

**Expectation vs Reality: Teacher's Experiences of Educating Children with Autism
while Relying on their Teacher Training Practices**

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Year of Submission: 2023

Word Count: 8,013

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland

Research Students Declaration Form

(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

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Degree for which thesis is submitted: BA (Hons) in Psychology

Title of Thesis: Expectation vs Reality: Teachers' Experiences of Being Responsible for the Education of a Child with Autism in Contrast to their Learned Theory

Date: 13th March 2023

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank all of the interviewees and their schools for their involvement in this study. I am eternally grateful for them for dedicating time out of their busy lives to take part and to contribute to this research. Without them, this wouldn't have been possible. Their devotion to their careers and to the children they teach has been so inspirational to see first-hand, and I will be perpetually appreciative to them for their participation.

To Dr Amanda Kracen, someone who has become a substantial influential figure to me for her contribution to science and Psychology, her help and guidance all the way through aided significantly in making my idea come to fruition, and she made the whole experience achievable and enjoyable throughout while never turning down the chance to help in any way she could. Thank you.

To my family - each of my siblings have always served as huge inspirations to me for their many achievements throughout the years. Each of their support and help has meant the world to me, and I am beyond grateful to each and every one for their constant reassurance and belief in me for as long as I can remember.

To my parents, two people who never let me feel as though I couldn't do anything I wanted to do, my Dad has always been a rock of knowledge and sense to me throughout my life and his unwavering support, unconditional encouragement, and many cups of tea have helped me more than I ever could materialise into words. Finally, a special thank you also to my wonderful Mam who I know would have been thrilled to see how happy I am doing something I love, and I am passionate about. I hope I am always doing you proud.

Abstract

Broadly, the data surrounding educating children with Autism is rich with guides and techniques for parents and teachers, but lacks in information surrounding teacher's opinions on being responsible for the education of children with ASD when compared to their teacher training. The current study aims to explore primary school educator's experiences and opinions on teaching children with ASD in comparison to training they received, including parental and collegial influences, the need for additional learning, and the role experience in the classroom plays. The objective of this study is to yield and analyse themes from data collected qualitatively. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, with opportunity share opinions and experiences. Through the means of thematic analysis, four themes were extracted from the data; (i) Thrown into the Deep End, (ii) Taking Matters into our Own Hands, (iii) We're All in this Together and (iv) Experience Trumps what the Books Say. The results of this study show unanimity in agreement that provisions to the current curriculum for teacher training needs to be made, and training needs to be continued through CPD. This was seen consistently throughout. Recommendations for policy changes and revisions to current teacher training curriculums were made.

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Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex disorder that is typically behaviourally defined (Muhle et. al, 2004). It is a neurodevelopmentally categorised syndrome, defined by its deficits in social reciprocity and communication, along with behaviours that are deemed to be unusual and/or recurring (Lord et. al, 2000). Those with ASD are also believed to under-rely on certain knowledge within the context of perceptual decision-making (Allenmark et. al, 2020). It can be difficult when attempting to define or conceptualise how Autism presents itself in individuals, due to its variance in symptoms, age of onset and manifestation of its features in those who are diagnosed with it (National Research Council, 2001).

In an Irish context, Autism is becoming increasingly more prevalent, with data from the National Council of Special Education (NCSE) indicating an Autism prevalence rate of 1.55 per cent (Department of Health, 2018) in children being educated in an Irish setting. ASD is the second most common disability in children in Ireland after intellectual disabilities, with a recent report from Inclusion Ireland showing 44% of its respondents had children with Autism, nearly half of the study sample (Inclusion Ireland, 2022).

Parental influences on the education of children with Autism and training practices has been heavily researched in recent years (Dekker et. al, 2014; Ozcan & Cavkaytar, 2009; Godfrey & Haythorne, 2013; Howlin, 1998; Howlin & Baron-Cohen, 1999; Kubina & Yurich, 2009). As primary educators, parents having increased collaboration with teachers on their child's learning has been seen to have had emphasis placed on it within the research (Azad et. al, 2021; Azad et. al, 2016; Cesur & Odluyurt, 2019; Murray et. al, 2009). Newly established guides, practices and screening advancements have proven to have had positive

results for both parents and their children over the years (Chaidi & Drigas, 2020; Harris, 1987; Posserrud et. al, 2008; Schreibman et. al, 1991).

The increase in research around this topic is vital when looking at the impact of teacher training on a child with Autism's learning, as although the parental influence in a child's educational life is of paramount importance, when a child enters into formal education be it mainstream or other, the teacher assumes that role. Therefore, it could be argued that parents, although in collaboration with teachers, may seek guidance or help on management and upkeep of their child's learning through best practices implemented by the teacher. However, this is not achievable should teacher training not sufficient in preparing teachers for this role, particularly as learnings procured by experience only requires accumulation of years spent in a career. This is what the current study is aiming to explore through the testimonies of teachers.

Additionally, it is worth noting that between 30-40% of those who have a diagnosis of Autism in Ireland also have an intellectual or learning disability (AsIAM, 2022) therefore further revisions to curriculum and/or teaching methods may need to be taken into consideration by teachers when a child with Autism is present in their class. There is ample research within the field of educating Autistic children for guidance and training that can be found and evaluated, and it proves to be a useful tool when looking to enhance the educational lives of those with ASD. However, the research around guides to educate Autistic children is sizeable in comparison to studies done on the educators themselves. This gap, although attempts in recent years to collect this type of data, may prove to pose limitations in this particular area of research when there is less literature to review how teachers really feel about their ability to teach children with Autism.

As previously stated, literature in recent years has aimed to provide some insight into this, through both qualitative and quantitative means. Much of the data surrounding this topic

details the fundamentality of providing adequate education for children with Autism in a mainstream setting. This includes the influence of support by various means, the integration of students into mainstream school settings with varying special needs, accurate and up to date training in the field of Autism specifically, and improvements within meaningful continuous professional development within the topic of Autism (Glashan et. al, 2004; Linsay et. al, 2013; Lu et. al, 2020; McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2014; Osborne & Reed, 2001; Symes & Humphrey, 2011). Although the data suggests that these factors are imperative for successful educational journeys for children with Autism, it is suggested that these factors are not currently feasible to coincide with one another due to the lack of resources, the need of overarching support from institutions and organisations, and vital amendments to be made to current teacher training practices (Bond & Hebron, 2016; Jury et. al, 2021; Leonard & Smyth, 2020).

One recent qualitative study around the topic of teaching children with Autism found that many teachers also lack confidence and knowledge in supporting Autistic students within their education (Cook & Ogden, 2021). This study obtained participants from special education and mainstream schools, attempting to take into consideration the challenges and strategies they apply within their teaching of Autistic children. The results of this study revealed the common and persistent feelings of self-doubt about the efficacy of their abilities to teach children with ASD (Cook & Ogden, 2021). It revealed the environmental impacts on the delivery of education for Autistic children, and how mainstream classes may have adopted mainstream approaches to teaching and behavioural management of Autistic children in the classroom (Cook & Ogden, 2021). It is possible that this generalised approach to managing behaviour is a reflection on the teacher attempting to integrate the individual with Autism in the class as a form of inclusion, however it may be more probable that insufficient

training provided a lack of knowledge on how to educate those with Autism in the classroom through individual consideration to likes and dislikes, etc.

Although this study provided an excellent insight into the educators responsible for the education of Autistic children in both special and mainstream settings, its sample consisted solely of senior educators in their respective fields, providing possible bias due the level of experience gained during their career. In conjunction to this, the level of training received during their own education was not a factor taken into consideration, making it impossible to consider whether or not this was a contributing factor to the afore mentioned doubts of self-efficacy within teaching Autistic children. The present study will attempt to address whether or not this is the case, whereby previous experiences of Autism in the classroom will be assessed, along with taking into consideration the level of knowledge the participant obtained during his/hers training. The most generalisable feelings related to teaching children with Autism are reflected and reiterated throughout the literature, with apprehension and doubts about self-efficacy for performance in teaching being highlighted numerous times in various studies (Anglim et. al, 2017; Boucher, 2018; Jones, 2018; Muhanna, 2010).

The current literature around the topic on teaching children with Autism has had a major focus on the methodology and implementation of best teaching practices in an educational setting (Bolourian et. al, 2022, Conallen et. al, 2016 & Quill et. al, 1989). Studies' dating back to 1974 (de Villiers et. al., 1974) see a focus on the intervention itself, but not on those teaching it. Research dating back to 1977 sees assessments on teachers' uses of behaviour modifications on children with Autism being reviewed (Koegal et. al, 1977). More recent studies such as one published in 2008 sees studies such as reviewing the clinical efficacy of Discrete Trial Teaching (Zou, et. al, 2008), with research showing that both

teachers perceptions and knowledge are of paramount importance within their performance and management of Autistic children in the classroom (Syriopoulou-Delli et. al, 2011).

However, research around this topic is surprisingly sparse despite its importance, particularly when taking into consideration how prevalent Autism is today. When evaluating the existing literature, it can be hypothesised that both personal education and experience are vital when providing an adequate education for those with ASD (Able et. al, 2014; McDougal et. al, 2020; Syriopoulou-Delli et. al, 2011,). However, the literature still examines teachers from the perspective of enriching the education of children with Autism, not from the perspective of what the impact of teachers with inadequate education for teaching children with Autism has in the classroom.

Autism has not been the only area that proposed revisions have been looked at in teacher training in Ireland. Bullying, reflective thinking, inclusive education and the effectiveness of teacher training have all been examined within an Irish context (Emberson, 1993; Grey et. al, 2005; Lambe, 2007; O' Moore, 2000). The reiteration of proposals to make amendments to teacher training programmes in Ireland arguably flags a need for change, however more research is needed to determine specifically within the context of Autism what these amendments should be. This is what the current study will look at through the means of semi-structured interviews with teachers of varying career lengths.

The current study specifically attempts to address the gaps in the literature through a qualitative approach, by looking at the experiences teachers have educating Autistic children in comparison to their own education, particularly in an Irish setting due to the prevalence of Autism in Ireland today. It is clear from the literature that being faced with the role of teaching children with Autism in a mainstream setting can bring forth individual worries or feelings of doubting self-efficacy (Boujut et. al, 2016; Dybvik, 2004; Jury et. al, 2021), however no research has specifically been done in order to address whether the education

they receive to teach Autistic children is ample enough to carry out such an important role.

More research around this topic may provide answers to whether increased sufficient training in this area could help teacher's feel as though they are providing better quality education for children with ASD. Additionally, this research may be able to harvest possible proposals for changes to be made to current teacher training courses, through the opinions of professionals.

