

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUSIVE MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

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Jessica Martin

B.A. Honours in Psychology

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUSIVE MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

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## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUSIVE MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

**Abstract**

The focus of this research was to examine whether children with special educational needs benefit from inclusion in mainstream education. The three aims of this study were to examine teachers' perspectives of inclusive mainstream education, how inclusive education affects the social development of students with SEN and how children with SEN develop academically in the mainstream classroom. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews of five female qualified secondary school teachers. Using thematic qualitative measures, interviews and were transcribed, coded and analysed according to the six-phase data approach (Braun & Clark, 2006). This study generated four main themes (*Differentiation, Similar needs, Teachers' views, Social development and Academic development*). These themes reflected the research aims. Themes indicated that the students with special educational needs do not develop academically in par with their peers. Socially, students with SEN are accepted by their peers. However, they do not have reciprocal friendships. Students with SEN mainly have friendships with other students with similar needs. Teachers perspectives of inclusive education was mainly negative as they saw it as, "good in theory but not in practice". Teachers felt they did not have adequate facilities or support to maintain inclusive education to an adequate standard. Future studies should use a Longitudinal design which would create a deeper capacity to examine the academic and social development of individuals with SEN over a longer period and allow for a more thorough investigation of the impact of inclusive education on students with SEN.

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Dedication

To my family

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who participated in my thesis, my supervisor Dr. April Hargreaves and my family for the support they have given me throughout the past year.

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## **Introduction**

In the past it was common practice to refer students with special educational needs (SEN) to special schools for full-time education (Pijl et al., 1997; Bickenbach, Chatterji, Badley, & Üstün, 1999). However, Tomlinson (1982) found that children who were sent to special schools were then stigmatised during their time within the educational system and into the future. The Warnock report (1978) indicated that categorising an individual depending on their mental or physical disabilities does not indicate the type of education that child needs. This report did not encourage inclusive education, but it did contribute to initiating an agenda that led to inclusive education policies as an international human right. This led to a change in international educational legislation.

In recent years inclusion into mainstream schools and classrooms has been a major policy initiative designed to improve the educational opportunities of children with special educational needs and disabilities. The support for inclusion is mainly advocated by parents, schools and policy makers (Cooc,2019; McLeskey, 2019; Irish educational act of 2004 section 2). The drive for inclusion is mainly based on two foundations; first that the children have a right to inclusion within mainstream schools and secondly that inclusive education is more effective. The term 'inclusive education' refers to schools having a large diversity of students, including those with SEN and providing differentiated education for them (Pijl, & Frissen, 2009). Special educational needs refer to children with developmental difficulties that impact their learning, emotional, social and communication development (Lindsay,2007). Within the European Union 53% of students with a diagnosis of special needs are taught in a general classroom with their peers without disabilities (Ntinias et al, 2006; Ramberg, Lenart, &Watkins,2017). In the United States two thirds of students receiving special education spend



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most of their school day in general classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This increase in students with SEN in the mainstream classroom has led to increasing challenges for teachers (Ekins & Grimes, 2009; Hodkinson, 2009; Barton & Armstrong, 2007). There are mixed results as to whether inclusive education is beneficial for individuals with SEN regarding academic and social development.

The attainment of appropriate social skills is considered crucial for a person's social development and personal well-being. This consideration is far more important in the area of inclusive education, where the development of social skills in children with SEN has been associated with academic progress, social inclusion and successful transition into adulthood (Vlachou, Stavroussi, & Didaskalou, 2016). Inclusion gives children with SEN the opportunity to develop appropriate social skills and to engage in social relationships with peers in their area (Vaughn, elbaum & schumm, 1996). Baker, Wang and Walberg (1995) studied the effect sizes from three meta analyses. The effect sizes demonstrated a small-to-moderate beneficial effect of inclusive education on social outcomes of special-needs children. Social outcomes were measured by self, peer, teacher, and observer ratings of special-needs students' success in relating with others in the classroom. The average effect size ranged from 0.08 to 0.44 which indicates that special-needs students educated in regular classes do better socially than compared with students in non-inclusive settings. However, this effect size is not large. A longitudinal study that examined the development of students with severe learning difficulties in an inclusive educational setting, in comparison to a segregated education, found that students in the inclusive setting progressed in terms of social development, as opposed to the segregated group, which regressed over time (Cole & Meyer, 1991). When focusing on social factors, addressing friendship, loneliness, self-perceptions and social skills, of all children either educated in an inclusive classroom or in a special educational room only, results showed that a comparison of each factor favoured the more inclusive approach. However, the overall

