***Teacher’s Perceptions of the Quality of Special Education Teacher training for working with students with special/additional needs.***

*Key Words: Teacher, Quality, Special Education, Training.*

*Acronyms/Abbreviations*

* CPD = Continued Professional Development
* SNA = Special Needs Assistant
* ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorder
* SET = Special Education Teacher/ Special Education Teaching

*Abstract:* It is the purpose of this research to investigate teacher’s opinions of whether they felt their teacher training was of sufficient quality for dealing with students with additional needs. They reflected on their courses in what they did to prepare them to work with students with additional/special needs and how comfortable they felt when confronted with these students. It is well known in teacher training programmes that there are modules in Special Education, but were these modules sufficient? It is well known that the Special Education modules in colleges do place a focus on the more common disabilities seen in education settings today and does not place a focus on complex needs/disabilities that are also seen in education. It is the aim of this research to determine whether a specific special education teacher training programme to educate teachers of these needs would be beneficial in Ireland. In education today, there are more and more students presenting with special/additional needs in classrooms, some being more complex than others. It is the duty of the education system to provide teachers who are competent in working with these students as it is their right. The participants in this research consisted of two primary school teachers and three post primary school teachers, all who had experience with working with students with special/additional needs.

*Introduction*

The objective of this research is to place emphasis on the lack of training provided to teachers in their teacher training programmes for working with students with special/additional needs. It is the intention of this research to investigate teacher’s perceptions of the quality of training they felt they received in their own training as well as discuss whether they feel a specific special education teacher training programme would be beneficial in Ireland. In this research, qualitative research was conducted to allow for the participant’s honest opinions and experiences to be heard. All five participants had experience of working with students with special/additional needs. Each participant stated that they did not feel prepared to work with these students when they finished their teacher training programmes. The participants ranged from one year to forty years qualified and each participant highlighted the lack of training in their teaching programmes. It highlights a chilling reality of how little progress has been made in educating students with special/additional needs in forty years. As well in this research it was noted how much teachers depend on SNA support in their classrooms.

It is the purpose of the research to highlight this dependency teachers place on SNAs in their classrooms when access is available: investigate these teacher’s opinions of their feelings about the quality of their teacher training for working with students with additional/special needs and gain insight as to whether they feel a specific special education teacher training programme would be beneficial in Ireland.

The research conducted for this project determined the themes of lack of training, challenges and dependency that is highly experienced by teachers when teaching students with additional/special needs.

*Literature Review*

In research for this article there were many aspects, outside of Ireland, which opinions were taken from. From this research, the themes of training and challenges prevailed.

It was evident in the research that there was a lack of training for teachers when working with students with additional needs - not only in Ireland but in America and Canada also. In these articles, it was evident that teachers have faced many challenges due to their lack of training in their teaching careers when working with students with special/additional needs.

The perspective this research was read in was how teachers felt when teaching students with complex needs. For example, in one article the focus was on working with students with emotional disorders where educators felt they weren’t trained sufficiently to assist these students and found themselves relying on professional assistance in order to cope. (Gable, et al., 2012. P.2). The limitation to this research was that there was difficulty finding resources within Ireland as well as finding articles that discussed complex needs outside of ASD. Through these articles and research, it was evident that three main themes of training and challenges prevailed.

Training

In relation to teacher training, it is evident that there is a lack of teacher training for special education teaching in regards to working with students with complex needs. These needs would include physical, intellectual, emotional and medical needs. (Gable, et al, 2012) determined this in relation to their study when implementing evidence-based practices for working with students with emotional disabilities where there was lack of training to do so.

“.. belief that beginning teachers require the knowledge and understanding to help them see the child as an individual with a learning difficulty that may be addressed through appropriate teaching; that they can overtime, learn many of the teaching skills and strategies to help them reach out to those in need and meet the challenge of inclusiveness and that they should recognise that there are demanding intellectual as well as practical questions raised by working with children who have special needs.” (Benton, and O’Brien, 2001. P.192).

It is evident in this text that the author believes teachers are to be sufficiently prepared to work confidently with students with all needs. It is also the right of the child with disabilities that they are entitled to an education - shouldn’t this quality of education meet a certain standard?