The goal of this research is to promote social action within schools, in order to promote mental well-being and positive self-efficacy, as can similarly seen in a study conducted by Carabello et. al (2020). This study aims to explore teacher's subjective experiences educating children with Autism within a mainstream classroom, specifically when reflecting on the experiences they have had in comparison to the education they received in order to prepare them for this role. The approach to enquiry for the current study will be essentialist/realist, as experience, opinions and motivations extracted from the data can be theorised in a straightforward way, with the assumption that the relationship between them is unidirectional (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Methodology

Study Design

This project used a qualitative approach in order to collect its data. Data was collected through the means of semi-structured interviews between the researcher and participants. It was felt that this approach was best suited to this research, through the use of interviews to explore the thoughts and feelings of the interviewees (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In conjunction to this, the study was cross-sectional in design, and required participants to reflect on their previous experience(s) at one moment in time. Qualitative measurements were favourable for this study, due to the reflective aspect of the design the data generated that was able to be reviewed and analysed in order to compare and contrast similar themes found. It allowed the participants to generate data that gave a true and honest reflection of their experiences, while also allowing for a more comprehensive review of the topic due to its sensitive nature. The interview schedule (Appendix 1) consisted of 11 open-ended questions, assessing previous experiences of teachers educating Autistic children in the classroom. The finalised interview schedule aimed to propose non-leading questions as not to form biases in participants' answers.

Researcher's Position

This study was of interest to the researcher due to my experience with Autism in the school setting through my work as a special needs assistant for the last number of years in a variety of settings. I also come from a family heavily involved in primary school education, with an accumulated career span of over 40 years. My prior experiences and beliefs around the current study's topic can potentially hold bias, as I have seen first-hand the impact of being ill-prepared for the role of an educator can have on both the person themselves and the student they are teaching. The prevalence of Autism has only increased in recent years, which

is what has been the biggest motivator for this study's completion in order to possibly aid change down the line.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was granted by the National College of Ireland's Psychology Ethics Sub Committee. Further permissions to conduct study were also granted by two school principals, of which various staff were recruited from their schools. All participants both during recruitment and prior to the commencement of the study had the nature of the research explained to them, and also were redirected to the information sheets provided where voluntary helplines were available should any potential distress from study participation had arisen (Appendix 2). This was reiterated before beginning each interview and was also readily available in the debriefing sheet (Appendix 5). Interviews were mostly completed in-person in classrooms after school, therefore in these instances appropriate permissions and notifications were made to any third parties who may be affected. Both verbal and written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Prior to the study being conducted, ample opportunities for any potential questions was given. This was also given after the interview had been completed.

Sample / Participants

This study used both purposive and snowball sampling in order to recruit its participants. Purposive sampling was used to generate a sample with particular eligibility criteria. Among qualitative research, purposive sampling is one of the most commonly used methods (Marschall, 1996). Purposive sampling, also known as selective or subjective sampling (Rai & Thapa, 2015) is a type of non-probability sampling that is useful when the research requirements require studying a certain domain with knowledgeable participants

within (Tongco, 2007). Snowballing sampling was used following purposive sampling techniques, and is widely used in qualitative research through networking done within a proposed study sample (Parker et. al, 2019). In the current study, it was used by word of mouth between participants through sharing of the study poster through various social media outlets (Appendix 7).

The study sample ($n=7$) was chosen having met the study requirements e.g. being a fully qualified mainstream primary school teacher. The final sample number was chosen as the data had reached saturation.

Initially, when the purposive method of sampling was employed, participants for this study were recruited from three large local primary schools with the permission of the principals through a permission letter (Appendix 6) given by the researcher requesting circulation of recruitment within their school. One agreement had been reached by the principal, a recruitment poster (Appendix 7) was distributed to staff with details of the study and the eligibility to take part included. The researcher also spoke briefly to staff about the study when the poster was circulated. Then, candidates who had an interest in participation contacted the researcher using the contact information provided on the poster, the option to request more information was given, but most wanted to proceed without requesting additional information. This is when snowball sampling occurred through the circulation of the study to candidates in other schools, whereby some of the sample were recruited.

All participants who completed the study ($n=7$) met the inclusion criteria – participants were required to be a qualified teacher with experience teaching a mainstream class with the inclusion of a child with Autism prior to this academic year. The arrangements for interviews were made by email between the researcher and participant. The sample was composed of 6 females and 1 male, and ranged in ages from 29 to 60. All children that were

reflected upon were taught in mainstream classes by the interviewees and varied in gender and diagnoses of Autism. Some of the sample had familial relations to the researcher prior to research being conducted, but every effort was made to produce unbiased data and the same interview schedule and interviewing methods were used consistently throughout.

Materials

For all 7 interviews completed, the researcher's MacBook Pro was used along with the Microsoft Teams application. For both virtual and in-person interviews, the recording and transcription software was used. An interview schedule was devised and amended after the pilot study (Appendix 1) whereby a tailored, sensitive and broad range of questions were used with the intention of generating meaningful data in relation to education children with Autism. The interview guide was developed as to attempt to address the gaps in the literature surrounding this topic. Once the literature had been reviewed, initial drafts of the interview schedule were derived. The final draft aimed to provide open-ended questions specifically pin-pointing opinions about individuals' teacher training, and how adequately it prepared them for the role of educating children with ASD.

A pilot study was conducted in order to ensure that the devised interview schedule was appropriate and would generate meaningful data relating to the study, while being centred around the study objectives and topic, giving interviewees the opportunity to speak openly and candidly about their experiences. Along with this, the pilot study also provided the researcher with the opportunity to record the rough timing of the interview, while also considering any amendments that may have been needed to be made to the interview schedule before commencing data collection on the rest of the participants. This is a vital part of conducting qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This study utilised the pilot study

data, as the only amendment made to the interview schedule was the removal of a question due to repetition of its answer within other questions (see Appendix 1).

In addition to this, participants were also provided with a demographic questionnaire (Appendix 3) prior to data collection.

Study Procedure

Participant's initial interaction with the study was within the recruitment process, whereby purposive sampling was used. Eligible candidates for the study initially heard about it through their workplace through the school principal. A recruitment poster (Appendix 7) was readily available to teachers, which specified that only qualified teachers (for example, no students on teaching practice or special needs assistants) who have had a mainstream class that included a child with ASD before the current academic year were eligible to take part. Verbal permission was obtained from the principal to briefly speak with teachers prior to the circulation of study posters. In conjunction with purposive sampling, snowball sampling was used in order to attract more potential candidates by sharing the study with colleagues in other schools etc. Potential candidates had they been interested in finding out more were requested to contact the researcher with any questions they may have had regarding the study. Most importantly, the information sheet detailed in bold that should they have needed to contact the researcher with questions it did not equal participation in the study. Following contact with the researcher and confirmation that the participant wanted to take part, the participant was then sent a detailed information sheet (Appendix 2) and consent form (Appendix 3) that was required to be read and reviewed prior to their interview taking place. Both the information sheet and consent form took roughly 4-5 minutes to read and to sign. Once both interviewee and researcher were satisfied with participation, an agreed time and place for the interview was then established. Interviews took place in the participants

workplace with permission from the principal, at a time that suited them with the exception of two interviews that were completed virtually interviews over Microsoft Teams.

On the day of the interview, the researcher confirmed with the participant that they had read and understood the consent form and were happy to proceed with the interview. The researcher then produced a physical copy of the form and the participant signed and returned to the researcher. The researcher then once again verbally ensured that the interviewee gave consent that the interview will be audibly recorded, and that they have the right of termination of the interview at any time. The researcher also stated that the interviewee can withdraw their data at any time up to completion of the transcription of data (Appendix 3). The researcher then began the recording of the interview using the Teams application on a MacBook Pro, so that all recorded data stayed within NCI.

Included on the information sheet is roughly how long the interviews take place, which all interviews held for 25 to 35 minutes, with an average interview time of 29 minutes. Participants were not offered breaks, as the maximum period of interview aimed to be under an hour, however had the participant requested a break they could have been allocated during so.

Antecedent to data collection proceedings, the pilot study was conducted. The total collection of data took place over a six week period. All participants that took part in this study were interviewed individually (Gaskell, 2000), and seven interviews were conducted in total, two held virtually.

Before the interview began a demographic questionnaire was answered by the interviewee, following their consent form being signed. All interviews followed a similar trajectory, beginning with the length of their teaching career, continuing to questions about their previous individualised experiences teaching children with Autism within the classroom and finishing with what advice they would give to a newly qualified teacher in the role. The

qualitative nature of the study gave participants to delve into their own opinions from their experiences give their opinions in a non-regimental way, allowing for non-influenced answers. Following the successful completion of all interviews, interviewees were thanked and debriefing forms were made available which detailed information concerning the study and the afore mentioned relevant voluntary helplines. Data collection lasted from 25-35 minutes. 5 interviews were held in the participant's classrooms, with two held virtually to accommodate location strains.

The transcriptions with the aid of the recordings were edited accordingly and finalised verbatim. For interviews that may be completed on Teams, the above steps were repeated but virtually. In this instance, consent forms were emailed to participants and were printed, signed, scanned, and sent back to the researcher. Following both types of interviews, a debriefing sheet (Appendix 5) was emailed thanking participants for their co-operation and also detailing the aims of the study, the researchers contact details and various relevant support lines.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted by using Braun and Clarke's six stages of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six stages consist of: the familiarisation of the data, generating initial codes from the data, searching for possible themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and then producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following the successful transcription of interviews, the reviewing of data began. This was so the researcher was able to familiarise herself with the data and in turn complete the first step of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, in order to then complete the next steps, deriving themes and codes that had arisen. The process of reviewing the data in order to obtain these themes and codes repeated until the goal of data saturation was achieved. This is

