An Exploration of the Factors that Impact Upon the Inclusion of Pupils with Additional Support Needs in Mainstream Secondary Education: The Staff's Perspective

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Abstract

This small-scale exploratory study investigates the perceptions of staff in relation to inclusion of pupils with additional support needs (ASN) in a mainstream secondary school. It set out to provide unique insights and personal accounts of issues pertaining to inclusion in an attempt to obviate such barriers in the future. Twenty-five staff (thirty-four percent of whole school complement) across a variety of disciplines from one school in Scotland engaged with an online survey gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. Information was collated in relation to legislation awareness and engagement; direct experience of specific ASN; confidence in relation to supporting and meeting the needs of pupils with ASN and limiting factors that currently exist as barriers to inclusion. Analysis of results identified that there was a significant deficit in staff awareness and engagement with legislative documents that outline and underpin inclusive education and meeting the needs of all pupils. Most staff identified a recent increase in the prevalence of numbers of pupils with ASN and there were varying confidence levels for supporting these. Staff reported that the main reasons for experiencing a lack of confidence in effectively meeting the needs of pupils with ASN were time pressures, large class sizes, a declivity of resources and a lack of specialized ASN support. References were made in relation to a lack of ASN specific training, not only as part of one's continuing professional development, but at the point of investment in education of initial teacher training. Staff positively regarded training as a valuable intervention in bridging existing gaps in knowledge and understanding. These findings imply that there is a considerable need to increase the fundamental ASN skill-set and education of school staff in order that they are suitably equipped, competent and confident to meet the needs of all pupils in their care, consequently becoming more effective inclusive practitioners.

Research Focus

As a Teacher of Additional Support Needs (ASN), it is my role to ensure that the needs of every child in my care are met at every opportunity and circumstance. According to current legislation and policy including: A Curriculum for Excellence

(CfE) (2004); Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2014); Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) (2012); Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act (2004); National Framework for Inclusion (NFI) (2014) and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRN) (1989), it is imperative that the individual strengths and needs of the pupil are considered by their Keyworker or Named Person, to ensure that they have an education matched to their strengths, interests and needs. The Standard in Schools Act (2000) and Educational (Additional Support for Learning) Scotland Act (2004) also requires that education is directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the individual, which will allow them to achieve their greatest potential.

Furthermore, the Educational (Additional Support for Learning) Scotland Act (2004) stipulates that every local authority has a legal responsibility to provide individualised provision for pupils with ASN and to make adequate and efficient provisions in order that they receive an education that meets their needs. The NFI (2014) also aims to ensure that all teachers have an understanding of inclusive education and the knowledge to carry out their roles accordingly. It is an approach designed to make certain that teachers are appropriately and suitably guided and supported throughout their careers towards gaining the necessary knowledge and understanding of inclusive education.

Through previous research studies, professional dialogue with colleagues in my current context and the reporting of concerns, both formally and informally to management, it has been identified that there are a number of concerns amongst staff about the increasing quantity of pupils who have ASN in our establishment and the staffs' perceived ability to meet the needs of these pupils as expected under current legislation and educational policies. With ever-increasing numbers of pupils with ASN in mainstream education and with little or no investment in ensuring that mainstream teachers have the essential skills, knowledge, understanding, support or resources in order to meet these needs, the theme explored within this study, from the perspective of the staff in my current context, is can ASN pupil need be effectively met in mainstream education settings?

Rationale and Focus of The Study

This study intended to investigate the issues that exist in relation to meeting the needs of pupils with ASN in a mainstream secondary school setting. Due to personal experience and prior research, the methodology has been designed around the fact that there may already be existing barriers in the context pertaining to inclusion including variations in approach between mainstream and ASN staff, a declivity of managerial support in promoting and encouraging inclusion and a resistance to change to meet the needs of learners (Ronald, 2016). It is the purpose of this project to identify and explore the barriers from the emotive and personal experience of staff from all disciplines within a school and formulate a way forward in terms of the issues surrounding inclusion in a mainstream school that need to be addressed as a matter of priority in line with current legislation.