As seen in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN Act 2004) children with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment and have the same rights to appropriate education as children without special needs. It is highlighted throughout this article of how the quality of education for teachers to provide an inclusive education to those with emotional disabilities needs to be improved. It also stated that most classroom practices of teachers of students with emotional disabilities is now dated. This was evident in findings by Kaczorowski, (2021), carried out in America also in “Teacher’s perceptions of Preparedness to Teach students with Disabilities.” Stated in this was the fact of general teachers and special teachers carrying out their training separately.

In the research, it was found that “general education teachers reported they were neither prepared to implement nor did they make routine use of any of the individual practices.” (Gable et al, 2012, p. 7). These participants carried out surveys about teachers experience with evidence-based practices to aid in educating students with emotional disabilities, to which it was found teachers indicated they were not prepared or trained to do so in their own teaching programmes. A lack of training was also prominent in other articles including “Educators’ Challenges of Including Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Mainstream Classrooms” where the findings of the research conducted determines teachers recommend that more resources, training and support are needed to enhance the education and inclusion of children with ASD. (Lindsay et al, 2013, p.2). Stated in this article, “educators are expected to create an inclusive educational environment, often with few or no guidelines on how to do so.” (Lindsay et al, 2013, p.3). This statement makes it apparent that the teaching education programme did not deliver on how to educate teachers on inclusive education, despite the stipulation from The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ([34]) that all children “should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community” (Article 23). It cannot be denied that there is a similarity in this statement to Montessori’s philosophy of a prepared environment and children teaching themselves. Despite the prominent theme of lack of training for educators throughout this article, there is a limitation to this research in that it is directed toward efficient teaching of students with ASD rather than students with other special/additional needs. Another limitation to this research is that it is Canadian based. It may not be an accurate comparison to teacher education programmes in Ireland. Similar to Ireland, there does appear to be an inclusion framework in place in Canada under Lipsky and Gartner’s ([23]) model. This framework can also be compared to Ireland’s Inclusive Education Framework (NCSE 2011), which is intended for use in every school in Ireland. This framework also aligns with the EPSEN Act 2004. The participants in the research carried out by Lindsay et al, repeatedly mentioned the lack of training made available to educators and they also stated where they saw how it impacted students with ASD when they were unprepared of how to react to an episode or meltdown of a child. Mentioned in the article, the teachers how educational assistants would be a benefit to have in a classroom with students with ASD, this is a contradiction to other research this author has conducted where teachers rely too much on external professionals to manage student behaviours as a result of the lack of preparation to manage these behaviours themselves. Lindsay et al, also discovered in this article that colleagues of the teachers were not aware of the variations in which ASD can present in children, as a result they were educating their colleagues and bring awareness of ASD in their education setting, which is an additional pressure to them.

In an article called “Training Special Education Teachers to Select and Implement Appropriate Procedural Variations of Functional Communication” by Luck et al, 2022, it was stated here that “only about 30% of special education teachers reported that they received direct instruction on evidence-based interventions through their teacher education programs or in-service professional development” (Luck et al, 2022, p.3). This shows that in this study carried out in America there is a clear lack of preparation for special education teachers during their teacher training.

Challenges

In research, through the lack of training for teachers, a lot of challenges have been evident. According to Lindsay, et al, (2013) “Teachers reported several challenges including understanding and managing behaviour; socio-structural barriers (school policy, lack of training and resources) and creating an inclusive environment.” In this article, it is apparent that teachers felt unprepared when working with students with ASD. This research was conducted in Canada, which does set a limitation to these findings. Compared to Ireland, there is the Inclusive Framework, 2011, which is supposed to guide teachers and schools of how to implement inclusivity in their establishments.

“The Inclusive Framework supports the good work that has been ongoing in schools over many years. It is a practical resource that invites schools to reflect critically and evaluate how inclusive values are promoted in classrooms, staffrooms and school yards and in interactions with all members of the school community.” (NCSE, 2011., p.11).

In another article, it was stated again that the lack of training for Special Education Teachers caused strain on the teachers in their practice, which would also present challenges in their teaching careers. This theme of training in teaching programmes is prevalent in the research conducted for this project. “The participants also did not receive training on other function-based interventions that some teachers may find more acceptable.” (Luck et al., 2022). With this statement comes an obvious lack of training as it shows participants in this study were not provided with training to prepare teachers on working with students with specific needs.