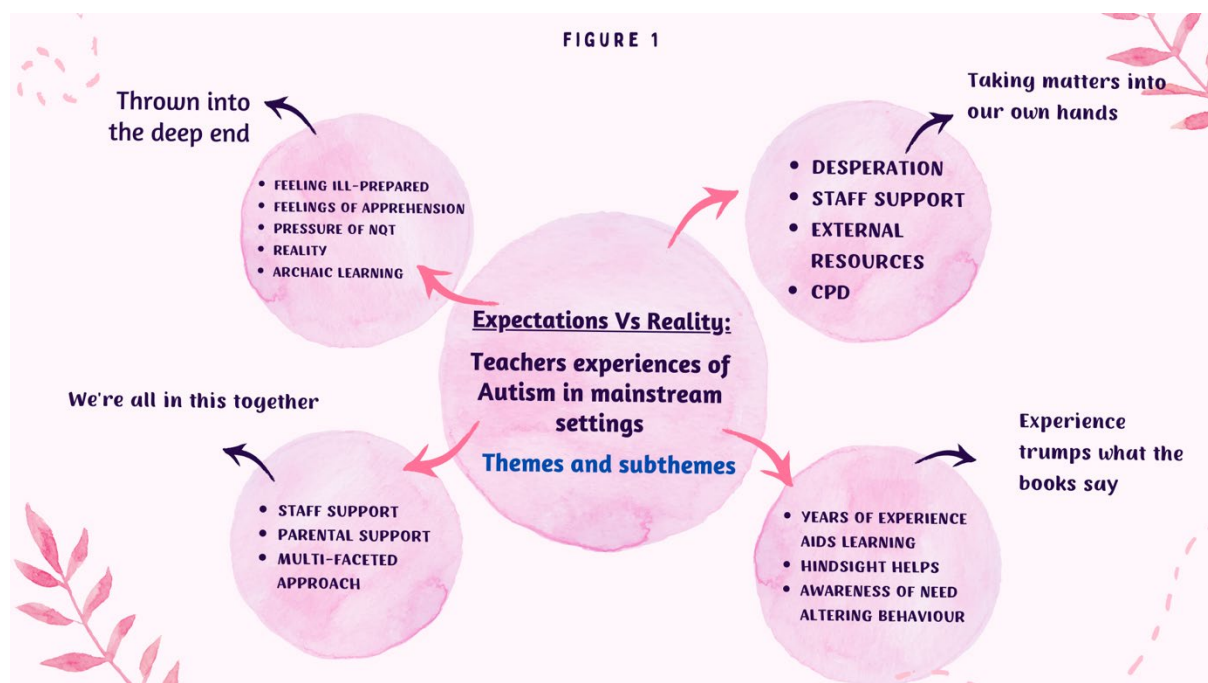
where no new themes will emerge from the data. The researcher decided on the approach of using a rich, thematic description of the entire dataset, so all possible themes within the data could be considered before the reviewing process. The researcher began by reading and re-reading the completed transcripts that had been edited verbatim with the inclusion of all punctuation and utterances to provide accurate data for analysis. Following this, the generation of initial codes was completed by thoroughly examining the data to allow themes to emerge organically. Codes were then developed into possible themes and subthemes, with those then being reviewed again to be finalised as an accurate and succinct representation of the data (see Appendix 8). This method of data analysis was chosen in order to let any themes that may arise to come up of their own accord and not be pre-dispositioned by the interview schedule. Additionally, an inductive (data-driven) analysis was used to allow for themes to emerge themselves, not on the basis of an existing theory/framework (Thomas, 2003). The final themes were semantic in nature, as the finding of this study progressed from description to the researcher's interpretation (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). All data recorded was stored on the Microsoft Teams application, as to keep all information within NCI.

Results

Within this section, the themes found within the analysis of data from the 7 interviews completed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps to thematic analysis will be discussed and evaluated. The overarching themes that have been extracted from the data are: i) Thrown into the Deep End, ii) Taking Matters into our Own Hands, iii) Were All in This Together, and iv) Experience Trumps what the Books Say. All subthemes from main themes have been discussed in conjunction with their corresponding themes. Figure 1 below shows the relationship between themes and subthemes. All are discussed with exemplar quotes from participants. Overall, it can be deduced that there is a lack of sufficient education regarding teaching students within all remits on the spectrum, in relation to proper techniques, information and resources available to better equip teachers within their roles.

Figure 1

Finalised List of Themes and their Subthemes



Theme 1: Thrown into the Deep End

All participants ($n=7$) recalled feelings of being inadequately trained for the role of educating children with Autism within a mainstream setting, particularly when starting out. Teachers recounted having intrinsic fears of not providing sufficient education for all students, particularly those with diagnoses (suspected or diagnosed) of Autism, due to the lack of adequate training provided to them during their studies. Due to this, feelings of apprehension and fear of the unknown came to the fore for many of the interviewees. One participant recanted,

I can categorically say [college] gave me zero help, zero knowledge, zero resources to know how to teach a child with Autism, and I don't think that was anything to do with even being an NQT I think had [their first experience teaching a child with Autism] happened five or six years later, you know... before I encountered a child with severe Autism, it still would have been the five or six years learning on the ground I would have had to have leaned on, not the option to be able to pull anything from my college years and training. It was so curricular based, It was so the pedagogical model compared to what its actually like (Participant 7)

This became a common theme amongst the participants, with the early years of their career remembered as being under pressure to master the tasks within being a Newly Qualified Teacher while attempting to supports students with Autism without the necessary appropriate training,

I didn't have a clue, I wouldn't have been able to pick out children in the room who had any special needs particularly as such in terms of Autism because we got no training, none. That wouldn't have been on my mind at all. I had to figure out fast what was going on here and how I could help these children (Participant 2)

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These findings were reiterated throughout the data by those who had longer careers and would have trained a number of years ago, but interestingly those who qualified more recently shared views that mirrored the above. Participant 6 comments,

[in training] we weren't answering questions or quizzed on all of the needs that we had learned about and learned about minimally at that. So I would say overall quite a lack of training, to be honest, compared to then when you get into the real world, I suppose when qualified and you're then all of a sudden faced with much, you know more needs than what you even had learned about or had been prepared for

Nearly all of the comments surrounding this theme related back to the actual realities of the job in day to day life compared to what they were expecting from their training. Many felt that this was the biggest pitfall of their education around Autism, as the little exposure to this type of work they achieved failed to give an accurate representation of the experiences they were probable to have later on.

my expectations were that maybe special educational needs in mainstream were more of a rarity, and that in maybe one in three classes you might have a child with an additional need ... I suppose I learned quite quickly that nearly every classroom definitely has children that have needs, but nearly every classroom has a child - at least one child with Autism (Participant 6)

to be honest it felt slightly out of the blue... there was no courses, there was no training in college. We never got any of that. And it was like just learning out of necessity and trying to find people who could understand what was going on here and help us (Participant 2)

In later years, some participants recalled feeling desperation at having to resort to trial and error of previous experiences to enable a positive and healthy learning environment for these students,

And I was a young teacher and felt like, ohh my gosh, they're all going to see this as a reflection on me. And - and I was petrified... if you have a child with severe behavioural issues turning up in your class every day, all behaviour is communication. So for me it became a case of just trying my best to figure out why is the child behaving like this and what do I need to change to make a better learning environment, so that the child doesn't have an outburst or act out or what? What are they trying to communicate to me?

As a principal of a primary school, Participant 3 recalled noticing the affects this had on their staff as they began to navigate their careers with these inclusions to their classes

I could see the younger teachers starting to become- become really stressed about [their class] and I felt it imperative to remind them that number1, it's not your job to fix this, and there isn't any fixing or curing. I think as teachers, we kind of intrinsically feel like we have this whole weight in our shoulders that you have to sort out this behaviour or this can't happen, particularly since we don't get properly educated from the get go on what to do, when in fact you know there are some techniques that can be implemented to make the classroom life easier

Also, evidence within the data suggests during their training there was an emphasis put on curriculum driven learning, which was then “archaic” in its methods when compared to the realistic demands of a mainstream classroom. One participant reflected,

What's interesting is I think your focus was different, back then, you probably would have been much more driven by the curriculum and trying and maybe that's just a new teacher thing you're trying to get the whole curriculum covered and you feel you

have to get through these books and everybody has to sort of conform... when in time come to learn that that expectation is just simply not reality you know? (Participant 2)

This point was then reiterated in the unbalance teacher's felt in the demands that were put on certain aspects of their training. Participant 4 remembered,

[on their first experience teaching a child with Autism] I felt ill equipped... I was letting that child down by my lack of preparation training to teach him, you know, but my preparation to teach your neurotypical child was in a sense so well-rehearsed at that stage

Theme 2: "Taking Matters into Our Own Hands"

The evidence of external learning both personally and through others was extremely evident with all participants. There was repetition of a certain sense of despondency that was threaded throughout the interviews, whereby participants reflected on feeling a need to expand their knowledge on the needs presenting within their classrooms, particularly within the remit of Autism. Six participants recall leaning heavily on the other more senior members of staff both at the start of their careers and throughout, particularly within cases where the child and/or children in question were presenting with more complex symptoms within the classroom. Participant 7 recalls,

With the staff I knew who to go to and who would have been a powerhouse of knowledge in in any area, or any diagnosis that I was doing within a mainstream class or in in a special Ed class, and they were always people who were self-motivated to find out themselves or to train up themselves and were willing to help. Without them I don't know what I would have done because it was so easy to just get lost and overwhelmed with no guidance

Along with employing staff to gain knowledge on how to better deal with Autism within the classroom, personal expansion of knowledge within the topic of ASD was the most prevalent factor among all participants. This could particularly be seen within the area of Continuous Professional Development, a tool teachers can utilise to broaden and expand their knowledge through the likes of courses and workshops on certain topics (Luneta, 2012), and external resources such as books, courses and professional opinions. It could be argued that this need to continue the expansion of knowledge reflected the rapid changes being made within Special Education in the last few years, as many interviewees commented on the changes that had happened and continue to do so since the start of their careers. Participant 2 recalled their first year of teaching and interacting with a child showing severe traits of Autism. This instance saw them feeling obliged to look for resources elsewhere, as

I realised that there was a curriculum for children with moderate, learning disabilities, and I went and found that and I could take objectives from that. And that's where it got me to sort of think about. OK, what are we trying to do here? What are the important things for this child to be able to do? So I worked off that then. And that really helped

The afore mentioned Continuous Professional Development was something that was spoken about in five of the interviews, as a positive tool for the expansion of learning on the topic of Autism. Many interviewees viewed Continuous Professional Development in all its mediums as being “brilliant”, with one participant describing it as being a “constant building of the knowledge you have so far” (Participant 4). The topic of Continuous Professional Development within the context of Autism was of interest within the results, as when asked opinions on it the general consensus from participants as to why it was so vital was because of how much change happens within primary schools, and more importantly within Special Education. Participant 7 noted,

it is something that I don't think any teacher can avoid in this day and age... is to - to keep themselves as up to date with the research and what's best practice for autistic children And also that counts within either mainstream or special Ed or whatever area you come from because there's constant change in primary school which is good, But all teachers need to be constantly upskilled to keep up with it

On the topic of change within Special Education, one participant who is the principal of a large primary school recanted their experience of opening an ASD early intervention class for 3-5 year olds in their school for the first time. Being described as a “*big learning curve*” (Participant 3), the perspective of the managerial side of things within the education on how to provide adequate learnings for children with Autism was mentioned, with the inclusion of consideration of teacher's feelings having to step into a role that they were not explicitly trained for, from the perspective of a principal who had a long teaching career prior and who could see what possible feelings could arise,

I suppose from where I stood I could see how teachers then would've been more, I suppose. Nervous of teaching in an ASD class because it's fear of the unknown. Nobody likes change and it's how you, you know, bring those teachers along. Get the right training, the right courses for them, prepare them before they start and offer them as much support and resources they need

Participant 3 later revealed that the said ASD classes were “*a great addition to our school, but not without its challenges*”, but how “*anything is possible with the right support and learning*”.

