

Class Teachers' Perspectives of Meeting the Sensory Needs of Pupils With ASD Within the Mainstream Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with the provisions available for the inclusion of sensory integration in the mainstream classroom to support the needs of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and sensory needs.

While previous studies have examined the effects of sensory difficulties on the educational experience of children with ASD (Ashburner *et al.* 2008; Howe and Stagg 2016), little research has been undertaken within an Irish context to examine the perspectives of primary educators on this topic.

Qualitative methods were used during data collection to explore the current context for inclusion of children with ASD and sensory needs in the mainstream classroom. Themes in relation to teacher education, supporting children with ASD, partnership, barriers, relevant policies and legislation were examined during the research process.

INTRODUCTION

"Inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights" (UNESCO 1994, p.11). Therefore, inclusive education involves transforming educational systems to support students, irrespective of their disability status (UNICEF 2017).

The purpose of this study was to explore the quality of inclusive education within the Irish primary school setting, focusing in particular on facilitating children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and sensory processing disorder (SPD) within mainstream classrooms.

The motivation for this study derived from the researcher's aspiration to become a more informed educator, learning from the experiences of those already in the profession to understand how to make a learning environment conducive for those with ASD and Sensory Needs.

Through the diagnosis and experience of a family member, the researcher had experienced the effects of both adequate and inadequate support for an individual with ASD and so was personally invested in the results of this study.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of experienced teachers on supporting pupils with ASD and Sensory needs within the mainstream setting.

As qualitative research involves "the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes" (Creswell 2013, p.44).

A qualitative approach was adopted with the researcher undertaking six semi-structured interviews allowing insight into the "life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale 1996, p.6).

FINDINGS/ ANALYSIS

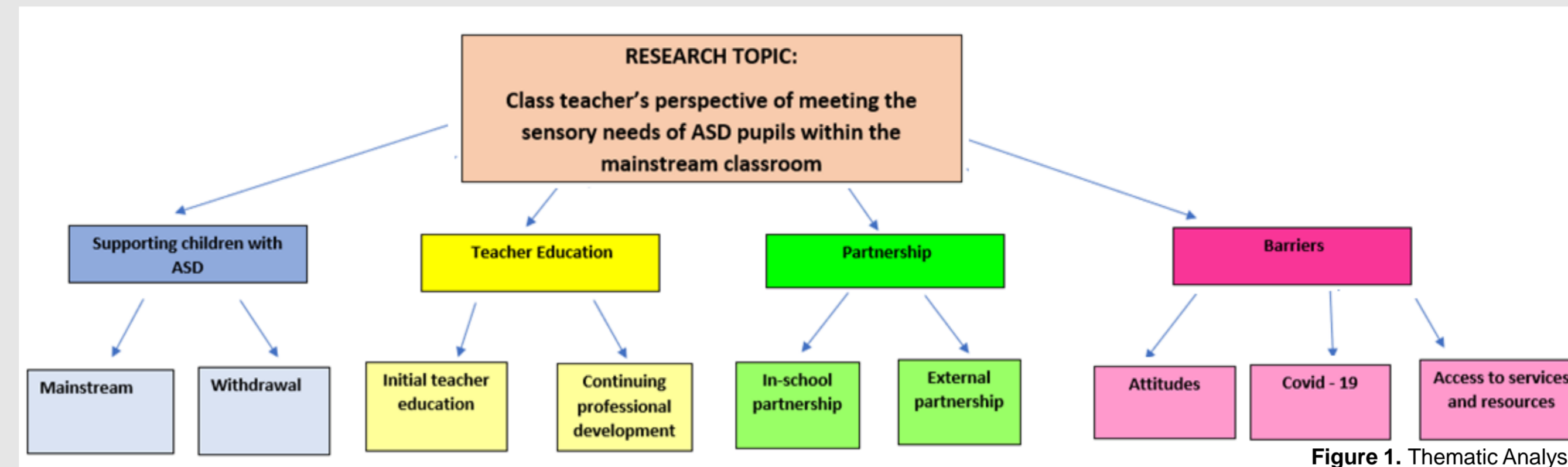


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis

1.Supporting children with ASD:

Mainstream

- Sensory activities within the mainstream classroom are beneficial for students and enables teachers to support varying learning styles and children who are undiagnosed.
- Incorporation of sensory activities into the mainstream classroom can improve academic achievement, concentration as well as alleviate discomfort and anxiety.
- Teachers had concerns with classroom management and time management and practicality of certain strategies within mainstream classrooms.

Withdrawal

- The use of withdrawal was entirely dependent of the severity of each child's needs, with many teachers identifying the need for a balance between both withdrawal and in-class support.
- Withdrawal allows students opportunities for self-regulation and focused interventions. In addition it provides teachers with opportunities to become familiar with a students individual needs.

2. Teacher Education:

Initial Teacher Education

- Did not prepare teachers for teaching students with ASD and Sensory needs, with more practical elements such as a mandatory special education placement needed.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

- Offers teachers valuable experiences to keep up to date with new developments, creates a platform for collaboration between teachers and provides teachers with practical ideas which can be implemented immediately.

3. Partnership:

In-school partnership

- There is a greater chance of success in supporting students with ASD when everyone is invested and as such a whole school approach should be adapted.
- Team teaching offers the opportunity to give students with ASD and sensory needs necessary support and enable them to succeed within the mainstream setting.
- Parents are important educational partners and offer key knowledge and observations regarding their child's development.

External partnership

- Can support teachers in supporting students with ASD and Sensory needs, providing advice to assess the child's needs.
- Communication pathways between schools should be created, to share information and provide support.

4.Barriers:

Attitudes

- Lack of experience and knowledge regarding SEN can negatively influence teachers attitude towards inclusion, inhibit their teaching with feelings of fear. This may result in teachers resistance to incorporating sensory activities into the mainstream.
- It may also prevent teachers from engaging with CPD.

Covid-19

- Online learning presented a number of challenges for students with ASD including the effect of technology on voice, facial gesturing and proximity to read body language.
- In addition it was difficult for students with ASD to be integrated into the mainstream zoom classes as well as facilitate the curriculum and maintaining connections with students.

Access to services and resources

- External services and resources are inadequate with issues including long waiting lists, lack of support and overstretched teachers identified as key areas for improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A series of recommendations emerged from this research, providing guidance for policy makers, practitioners and to inform future research.

- It was recognised that teachers skills, knowledge and efficacy affects their ability to support children with SEN (Reese *et al* 2003). Therefore, the introduction of a mandatory special education placement during Initial teacher education is necessary.
- Due to the worrying inconsistencies reported by teachers an immediate review of the current provisions for external supports and services is required.
- A child centred approach should be adapted by all educational partners in supporting children with sensory needs as it allows for greater understanding and continuity between home and school.
- Additional research, involving a larger sample is required to provide a more in-depth analysis of the perceptions of Irish primary school teachers and their ability to provide for sensory needs within the mainstream setting.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the issue of supporting pupils with ASD and Sensory needs within the mainstream classroom. An inclusive educational environment which is "concerned with the identification and removal of barriers to the presence, participation and achievement of all students" (Ainscow 2020, p.9) has been acknowledged as fundamental in successfully supporting these students and allowing for an individual child-centred approach.

KEY REFERENCES

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