It is well known that every child learns differently to another, be it through visual learning, auditory learning, reading or writing learning or kinaesthetic learning, but surely it is the role of the teacher training programme to adequately prepare students to have the ability to cater for all of these learning styles in both a mainstream and special education settings? “Special education and general education teachers must be prepared to address the diverse academic and non-academic needs of students.” (Gable et al., 2012). In turn with this lack of preparation produces challenges for teachers of how to work with students with special needs effectively. It puts huge pressure on teachers of trying to figure out effective strategies of working with students as well as stress on the students. Teachers in Kaczorowski’s research in 2021, found teachers were instructed to “ask experts” or “specialists” or “’x’ is a great resource, try there” when confronted with situations they weren’t prepared for, leaving them with a challenge of figuring out how to support a student on their own accord rather than through appropriate training.

The challenges proven to become educated in SET show that although there may be a lot of CPD available to prepare yourself for working with students with special/additional needs, but why is this training not provided in colleges? In order to become an SET, one must complete mainstream education teaching first to even be considered then they must complete additional training in special and inclusive education which is available through multiple colleges such as Hibernia College, Maynooth University College, University College Cork, Mary Immaculate Collect, University College Dublin, and University of Galway. These may appear to be many options, but it poses a challenge to those who want to be special education teachers where they must complete mainstream teaching first. Is there a need for a specific teaching course for special educational teaching where all complex needs are addressed or is the current system good enough?

*Research Design*

The research design for this project was through qualitative research. This was demonstrated through a series of face-to-face interviews with volunteers from a range of education settings.

“Qualitative research is based in a belief that we continually create and construct our social world by negotiating with others the *meanings* of our actions. Qualitative researchers are interested in the complexity and diversity of human interactions. For qualitative researchers, people and organisations tend to be contradictory and sometimes irrational.” (Roberts-Holmes, 2011, p.70).

The use of qualitative analysis is essential to this project as it allows for comfort in the interview process. Interviews can be given the opportunity to expand on the discussion almost like a conversation rather than an enquiry into their experiences. It is through this where participants will have the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences and expertise to allow for their personal opinions and experiences to come through in research.

It is the intention of the researcher to come from a positivist perspective in this dissertation, although in reality the perspective that is evident would be more of an interpretivist perspective as with qualitative research it is interpreting the opinions of multiple sources.

With the possibility of a contrast in collecting data between participants, it allowed the researcher to interpret the information being presented and analyse it. This would be a different process if using quantitative analysis, but that form does not allow for opinions. It is the opinion of the researcher that quantitative analysis is very black and white, whereas qualitative analysis allows for the grey area of data collection. In collecting data and interpreting it, it is evident that this has come from an interpretivist perspective.

It is the objective of the researcher to gain un-bias and authentic data from participants of this dissertation. In doing so, to ensure triangulation occurs, participants who volunteer for the semi-structured interviews were from primary school, secondary school and special education teaching experience. Triangulation is defined as a “research practice of comparing and combining various resources of evidence to reach a better understanding of the research topic” (Roberts-Holmes, 2011, p.72).

The interviews carried out for this research consisted of five participants, two who were primary school teachers, one a principal and the other three participants were secondary school teachers. All five participants had experiences of working with students with additional needs and their years of teaching experience ranged from one year to forty years.

These semi-structured interviews allowed for participants to really elaborate on their personal experiences of training, teaching and discuss their points of views on the matter of this research project. It was important for these questions to align with the objectives for the research as it is the opinions of these teachers that the findings depend on.

Through collecting data, each interview was recoded on a separate device, which was stored in a protected file on the researcher’s personal device. Each interview was transcribed and themes were pulled from the answers of the participants.

The participants for these semi-structured interviews were all teachers. They were teachers from primary schools, secondary schools and a special education experience. This ensured that there are no ethical issues to arise from the voluntary participants of the interviews and that there was no one who may be vulnerable participating. As a result of the dissertation topic being about teachers feeling prepared or unprepared to work with students with special educational needs once qualified, the most logical participants to interview are qualified teachers from a variety of education settings and experiences. This ensured for unbiased results as these participants range from different ages, gender and qualification.

There are a range of ethical considerations to be carried out in this research project. It is essential that the respect of the participants dignity is maintained. This was done by ensuring they were aware that the interview process is completely voluntary and they could change their mind at any time of the research project. The interview must gain consent from both the participants and their complying work places before collecting and data. In order to minimise risk of harm to the participants there was complete anonymity when recording data as well as privacy and confidentiality being maintained by the interviewer by ensuring any data recorded is privately stored and only the researcher would have access to this. The participants were encouraged to express their own opinions and experiences relating to the topic of the research project and they were not encouraged to express the opinions of others in their answers. In the event where a student’s identity is at risk, this was discouraged and removed from data collection but fortunately that was not necessary.