Theme 3: “Were All in This Together”

One major overarching theme that stood out from the data was the constant reiteration of the importance of social support when considering the experiences of teachers educating

children with Autism. Many positive experiences that were spoken about were always connected to a stream of communal support in some variation, be it parental or collegial.

there's a famous phrase in teaching that your best CPD is the teacher down the hall

(Participant 6)

Participants regularly spoke about the comradery between staff, and how support didn't just manifest itself in the form of education, but also in confidence instilling practices and sharing workloads, with Special Needs Assistants and Resource teachers getting many honourable mentions when positive experiences in teaching children with Autism was discussed.

Participant 6 recalled,

I suppose the SNAs I would have worked with, their experience is just phenomenal to me, especially when I was starting out the things they could tell me and ways and means that worked for them during their whole career which could be 20 plus years and also the fact that they supported me as a class teacher and the same goes for other teachers who were just teaching that bit longer for them than me either mainstream or resource, I just never really felt on my own at all

Similarly when talking about parents, comparisons between then and now showed the developments within the broader school community in recent years.

I think nowadays, you know, it's very much you're on the emails, the parents, all the time, you know, like oh (OMMITTED) didn't have a good night last night This happened that happened and you're tuned into the child straight away when they come in you know Whereas back then parents you met them once a year for the For the parent teacher meeting and you might see them as at the Christmas Carol service and that would be it (Participant 3)

Participant 6 also mentioned that,

were all working as a team...it's all about communicating with the parents...it can be very efficient.

The interviews showed substantial evidentiary data to support the fact that the education of children with Autism is not one-dimensional, it's multi-disciplinary in its approach and with the right input from everyone positive progress in Special Education for the individuals involved can be made.

Theme 4: "Experience Trumps what the Books Say"

Throughout the course of data collection, the experience driven opinions from participants with longer careers could be seen coming to the forefront. Many of the experiences spoken about demonstrate how years of accumulated practice help to mould and shape teaching methods and instil confidence in individual teaching techniques

Now, none of that phases me (Participant 2)

I just I'm more confident in myself I have more even in my ability to be able to to speak about this and try and help others and and when I take on a new class that has say in September this year, OK, I have a new class and there's three children who have Autism I say OK, so where can I start?(Participant 6)

When asked what advice could be given to newly qualified teachers starting out, many interviewees utilised their experience in order to give recommendations of what can be done in order to help any feelings of apprehension or nervousness from impeding their work. Much of the advice given was generated from what the participants would have liked to have known/been taught about before they started out themselves, along with reassurance that the role is achievable to do an excel in being one of the most popular responses.

Realistically, NQTs currently out in their own don't get the experience they need to be able to feel confident in the role especially when it comes to [special] needs like Autism, so try get as much experience in units, in classes, seek out the special ed

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teachers, seek out the SNAs, learn by observing, learn the different spectrums from one end to another, just try equip yourself as much as you possibly can (Participant 7)

You need to know an awful lot more than just what you're taught, but it's 100% not an impossible task to be taught how to be prepared (Participant 6)

Nobody's an expert, every person with Autism is different, but if you're getting through training then you have the capabilities to do the job well (Participant 5)

Many participants commented on the changes their perception and outlook on teaching children with Autism has had compared to early on in their careers. The afore mentioned feelings of apprehension and fear of the unknown had subsided, with confidence and assurance in themselves and their ability to do their jobs now taking their place,

At this stage I kind of feel like yeah, there's nothing you guys can throw at me that I haven't seen before you know, there's nothing I wouldn't be able for compared to when I started out (Participant 4)

To be honest, now, [teaching a child with Autism] wouldn't phase me. There isn't anything I haven't seen before or that I know I wouldn't be able to try with full confidence in myself because all of the years I have been doing this [Participant 2]

Additionally, many shared the skills that they had developed on account of the exposure to varying situations and the adaptability they had built up on account of these situations. The most common skill shared amongst the interviewees was that of recognition in children who may have suspected ASD. There was general agreement that these signs would have not been flagged to them as NQTs, compared to now where there is immediate recognisability and action taken where needed,

Back then, you know I didn't have a clue, I wouldn't have been able to pick out children in the room who had special needs be it intellectual or learning much less in terms of Autism, that wouldn't have been on my mind at all, compared to I suppose now where you can see it every day, it actually feels like nearly impossible not to notice it (Participant 2)

In conjunction with this, the techniques that are used in the classroom with children with Autism have also been developed over time, through “*trial and error*”,

[on working with a particular student] to be honest we just found out own little routine, he never liked taking off his coat and generally I think his coat was a protective layer and I never really got into any debate with him about it, I tried a few different things and some worked and some didn't, but eventually once I got to know him I could start to tell what I could implement that would be successful, and as I continued my career then I just started to apply the most successful methods I had found to the students I was coming into contact with then just tweaked them as they so fit.

Discussion

Introduction

This study was qualitative in nature and aimed to provide data on the realisms of teacher's experiences educating children with Autism in the context of how their learnings in college served them in their careers later on. Through exploration of the data collected, four key themes were extracted, (i) Thrown into the Deep End, (ii) Taking Matters into Our Own Hands, (iii) We're all in This Together, (iv) Experience Trumps what the Books Say.

The findings of this study produced saliency within the findings of being underprepared, apprehensive, and needing external information for support, among others.

Within the theme "Thrown into the Deep End", participants were recalling the early days of their career, for some over 30 years ago. All participants ($n=7$) were immediately exposed to teaching students in their class with Autism on varying degrees on the spectrum in their first year of teaching. There was a sense of agreement among all interviewees in the opinion that their training was not sufficient compared to the realisms of a mainstream class when the inclusion of children with Autism was imminent, with reflections of feelings of apprehension and the fear of the unknown most commonly coming to the fore. These findings resonated with previous literature on this topic, with a study by Busby et. al, (2012) noting how some teachers feel a stigmatised, rooted belief that the role of educating children with Autism is a highly specialised skill, which takes years of training to develop. Additionally, the pressures tied to expectations surrounding being a newly qualified teacher were recollected, particularly due to the emphasis on curriculum led learning that is the norm during teaching training in all capacities. One study that examined the attitudes of teachers about the integration of Autism into mainstream schools found that a high percentage of the sample of teachers found the curriculum difficult to teach to children with Autism due to the

language and communication discrepancies that present in these children (Gregor & Campbell, 2001). These outcomes found within the current literature are synonymous with previous studies (Lindsey et. al, 2013; Jennet et. al, 2003; Ruble et. al, 2010;) and strengthen the argument surrounding the importance of providing adequate training consistent with the role expectations, whilst also instilling confidence in teachers that they have the tools to provide education for children with Autism in a mainstream setting, particularly due to the prevalence rates that are increasing rapidly year on year (Department of Health, 2018).

The theme of "Taking Matters into Our Own Hands" dealt with feelings of desperation from the lack of practical learning in college, evidently resulting in retorting to external learning by others or individually. Here, participants expressed their opinions on the everchanging trajectory of special needs education, particularly in the context of Autism with the constant emergence of new information available and the emphasis it places on keeping up to date with best practices. This is constantly reflected in the research (Barry & Burlew, 2004; Carre & Felce, 2006; Lang et. al, 2010;). One form of learning that was clearly evident in the data as being exceptional for teachers in helping them to build on their knowledge within the context of educating children with Autism, was that of continuous professional development, most commonly through the medium of courses. Continuous professional development is a tool whereby educators can educate each other on certain areas of learning that may be of interest, or to provide information on areas where a lack of information is felt (Dadds, 1997). Often times, continuous professional development is utilised to learn about novel practices and/or methods in the classroom, particularly common within the context of educating students with Autism (Kopetz & Endowed, 2012). It could be argued that the notion of Continuous Professional Development after teacher training has been completed is contradictory; the utilisation of this tool is beneficial to those already with experience to sharpen the skills they have learned up until this point and is done so by constant, up to date

information consistent with changes along the trajectory of Special Education. Yet, initial teacher training showed feelings of unanimity among the participants in regard to feeling underequipped to begin with. That being said, more research is required in order to determine whether this is common among a larger sample, and as Theme 3 eludes to, support among staff and parents was proven to be one of the most vital pieces in being able to adequately educate children with Autism.

Theme 3's "We're All in this Together" strengthens the previous point on the positive impact ample support can have on all of those involved in educating students with Autism. This theme revealed opinions on the education that takes part outside the classroom, more specifically collaboration between colleagues and the familial aspect regarding parental education. There was a significant sense of gratitude from participants for the help they received along their career from other staff members and external figures, for example, educational psychologists. This strengthens the research surrounding this area, as it shows social support among staff being a vital component for the functionality of education (Barned et. al, 2011; Boyer & Lee, 2001; Finke et. al, 2009; Rodríguez et. al, 2012;) Along with this, an understanding and comprehension of the role parents play in their child's educational journey when there is a diagnosis (suspected or confirmed) of Autism was also evident in the current study's data. Some of the participants said that they had noted a change in the involvement of parents in their child's learning compared to what it has been in the last 10-15 years. The existing literature on the parental role in Autism education reflects this collaboration piece, with many of the existing studies showcasing the positives in the multidimensional approach to learning (Azad et. al, 2018; Azad & Mandell, 2015; Carothers & Taylor, 2004; Falkmar et. al, 2015; Starr & Foy, 2010). It is also worth noting that the literature is rich on best practice and technique guides for both parents and teachers (Charlop-Christy & Carpenter, 2000; Kashinath et. al, 2006; McGee et. al, 1999; Moyes, 2001; Rao &

Gagie, 2006). This further strengthens the current study's stance on the equal importance of social support from parents, colleagues, and other relevant personnel. However, the discussion of parental roles in regard to Autism education was not explicitly questioned in the interviews, therefore future research would be required on this topic to determine more conclusive answers regarding this in support of the current study's findings.³³⁶

"Experience Trumps what the Books Say" considered the testimonies of the participants, they detailed how the skills they possess and use now in everyday practice came from years of trial and error in the classroom. The reflections on life then compared to now showed just how far education for children with Autism has come along, with many of the opinions and recommendations proposed within the current study mirroring previous literature surrounding the topic (Helps, 1999; Luiselli, 2014; Zager et. al, 2004). Due to the complex nature of an Autism diagnosis, participants agreed with the point that it can be difficult to make generalisable recommendations for best practice when educating Autistic children. That being said, there was unanimity among interviewees that some changes to the accessibility of resources, generalisable tips and techniques for classroom management in the instance where a child with ASD might become distressed and added exposure and awareness to the practicalities in a mainstream classroom during teacher training can be made. This is also reflected in the existing research (Arif et. al, 2013; Cassady, 2011; Kossewska, 2019). Finally, all participants were able to provide clear and in-depth recommendations for what could be done in the future regarding the education of children with Autism. This was due to their accumulative experience in the field, which emerged as the most prevalent and robust theme, particularly congruent when compared with the other themes within the current study. There was mutual agreement that years of experience has a vital role to play in becoming comfortable within teaching children with Autism, and letting feelings of apprehension or worry subside, however there was also mutual agreement that there are provisions and

adaptations that can be made to the current teacher training programmes in order to better equip its students to prepare for the role, particularly within an Irish population with the prevalence in Autism diagnoses increasing annually. These points were also reiterated within the existing literature (Bolourian et. al, 2021; Higginson et. al, 2012; Khalil et. al, 2020; Lozic, 2014). Overall, the four themes extracted from the data are representative of the existing literature, and when taking this data into account of prior research, they provide testimonies of universal experiences that are illustrations of experiences shared by teachers not only in Ireland, but globally.