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levels of social and emotional functioning were lower than children without special educational needs within the class (Wiener & Tardiff, 2004). Other studies have indicated that inclusion within the classroom can cause a negative effect on children with SEN. Monchy, Pijl and Zandberg (2004) found that children aged between nine and twelve with behaviour problems in an inclusive classroom produced negative findings when looking at inclusion. Children with SEN were socially included less than their peers without special educational needs. Pavri and Monda-Amaya (2000, 2001) also found this correlation when studying 20 to 30 children with SEN. Their results indicated that although children with educational needs felt part of a social network, many felt loneliness at school. In Pijl and Hamstra (2005) Norwegian qualitative study focusing on social/emotional functioning, pupil behaviour and the quality of education, independent inspectors were invited to study the files of 24 pupils and evaluate their development and education. They reported that seven of 24 pupils (29%) in a full inclusive model of education demonstrated social-emotional development that was judged as 'worrying' by the independent inspectors, although the teachers and parents showed a more positive view. Myklebust (2002) examined the academic success of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms. Though this study saw a higher success rate of inclusive learning, there was a higher dropout rate from the inclusive classroom and back into special education. This study suggested that this dropout rate could be due to social isolation.

Baker, Wang and Walberg (1995) found that special-needs students educated in regular classes do better academically in inclusive settings. This study compared the reading and mathematical performance of 71 primary school students with learning difficulties, educated in a mainstream classroom, compared to a control group of 73 students with learning difficulties who received resource room learning only. Their results indicate that students with learning difficulties educated in the inclusive classroom showed significantly greater gains in reading than the control group. However, no difference was found between the two groups

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mathematical progress (Waldon & McLeskey, 1998). In a similar study Banerji and Daily (1995) used both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the effects of inclusive education on academic progress. Academic performance in reading and writing was collected over a period of three months. The results suggested that the reading and writing performance of the 13 students with learning difficulties was similar to that of their peers without such difficulties. Lipsky and Gartner (1996) also noted positive academic outcomes for students with special educational needs and no adverse outcomes for their typically developing classmates. More recent studies have also found positive outcomes for inclusive classroom learning (Cawley, Hayden, Cade, & Baker-Kroczyński, 2002). Ruijs, and Peetsma, (2009) longitudinal Norwegian study took place over five years, comprising 700 students with mild SEN. The study indicated that students with SEN in mainstream classes achieved higher grades than their peers in a special school. Their academic outcome was measured by their achievement of state exams. The study revealed that mainstream SEN students were more likely to achieve state exams at some level than SEN students in special schools. A longitudinal study over four years examined the development of matched pairs of primary schooled children in mainstream education and special school. The data gathered included standardised tests in language and maths, teachers' assessment of psychosocial development, teachers' reports of the extent of support given to children with SEN and qualitative semi-structured interviews with students and teachers. The SEN group were shown to have mild behavioural benefits after four years and had made greater gains in academic progress than their matched peers in special education. The study was interested in examining the factors which led to this improvement. One possibility was the way the lesson was delivered by teachers. On the other hand, studies have also shown that inclusive education is not advantageous for academic outcomes. Zigmond et al (1995) indicated that in several studies, children with SEN did not develop in the area of reading compared with their peers in special education. Since most of these studies examined

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a wide range of disabilities, there was a small effect size (0.2) associated with mainstream education compared with special education. However, when examined closer, the type of disability was a significant factor. Pupils with higher cognitive functioning disabilities benefited the most academically in an inclusive environment. Students with behavioral or emotional disorders showed better outcomes in special education (Mills, Cole, Jenkins & Dale, 1998; Carlberg & Kavale, 1980). Fewell and Oelwein (1990) demonstrated that students with Down Syndrome progressed better in terms of expressive language when educated in a special education environment rather than in an inclusive classroom setting. Verdier and Ek (2018) studied 6 Swedish students with autism and blindness in mainstream classes. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews with students, parents and teachers, the themes gathered from interviewing teachers indicated that students had a lack of motivation and which made it difficult to achieve academic progress, Due to their lack of experience with students living with autism and blindness, the teachers did not know how to evaluate their academic achievement. They stated that if they compared them with the rest of the class without SEN they lagged behind. Overall the teachers felt they did not have the adequate skills to bring about an increase in academic development.

The success of inclusion within the classroom is highly related to the attitudes of the teachers (Hayes & Gunn, 1988; Hastings & Oakford, 2003). A meta analyses that investigated teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education found that 65% of teachers agreed that inclusion was a good concept. However only 40% of teachers actually thought it was realistic for all students and it usually depended on the type of disability (Scruggs & Mastropieri,1996). Cognitive and physical disabilities were viewed to be acceptable for inclusion into mainstream education. The severity of the disability was a leading factor for the success of inclusion. Teachers found that students with social emotional or behavioural disabilities were the hardest to educate within an inclusive setting (Avramidis & Norwich,2002; Subban, & Sharma, 2005).