The analysis of this research was very much the same across the board between participants. The five participants came from different educational backgrounds, three were secondary school teachers, one with SET class experience, all had experience with students with special/additional needs and two were retired primary school teachers, one of which was a principal and the other who was a resource teacher and special needs co-ordinator for a number of years.

Each participant endured a number of years in their teacher training programmes which they said “on paper” they should have had the knowledge to work with students with special/additional needs but in practice they did not feel prepared. Their preparation for these roles came from either learning as they go, experience, research or CPD courses done on their own accord. They felt their colleges did not sufficiently teach them strategies to support students with complex needs and believed that a specific special education needs teacher training course would be extremely beneficial for schools and students.

*Findings*

It is the objective of carrying out these interviews to identify how teachers feel about their training in regards to special education teaching. Some teachers have been in education between four and six years. The participants of these interviews have done a four-year training courses prior to this research, one of them is in her fifth year of education. The purpose of this research is to investigate after a four or a six-year teacher training programme are teachers still left feeling unqualified to work with students with additional needs which is an injustice to both the students and the teachers. An objective in these interviews is to investigate if they feel a specific special education teacher training course would be beneficial in Ireland.

The teachers who participated include secondary school teachers and primary school teachers who were both members of management prior to retirement. The limitations to this research would be that these teachers are all based in Wexford. Despite all having a range of experience in different counties, some had experience teaching outside of Ireland. The teachers participating in this research range from being newly qualified to retired which highlights both changes and lack of change in the last forty years of teacher training. With all these teachers graduating from various colleges, it does allow for a range of different experience in both their training and their teaching.

Each participant answered the same questions relating to this research project, some with additional conversation which came up during the interview process. The interviews with the teachers who are both retired was a very interesting perspective as they both experienced lack of training in their teaching programmes. They also witnessed and had been a part of the positive changes relating to special education teaching that have been implemented in education over the years.

There were multiple similar opinions and experiences relating to the quality of their teacher training programmes between these participants. These included;

* Teacher training programmes prepare students for the theory of teaching students with special/additional needs rather than strategies for supporting these students.
* Teacher training programmes should provide more hands-on experience for students to prepare for working with students with special/additional needs.
* With working with students with special/additional needs, in special classes or mainstream classes there can be huge challenges. This is very dependent on the ability of the class and students.
* Teachers are hugely dependent on SNA support in their classrooms.
* Teachers feel that school-based training days related to special education teaching would be beneficial in their teaching.
* It is challenging to provide an inclusive environment for their students.

It is evident in research that policies in education are extremely conscious of the importance of inclusion with students with special/additional needs. This is clear in the Education Act 1998, the Disability Act 2005, the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, the Children’s Rights Alliance Article 28 1992, Article 24 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018, Inclusive Policy 2011 and the list goes on. It is strange that among all of these rights and policies that are in place to support people with special/additional needs, that there is not one teacher training programme devoted to educating people with special/additional needs. Among the research there are courses and masters, for example, through Hibernia College, ICEP (Institute of Child Education and Psychology), Mary Immaculate College, University College Cork, Maynooth University and University College Dublin. These courses provide a masters or diploma in special and inclusive education, but one must already be a teacher to be eligible for a position. There is an abundance of continued professional development courses relation to teachers upskilling when working with students with special/additional needs. As mentioned in the interviews, with innovations, initiatives, new discoveries and technology, it is important for teachers to avail from continued professional development. The question remains, why is there not a teaching course devoted solely to special education teaching?

