on the subject of the conflict that arose from having more than one adult in the classroom, the final theme that emerged examined the importance of parent's involvement in teacher's opinions in the education of special needs children.

Conclusion

The current findings enhance our knowledge of teacher's and SNA's perceptions and experiences of having children with special needs in mainstream classes. Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to state that teachers and SNA's ultimately feel that mainstream school is the best place for the majority of children with special needs although this can be case specific it was felt on a whole that mainstream provided a much more holistic education than a special school could, as children had access to all areas of the curriculum and the chance to socialise with their peers which would not always be possible in special schools which coincided with the existing literature. It was also indicated that in general the integration process was seen as valuable to all those involved, as it teaches children about how diverse society is from an early age and that everyone is different and its ok to be different. The idea of reverse integration was addressed by one teacher, which was a very interesting way of helping children with special needs integrate. Teachers and SNA's discussed the challenges they face when a child with special needs is in their class, these challenges often left teachers and SNA's feeling stressed, guilty, overstretched and burnt out. Teachers and SNA's pointed out that lack of training they received in relation to special needs education in both college and employment could be a possible reason for a lot of these challenges they face which concurred with the literature review. The DES role set out for the SNA does not relate to the actual work they carry out on a daily basis, the role of the SNA is changing within schools to ensure that children are getting the help they actually need, not just physical care need anymore, which corresponds with Griffin and Shevlin's (2007) observation in the literature review.

Parental involvement was perceived to act as a vital role in a child's education, not only for the child in question but also for the staff involved with that child and the parent them self.

Through this involvement teachers spoke of how parents could support their child's learning through reinforcement just from being aware of how they are getting on and what they are doing on a daily or weekly basis. Teachers felt that good communication between both parents and staff was a necessary component to ensure a child with special needs wellbeing and happiness. It was suggested that poor communication can lead to conflict between adults within the class as they may not be on the same wave length about what's best for the child and this can lead to tension and ultimately a power struggle amongst the adults involved.

Limitations

This project was limited in a number of ways, gathering data was restricted to a small sample due to constraints on time and resources. Sarantakos (2005) highlighted that by researching with small samples, data obtained does not necessarily prove anything nor can it necessarily contribute to social policy. Another limitation lay in the fact that due to the small sample restraint only primary school educational staff opinions and experiences were examined, a bigger sample to include secondary school staff may have produced different results.

The current study only examined those who were employed in disadvantage schools in Dublin. This may have been a limitation as the staffs that work in these schools would have some different issues to deal with, that staff in non- disadvantaged primary schools may not have, which could have affected the answers and the topics that emerged from the results.

Another possible constraint was that the researcher interviewed members of their own staff, this may have affected the answers they gave and how honest they were throughout the interview, and this could have led to some data not being true that was collected.

The final restriction from the researchers point of view was the limitation of time, word limit and restriction in choosing the research method, a larger sample size that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative analyses would have brought about the helpfulness of statistical analysis as well as the rich quality of data analysis, as Richie and Lewis (2003, p. 38) suggest that both of these approaches offer a distinguishing kind of evidence and when combined they can be a powerful resource.

Recommendations

The current findings add to a growing body of literature on the subject of special needs education, this research has thrown up many areas in need for further investigation. The role of the SNA should be reviewed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), and made more realistic. It should give SNA's more leeway to help the children educationally and not only physically, it should be broadened to meet all needs of the child.

Considerably more work will need to be done to determine why there is such lack of training in special needs education. This area is vital as if teachers and SNA's don't possess the necessary skills and expertise to help children with special needs, who will be able to help these children. It is also recommended that the DES provide more on-going training for SNA's and teachers throughout their career and also during college.

Additional research might also explore the idea of reverse integration that was touched on in this study. The possible advantages of this type of integration could be examined, this study was so small scale that it did not have the ability to do this.

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Appendix 1Consent form

I am seeking participation for a research study as part on my undergraduate thesis. I am currently studying in Dublin Business School. The aim of this study is to investigate what teachers perceptions are of having special needs children in mainstream primary schools. If you decide to participate in my research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview. A dictaphone will be used to record the interviews. Participation in this study will require approximately 40 minutes of your time.

The results of this project will in no way reveal the respondent's identity. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers including audio tapes from the Dictaphone will be destroyed. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Amanda Brazil

Dublin Business School

amandabrazil05@yahoo.co.uk

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be (*video/audio*) taped during my interview. _____ (initials

Name of Participant (Printed)

Name of Participant (Signed)

Date

Name of Researcher (Signed)

Date

Appendix 2

Principal letter of consent



I am seeking participation for a research study as part on my undergraduate thesis. I am currently studying in Dublin Business School. The aim of this study is to investigate what teachers perceptions are of having special needs children in mainstream primary schools. If you decide to let your staff participate in my research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. This study consists of an interview. A dictaphone will be used to record the interviews. Participation in this study will require approximately 45 minutes of time outside school hours.