The NFI (2014) and A CfE (2004) set out clear guidelines and key priorities for all pupils in the Scottish education system, including pupils with ASN. They highlight the need for improvements in attainment in numeracy and literacy; closing the attainment gaps that exist between pupils of varying background and opportunity; improving the health and wellbeing of all children and young people in education and finally, improving the development of skills for lifelong learning and the increased likelihood of positive destinations for school leavers. As well as the aforementioned responsibilities and duties, it is also the role of each and every teacher to ensure that they are conscientiously delivering inclusive and integrative education practices to their learners (Educational (Additional Support for Learning) Scotland Act, 2004; GIRFEC, 2012; GTCS, 2012; Standards in Schools Act, 2000).

The Scottish Government (2016) reported that there was a relatively low incidence of pupils with ASN requiring high levels of resources and specialist input, however, upon closer analysis of the statistics, it would appear that the term 'low' may not give a true reflection of the current situation. The report indicates that there has been a 1.7% increase in the number of pupils with an identified ASN who were accommodated in the Scottish educational system since 2015, representing approximately 22.5% of the

entire pupil population (Scottish Government, 2015). Of these pupils, 95% of them are educated in a mainstream setting where it is the duty of the local education authority to ensure that they are providing adequate support and making suitable provision in order to meet the needs of every pupil in their care (Scottish Government, 2016).

With an increase in reported incidences of the number of pupils with ASN alongside simultaneously reported cuts in funding and education budgets (Kewin & Janowski, 2016; National Audit Office, 2016), it could be argued that the ability to provide the necessary resourcing for individualised and personalised learning programmes that are differentiated to include and meet the needs of all learners would be consequently diminished. Cook, Semmel & Gerber (1999) inferred that teachers were increasingly being charged with the complex task of increasing academic achievement and attainment in contexts that contained unprecedented and ever-increasing levels of ASN. This is concurrent with the investigations of Harpell & Andrews (2010) who concluded that recent increased demands placed upon teachers in inclusive settings compromised teacher effectiveness and competence and ultimately resulted in teacher shortages due to the profession being perceived as unrewarding, unrealistic and stressful. In accordance with this, the Doran Review (2012) stated that there was a clear need for professionals working with pupils with ASN to be highly trained and experienced in order to meet the demands of the job as well as provide the highest quality services that are responsive to the changing needs of society. With decreasing available resources in mainstream classrooms and also a lack of adequate training for specialisms in ASN, it is clear that mainstream teachers feel ill-equipped to meet the needs of pupils with ASN in their care and this can lead to negative attitudes towards the prospect of inclusive education (Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Schuum et al., 1994; Titone, 2005).

Research Method and Design

The research questions posed in this project are as follows:

1. What are the barriers to inclusion of pupils with ASN from the perspective of staff?

2. How can identified obstacles be prioritized in terms of importance and achievability?
3. What are potential interventions that would help break down any barriers to inclusion?
4. What are the gaps in knowledge, understanding and mindset that directly impact on the inclusion of pupils with ASN?

Although a single-method survey design was implemented in this research project, the pragmatism mixed-methods paradigm was applied in terms of gathering both quantitative and qualitative data to ensure that more in-depth and potentially more valid information could be amassed due to the fact that the latter method is better suited to the requirements of the context, participants and the research questions (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2003; Thomas, 2003). The survey consisted of a variety of both closed and open-ended quantitative and qualitative questions which allowed for initial statistical analysis of the quantitative data and also a deeper exploration of issues from a personal viewpoint of the research survey using the qualitative data.

This study took place in the form of an online survey using 'Bristol Online Surveys' (BOS) for secure storage of data and links to University facilities. There were many contributing factors as to why an online survey was deemed the most suitable research method for this particular study including: wide and inclusive coverage of the whole-school population; anonymity of participants to promote engagement and encourage the ability to gather in-depth qualitative data where participants could provide emotive, real-life examples directly linked to experience and practice; the ease of inviting participants to engage in the research avoiding time constraints, both in terms of the researcher conducting lengthy interviews and also the participants sacrificing their own time given that lack of time is already a major factor in education (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Peters, 2004).