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Teachers without the special educational need's qualifications are required to teach students that would require more specialist care and attention than an ordinary teacher could give. This can cause a greater level of stress and higher rates of teachers retiring earlier due to burnout (Hastings, Remington, & Hopper, 1995 Brackenreed ,2008;). Mainstream teachers are found to have a more negative view towards inclusive education and their ability to bring about positive outcomes such as academic achievement, than teachers with special educational qualifications (Woolfson, Grant, & Campbell, 2007). Studies have shown that the number of years teaching is associated with teacher's attitudes towards inclusive learning. Teachers with less experience have shown to have a more positive view towards SEN students in their class than teachers with more experience. Studies hypothesised that this could be due to the fact that more recently qualified teachers studied inclusive learning in greater depth than teachers who trained 15- 20 years ago (Brady & Woolfson,2008).

Inclusion into mainstream schools and classrooms has been a major policy initiative designed to improve the educational opportunities of children with special educational needs and disabilities. The support for inclusion is mainly advocated by parents, schools and policy makers (McLeskey, 2019). Studies that interviewed parents on why they chose to send their children to mainstream education, demonstrated that social interaction with other students without special educational needs was identified as the primary motivation (Bossaert et al., 2011; Colum, & McIntyre, 2019; Mamas, 2012). The attainment of appropriate social skills is considered crucial for a person's social development and personal well-being. This consideration is far more important in the area of inclusive education, where the development of social skills in children with SEN has been associated with academic progress, social inclusion and successful transition to adult life (Stiefel, Shiferaw, Schwartz, & Gottfried, 2018; Vlachou, Stavroussi, & Didaskalou, 2016). Despite the reported benefits of inclusion for children with SEN, the process of inclusion is not without difficulties. When analysing the

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success of inclusion from the perspective of teachers, the people that see the impact of inclusion in action on a daily basis, previous research has reported mixed findings. Vlachou Stavroussi, and Didaskalou, (2016) study examined special educational teachers attitudes' towards mainstream education. Their study reports that children with SEN have limited peer relationships. On the other hand, Wiener and Tardiff, (2004) study reports that children in mainstream classrooms do better socially than their peers in special educated classrooms. One potential reason for this discrepancy is the different analysing methods. The first study used a qualitative design, whereas the second study used a quantitative design. Previous studies have mainly used quantitative analyses of teachers' perception towards inclusion education. It is thus possible that the details and nuances of classroom experience have been missed; that the type of definitive data gathered in quantitative studies precludes deep exploration of the subject. Therefore, this study aims to examine teacher's perspective of inclusive education within mainstream schools, by using qualitative analysis. This allows for a richer understanding of the advantages or disadvantages of inclusive education both socially and academically for students with special educational needs.

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### Methods

#### Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted, as this study used a mixture of previous interview questions from other studies. It also allowed for any changes to the interview questions or schedule and to make sure that the questions were appropriate to the research questions and aims.

#### Participants

Participant selection was done through convenience from a multi-denominational school in North Dublin. A total of three participants were used in this pilot study, two females (aged 27 and 30) and one male (aged 45). The mean age was 34 years. All participants were qualified secondary school teachers. The two female participants had an undergraduate degree in English literature and History and the male teacher had an undergraduate degree in mathematics. All three teachers had a master's degree in education. All three participants taught in mainstream classrooms and had been teaching for the past three years.

#### Procedure

Written consent was sought from the principal of the school, indicating the purpose of this study and what participation would consist of. An information sheet indicating the purpose of the study and a consent form were sent to the school, with the researchers contact details. Those who met the requirements of the study were instructed to get in contact via email. Consent forms were collected prior to the interview taking place. This allowed participants the opportunity to ask questions they did not understand and allowed them to give their consent without any feeling of pressure. Interviews were scheduled depending on the availability of the participant. Semi-structured interview questions aimed to investigate teacher's perception of inclusive education both negative and positive were conducted. A small quiet room with no distractions was arranged for the interviews to take place. The

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interviews were transcribed into transcripts from the audio file. The data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method to produce themes.

This pilot study indicated that the teachers who participated in the interviews were willing to share their views on inclusion within the classroom. The initial time assigned to the interview as being one-hour long was longer than necessary. This suggested that the future study time should be shortened to 25mins. All the participants understood the questions being put forward and answered accordingly. Therefore, the interview questions were appropriate for the interview.