Training

In discussion with participants, it became evident in their interviews that the preparation provided by their colleges for working with students with additional needs in theory was great. It covered the theory of disabilities that were likely to be encountered in their careers. That isn’t exactly inclusive of all needs though is it? These same teachers found that the most valuable lessons they learned were through experience, working hands-on with students with additional needs or in special classes. This was not part of their initial teaching placement. These teachers encountered their first student with additional needs, some more challenging than others, once already qualified. At this stage, they were already recognised as a qualified, competent, confident teacher of mainstream education. There was little to no consideration put into their abilities to work with students with additional needs. When interviewing a secondary school practical teacher regarding his training it was very interesting to see how they were taught how to teach curriculum and break down instructions to cater for abilities. But it was only the facility of the school he taught in that allowed him to prepare the environment to cater for the needs of a student in a wheelchair. “I felt it was sufficiently based from a theory point of view but putting theory into practice is very different in particular in a busy engineering room, practical room or graphics room.” When interviewing two retired teachers, both were extremely interesting to talk to as they had almost no special education teacher training in their degrees. One was a principal of a school and the other was a special education co-ordinator before they retired. It was interesting to listen to their thoughts about the introduction to the Inclusion framework in 2011 because they got to see first-hand how it improved education. Although it wasn’t initially planned to discuss the implementation of the inclusive framework, it was interesting to hear how he believed it was beneficial for students and schools. Not only for the benefit of the students in their care but also for schools to have the same guidelines to follow rather than figuring stuff out for themselves and using their own judgement to care for these students with additional needs. “There is a framework to follow. Schools across the board should be of fairly similar ways of meeting the needs of children with additional needs.” It became a common trend in these interviews that all the teachers availed of upskilling from their own personal preference rather than a school implemented training day regarding caring for students with special/additional needs. The point of some teachers not having the time or finances to participate in CPD courses in their spare time was interesting to hear about as it is not often discussed. One of the participants included she felt it would be beneficial for a school in-service day or Croke Park hours would be more beneficial if directed toward caring for the students with special/additional needs. This viewpoint was also shared with another teacher as he believed it would be beneficial for all members of staff to have access to the same training and help each other out.

Challenges

It is well known that when working with students with additional needs, there are a range of challenges that may occur. These can vary as each individual carries themselves different: they would have different reactions to different things and they would regulate themselves in various ways also, if able. As the participants stated, on paper, they know about the theory of the more common disabilities presented in schools. How do we cater for the more complex, aggressive, emotional, challenging, volatile needs? “we didn’t really know what to expect until we came across it in our class.” This was stated by a teacher who has since retired from teaching for forty years. “What I have learned this year in teaching is, there are a lot of students with emotional difficulties and I am not prepared to work with these students which isn’t fair to the students or myself.” This was stated from a newly qualified teacher in her first year of teaching. It appears not much has changed. Participants discussed the difficulty with including students also as occasionally, some students didn’t want to be included, others strived to be and were not able, for example a student was non-verbal, he had no learnings of alternative communication, staff had no learnings of alternative communication and as a result his aggression from frustration led to his classmates being scared of him and him struggling to communicate with everyone. What all participants brought up was the complexity of working with students with additional needs. They found it challenging in having the theory behind various needs but not having strategies to best cater for the needs of the children in their care. “In that unit, it was hard to facilitate all needs but we did our best.” Someone doing their best is all that can be asked of any teacher, but it is a fault of teacher training programmes of not doing their best in preparing their students for working with students with special/additional needs.

Dependency

A common theme found in these interviews was the dependency of teachers on SNA’s as well as students becoming dependent on SNA’s. In a secondary school, teachers become dependent on SNA’s in regards assisting students to regulate, complete tasks to the best of their ability, look after other students with needs in the classroom and remove students for movement breaks at times. This allows the teacher to not only give their time to the students with additional needs but also assist other students in the classroom. This was made evident by the participant who is a practical teacher. “SNA support is absolutely essential in every lesson. I have found that ,although it’s great to have the SNA available and at hand, sometime students with medical, emotional, physical and intellectual needs benefit themselves from that safe-failure of the teacher at hand to help if they’re struggling or the SNA at hand if they are struggling.” In regards to primary school, a participant stated that SNA’s are no longer allocated to specific students, they are allocated to a class and without this help she would not have gotten the curriculum covered in her teaching. “Any time that I have had an SNA with special ed. children, there’s no way I would have managed without them.” When interviewing a retired principal and discussing the dependency some teachers have on SNA’s, he shared that it wasn’t until the late 1990’s and early 2000’s where SNA’s were working. “Having SNA support in mainstream education and in special education classes has really been probably the biggest improvement in meeting the needs of additional needs students in all settings.” Naturally, it is the intention of the school for students to become less dependent on their SNA support as they grow older but for some students this is not the case. It is essential that this support is recognised and appreciated. Participants have mentioned that seeing students look for more independence from their SNA support has been very rewarding for them as a teacher.