The results of this project will in no way reveal the respondent's or schools identity. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers including audio tapes from the Dictaphone will be destroyed. Your staff participation is entirely voluntary. They are free to choose not to participate. Should they choose to participate, they can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Amanda Brazil

Dublin Business School

amandabrazil05@yahoo.co.uk

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me in this study. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

Name of Principal (Printed)

_____ _____
Name of Principal (Signed) Date

_____ _____
Name of Researcher (Signed) Date

Appendix 3

Interview Questions SNA's

Training/experience

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and how you came to have a career in education? Prompt: length of service
2. How adequate was the training you received in the area of special needs during your time in college?
3. Does the department of education and skills (DES) provide on-going training to Special needs assistants in the area of special education?
4. Can you tell me about some types of special needs you have encountered during your time in this profession?

Integration

1. Special needs children integrating into mainstream schools can be challenging for the child, can you shed some light on the subject from your experience?
2. How involved is the special needs child you work with in his or her class? prompts:
< class <friends <yard time

Education/resources

1. Tell me about the resources available for special needs children from the Department of Education and your school?
2. In your experience can a special needs child become too reliant on their special needs assistant?
3. Statistics show your job often has a high burnout rate? Can you shed some light on this?
4. Are you assigned to one child or more than one? In the case of more than one do you ever feel overstretched or feel you cannot spend an adequate amount of time with each child?
5. Do you receive support if it's needed in your work place?

Parent/teacher relationships/ staff relationships

1. Is it important for parents of special needs children to be heavily involved in their children's education in a mainstream setting?
2. What is your relationship like with the parents of the special needs child/children you deal with?
3. Working in a classroom with another adult certainly has its advantages but what if any disadvantages could it also have?

Budget cuts

- 1) What are your feelings about the proposed educational cuts to DEIS schools outlined by the government?
- 2) What will be the implications of such cuts to the children with special needs you work with?

Role of the SNA

1. Your role set out by the department of education is very clear, do you feel this role adequately sums up a SNA's role?
2. Is there any ways which your role differs from the one set out by the Department of Education?
3. Would you like to change the department's version in any way? Prompt: Would you add anything to it?

Have you any questions you would like to ask me?

Appendix 4

Interview Questions Teacher's

Training/experience

5. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and how you came to have a career in education?
Prompt: length of service, different class levels/ages
6. How adequate was the training you received in the area of special needs during your time in college?
7. Does the department of education and skills (DES) provide on-going training to teachers in the area of special education?
8. Can you tell me about some types of special needs you have encountered during your time in this profession?

Integration

9. Special needs children integrating into mainstream schools can be challenging for the child, can you shed some light on the subject from your experience? Prompt: how does it affect your class on a daily basis .i.e. time management
10. How involved is a special needs child in his or her class? prompts: < class <friends <yard time

Education/resources

11. In regards to special needs children in mainstream schools do they get a more holistic education (being with their peers and learning everyday social skills as well as the access to all areas of the curriculum)?
12. Tell me about the resources available for special needs children from the Department of Education and your school, and do you get the support you need?
13. Can a special needs child become too reliant on their special needs assistant?
14. With some special needs children being sent to special schools and others to mainstream schools, depending on the severity of the disability. The decision mainly stands with the parents. As an educator where do you stand on this subject in regards to mainstream vs. special school?

Parent/teacher relationships/ staff relationships

15. Is it important for parents of special needs children to be heavily involved in their children's education in a mainstream setting and why?
16. What is your relationship like with the parents of the special needs child/children you deal with?
17. Working in a classroom with another adult certainly has its advantages but what if any disadvantages could it also have?

Assessment/ curriculum

18. The assessment procedure has fallen under scrutiny from parents and teachers in the past, could you highlight why, if and where any changes could be made in the assessment procedure?
19. Is the curriculum set out by the DES for mainstream schools suited to children with special needs?
20. What would you see as the advantage/disadvantage of a new curriculum to suit all types of learning abilities?

Budget cuts

- 3) What are your feelings about the proposed educational cuts to DEIS schools outlined by the government?
- 4) What will be the implications of such cuts to the children with special needs?
- 5) Have you any questions you would like to ask me?