Study Strengths and Limitations

The current study used a qualitative approach, which by design typically recruits much fewer participants, but procures much richer data through the medium of interviews (Gill, 2020). Although the smaller sample size could be viewed as being a weakness in the study's design, data saturation was achieved and the sample size had also coincided with Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations for performing thematic analysis. The use of a qualitative approach also enabled the researcher to obtain rich data surrounding this topic, which could be seen as being more appropriate for the topic in this study as opinions were vital in order to assess results and make recommendations for future research. One limitation would be the variance in participant career lengths. Many participants who took part had been teaching for over two decades, providing a gap in those who had qualified more recently, yet this enabled the researcher to be provided with guidance and recommendations of what should be done by those who had become experts in the field as a result of their experience. The lack of consistency in data collection is a weakness that can be observed in this study, however accommodations were made to those who wanted to take part but faced location limitations, resulting in the researcher providing accommodations for these participants over video calls. There were concerns that there may be reluctance to participate in the study over

apprehension of providing opinions on topics of a sensitive nature, particularly as participants were invited to comment on past experiences they had had within their careers. Admittance to a lack of adequate training may have resulted in worries over a bias in the researchers opinion over the efficacy of the participant's job performance, however neither of the above came to the fore across any of the interviews. The researcher's commitment to a qualitative approach deemed difficult during recruitment due to certain time and location restraints, yet the data procured as a result of the interviews is a significant strength, as it is representative of the teacher cohort and encompasses what the expectations vs the realities of the role really are.

Clinical Implications and Future Research Recommendations

There are multiple important clinical implications from the current study's findings. The results of this study coincided with previous papers, highlighting the immediate need for revisions to the current teacher training programmes in order to provide curriculum that not only encompasses theory, teaching techniques and emphasis on planning but also the practicalities and realisms of mainstream classes with the inclusion of children with ASD (Boujut et. al, 2017; Eldred, 2021; Segal, 2014; Teffs & Whitbread, 2009). This is also even more particularly important due to the increase in ASD diagnoses and rates of integration of these children on all levels of the spectrum in mainstream schools. The findings of this study showed a leniency on collegial advice and support, along with parental. This strengthens the previous point, whereby the lack of adequate training is showing to be made up in other areas through self-led learning. In the current climate where the levels of those presenting with ASD traits are higher year on year, revisions to current teacher training programmes could aid in equipping students with meaningful tools to prepare them to teach any child, in any situation. Along with initial teacher training, it could be argued that more widespread emphasis on continuous professional development could be employed, to ensure all

practicing teachers are kept up to date on the ever changing landscape of education for those with ASD. The possibility of making CPD mandatory for all teachers could aid in regulating self-led learning, through teaching and learning from colleagues nationally.

Future research may develop these findings further, by recruiting participants with a broader range of career lengths or multiple representatives of a certain number of years teaching, to allow for a more consistent report of data from those who would have had a similar college experience. Additionally, future research could open this study to student teachers to employ a mixed methods approach longitudinal in design. This could provide feedback from those currently in teacher training to when they graduate, in order to gain insight into specificities that would enhance these courses, and what is needed to improve them in the context of ASD education.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to Autism research in the context of education, as it has harvested and provide real experiences and useful recommendations from those who could be deemed as experts due to their commitment and experience within their careers. The results of this study show that across the board, newly qualified teachers universally feel anxious, apprehensive, ill-prepared and desperate due to the lack of a concrete foundation of learning they could fall back on for educating a child with ASD from their teacher training. As these teachers evidentially came into contact with students on all varying degrees of the spectrum, they felt required to search for assistance from others for a plethora of information from a hose of resources such as staff and parents, including techniques, tips, classroom and behavioural management, and advice. The training they received didn't accurately represent everyday life in the classroom, not did it move with the modifications and variations in special education nowadays. Communal support from all areas is strong, but in the end with

experience comes knowledge and changes can be made to the current curriculum surrounding this topic to better equip those currently in the process of being qualified. The above themes were consistent regardless of career length also, proving that a need for change has been on the horizon for some time. This study adds to the minimal literature within an Irish cohort, providing an opportunity both for future research and for highlighting the importance of revisions being made to the current teacher training curriculum. Due to the quality of the data, the researcher hopes that this can be achieved, and also hopes to expand this study in the future.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview Schedule

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. What age range was your most recent class that included a student/students with Autism?
3. Was this your first experience in having a student with Autism in your class?
4. Can you talk to me about what you were taught in college around educating children with Autism?
5. If this was your first experience, how prepared did you feel prior to commencing teaching this student(s) relying only on your learning about this disability whilst in college?
6. How did your experience differ from your expectations?
7. If this wasn't your first experience, how prepared did you feel prior to commencing teaching this student after now being able to use past experiences to help guide your teaching approach?
8. Talk me through a typical day in the life of teaching a child with Autism in a mainstream class.
9. How did you deal with any situations where the student may have become distressed or overwhelmed in the classroom?
10. Did you find that these techniques came from learning from personal experiences or what you were taught in college?
11. Do you feel as though the curriculum you were taught about this topic gives an accurate and fair representation of the experiences of teaching a student with Autism?
12. Finally, would you have any advice to give to a newly qualified teacher with no experience of teaching children with Autism that would help them in the classroom?
13. ***N.B. OMMITTED QUESTION FROM PILOT INTERVIEW:*** Without taking into account added support from any potential SNAs in your classroom, do you feel as though your training **only** provided ample information that made you feel fully equipped when teaching a student with Autism?

Appendix 2

Participant Information Sheet

This is a document containing information about the research study you are being invited to partake in. Should you wish to become a participant within this study, please take the time read the entire contents of this document. It details why this research is being done and what your participation would involve. Should you have any further questions following reading this document, please don't hesitate to contact me by using the contact details provided at the end of this sheet.

What is this study about?

I am a final year student enrolled in the BA in Psychology programme at National College of Ireland. As part of my final year studies, I am required to carry out an independent research project on a topic I feel needs to be highlighted and further studied. The general aim of my project is to investigate teachers experiences teaching children with ASD.

What will taking part in this study involve?

If you choose to take part in this study and become a participant, you will be asked to complete an interview discussing the topic of education and Autism, where you will be invited to reflect on your experiences in the classroom from the academic year **prior** to this one. Interviews will take place in person at a time and place suitable to you. Arrangements can be made for virtual interviews through Teams if necessary. Interviews will likely be no longer than an hour, **and will be audibly recorded.**

Who can take part?

You are invited to take part if you are a fully qualified primary school teacher
You are invited to take part if you have experience teaching a mainstream class in with the inclusion of at least one child with Autism **prior** to this academic year

Do I have to take part?

All participation involved in this research is voluntary. Those who decide not to partake will be subject to no consequences. Should you decide to partake in this study, you can withdraw from participation at any time by notifying me using the contact details below. However, it is important to note that the data generated by you will be anonymous, therefore once the transcriptions from the interviews have been created it will not be possible to withdraw from the study due to individual responses being unidentifiable. As previously mentioned, the research will require you to reflect on past experiences teaching children with Autism prior to this academic year. There is a fractional risk that may provoke feelings of distress. If you feel that these topics would be too sensitive to provide data on, it is advised that you do not partake in the study.

What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?

Although there are direct benefits to you taking part in this research, the data collected will greatly contribute to the pre-existing research already completed in this topic. As previously mentioned, some of the topics being examined within the interview may cause slight distress for some participants. I would like to reiterate the fact that should this be the

case, or if for some reason you decide that you no longer wish to contribute to this study, you are entitled to withdraw participation and terminate the interview or withdraw your data prior to transcription.

Please refer to the end of this sheet for my contact information and for support services in place in the case of any emotional distress caused.

Will taking part be confidential and what will happen to my data?

All data will be treated in the strictest confidence. The interviews will take place one-to-one in a location that is convenient to the participant and provides sufficient privacy. All interviews will be recorded using a recording application, and these interviews will then be transcribed for analysis. Audio recordings will be destroyed once the data has been transcribed. Any information in the interview transcript that could identify the participant or any other individual (e.g. names, locations) will be anonymised. Each participant will be assigned a unique ID code, and their data will be stored under this ID code, separate from their name or other identifying information

As this is a qualitative study, direct quotes from interviews may be included in the presentation of the results., but these quotes will be anonymised and will not contain any information that could identify the participant or any other individual in any circumstance. All voice recording data will be stored and managed in line with GDPR guidelines. Should you have any queries in relation to data protection for this project, please contact the NCI data protection officer at Niamh.scannell@ncirl.ie.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results from the research may be shared at a scientific meeting and may be published in articles but only in aggregate form.

FURTHER CONTACT INFORMATION AND HELPLINES:

Researcher: Lauren Barrett
Email: X20303943@student.ncirl.ie
Supervisor: Dr Amanda Kracen
Email: Amanda.kracen@ncirl.ie

Helplines:

NTO Helpline for Teachers

Telephone: 1800 411 057

Samaritans:

Telephone: 116 123

Autism Helpline:

Telephone: 0808 800 4104

Relying on their Teacher Training Practices

EAS Service

Telephone 1800 411 057

Text "Hi" to 087 3960010

These helplines are available 24/7 & 365 for anyone who may need support following study participation.

Appendix 3

Participant Consent Form

Participants consent to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I give my written consent to participate now, I can withdraw my data without penalty up until my interview is transcribed.
- I understand I am being asked to take part in an interview where my answers and any information I give will be audibly recorded.
- I understand that once transcription has been completed and the audio files have been destroyed I won't be able to withdraw that data as it will be anonymous and unidentifiable to researchers.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask my researcher questions about the study by email, text and in person.
- I understand that the research will be completed during this current academic year.
- I understand that participation involves taking part in an interview on topics of a sensitive nature regarding my personal feelings that may have arisen during my professional life.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research, but that my data will be used in order to contribute to this research topic.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially, and that my consent form will be stored securely along with my interview and its transcription throughout the course of the study.