### **Participants**

The current study was conducted in a multi-denominational secondary school located in North Dublin. Using convenience purposive sampling, 10 people were contacted to partake in the study. However, in the final study five qualified teachers participated. The sample comprised of five females aged between 25 to 55. The mean age was 35.2. Three of the five participants were Irish; one participant was Canadian and the other was American.

Participant 1 has taught for 9 years, participant two has taught for two years, participant three has taught for 13 years, participant four has taught for two years and participant five has taught for five years. All participants taught in both mainstream inclusive classrooms and special classrooms. All five participants received both a college undergraduate degree and a master's degree in education and four participants received a postgraduate degree in special education (see table 1).

### **Design**

This study used a qualitative cross-sectional design.

### **Materials**

Semi-structured interviews were used because they had proved effective in previous studies designed to examine teachers' perception of the social functioning of students with SEN as



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well as their perceptions of the difficulties of these students in the social and academic domain. The interview schedule consisted of 5 questions that examined academic development (Ruijs, & Peetsma, 2009), 5 questions examined social development (Wiener & Tardiff, 2004; Estell, Jones, Pearl & Van Acker, 2009). 6 questions examined teachers' perception of inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Vlachou, Stavroussi, & Didaskalou, 2016). Eight questions examined teachers' qualifications (Woolfson, Grant, & Campbell, 2007; Subban, & Sharma, 2005).

### **Procedure**

This study was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of both the PSI and the National College of Ireland. An email (see appendix 1) was sent out to four different school principals for consent to use their teachers as participants for this study. The email outlined the purpose of the study and what taking part would involve. Only one principal gave written consent to use their teachers as part of this study. An information sheet (see appendix 2) indicating the purpose of the study and a consent form (see appendix 3) were sent to the school, with the researchers contact details. Those who met the requirements of the study were instructed to get in contact via email. Consent forms were collected prior to the interview taking place. This allowed participants the opportunity to ask questions they did not understand and allowed them to give their consent without any feeling of pressure. Interviews were scheduled depending on the availability of the participant. All interviews took place within a small office within the school. Both verbal and written consent was given to the recording of the interviews prior to the beginning of the interview. Semi-structured interview questions (see appendix 4) were designed to examine teachers' perception of inclusive education, the social and academic development of students with SEN, the challenges that students and teachers face with inclusive education and the benefits of inclusive education. Each interview lasted about 15 to 25 minutes. A debriefing sheet was given to each participant after the

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interview was concluded once again indicating the purpose of the study. The audio files were then uploaded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

After the interviews were conducted all responses were analyzed using thematic analysis procedure. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method to produce themes, first the data was transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings into transcripts, cross checking the transcribed data with the audio file and writing down notes that reflect the research aims. The data was then generated into codes. This included looking through all the transcripts and highlighting or placing post-notes on extracts that could later be developed into a theme. Grouping the codes that reflect the same idea together, produced the first set of themes which was the *main special educational needs*. Once again returning to the data to make sure the code fitted in with the theme, this process was repeated to develop the remaining four themes. The best quotes were picked to represent the different themes. These were placed into the results section.

## Results

### *Main special educational needs*

The main special educational needs within mainstream classes and resource classrooms were dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism, DCD (developmental coordination delay), ADHD, ASD, ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder), mild general learning disabilities, borderline moderate learning disabilities and dyscalculia. Then there were a lot of students who have a general learning disability that are, performing below their norms for their age

### *Similar needs*

All five participants indicated that though the students with SEN were accepted by other students in the class without special educational needs, they did not interact with them socially outside of class or school. Participant 4 stated that "They do not have reciprocal friendships with others in the class without special needs". Participant 3 stated "they tend to lose any friendships that they might have had. As they kind of progress socially through the years, they tend to lose their friends because they don't mature socially like other kids do." Participant 3 also stated that they believe that individual would have "more friends and be socially included more if they attended a special school". However, students with SEN do tend to associate more with students with "similar needs, hangout with one another." They tend to have more reciprocal friendships and organise after school activities between one another. The nature of the disability is also a factor in whether a student will have reciprocal friendships away from just students with SEN. Those with Dyspraxia and dyslexia have "no problem" making reciprocal friendships, whereas those with moderate to low special educational needs such as autism tend to have more of a problem and stick to those who are like themselves.

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### *Academic development*

All participants indicated that academic achievement was not the sole target for teaching children with special educational needs. "Achievement is not measured by exam results". When asked how teachers track a student's academic progress, Participant One indicated that seeing progress in their academic achievement is difficult: "you feel as though you are going backwards rather than forwards." Participant One stated that for students with SEN who are in the class for mathematics, "their motivation has dipped, and they are now more bored".