Concurrent with the writings of Denscombe (2003) and Silverman (2005), another consideration linked to anonymity and the decision to pose questions through an online resource was to relieve participant concerns about engaging with the research as the researcher is a known member of staff in the school. The survey being online acted as a buffer-zone between myself and participants and it was important to have

this open forum so that participants felt they could be honest and unguarded about their feelings and viewpoints without judgement or repercussions in order to increase validity of the results. This was cautiously contemplated as part of the methodology design of the project and the reason why focus groups or interviews weren't utilised.

There were fourteen questions in the survey, formulated to explore the staff's awareness of current legislation and initiatives that exist to promote and support staff to have the skills essential to promote inclusion in their classrooms and also their personal accounts of whether these are successful or not, with the option for them to share their reasons and understanding of why. To avoid researcher bias, the questions were thoughtfully devised and designed to be entirely objective.

Another component of the research included exploring whether staff felt suitably equipped to deal with the expectations outlined in current inclusion legislation, policies and documents pertaining to this. Questions exploring training and staff education in relation to knowledge, understanding and an ASN appropriate skills-set were posed with the purpose of comparing training and specialisms in relation to confidence and perceived ability.

Participants in the research were all school staff members within the mainstream secondary school setting where the study took place. As advocated by Denscombe (2003) cluster sampling took place which ensured that the survey was made available to all school staff members so as to include the broad perspectives of all staff responsible for working with pupils within different disciplines including leaders, mainstream teachers, guidance teachers, ASN teachers, ASN support staff, community link workers and library staff. Staff did identify which category of role they belonged to within the school which allowed for a deeper analysis of results linked to staff groups throughout the study.

The timing of the delivery of the survey to staff was carefully considered to take school priorities and staff workload commitments into account and to avoid 'overloading' staff. Hargreaves & Fullan (1992) and Peters (2004) emphasised the notion that teachers are very much 'prisoners of time' and have very strict timelines

and deadlines during which courses must be delivered. They also noted that the majority of teachers' time is tightly structured to direct classroom teaching and that there is little scope for much else without encroaching into their personal time. Hargreaves & Fullan (1992) stated that it is the overloading of staff which is the greatest barrier to successful educational reform activities.

Thematic analysis supported the researcher to highlight emergent patterns within the data results collated whilst giving the researcher flexibility and autonomy in data interpretation to focus on information outcomes that best related and were most significant in relation to the research questions. Nowell et al. (2017) and Braun & Clarke (2006) promote thematic analysis as a good tool for translating, interpreting and reporting themes found within a data set. The quantitative data was analysed first, followed by the qualitative data, which required greater input in order to process the information given by staff and determine the themes that it supported or pertained to. In order to make greater sense of the information gathered and be able to compare and contrast the quantitative and qualitative data more deeply, the results were further divided into staff group responses dependent upon role selected to allow for discernment between staff sectors, opinions, discrepancies and incongruities.

The emotive views, opinions and direct experiences of the staff in this survey gave increased meaning and justification to the results obtained and were a fundamental founding for an accurate analysis of the data. This study relied on transparency and the researcher's representation of the results being entirely credible in order for a true reflection of the current context for inclusion in the school sampled.

<u>Table 1: Summary of Key Findings</u>

The key findings from this study are summarised below:

Research Area	Outcome
Legislation Awareness	• There was significant variation in staff awareness of legislative documents pertaining to inclusion of pupils with ASN. Those with greater publicity and exposure in mainstream population such as A CfE (2004), GIRFEC (2012) and UNCRC (1989) had higher awareness than others, however, were still not known by the entire sample population. • An awareness of legislative documents did not translate into the staff actively engaging with the literature. Engagement was comparatively less than awareness for all legislation explored. This poses the question as to whether school staff are trained enough and accepting of legislation and its object and aspiration. • If only 64% of staff are aware of The NFI (2014) it presumes that 36% are unaware of it, and therefore may not be adequately informed or skilled in order to demonstrate inclusive practice.