To conclude, it has been made evident from these participants that they have found their personal experiences in their teacher training programmes not sufficient to work with students with additional needs. The knowledge they gained on paper from these courses was relevant to the more common disabilities presented in education yet in real experiences they had to learn for themselves through research, CPD, asking questions and SNA support of how to assist the children in their care. Stated by these teachers in relation to whether they feel there would be a benefit to having a specific special education teacher training programme available in Ireland “I think it’s really becoming more of an essential almost at this stage. While each individual class teacher should have some training towards special education but having teachers who are fully trained in special education in the system would be brilliant as well. Somebody trained in special ed. would be a huge benefit in any school.” Another stated “Absolutely. Without a doubt. It needs to be broad, it needs to go across the board as it can rather than its current focus on the common disabilities of children. Teachers need to be prepared for what can happen. Children deserve appropriately qualified teachers to teach them.” These findings without a doubt state this teaching programme would be beneficial to schools, but it could also become a huge resource for students knowing there is someone qualified and experienced to help them in every possible way, covering all the basis of special/additional needs in physical, intellectual, emotional and medical needs.

*Discussion*

Having conducted research into the topic of this dissertation, it became evident that there was a shortage of information regarding teacher’s perspectives of the quality of training for teaching students with additional needs. It was important to the researcher that this topic does not get categorised into the academic aspect of education, as in covering curriculum, assisting in numeracy and literacy development, but the holistic development of a student with special/additional needs. It is common practice for teachers in training to learn about abilities and disabilities that are commonly presented in education, for example, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and so on, but there is little preparation for the student with more complex needs such as emotional disorders, anxiety, depression, dwarfism, cerebral palsy, anger management, diabetes, negative muscular dystrophy and others that may be unheard of. These are all conditions that students live with, need assistance and care in, yet are rarely spoken about in teacher training programmes. They are sometimes addressed, yes, but strategies of care are not. This was evident in carrying out interviews with qualified teachers with experience ranging from one year to forty years teaching. In the literature that was available, it was highlighted that there are many challenges in teaching students with additional needs and that training needs to be improved for this area. In conducting research interviews, these views were shared.

In collecting research to review for this research project, it was difficult to gain resources from Ireland. From the perspectives of some of these articles, teacher’s views on working with students with additional needs was seen as “managing” the students. “.. many special education teachers and general education teachers lack the necessary preparation to implement a number of evidence-based classroom practices effectively.” (Gable et al., 2012. P.2). It was evident from this article that the strategies teachers received for working with students with special/additional needs was theory-based rather than evidence-based, which was also mentioned multiple times when interviewing participants. “The theory was great but it never went into what do you do to support these children. So, you knew all about it, but you didn’t know anything about how to support them in a mainstream class.” Spoken by one of the participants who is recently retired. A participant who is only 2 years graduated from a different teacher training programme stated “so on paper technically we should have been prepared but getting out into the real world I don’t think we were”. It is evident that not much has changed in Ireland in facilitating the needs of students with special/additional needs in forty years.

It is stated in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN Act 2004) that children with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment and have the same rights to appropriate education as children without needs. Throughout the article by Gable, it is highlighted of how the quality of education for teachers to provide an inclusive education to those with emotional disabilities needs to be improved, upon interviewing teachers, this is still evident in teacher training in Ireland.

Throughout the article by Lindsay et al, lack of training for professionals was also highlighted in a statement of “educators are expected to create and inclusive educational environment, often with few or no guidelines on how to do so.” (Lindsay et al, 2013, p.3). The difference of this research compared to Ireland is that it was conducted in Canada. Ireland has the Inclusive Framework 2011, to ensure teachers are aware of inclusion in school and how to implement it. This framework defines itself as a “guide” on the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. It is the role of the school and the teacher to refer to this framework where possible, but it is also the role of the teacher training programmes to give their students strategies of how to care for these students. Participants in this research agreed that the implementation of the inclusion framework was very productive for education, insisting it gave teachers and schools the same guidelines to follow rather than working from their own initiatives. This article determines how there is inadequate support for students with emotional difficulties. This was also highlighted in interviews with participants where she encountered challenging behaviour with a student with emotional difficulties and stated from this incident “They had to understand the outcomes of various behaviours and I had no idea how to communicate with them effectively.” Not only is an incident like this unfair to the teacher, but it is extremely unfair to students with needs to have “professionals” clueless of how to cater for them. It is the role of the teacher to look after the students in their care to the best of their ability but if the programmes they came from are not doing their best to look after not only their students but people’s vulnerable children, there is something wrong. These findings have highlighted that there is a contradiction occurring in education in relation to the rights of children in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [34] that all children “should enjoy a full decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community.” (Article 23, 2002).