- I understand that my identity will remain anonymous throughout the course of this study apart from my signed consent form and audio file from interview.
- I understand that signed consent forms will be given to my researchers supervisor, and will be stored safely and confidentially in a locked filing cabinet until my researcher has received the results of their dissertation.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

Participant's consent to take part in research

- I understand that I am agreeing to the above terms and I am aware that I have the right to withdraw my participation and/or data from the research should I want to.

Signature of research participant

.....

Date

Signature of participant

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

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.....

Date

Signature of researcher

Appendix 4

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Age of teacher:
2. Length of teaching career:
3. Experience teaching in a special school/ASD unit (Yes/No)
4. Is this academic year your first year teaching a mainstream class with a child with Autism?

Appendix 5

Debriefing Sheet

This is a document containing information about the research study you have now partaken in. Please take the time read the entire contents of this document. It details why this research is being done and what the data generated from your participation will be used for. Should you have any further questions following reading this document, please don't hesitate to contact me by using the contact details provided at the end of this sheet. I would like to sincerely thank you for your time and for contributing to my research within this topic.

Why have I been asked to complete this research?

You have been asked to complete this research in order to enable further study to have been carried out on a topic I felt needed to be highlighted and further researched. The general aim of my project was to investigate whether or not teachers' experiences of being responsible for the education of a child with Autism differed from their learned theory.

What will my data be used for?

The paper records (i.e. the signed consent forms) have been stored securely, in a locked filing cabinet, accessible only by me and my supervisor. Any consent forms signed by you have been retained throughout the course of the study until study completion. This is for researchers records that you did give consent for your data to be collected.

Is my data confidential?

Yes, your data is completely confidential and non-identifiable due to the unique ID you were assigned at the beginning of the study. The only data that is not anonymous is the signed consent forms, which will be destroyed following publication.

Where can I get support should I require it?

Below is a list of helplines should you require them.

Helplines:

NTO Helpline for Teachers

Telephone: 1800 411 057

Samaritans:

Telephone: 116 123

Autism Helpline:

Telephone: 0808 800 4104

Appendix 6

Letter of Permission to Principals

Re: Ethical Approval for Study

National College of Ireland (NCI)

Mayor Street

IFSC

Dublin 1

17th October 2022

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is to confirm that Lauren Barrett has received conditional approval from the Ethics Filter Committee at NCI to carry out her study: Expectation vs Reality: Teachers Experiences of Being Responsible for the Education of a Child with Autism in Contrast to their Learned Theory.

Full ethical approval will be granted upon agreement/consent from you, Mr Power of Holy Family JNS. The study is being carried out under the supervision of Dr Amanda Kracen. If you have any further questions, please contact me at the email address below.

Best regards,



Dr Michelle Kelly (on behalf of the Psychology Ethics Filter Committee)

Assistant Professor of Psychology

National College of Ireland

Tel: + 353 1 6599256

Email: michelle.kelly@ncirl.ie

Appendix 7

Recruitment Poster

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!
YOUR VOICE MATTERS

ARE YOU A FULLY QUALIFIED TEACHER WITH EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM?
HAVE YOU TAUGHT A CHILD PRIOR TO THIS ACADEMIC YEAR WITH AUTISM IN A MAINSTREAM CLASS?


WE ARE CURRENTLY LOOKING FOR FULLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS TO TAKE PART IN A PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH PROJECT.

OUR AIM IS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN BEING A PARTICIPANT AND TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES PLEASE:
CONTACT LAUREN BY EMAIL AT
X20303943@STUDENT.NCIRL.IE

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SHARE THIS SHEET WITH COLLEAGUES FROM OTHER PRIMARY SCHOOLS THAT YOU FEEL AS THOUGH MAY BE INTERESTED.

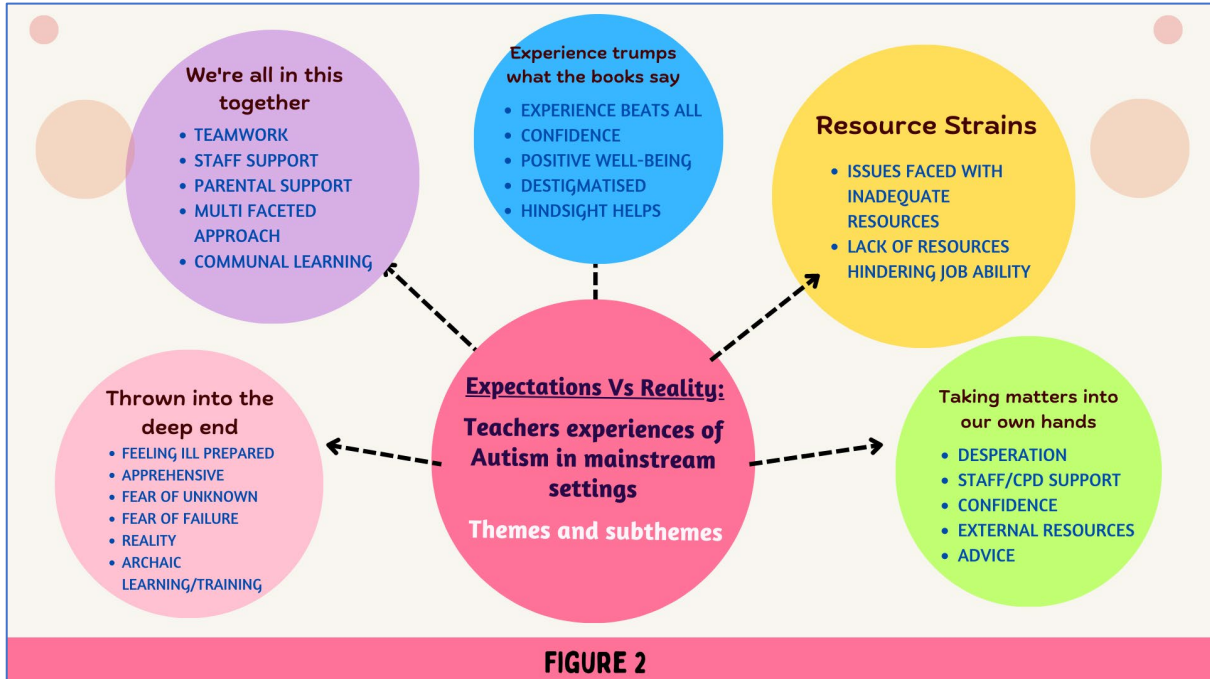
LAUREN WILL FOLLOW UP WITH FURTHER DETAILS RELATING TO THE RESEARCH ONCE YOU GET IN CONTACT. THIS WOULD NOT MEAN YOU ARE REQUIRED TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH.



Appendix 8

Figure 2

Initial Themes for Thematic Analysis



Appendix 9

Sample of Data

INTERVIEWER OK so The time is [OMITTED] I'm here with [OMITTED] You consented for this meeting to be recorded and transcribed

PARTICIPANT Yes, that's no problem

INTERVIEWER Excellent OK So start with the easy question then So how many years have you been teaching?

PARTICIPANT That 17 years

INTERVIEWER 17years OK And then what age range was your most recent class that would have included the student or students with autism?

PARTICIPANT second class

INTERVIEWER Second class OK, so around kind of the 8-9 year old mark

PARTICIPANT Yes

INTERVIEWER Perfect So, OK So then was this, would this have been your first experience and having a student in your class? And if it wasn't, maybe do you wanna chat about what would have been your first experience that would have had a child with autism in your class?

PARTICIPANT No So my very first experience with a childhood autism was my very first year of teaching So as an NQT, and I had junior infants. there was a four year old boy and he would be have been on the more extreme side of autism, so I suppose trying to self-regulate rocking hugely on the floor, on the chair and colouring black over every colour in sheet He would have been nonverbal, did not speak for the entire year, was not assessed where parents had not Brought this up with any healthcare professionals in any of his milestones or any of his developments before he reached school, and so he would have been my very first experience of a child with autism and he would have been And as I said, on the severe end of showing autistic traits.

INTERVIEWER And obviously you mentioned that he wasn't and didn't have a diagnosis or an official diagnosis, It was just kind of your own findings or what he was presented in the class But like, can you talk to me then a bit about what you were taught in college around educating autistic children because you mentioned that you were an NQT, so you obviously would be fresh out of, you know, your studies and stuff like that So what did you kind of learn up until that point about the diagnosis?

PARTICIPANT And as far as I am remembering, obviously 17 years ago, it's a while to remember back, but we had at I don't think was any more than a three-week placement, possibly a four week placement and that was every Friday in a special class and that was at the final term just before we finished in college and autism was - Was not brought up at all

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from what I can remember, it would have been, I suppose, resource and resource is what it would have been called at the time and learning support that was focused on so withdrawing kids for just curriculum support and that was as far as our special Ed training went for those three weeks And as far as I know, it was just a Friday of every week for three weeks or four weeks So it was little or nothing, No emphasis put on it, never had an actual lecture in special Ed in (OMITTED)

INTERVIEWER OK And so yes, you wouldn't have had maybe any kind of notes or any theory around I suppose any type of of learning disability in the classroom, whether it be autism or dyslexia or whatever like that or would have just kind of been kind of a general overview?

PARTICIPANT Not at that time, Dyslexia would have been discussed alright Probably the most it would have been discussed and dyslexic tendencies, and you would have known things to look out for it just because of, I suppose it was popular at that time in as regards And you know, knowledge coming out within and becoming more diagnosis becoming more common and dyslexia and then maybe the previous or years But autism was relatively new back then

INTERVIEWER And then obviously you mentioned that that this was an infants class and it was your first experience probably as you're having your own class, but like How prepared do you feel are kind of what feelings did you feel prior to commencing teaching this student like relying only on your learning or relying only on what you would have gone through and college up until that point?

PARTICIPANT

And I remember it, it was not a nice experience at all. He was he was He had obviously physically huge needs He had psychological huge needs And he obviously then had educationally wise It was his first year in primary school and in junior infants, he achieved nothing that another junior infant in that class would have achieved by the end of the year holding pencil, sitting, using different colours Speaking, as I said, he was nonverbal So When you have no experience and it's just that I had a very good principle, who was very experienced and before any diagnosis it was picked up that clearly there was an issue here I do know that it took quite a while to get his diagnosis Just being in the system and before second class So I think first class, my memory serves me right He actually went to a special school So he was taken out of mainstream completely That's, I suppose gives you an idea of how severely on the spectrum he was

INTERVIEWER

Yeah

PARTICIPANT

But it was just his parents were quite Umm His parents were quite vulnerable from what I can remember, they weren't educated themselves and he was the oldest So I suppose he had two younger brothers and sisters, so they probably just didn't have even much experience But he would have shown huge signs of autism from From one years of age and he wouldn't have met his milestones And I know that came out after I had him, but again, it just wasn't picked up in that particular case And I think it was, it was It was maybe less common and to diagnose kids with with autism back that long ago, and whereas now I think things have hugely improved and what I've seen in my later years of teaching and things, have you

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improved as regards identifying children who are showing signs of autism or autistic traits and the the diagnosis seems to be much faster

INTERVIEWER Ohh, like obviously you were an NQT at this stage, so you're going to have, I suppose, certain feelings towards trying to get into a class by yourself as it is anyway But I suppose how did your experience then differ from your expectations in a general sense as well to to be in this classroom and then now have to cater for the additional needs that you were presented with in one of the students?