Staff Confidence	• Staff confidence to meet the needs of pupils in their care was relatively low. Only 16% of staff were fully confident that they could meet the needs of every child.
	• Most common reasons for a lack of confidence in the ability to meet the needs of every child include lack of time; large class sizes and an increased number of pupils with ASN.
	• The entire staff sample population had direct experience in supporting pupils with a variety of ASN. The ASN that staff had a highest incidence of experience with included: SEBD; ASD; Dyslexia; Learning Disability and ESL.
	• Staff were most confident in supporting pupils with the following ASN: Dyslexia; ASD; Visual Impairment; Physical Impairment and Language/Speech Disorder.
	• Staff were least confident in supporting pupils whose ASN was either ESL or not declared/disclosed.
	• The most common reasons for a lack of confidence in supporting pupils with ASN included: lack of specific training; lack of time; lack of resources and lack of access to ASN Support.
	• Most staff felt that the solutions to improving the current lack of confidence in supporting pupils with ASN were by: increased ASN teaching support; increased resources and relevant in-house training.

ASN Specific Training	64% of staff did not receive any specific ASN education or instruction in their initial teacher training. If staff are not being adequately trained to be inclusive practitioners and meet the needs of all pupils in their care then how can they be expected to permeate inclusion throughout their teaching practice? - Only 52% of staff had undertaken formal training in order to develop and increase their ASN skillset. 84% of staff had undergone informal training pertaining to ASN. Of those teachers who underwent training, 84% stated that the training had a positive impact upon their ability to meet pupil ASN. - The majority of staff identified that there was room for improvement in ensuring that they were better prepared, resourced, trained, supported and informed in order to meet the needs of pupils with ASN in their care.

<u>Analysis and Discussion</u>

The first research question in this study sought to identify and highlight the barriers that currently exist in the mainstream secondary school that the research took place in. From analysis of the results gathered, the answers to this question have been multi-faceted, and pertain to all areas of education including: resourcing; initial training; CPD; legislation awareness and engagement; increasing numbers of pupils with ASN; lack of staff confidence to meet pupil need and a lack of leadership support.

It has frequently been reported that there is a large deficit in the fundamental funding and resourcing of schools nowadays which ultimately impacts upon the achievement and attainment of all within the school community (Tomul & Savasci, 2012; Card & Krueger, 1996; Greenwald, Hedges & Laine, 1996). With an increase in the prevalence

of pupils who have an identified ASN (Scottish Government, 2016) as well as an increase in the extent to which pupils with ASN are placed in mainstream education settings, it is self-explanatory that in order to cope with the magnitude of this situation the corresponding investment encompassing classroom support, staff training and resources to support and facilitate learning similarly requires to increase. Currently, however, there is a declivity of all the necessary resources which are essential in ensuring all pupils have the ability and facility to access and engage with the learning available to them. In this study, staff also identified that without essential resources such as knowledge, understanding, in-class and leadership support as well as time to improve and capitalise on their service delivery, they struggle to meet the needs of every pupil in their care.

Staff highlighted their most common reasons for a lack of confidence in the ability to meet the needs of each child in their care were lack of time, large class sizes and an ever-increasing number of pupils with ASN to support. This is concurrent with the writings of Avaramidis & Norwich (2002), Fuller & Clarke (1994) and Demir (2009) who state that student-teacher ratio, provision of appropriate educational materials and teacher skills and abilities are the most significant factors for pupil success and academic achievement. Norwich (2009) commented upon the current dilemma for educational systems to be governed by two conflicting specific policies, one set to raise educational standards and achievement and the other to promote inclusion for all. It is clear from the information gleaned in this study that this predicament is real.