However, despite difficulties in academic progression, most participants did note progress in other areas for the children with SEN. Participants One, Two, Three and Five indicated that by setting targets in their "IEP" (individualised education plan) they saw a progression in achievement such as "being able to send an email or write a letter". Other targets were more social such as "lowering their voice in a classroom or finding their way around the school". Participant One also saw more of a progress in their confidence to ask a question in class. Once targets are met the teacher moves onto another target.

### *Differentiation*

All five teachers indicated that differentiation was the hardest part of inclusion. When asked what the main challenges were for teachers, Participant One stated "differentiation - trying to cater for each and every individual diagnosis; children are at very different levels." Participant 3 indicated that she found it difficult to teach both children with special educational needs and teach the other students without special educational needs, without hindering the education of either groups: "how could I do my job as a teacher and teach them the program properly because they need functional maths... we are still doing snakes and ladders and using fake money, whilst being in a room with ones who are trying to prepare for their Junior Cert."

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Participant 4 stated that individual planning is not feasible as “you cannot go around to every student and give them the special attention that they need”

### *Teachers' opinion towards inclusion*

Two out of the five teachers suggested that inclusion within the classroom and schools was “great in theory and a great concept” but does not work when put into practice. “Without the proper support and facilities, it doesn't work, and the children suffer”. Participant 3 thought that the “Department of Education are driving for all-inclusive schooling. However, they are not seeing all of the needs and all of the requirements of catering for someone with a moderate learning disability.” All participants stated that they currently do not see inclusive education as an adequate form of education for individuals with moderate special needs. When asked about inclusive education, Participant 3 stated “I don't think that they are catering for the child with moderate needs as much by sending them to mainstream because realistically and practically we cannot cater for their needs”. This participant went further and stated that if they had a child with special educational needs, they would not send their child to a mainstream school.

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*Table 1 Demographics*

Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Female	5	100
Race		
Irish	3	60
American	1	20
Canadian	1	20
Classes		
Mainstream	3	60
Resource	2	40
Qualifications		
Undergraduate	5	100
Postgraduate in education	5	100
Masters in SEN	4	90
Years Taught		
1-6	3	60
6-12	1	20
12 or more	1	20

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**Discussion**

This study aimed to examine teachers' perspectives of inclusive mainstream education, how inclusive education affects the social development of students with SEN and how children with SEN develop academically in the mainstream classroom. Through thematic analysis of interviews, data resulted in the identification of four themes. The first theme identified the main special educational needs within the class. The second theme (*similar needs*) examined the psychosocial development of students with SEN. The third theme (*academic development*) examined the academic development of students with SEN. The fourth and fifth theme (*differentiation and teachers' opinions towards inclusion*) examine teachers' opinions towards mainstream education and if they believe it is beneficial to students within the classroom. Overall, teachers found inclusive education difficult to implement. The main difficulty of inclusion was the diverse needs within the class and the lack of resources available to support every child.

Social interaction with other students without Special educational needs has been identified as the primary motivation for parents in placing their children in a mainstream school (Bossaert et al., 2011; Colum, & McIntyre, 2019; Mamas, 2012;). The theme *similar needs* indicated that although students without SEN are generally accepting of individuals with SEN, Students with SEN such as autism, moderate disabilities, and general learning difficulties are not included socially with other students in the class. They do, however, tend to have reciprocal friendships with students of similar needs. Despite this, teachers did find a positive progression of social skills in students with SEN, as depicted by an increase in confidence and a change in classroom behavior such that it became more appropriate and acceptable. Other studies used qualitative, semi-structured interview methods to examine the social factors of inclusion addressing friendship, loneliness, self-perception, and social skills, of students with SEN. Their results reflected the results in this study where students felt isolated, lonely and excluded by

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other students within the class. (Cole & Meyer, 1991; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Koster et al., 2010; Lindsay & McPherson, 2012; Pavri & Monda-Amaya 2000, 200). Norwich and Kelly's (2004) study also found that children with SEN were bullied more because of their disability than other students in the class. These results are mirrored in Lindsay and McPherson (2012) study of children with SEN which explored their experiences of exclusion and bullying. However, the case of bullying was not found within this study. This could be due to using teachers, as they may not be made aware of the bullying occurring within the class. This is an important finding as social inclusion is contingent with academic success. This could be the reason why students are not achieving academically in line with their peers.