PARTICIPANT Well, I suppose the initial thing is I did not have an SNA, so it was a class of there was at least in that class And so I didn't even have the support of an SNA, which I would have had in subsequent years since I moved to my other school

INTERVIEWER Yeah

PARTICIPANT And so that was obviously a huge thing It's time because he had huge, as I said And he just could not self-regulate and he was he would he would hit other children, lash out with his hands, would be going He wouldn't be trying to hurt them It would just be he would be invading their personal space because he just would be constantly this massive rocking, flailing of hands And I know now he was trying to self-regulate But back then with no knowledge and no kind of education and this

INTERVIEWER OK

PARTICIPANT And it was It was very difficult to manage that with so many other four year olds in the class and keep them safe and keep him safe and also try to try to, in my innocence at that time, try to teach him like everyone else and try to get through to him Whereas if I had the knowledge I had now if I had been trained and teacher training college as to what to do and how to help these children, he would have had a very different first year in primary school

INTERVIEWER Yeah, I'm like, I suppose in that then like, you know, was there, I suppose it was probably a very different experience than what you would have imagined it was going to be?

PARTICIPANT Ohh was extremely different experience and and you know like that you go into college and you're kind of taught that you know and there might be different levels of ability in a class but that they will all be able for the curriculum and they'll all be at a certain you know obviously junior infants they're just starting off but that they'll all be able to do the same thing and it was just very obvious that even the time it would take to try and settle him or to try and keep him and I suppose happy for any lesson that he would take a huge amount of time so yeah that was very daunting as an NQT because And nobody has warned you this Nobody has told you to expect this, and it is totally different to maybe what you had in your mind's eye when you had your own class

INTERVIEWER And I like your mentioned there earlier on that like you know obviously your career is progressing then and you've moved on to different schools and you know I suppose in general the trajectory of of special special needs to learn and has moved on and in the school system But like you know as you did gain experience and you started get another

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classes then how did your teaching styles change as you started to you know get SNA and all the kind of stuff when you would have dealt with other students then he would have autism in your class?

PARTICIPANT And well I suppose my next very obvious experience would have been when I came to this school, I mean now So I would have started in second class there and it was the first year our school had set up an ASD unit So he, Umm, the boy in question was assigned to my class I was his mainstream teacher But again, he was severely autistic, so he had a teacher to himself in this new autistic unit that was set up so he would come in and he would have lunch with us, that small break and big break with his His unit teacher and he would sometimes try and integrate in things that we're doing So if there were suitable, if we were doing a very quiet art lesson where you had kind of calming music on and there were just drawing or they were just sketching and the whole the whole lesson was based about silence and being absorbed in the lesson, something like that, he would sit in And he would cope very well because his sensory issues would have been covered And so I learned a huge amount that year just from seeing even, you know, the pecks, even all the different things, all the strategies that we're used to help this child And he made huge progress from the start of the year to the end of the year So he was probably my biggest learning curve in the whole autism units And what I suppose strategies and what Watched even concrete materials that you can use to help them kind of formulate their day and picture cues And he was nonverbal as well So even his diet changed from chicken Nuggets and chips that were heated in microwave to towards the end of the year Actually eating a sandwich like the other boys would eat And it was just caught up in a certain way So he had massive sensory issues he had And auditory issues He was again, a really extreme case And then as as the years went on, I would have had their class and 6th class and I would have had Boys with autism who were in mainstream and for the majority of the day there were not assigned to a unit and but they would get special class And support for maybe an hour in the day, so that was usually maybe OT or or big movement breaks or just a very kind of strict routine of what they would do out there But they would cope very well with maths, English, Irish and all the curriculum areas they would have been extremely bright They would be verbal and it's just like that You would have to be very Aware of the noise level in the class of how you spoke to the class as a whole, keep your voice low that we kept the exact routine of whatever was on the timetable There was no change in things up, but those boys would have coped very well in mainstream with their kind of routine access to special class then for non curricular issues it was it was really OT or it was, I suppose, specialized curriculum for them That wasn't part of the mainstream curriculum

INTERVIEWER I mean, you know, you know, things progressively change over the years compared to to the start of your career Like what you're saying But like, you know, how prepared do you feel then as you did start, I suppose getting a few years under your belt and stuff like that and you started to interact with a, suppose a couple of different students on all varying levels of the spectrum How did you feel compared to what you would have when you started?

PARTICIPANT I was way more prepared It was not daunting And I felt I was helping the children in my class, whether they were fully assigned in my class or like that, whether they were assigned to a unit and they were part of my mainstream class, and I felt hugely supported by the other staff in the school, I felt And I felt motivated to do further training We do courses, we do CPD and like that, where was pecks, whether it was sign language for certain kids So the support was massive, the knowledge was massive Even as a school

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community, we knew why the teacher in the unit was doing a certain thing and a certain day in the car under outside, we were all educated together as opposed to it being a unit with a closed door Not really know what's going on That's a different kind of education, a different kind of teachers not to do it mainstream We were very much encouraged as a staff and still are That we were all one unit that I could be in the unit as the the, the special unit teacher next year and And if there's constant movement and that ability is always there, so now we have I think, (OMITTED) From preschool up to six class So we have constantly built on that year on year So my knowledge and my experience would be massive over the years now compared to year one when I started where I really had nothing and autism was not something I'd come across or actually was able to identify only that I knew this behavior was not normal and it was completely different to the other children in the class and it stood out so much and the only person I'd go to who I did go to was my principal who straight away was able to identify that it's a huge issue here, but we can do nothing The process is so long To get them assessed and that is unfortunately for that child that did happen So things have improved, yeah

INTERVIEWER Yeah, I'm gonna get you touched on there as well Like obviously you're you're speaking about the fact that, you know, you didn't feel as though you were adequately trained when you were in college But like the the, I suppose, the idea of the continuous professional development was that an intrinsic feeling for you that you felt you had to go and get an external source of more information on how to teach these students and how to support them in the classroom, or was it just a case that, you know, that's how it kind of fell? Or where did that come from? Was that something that you wanted to do yourself or was it something that you felt as though that you needed to do?

PARTICIPANT And a bit of both You're hugely motivated with what you have in your own classroom, and that always shapes whatever continuous professional development you you try to do that somewhere because you want to get value out of what you're paying for on your time and you wanted to help your teaching in the in the following year And that's the whole point of it And and really there are amazing courses out there that probably weren't out there for years ago and and again, whether you have a child in your class with autism or a year that you may not know, there's a child coming in, you are constantly building on what's going on Around the school, even if the child is not in your class, you have an interest in you And like I said, you see things going on You know exactly why they're doing that So knowledge is power So I think it was, it was definitely motivated by what I had in my class and what I may have been taking in our knew I would be taking in the th class with somebody attached to a unit or coping well in mainstream, but would be on the autistic spectrum and might have behavioral issues are just might And have sensory issues and and but, but academically very bright and could cope in their in their mainstream class But I suppose You are you You have to train in those things in order to keep up to date and in order to educate yourself, whether you have them or you don't have them If you continue not to do courses or not to educate yourself in them, you really are like back from when you were in in QT and and it is something that I don't think any teacher can avoid in this day and age... is to - to keep themselves as up to date with the research and what's best practice for autistic children And also that counts within either mainstream or special Ed or whatever area you come from because there's constant change in primary school which is good, But all teachers need to be constantly upskilled to keep up with it

INTERVIEWER Here I suppose like anything, there's gonna be like there's gonna be

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progression in every and any area of life So I suppose it is probably vital, particularly with something that is progressing so quickly somewhere like special Ed like it's it's vital to keep keep yourself kind of clued in and what's going on now And as you say

PARTICIPANT Absolutely And all CPD is led by teachers You never really, you're never really forced by management or any other teacher or school policy to do any particular course It is really the teachers who do want to educate themselves And the majority of my colleagues, I would say, have all done something in this area Now, there are exceptions There are all the teachers who would just not interested, don't believe it's nothing to do with them As I said, it's a special Ed area They're not special Ed They're always going to be mainstream There always going to be six class teachers Nothing is going to change and they would not But you can see how Their ignorance comes across, then, when there is whole school stuff going on, or if there is stuff being brought in that they don't understand And I think I think that is not a good thing I think all teachers maybe not compulsory and it shouldn't be compulsory, but there should be something brought into school if if people are not willing to do these courses and in their own time, whether they, you know whether it's a CPD course in the summer or just courses as they come up through the year, there should be whole school training for all staff, whether they're involved with children with autism or not, in order to make it I suppose the best place for children to to flourish and to have the best rounded education, whether they happen to be in that spectrum or they happen to be completely mainstream, they're still getting the best If all teachers are, I suppose, looking out for this then, and a lot of children can go undiagnosed for a lot of years like that They're very bright academically, it can go miss They can be just, I suppose there's so many different ends of the spectrum from one end to another, and we definitely have kids throughout the years who might have been in th or th class before they've been diagnosed actually came back to diagnosed of on the spectrum or

INTERVIEWER Yeah

PARTICIPANT My general learning disability or you know what I mean, different things that were not picked up in their first six years or seven years of primary school

INTERVIEWER

Down, I suppose theres so many diagnosis now Of autism and aspergers Like you know, it is even stuff like pervasive developmental disorder and all that kind of stuff that could be it And I suppose you're you're on the money there When you say like, if there's teachers that don't want to expose change their their learning styles is going to be stagnancy in their teaching methods then and that's not going to benefit anyone really as they go on like you know

PARTICIPANT No

INTERVIEWER And but like on on the topic of other staff then like you would have, I suppose, considering the fact that when you started, you wouldn't have felt as though that you were maybe as adequately trained as you would have liked to help support your kids So you felt as though that when you were relying on other members of staff, do you feel as though that they're learnings and their knowledge would have come of come from their own experiences or like that, you know, they're training or any other professional development they would have done throughout the trajectory of their career?