There are huge amounts of challenges faced by teachers on a daily basis when working with students with special/additional needs. A lot of this comes down to lack of knowledge and experience in knowing how to work with these students. An article by Luck et al, 2022, investigated the training of special educational teachers to select and implement appropriate procedural variations of functional communication. In this article, it was found that “only 30% of special education teachers reported they received direct instruction on evidence-based interventions through their teacher education programmes or in-service professional development.” (Luck et al, 2022, p. 3). This study was carried out in America, but it does show similarities in research from other articles as well as finding from interviewing the participants from this research project. Stated by one participant only newly qualified as a teacher, “not having multiple teaching strategies for working with these students was difficult and more uncommon needs weren’t addressed either.” It is unfair to the students that their teachers do not know how to teach them. In Ireland, to help teachers’ direct inclusion in their classrooms, there is the Inclusive Framework (2011) to follow. Its purpose is to ensure each school has a framework to follow in order to include students of all needs in their classrooms.

“The Inclusive Framework supports the good work that has been ongoing in schools over many years. It is a practical resource that invites schools to reflect critically and evaluate how inclusive values are promotes in classrooms, staffrooms and school years and in interactions with all members of the community.” (NCSE, 2011, p. 11).

In carrying out interviews, participants stated that when the inclusive framework was first introduced that it made a huge difference in education in Ireland. It was stated by a retired principal, “there was more consistency between schools like, up to that, each school was doing their own thing and a lot of it was very good. It really just depended on the individual school or individual teachers in the school.” It was also stated by teachers that this framework allows schools to follow the same guidelines rather than trying to figure out things for themselves but unfortunately, there are still people figuring out how to support children with special/additional needs on their own as inclusion is not the only aspect of caring for these students. One teacher stated that “on paper, we should be prepared, but in real life we are not.” This was brought to the point of in the event teachers did want to upskill in special education teaching, it has to be done in their own time after completing four maybe six years of college. Ideally, most of this CPD could have been covered in their teaching course or ideally, in a specific teaching course for working with students with additional needs. It was also mentioned in research that the lack of training, stated in previous discussion, causes huge challenges for teacher’s as they do not know how to support students with particular needs.

In research, it was stated “The participants also did not receive training on other function-based interventions that some teachers may find more acceptable” (Luck et al, 2022.). It is evident in these findings that not only are teachers not given sufficient training, but they are not given the choice of training for them to decide which method they wish to use. It is well known that students with special/additional needs are not alike. Each individual student has various strengths and weaknesses just like anyone else and ways to support them vary also but it is the duty of the teacher training programmes to give teachers strategies to support these needs and not just tell their students about them. This was highlighted in interviews with both secondary and primary school teachers when stated on multiple occasions, “On paper we should have been prepared.” It was also stated by a participant, “the only way I was prepared to work with students with additional needs was working in a unit for 3 or 4 months.”. It is from experiences like this where the system fails the students.

In relation to a question regarding whether they feel a specific programme for special education teacher training programme would be beneficial in education it was stated by multiple participants that it would. One newly qualified student stated “If I had went straight from that course into work I would have learned how to work with special needs students rather than learning how to do it now, 4 years later.” A retired primary school principal stated “Somebody trained in special ed. would be of huge benefit to any school.” Another retired primary school teacher who worked in resource for a number of years stated “Teachers need to be prepared for what can happen. Children deserve appropriately qualified teachers to teach them.” It appears that not only in reading research from other countries that the support for special education students is not meeting criteria internationally, but it is not meeting it in Ireland either.

It is the objective for any teacher, both mainstream and special education, to encourage independence in their students. It is well known that this independence is essential as they will not have the same supports in their next stage of life, students have to learn how to look after themselves outside of their education setting.