The theme *Students' academic development* had mixed results as two-fifths of the participants stated that they did not see academic development and they found that students' motivation to learn dwindled as time went on. They sometimes felt a regression rather than a progression in students' studies and understanding of the material previously covered. These results are reflected in other studies that examined students with special educational needs and their academic achievement and task motivation (Kvande, Bjørklund, Lydersen, Belsky, & Wichstrøm, 2019; Morgan, Farkas, & Hibbel, 2010). These studies found that the academic achievements of students with SEN cannot be compared to other students in the class as they tend to be at a lower level of achievement and many of them do not participate at state level exams such as the Leaving Certificate or the Junior Certificate. This contradicts other studies that stated that students with SEN in mainstream classes are at the same reading and writing levels as other students without special educational needs (Cawley, Hayden, Cade, & Baker-Kroczyński, 2002; Lipsky and Gartner 1996; Ruijs, & Peetsma, 2009). This discrepancy could be due to the type of SEN these studies were examining. These studies also used quantitative analysis which only signifies a significant nor non-significant result. None of the studies identify what type of SEN they were examining. A diagnosis of a SEN was all that was



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required. Nor did the studies state what type of class they were comparing the students with. For instance, they could have used resource enriched class which mix lower performing students without SEN in with SEN students. This could result in students with SEN appearing at the same level as their peers. Within this study the two participants who indicated that academic achievement was not feasible worked mainly in mainstream classes while the three participants that stated when they kept tasks at a minimum, they saw an improvement with academic achievement such as abilities to write an email or a letter worked, mainly taught in resource enriched classes. The difference in types of learning environments may influence academic improvement.

The themes of *differentiation and opinions* give a more detailed account of teachers' attitudes and perceptions of inclusive mainstream education. The resounding response of their perception towards inclusive education was negative. When asked about the challenging part of inclusive education, they stated that the mixture of different educational and behavioral needs between students with and without SEN was the most challenging part. This finding is reflected in other studies that interviewed teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. Their results indicated that teachers are mainly positively inclined towards the philosophy of inclusive education. However, their attitudes were found to be strongly influenced by the nature and severity of the disabling condition presented to them and the availability of physical and human support (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Subban, & Sharma, 2005). Teachers felt that they did not have an adequate number of extra teachers or SNA's (special needs assistance) in the room to facilitate the number of students with needs. As a result of this, the extent of support was reported as an important factor to consider for inclusive classroom success. All teachers indicated that an all-inclusive environment is not feasible, that the drive from the government for an all-inclusive educational system is not practical and there is a need for special schools.

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Some studies have suggested that the years of teaching and qualifications impact teacher attitudes towards inclusive education. Teachers who are more recently qualified and hold a degree in special education, tend to have a positive attitude toward inclusion. Teachers who have been teaching for a longer period have more of a negative attitude (Brady & Woolfson, 2008; Woolfson, Grant, & Campbell, 2007). However, in contrast to these findings, the results from this study suggest that years of teaching and a qualification in special educational needs do not necessarily affect teachers' attitudes or opinions towards inclusive education. Four out of the five teachers interviewed had a master's qualification in special education, and three out of the five teachers had a maximum of five years teaching and held a master's qualification in special educational needs. Yet these participants had the same attitudes and perceptions as the other participants who held a maximum of thirteen years of teaching practice. This would indicate that even with a post graduate master's degree in SEN and a short number of teaching experience, there is another factor influencing a negative attitude towards inclusion. Perhaps this could be down to increase responsibility accommodating the varied needs of students and not enough in class supports.

This study gives parents, school officials and government departments a greater insight into teachers' own perceptions of the challenges and benefits of inclusive education. Parents place their children into mainstream education to boost their social development. However this study found that inclusion does not do that. Instead, it creates a whole plethora of challenges in the classroom. It isolates children with SEN, potentially causes them to feel lower self-esteem (as they do not progress academically like their peers and are treated differently (Belsky, & Wichstrøm, 2019; Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2013; Humphrey & Mullins, 2002; Norwich & Kelly, 2004)) and is not beneficial for academic progression. As such, it doesn't not appear to provide much benefit for children with SEN at all. On top of that, it creates difficulty for the other children in the class, who have their learning disrupted by

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challenging behaviour and by the loss of time taken to cater to SEN children. It also makes work life particularly challenging for teachers. The added responsibility and stress, particularly when so much effort and time is expended on an aim that ultimately can never be achieved, leads to dissatisfaction, burnout and higher rates of teacher turn-over. Many teachers now retire early from the profession, and this has been cited as one of the reasons why (Brackenreed, 2008; Tye, & O'brien, 2002; Gonzalez, Brown, & Slate, 2008 ;Hall, & McGregor, 2000;).