Staff reported the most common reasons for a lack of confidence in meeting the needs of pupils with ASN as being: a lack of specific training; lack of time; lack of resources and lack of access to ASN Support. Staff conveyed opinions that the solutions to improving their current lack of confidence in supporting pupils with ASN lay in increasing ASN teaching support, increasing available resources and being in receipt of relevant in-house training. There was a general modality amongst participants from all disciplines that there was an increase in the need for specific, targeted and specialised support in order to support staff as well as pupils.

The Doran Review (2012) stated that all staff in schools needed to be competent and confident in meeting the needs of the pupils that they work with. Burke & Sutherland

(2004), Barton (1992) and Bacon & Shulz (1991) all echo this sentiment in their writings, noting that a lack of knowledge and understanding in relation to support, a deficit of professional inform and also the absence of suitable levels of in-class support for pupils would lead to teachers being unable to effectively include pupils with ASN in their classes. In this study it was apparent to the researcher that if staff in themselves feel unsupported, then a direct consequence is that it becomes increasingly difficult for them to meet and support the needs of pupils within their care. Deana, Rust & Brissie (1996) stated that teachers with the most positive attitudes to inclusion were those who invested their time in training and CPD, as well as those who had the most direct experience in dealing with a variety of ASN. The correlation made here is that training leads to better inclusive practice due to an increase in confidence and skill-set.

The ability to successfully embrace inclusion is a vital part of being both an effective educator and fulfilling one's moral and legislative obligations to meet the needs of every child in their care (A CfE, 2004; GIRFEC, 2012; Children and Young Persons Act, 2014; NFI, 2014; Standards in Schools Act, 2000), it is concerning that there does not seem to be consistency pertaining to the initial education and training of those who are going to be at the forefront of delivering an inclusive and holistic practice to pupils with a wide variety of ASN. Kershner (2009) highlighted inclusive teaching practices and an understanding of the needs of all learners as being fundamental to effective learning and teaching.

Schuum et al. (1994) and Boyle, Topping & Jindal-Snape (2013) reported in their studies that teachers often indicated lacking confidence in the possession of the skillset required to teach pupils with ASN in the mainstream classroom. It may be that this stems from a lack of training at an initial input level. Only 36% of staff in this study reported being in receipt of some sort of ASN specific training in their initial teacher education. Boyer & Lee (2001) observed that due to a lack of ASN specific training in induction programmes, teachers were being expected to take on duties for which they lacked the skills. Harpell & Andrews (2010) perceived that this led to an increase in stress, a decrease in confidence and a negative perception of inclusion as teachers struggled to meet unfamiliar needs.

The Doran Review (2012) documented that there was a distinct lack of availability of professional training available for educators and that existing training programmes often did not provide suitable breadth and depth of levels of knowledge, understanding and exposure required in order to effectively meet the needs of all pupils. Concurrent with this and supporting the emergent theme of lack of training leading to a lack of confidence observed in this study, Daane et al (2000), Edmunds (2003), Shade & Stewart (2001) and Timmons (2002) affirmed that one of the most prominent barriers to inclusion in schools is the lack of fundamental preparation of both mainstream and special education teachers.

In order to get better at inclusion and meeting the needs of all pupils, it is clear that there is a need for training to be improved, both at an initial staff training and preparation level, but also as part of an ongoing process to ensure that the skills-set of staff develop and evolve with the ever-changing needs of pupils in their care. The Doran Review (2012) noted that in order for this to be successful, the profiles of specific ASN and appropriate supports and interventions required to be regularly maintained and would have to be underpinned by appropriate research developments and professional learning.