PARTICIPANT Across the boards in both schools, both big schools, it was definitely the teachers who had a genuine interest themselves who would have gone on to either do you know the special egg course or the Diploma in Special Ed, or they would just say this is an area I'm really interested as it started progressing So as autism started being something that was talked about And I suppose what you could look out for and that it would definitely be teachers would have educated me

INTERVIEWER Yeah

PARTICIPANT With the staff I knew who to go to and who would have been a powerhouse of knowledge in in any area, or any diagnosis that I was doing within a mainstream class or in in a special Ed class, and they were always people who were self-motivated to find out themselves or to train up themselves and were willing to help. Without them I don't know what I would have done because it was so easy to just get lost and overwhelmed with no guidance

INTERVIEWER Yeah

PARTICIPANT Exactly, yeah

INTERVIEWER You're always gonna know that when you're in it, when you're in the staffroom Who who's who's the one to watch in a sense, because you were talking there about the different kind of exposed concrete materials that they now would have And like, a lot of, I suppose if you walk into any shop there like that, you can see a lot of sensory toys and kind of fidget toys and all that kind of stuff That would have been new compared to what compared to what it would have been before So can you talk me through a typical day in the life of teaching a childhood autism in a mainstream class that would be now, whether you have a mainstream class or not like What would it be like for you?

PARTICIPANT So what kind of supports have been in place?

INTERVIEWER Even just in your in your just talking through a typical day of of If you have a child who's presenting autistic autistic traits, or maybe who is diagnosed, what would a typical day be like as a general as a whole?

PARTICIPANT I suppose it's it's

PARTICIPANT Probably hard to answer that because no two children with autism or anything alike, and even in a even an autistic unit, there could be five to six children, and they're completely different ends of spectrum different, you know, different like that all sensory and OT is done, but they all do different things for different reasons So one might need huge kind of sensory like you said fidget toys and and the toys that they can use in their mouths for kind of that sensory feeling or something have headphones An earmuffs because they can't have any noise or their children cope quite well and they go in and out to a mainstream class from the unit that there is assigned to and they can cope with the hustle and buses so

INTERVIEWER Yeah

PARTICIPANT And I suppose it's it's just following routine for those kids It's like that If

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they're nonverbal, the pecks it, it's I've seen some I've seen from from the most severe end of the spectrum to the most to the less severe, where they really fit in so well and mainstream You just know that there is a small issue sometimes and it can show in different ways like that, maybe picky about food And it's only when there's a party or just know that they can't cope in yards socially, they can't make friends They're very they're kind of a loner It just all depends on the actual child And it's it's difficult without speaking about specific children, I suppose to say Umm, but the the sports are massive and the money that is put into autistic units and schools with autistic children and the money definitely is being well spent in because you can see that it is helping those children immensely just to progress through their day

INTERVIEWER Like you know, I think there's been a lot of kind of emphasis now on stuff like visual timetables on movement breaking, stuff like that So I suppose if you were in a mainstream class now, again, would you find yourself that you were kind of, I suppose, altering your teaching methods a bit depending on who you have or you know what I mean? Is there kind of a shift in the paradigm of teaching where you would have visual time table maybe for the whole class and that will be benefited those maybe who need it more And in general, everyone is getting help out of it or, you know, compared to maybe what it would have been Once Upon a time for you

PARTICIPANT I think Once Upon a time would have been very individualized to the child who had autism, and it would be a picture or pecks board or whatever they used and would just be that words I think, or what I see now is the shift is that you're trying to make it a whole class thing So like that, it would be a visual timetable for the whole class, whether they're even a senior into the class or not So that everyone is included this inclusion model that you're not singling out this child, that they're anyway different, that if you come into my room and I'm in fifth pass or I'm in th class, you should find it difficult to figure out who is the child with autism because Everyone is included in the same process that helped this one child, but that nobody is disadvantaged because of these things and the only I suppose The only difference is you allow for if you know you have a child with autism in your class and you know their issues and like that it might be sensory, it might be food, you'll know you'll have all the reports and you'll know that before they come into you So again, I suppose just keeping calm, it's maybe teaching the other children like you would hope that they have been together for the previous years So they know this child and what that But like that noise levels and how you speak to children some children get so upset if another children's child is in trouble and you're giving out to that child, you wouldn't give out to the autistic child Same way what you maybe have to pull it back and say OK like that, how I would speak to the childhood autism and with the same how would speak to the child without autism They're all treated the same So that is something I think we've been very conscious about in the last

INTERVIEWER Yeah

PARTICIPANT I would say even 5 to 10 years, whereas before those children were definitely seen as special, they were given special treatment They were given special resources even within the mainstream class But that is the inclusion model now, has really moved away from that And I think that is a really good thing I don't think should be able to straight away pick out a child that is coping well in mainstream Just has special supports in place And I think there's, like you often have a child with autism and you might bring another child for OT or movement breaks or, you know, the things that they would see as fun and every child benefits who gets to go with the child would autism So I I there's no real

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negatives, there's no drawbacks, especially if there's a good system in place It works for everyone in the class because it's working, and that child is kept calm and that child is kept regulated because of what's in place But it should be done in such a seamless way that they nearly don't know And even the other kids don't know that these things are in place to help because this child is special But that's what I see is working best in the last few years

INTERVIEWER

Because it's such like Such a change there even from when I was in school and the, I suppose the technology and the resources that are available, and I suppose people going to have their ear to the ground in the sense of everyone knows everything and everyone's trying to help everyone, so does make it a lot easier than in a whole class approach to kind of to include everyone As you were saying, the inclusion model is so apparent now I am, but I suppose seen as you do have such a a, a long and colourful career like a wealth of years under your belt You know

PARTICIPANT I could offer-

INTERVIEWER So you know, in your opinion then? f we're talking about your training alone, so, so your college years alone Do you feel when I probably know the answer to this, but do you feel as though that would have given you enough information or enough help as it were, to prepare you for the role that you would have had when you stepped into that junior for his class in that September?

PARTICIPANT I can categorically say it gave me zero help, zero knowledge, zero resources to know how to teach a child with Autism, and I don't think that was anything to do with even being an NQT I think had that happened five or six years later, you know... before I encountered a child with severe Autism, it still would have been the five or six years learning on the ground I would have had to have leaned on, not the option to be able to pull anything from my college years and training. It was so curricular based, It was so the pedagogical model compared to what its actually like

INTERVIEWER Yeah So

PARTICIPANT Sometimes completely irrelevant to what is actually happening on the ground in the classroom and I and that has not changed in the last years What they teach in college rarely matches up with what's actually happening on the ground in in mainstream classes, especially at classes and in the units they They definitely, even when you hear from NQT coming out now again, it's just touched on It's a it's a module that might be touched on It's definitely increased in the last years, but there should be far more emphasis on because anyone can teach history and geography and maths and science But not anybody knows how to cope with children who need these specialized interventions and how you could help best them And that is purely through knowledge and skills, learning and And and giving teachers the the, the, the time and the ability to to watch how Best practices and how to the because every child as we as we discussed is so different you might have to try a range of things before you find the thing that actually suits this child And you can say OK this is working This child is getting a lot out of school now So there's so much trial and error but if teachers are not given the full I suppose ream of what's available What you can do, what's about there? What programs are even up and running that have been researching or really good then we're just going to be floundering and hoping that we get the best in it and a school year goes by so fast and that child has missed another year Of where they could make progress due to the the

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teachers, through no fault of their own, the teachers just lack of skills and lack of knowledge that words never Made a priority in college

INTERVIEWER So so when you're, I suppose in your instance then you would have said that, I suppose experience in this in this case would Trump The I suppose how would I put a? Would Trump The learned theory that you would have gotten in that sense, but it can be improved?

PARTICIPANT It definitely has to be improved and what it was seventeen years ago But what I heard to the Grapevine from MQTT starting now, it has an improved massively Really the emphasis should be on special Ed and all the stuff that maybe not experienced up to years of age in your own education It is very nice to unless you have yourself autism or a family member with autism, you're going to have no idea of how to help these children and it takes a lot of time and knowledge to know everything that's available and to know And what to use and when to use it? Some some interventions can can make a child so much worse in in their ability to cope It doesn't help and like that, other interventions work so well, they need very little You know what I mean? So it's it's it is all trial and error, but I think definitely Uh, the department and and the education colleges need to just flip the you know what I mean? You don't need knowledge of maths and English and Irish if you've If you've got nearly points in the leave in search to get into a teachers training college, you have the educational ability to know how to impart that knowledge to mainstream children who can absorb learning very easily It's the children who can't absorb learning It's the children who can't learn in the same way as the mainstream It's the children who will constantly struggle And you'll constantly have to change it up That's where the time, money and effort should be put into team The training two to teach the children that are difficult to teach It's very easy to teach a bright child a bright child nearly leads the learning You are just there for facilitating and giving the information and keeping them, keeping them interested and motivated That it's difficult enough all the way along, but they are self motivated to constantly learn the middle children Then they get it with a little bit of help and you can move It's the weaker, it's the lower end of the children who struggle with learning and learning in the same way as the cohort in the class They are the children that should be given those, you know, the teachers need every tool in the toolbox Try and have those children

INTERVIEWER So I suppose as a final note, then you know Has someone in your position like, would you have any advice then to give to an NQT with no experience of teaching children with autism that would help them in the classroom? Like obviously I understand as you mentioned there will be a stint in a special school, but even at that it doesn't guarantee that you're going to meet the same types of children as you would when paired with other normal abilities Kids, you get what I mean

PARTICIPANT The best way to learn of any of these kind of thing is to watch on the ground what's happening So obviously, even even students in college know have massive opportunity to sub in schools that was never there before before they even qualify or graduate before they even ever become an NQT out in their own realistically, NQTs currently out in their own don't get the experience they need to be able to feel confident in the role especially when it comes to needs like Autism, so try get as much experience in units, in classes, seek out the special ed teachers, seek out the SNAs, learn by observing, learn the different spectrums from one end to another, just try equip yourself as much as you possibly can learn the different the different spectrums from one end to another Severe and pick up Oh yeah, he would be very obvious She would not And how do I help that? So learn on the ground Don't

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think you're going to get knowledge from a book or you know text, you know Research, knowledge and all that is not going to help you on the ground It is going to be course as practical courses, programs and OT sensory all the different things that are coming out What resources to ensure you have, what resources not to use If you see these signs So it'll be learning from people who have massive experience in a wealth of experience in all schools at this stage would have dealt in all bigger schools Would certainly have dealt with so many students over the years with autism, and those teachers and SNA Those staff are the the people who will give you the best training you can get And and bring that back to teacher training college Bring that back to your lectures and say we need more in this It is that it is the presence students who will make any sort of change It is not the teachers who have graduation and gone and paid their money and never going back again It's the teachers in first, second and rd th year who will bring that back and say we need more in this I saw this on placement I saw this sobbing I don't know how to deal with this and there is no shortage of experienced educators who can go back to teacher training college and give give any amount of information that you will use for your whole career And I suppose the owner shouldn't even be on them But I suppose if it is on them, it's up to them to make the change for those who come after them, or even for themselves, if they haven't finished college yet Please offer them to say what's going on on the ground in primary schools at the moment and special Edge is a massive part of any primary school because there is, as you said, more and more diagnosis of more and more disorders and things coming on board that if teachers and essays are not educated on, they are not helping the child in front of them.