Refusing to acknowledge these challenges is detrimental to the future success of inclusive education. Instead, parents and policy makers should be attempting to take these teacher views seriously and to find ways to reduce or circumvent these classroom difficulties. Future Departments of Education should acknowledge the difficulties reported of an all-inclusive educational system and make adequate provisions for teachers and students if they wish to continue the drive for all-inclusive education. The recommendations for sorting these issues would enable programs that allow for a greater number of special educational needs assistants within the class. A change in legislation that allows for dual enrolment, whereby a student can attend both mainstream schools and special schools. This would allow students the opportunity to receive extra care from a special school that is not possible in mainstream education while at the same time receiving social benefits by their attendance in mainstream as well. The demands of each requirement should be properly understood, articulated into a system and used as a master plan in the education of children with disabilities.

The primary limitations of this study are the use of Self-report interviews. This can create a bias. Given that inclusion is a 'politically correct' ideology, there exists the possibility that respondents might give socially desirable answers that have little or no correspondence with their everyday behaviour. Teachers may endorse general statements in favour (or against) having children with difficulties in regular classrooms. Though this is a qualitative design,

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having such a small sample size comprising of only five female participants from one secondary school in Dublin does not allow for this study to be generalizable to the population.

Future studies could use longitudinal mixed-method design that examines teachers' and student's perceptions of inclusive education. A Longitudinal investigation would have the capacity to examine the academic and social development of individuals with SEN over a longer period of time and allow for a more thorough investigation of the impact of inclusive education on students with SEN. Research of this nature has the potential to deepen our understanding of the complexities of inclusion and provide directions for change or continuity of provision as appropriate.

In conclusion, this study aimed to examine teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in mainstream classrooms. Inclusion is mainly based on two foundations; one that children have a right to inclusion within mainstream schools and two that inclusive education is more effective. The results from this study suggest that inclusive education is not entirely beneficial for students with SEN. From an academic viewpoint student's with SEN do not develop academically in par with their peers. Socially students with SEN are accepted by their peers however they are not socially included and mainly have friendships with others with similar needs. Teachers' perception of inclusive education was mainly negative. They felt it was good in theory but not in practice. Teachers felt that they do not have adequate support within the classroom to facilitate the growing number of students with special educational needs. Refusing to acknowledge these challenges is detrimental to the future success of inclusive education. Instead, parents and policy makers should be attempting to take these teacher views seriously and to find ways to reduce or circumvent these classroom difficulties. Future Department of education should acknowledge these difficulties of an all-inclusive educational system and make adequate provisions for teachers if they wish to continue the drive for a successful all-inclusive educational system.

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## Appendix

Appendix 1 *email sent to principle*

10/11/2019

Dear xxx,

I am writing to ask if you would consider allowing me to ask the teachers within your school to take part in a study, I am conducting in Dublin during 2019/2020. This study is part of an undergraduate research project I am completing for the National College of Ireland under the supervision of Dr April Hargreaves.

The focus of my study is in the area of Special Educational Needs with a specific focus on mainstream inclusion within the classroom. The research aims are;

1. To understand from a teacher's perspective how inclusion can help children with additional special educational needs from a social aspect. This examines the areas such as friendships, interacting with other students and how students are treated by their peers.
2. To Examine the academic achievements of the child taking into account the individual's academic abilities.
- 3 To examine the teachers own attitudes towards inclusion and whether they themselves believe it to be beneficial.

With your approval I hope to talk with the teachers within your school who teach in an inclusive classroom setting, about their attitudes towards inclusion and the benefits they see in the children's social and academic achievement. All interview responses will be treated in the strictest confidence and there will be no identification of individual schools or teachers or students. The study will adhere to the ethical code stipulated by the National College of Ireland. Your approval in this research is voluntary and I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the progress of the study.

I look forward to hearing from you as to whether you would be happy for me to talk with the teachers in

[email-x17357241@student.ncirl.ie](mailto:email-x17357241@student.ncirl.ie)

Many thanks

Jessica Martin

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### *Appendix 2 Information sheet*

#### **Teachers perception of inclusive classroom education**

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information.

#### **What is the purpose of this Study?**

The research aims are to investigate how inclusion helps children with additional special educational needs. This is examined from a social aspect such as friendships, interacting with other students and how students are treated by their peers. It also aims to look at the academic achievements of the child depending on the individual's academic abilities. I also aim to examine the teachers' own attitudes towards inclusion and whether they themselves believe it to be beneficial. The study is part of my undergraduate degree from National College of Ireland.

#### **What will taking part involve?**

Taking part in this study will involve an interview that will be audio recorded if consent has been given. The interviews will take place at a time that is convenient to you. The interview will be semi-structured, and the interview topics will range from your opinion on whether an inclusive classroom benefits a child with special educational needs from a social and academic point of view.