Research question three focussed upon suitable interventions that could be advised to break-down the barriers and obstacles reported upon in this study and facilitate the move toward greater inclusion of pupils with ASN. In-house training is a clear intervention that could be used to specifically target the individual needs of identified contexts in terms of what staff have reported as having lower levels of confidence in or less direct experience in dealing with as part of their working role. Boyle, Topping & Jindal-Snape (2013) reported that training in relation to ASN had a direct and significantly positive impact on attitudes to inclusion. 60% of the sample population felt that in-house training would help to reduce limiting factors pertaining to a lack of confidence in meeting the needs of pupils with ASN. Projecting forward, it might be useful for leaders to survey staff in their establishments to identify what ASN staff are confident in supporting and those which they feel they need further instruction and guidance with.

Relevant targeted training specifically selected to meet the current ASN of pupils in a school would provide an excellent opportunity for gaps in knowledge and understanding to be bridged and for an increase in staff confidence. This would deliver an excellent example of child-based and needs-led education concurrent with the guidelines set-out in A CfE (2004) and would certainly aim to accomplish the priorities detailed in GIRFEC (2012) and NFI (2014). Harpell & Andrews (2010) found a direct correlation between effective educational leadership that fostered and promoted values in educators and the successful implementation of inclusive practices in schools.

There is a distinct parallel between the aims, objectives and outcomes of research questions three and four in that the researcher discovered that apart from physical human resources, what staff identified as suitable interventions to remove barriers for pupils with ASN mostly involved bridging their gaps in knowledge and understanding, thus increasing competence and confidence. As well as the need for targeted, ASN specific education and intervention, it was apparent that the legislative documents and guidelines that underpin the modality of inclusion and meeting the needs of all learners in the Scottish education system need to be better acknowledged, comprehended and utilized in order to permeate the current curriculum and practice.

There was a clear lack of awareness of documents such as The Standards in Schools Act (2000), Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act (2004), Children & Young Person Act (2014), NFI (2014) and National Improvement Framework (2018) which would need to be remedied by teaching the teachers on the fundamental principles of inclusion and their responsibilities to deliver an education that meets the needs of all pupils in their care. Compounded by this, there was also a huge indicator that even with legislation that staff in the sample population were more aware of, there was in fact very little actual engagement with these guidelines and frameworks that stipulate the central and essential underlying principles of delivering an inclusive education.

With diminishing investment in the Scottish education system and lessening available resources such as money, time, people and training, the over-arching question as to 'how can we make things better in order to meet the needs of all pupils' for the

meantime lies firmly at the feet of leaders in educational establishments to prioritize the deployment of accessible and available resources and educate the educators in order to promote an inclusive ethos with clear legislation, policies and procedures to follow taking into consideration the organisational culture and community of the school. Dissemination of the results of this study, to establishment management and LA education leaders, will hopefully aid the process of identifying what the learning and development needs of staff are and how best to meet them, direct from the mouths of those who are on the front line of service delivery.

Conclusion

The outcome of this study has proven that there is actually a consistency in the mind-set of the majority of staff across a variety of disciplines in relation to meeting the needs of pupils with ASN. This uniformity can be applied to areas including: an increase in numbers and complexity of pupils with ASN; a lack of training specific to ASN; a decline in confidence; an insufficiency of resources resulting in a lack of confidence and the reality of the current situation in education in struggling to meet the needs of all learners with dwindling resources.

There were variations in the awareness and engagement of legislation in relation to ASN, in that ASN Teachers, Guidance Teachers and SfL Staff had an increased cognizance of the majority of documents in comparison to mainstream staff. This result can be explained by the greater levels of engagement and interaction required by staff whose primary focus and specialisation in school is supporting pupils with identified ASN. There is, however, a clear need for a substantial improvement in the delivery of education of fundamental legislation, knowledge, understanding and training to all staff in order that they are better informed, more competent and confident and have an increased understanding of their responsibilities in relation to meeting the needs of pupils with ASN.

What can be taken from this particular study is that there is a clear sense of hope that staff, although very conscious of the lack of resources at their disposal, are for the most part, positive and willing to embrace change by taking on additional learning and CPD of their own volition, and by making a concerted effort to increase their skill set,

knowledge and understanding to ultimately better meet the needs of the ASN of pupils in their care.

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