In research, a theme that arose in reading was the dependence of teachers on other professionals regarding supporting students with special educational needs. It was highlighted in reading as well as in interviews the reliance teachers have on SNA’s in their classrooms. Stated by a participant conducted in the research for the article by Lindsay, et al, “There’s very little support in terms of EA [education assistant] time unless the child is a threat to themselves of others in a physical way.” Another participant in this research stated “It would be nice if they [school board] stopped cutting EA’s.” This research was related to the research conducted by this author where all participants involved stated they rely heavily on the support from SNA’s in their classrooms. In interviewing both primary and secondary school teachers, it was interesting that both had the same conclusion of dependency from the teacher of their SNA support. Stated by an engineering teacher in a secondary school, “… there is different times where students can have good and bad days where students with additional needs would be very dependent on the support of the SNA as well. So over all I have been very dependent on SNA support at various times, in particular with students with physical needs.” It was also interesting when this teacher mentioned the independence some students gain from there SNA support and when they request for the SNA to give them space when working. This is the goal for teachers and SNA’s to see students develop independence in their learning especially if there was a heavy reliance prior to this moment. It was also stated by a retired primary school teacher that at “Any time that I had an SNA with special ed. children there’s no way I would have managed without them.” This statement was made in relation to covering the curriculum.

In an article by Luck, et al (2022), their findings found that teacher’s reliance on other professionals when working with students with special/additional needs was prominent in research. It was through this where the author decided to ask these participants about their reliance on SNA support to gain understanding of their perspectives of the quality of teacher training in Ireland relating to special education. It was interesting to discover that SNA support was not available in mainstream settings until the 1990’s early 2000’s years in conducting these interviews. It was stated by one of the participants that “Having SNA support in mainstream education and in special classes has really been probably the biggest improvement in meeting the needs of students with special needs in all settings.” This research has highlighted that the support of an SNA in a classroom is extremely valuable.

It has been made apparent in these findings that with research from articles as well as primary research through interviewing teachers that there is a huge issue with training, challenges and dependency for teachers working with students with special needs. In these findings, it has been highlighted that teachers did not feel prepared once completed their teacher training programmes to work with students with special/additional needs. They stated that there was emphasis placed on the common disabilities that may be encountered in a mainstream school, but little to no thought placed on more complex needs. It was evident through interviewing participants that this attitude towards special education teacher training has not shifted for forty years. It is a huge injustice to these students, their parents as well as their teachers. If parents knew how little confidence some teachers had when entering a classroom with a student with complex additional needs present, it would be understandable of their lack of trust. It is apparent in this limited research that there are vulnerable students who are being taught by unqualified teachers and the system of education in Ireland is allowing this to happen.

*Conclusion*

It is evident through the research conducted in this project that there are a lot of limitations present. In regards to literature, in relation to this specific topic, it was difficult to locate readings that were relevant to the desired topic. In reading, the themes of training, challenges and dependency were prominent but this research was not based in Ireland. These perceptions and experiences were primarily American based literature where teacher training programmes, policies and procedures would be very different to Irish perspectives.

In relation to training and policies in Ireland, there has been huge improvements in relation to supporting students with special/additional needs which was acknowledged by participants in this research, but as stated before, with the improvements and awareness and various practices implemented there are still huge gaps in the quality of teacher training for working with students with special/additional needs. As stated by participants, colleges have trained teachers in theory what to know about students with needs, but these focus on the needs that would be seen most often in mainstream settings rather than the more complex or uncommon needs. This is where the system of education fails in Ireland. Participants agreed that a specific teacher training programme devoted to all aspects of special and additional needs would be beneficial in Ireland for every school and student in our system. It is a shame to see and understand that some teachers who are engaging in special education teaching are not qualified to do so and some don’t even want to be there, it was a position given to them due to there being a shortage of teachers. With this, comes a huge dependency placed on SNA’s from the teachers when working with students in their classes. The limitation with this context also applies to these participants being based in Wexford and only five of them. If there was further research conducted on this topic, it would be great to see it being done on a larger scale.

Overall, having conducted this research over the last few months, it has been made painfully aware that teachers do not feel ready, once completing their programmes, to work with students with complex needs. As a result, the most vulnerable students are being taught by unqualified teachers and there is a huge problem here. This contradicts the whole education system, the rights of the child and persons with disabilities as well as leaves these children unprepared to transition from one stage of life to the next. It is evident that the holistic development of a student with special/additional needs is not the priority of the department of education at the moment, and this needs to change.

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