#### **Why have you been invited to take part?**

You have been chosen to take part because you are currently a qualified secondary school teacher. You teach in an inclusive mainstream classroom. You teach or reside in Dublin and are willing to take part in an interview.

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### **Do you have to take part?**

You do not have to take part in this study. This is on a completely voluntary basis. You are within your rights to refuse to partake in the study. If you do wish to participate, you have the right not to answer a question and/or withdraw from the interview at any time, without any consequences. Once the interview is concluded, you cannot withdraw from the study as your information is anonymized and cannot be deciphered from the rest of the interviews.

### **What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?**

The benefit from taking part in this research study is you get the opportunity to understand what aspects of inclusive classroom learning is beneficial to children with additional needs. The possible risks of being involved with this study are that you may be asked questions that you may feel are of a personal nature. However, a debriefing sheet will be given at the end of the interview that will have names and numbers of support groups if you feel the need to talk.

### **Will taking part be confidential?**

To keep your identity confidential and unidentifiable, any personal information given on the audio tapes will be bleeped out such as names and locations. The audio recordings will be stored securely on a computer and will be deleted from the recording device once transferred to the computer. The audio file will be destroyed once the study is completed and so will the transcripts. The transcripts will also have a sensor on names and locations. Once the study is completed the audio files and transcripts will be destroyed.

### **Information about illegal behaviours**

No illegal behaviours are to be discussed during the interviews as it may cause a risk to confidentiality

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### **What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results will be written up and presented as part of my undergraduate degree. The research maybe used for publication in the future.

### **Who should you contact for further information?**

For further information contact myself Jessica Martin on email [atx17357241@student.ncirl.ie](mailto:atx17357241@student.ncirl.ie) or my supervisor Dr. April Hargreaves.

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Appendix 3 *Consent form*

- I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I am over the age of 18
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw from the interview at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I cannot withdraw permission to use data from my interview after the interview is concluded, as it is anonymous.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves an interview where the researcher asks me questions about the benefits of inclusive classroom education and my own personal attitudes towards inclusive classroom education.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research, my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by not using my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in research in my undergraduate degree.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in a coded, encrypted password protected file on the computer until the completion of the study. All documents and files will be destroyed.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.
- I understand that the information I give maybe published or be part of a presentation.

I consent to be a part of this research study

Date



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### Appendix 4 *Interview Schedule for teacher*

#### **Introduction**

Thank you so much for letting me talk to you today. As you know I am interested in understanding from a teacher's perspective how inclusion within mainstream classrooms benefit children with special educational needs from a social, academic perspective and your own attitude towards inclusion.

#### **Questions about the social and academia**

1. What are the main Special educational needs in your class? How many students in your class have SEN?
2. How much are children with SEN included by the other children in the class?
3. From your perspective – how well do children with SEN interact with the other student in the class?
4. From your observation do children with SEN have reciprocal friendships? (If yes how is this shown?)
5. Do you find you need to do any other individualised planning for SEN? (If yes how much planning is needed?)
6. How do you adapt lessons / materials for the child?
7. How do you check on SEN children's progress?
8. From the beginning of the year to now academically how well do you find these children have progress? (e.g exam results)
9. What proposals would you make for improving the academic education of children with SEN?
10. How does inclusion of children with SEN impact on the classroom environment?

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11. What do you think the main challenges are for children with SEN have in mainstream class?
12. What are the main challenges you face with children with SEN in the classroom?
13. From your opinion what are the main benefits you see from inclusion?
14. Are there any negative effects of inclusion?
15. What do you think is the best educational provision for students with SEN?
16. What is your opinion about including students with SEN in the regular school/classrooms?

### Questions about Qualifications

Before I finish, I'd just like to ask you about your experience and qualifications

1. Where did you train? Was that a BEd, Grad Dip? (If Grad Dip – what subjects did they do for first degree?) Was there anything on SEN in your initial training? (Probe how much, any opportunity to work with pupils with SEN)
2. How long have you been teaching now? (Probes: Have you always worked in this school? Have you always worked in this role in the school? What classes have they taught? Any experience of special education?)
3. Have you had the opportunity to attend any courses/ CPD on special ed? (Probe for all)
4. Have you obtained any further qualifications since getting your BEd/ grad dip? (If yes, probe, especially for special education content)
5. How do you feel this has prepared you to support children with SEN?

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6. What is your school's policy towards inclusion?
7. Has the school had any support regarding special education?
8. Is there any additional form of training or support that you feel would help you?