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Authentic inclusion-utopian thinking? — Irish post-primary teachers' perspectives of inclusive education

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers held positive attitudes towards inclusion.
- Barriers to inclusion were cited as external.
- Teachers behavioural, normative and control beliefs diminished by lack of support.
- Initial teacher education is inadequate in preparation for inclusive practice.
- Stronger teacher agency and commitment for authentic inclusion is necessary.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study examines teachers' perspectives of inclusive practice for students with autism spectrum disorders in Irish post-primary schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 teachers nationally. The data were thematically analysed according to Braun and Clarke's framework, employing a deductive, constructionist, analytical approach based on Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior. Conclusions drawn include: In principle, teachers espoused the value of inclusion however, their practice evidenced little in terms of agency to effect inclusion. They attributed barriers experienced to external factors. Authentic inclusion requires adequate resourcing and attitudinal change in order to effectively transcend rhetoric and positively influence practice.

1. Introduction

Students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) present unique challenges for educators and policy makers alike due to social communication deficits, restricted interests and repetitive behaviours that can frequently characterise students with ASD. The fact that these difficulties can manifest in a multitude of ways compounds these challenges. While all children, in particular those diagnosed with special educational needs (SEN), can present unique challenges, those diagnosed with ASD are unique in that their challenges are often invisible to educators. This is particularly the case if they are on the high-functioning end of the spectrum. Examining the progress and effectiveness of inclusive education in the context of meeting the needs of students diagnosed with ASD offers better insight into the challenges associated with this specific population. Given that the challenges for those with ASD who are otherwise highly functioning are often invisible to educators, their special educational needs can remain unnoticed, with adverse consequence for their educational experience.

For the last number of decades there has been a significant shift from a "main-streaming" or "integration" approach for these students towards a discourse of a more comprehensive "inclusion" agenda. Vislie (2003, p. 20) suggests that at the time "integration did not have much focus on teaching and learning or on classroom processes," while inclusive education, set in motion largely due to the adoption of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994), aimed to address this lack of focus more comprehensively. The UNESCO (2009) definition that underpins this work conceptualises inclusion as:

A process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. (p. 8).

Practically however, a fully articulated and accepted definition of inclusive education remains elusive, with variances existing in both definition focus and indeed in what constitutes inclusion in practice (Winter & O'Raw, 2010, pp. 12—16). Despite this, there is international evidence of legislative and policy measures aimed at the "inclusion" of students with disabilities, guided by the United Nations (UN) International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). This global movement towards the "inclusion" of students with ASD in main-stream classrooms has shown some positive, albeit limited results (Myklebust, 2002; Peterson & Hittie, 2010; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). Lindsay (2007) in a historical review of the literature concluded that there is no clear evidential basis for the positive effects of inclusion. Though, there are some who suggest this is a result of current limitations in schools and practice rather than a case against "inclusion" in and of itself (Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Farrell, 2000). Without doubt the transition to "inclusion" has been fraught with difficulties, including implementation of policy, resourcing, funding, curriculum, assessment and teacher knowledge and attitudes (Mäkinen, 2013; McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2014; Singal, 2008; Tiwari, Das, & Sharma, 2015).

The post-primary learning environment can pose some considerable challenges for students diagnosed with ASD. "A busy post-primary school environment brings with it frequent timetable changes, various teaching styles, several classroom settings and usually a large school building" (McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2014, p. 325). As students diagnosed with ASD typically desire routine and predictability this can cause difficulty (Symes & Humphrey, 2011). Evidence also suggests that teaching styles employed by teachers don't adapt to the needs of students with ASD (Carrington & Graham, 2001). These issues can be compounded by increases in curriculum complexity (Shevlin et al., 2009) and the potential for raised anxiety levels as a result of examination pressures, to which many students diagnosed with ASD are already prone (Spiker, Lin, Van Dyke, & Wood, 2012). The literature also suggests students diagnosed with ASD experience lower levels of social support and a higher number of bullying incidents (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). These challenges can create an adverse environment for inclusion therefore, it was deemed of interest to place focus on post-primary education for the purposes of this study.

Consequently, and perhaps not surprisingly, the difficulties outlined in relation to "inclusion" also correspond with factors identified as being integral to successful "inclusion", such as resources, funding, the curriculum and teacher knowledge, beliefs and attitudes (Thomas, Walker, & Webb, 2006; UNESCO, 2009). Teachers, as key stakeholders, have a significant role to play in the success of inclusion. However, the international literature suggests they are not being sufficiently supported in this on-going transition. A study conducted in Zimbabwe (Chitiyo, Hughes, Changara, Chitiyo, & Montgomery, 2016) concluded that schoolteachers are overwhelmingly seeking professional development in special education

needs but are unsupported in obtaining it. In the United Kingdom Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden (2000) concluded that teachers lacking in training and experience held more negative attitudes towards inclusion. While a study conducted in New York by Burke and Sutherland (2004) concluded a statistically significant correlation existed between prior experience and knowledge of the disabled and their attitudes towards inclusion. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) identified a number of factors necessary for successful inclusion that pertained to teachers' needs. These included time for planning, training, personnel resources, material resources, class size (fewer than 20 when SEN students included) and consideration of the severity of the disability. It would appear that despite international claims to promote inclusion, lack of attitudinal change remains dominant and less than optimal training, investment and infrastructure required to make inclusion a reality continues to hinder the potential of authentic inclusion. That this is the case twenty-two years after the Salamanca statement is of concern. For the purposes of this research the concept 'authentic inclusion' is adopted. The nomenclature of authenticity is used because the authors are advocating the importance of authenticity in the inclusion endeavour, which they conceptualise as a culmination of the philosophy and ethos of inclusion in practice.

1.1. Theory of Planned Behavior

Clearly, many stakeholders are invested in the success of inclusive education. It is for this reason that quite typically, a whole-school approach to its implementation is seen as most appropriate. Successful implementation of meaningful and authentic inclusion requires teachers to have appropriate knowledge, competencies and confidence in working with SEN students. Teacher disposition is also an important factor as they need positive beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion, which in turn would influence openess to enacting policy regarding inclusive education both at national and local levels. Boyle, Topping, and Jindal-Snape (2013) identify that positive teacher attitudes towards inclusion are conditional on the provision of adequate supports and resources. Without doubt teacher attitudes have a significant impact on classroom practices (Monsen, Ewing, & Kwoka, 2014). Therefore, understanding teacher perspectives so that future developments can more accurately address their concerns, and ultimately support them in implementing inclusive practice is essential.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), proposed by Ajzen (1991) and developed from the Theory of Reason Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) posits that in order to predict a specific behavior (in this case the successful inclusion of SEN students), one must examine the behavioural intention as determined by attitudes (towards inclusion), subjective norms (how the action will be perceived by others/school culture) and perceived behavioural control (knowledge, competencies, efficacy). TPB has been used previously as a framework for examining teachers' perspectives and attitudes towards inclusion (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Tiwari et al., 2015). In adopting this theory as analytical model for the current study, the authors believe that for any meaningful behavioural change to occur, it is not enough simply for teachers to be told or to know that they have responsibility for inclusive education. Were this the case, the challenges presented would not exist. Enhancing this complexity is that teachers themselves need to believe in their own capacity and efficacy to affect real change for successful and meaningful inclusivity in classrooms. In this respect TPB provides us with a lens by which to examine factors, as documented in the literature (McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2014; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Singal, 2008; Tiwari et al., 2015; Winter & O'Raw, 2010). These factors frequently intersect, therefore examining them as a whole within a TPB framework the strength of the behavioural