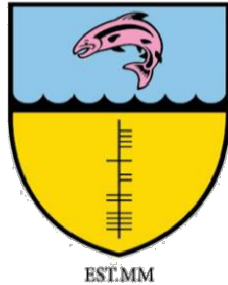


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## **Exploring effective methodologies to support the learning of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom**

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**HIBERNIA  
COLLEGE**

***‘Exploring effective methodologies to support the learning of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom’.***

Megan Timmons

Supervisor: Diarmuid Mooney

Autumn 2021 Cohort

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Professional Master of Education in Post Primary (PMEPP) with Hibernia College Dublin

Submitted to Hibernia College, Dublin, on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023

## Declaration

“I declare that this work is entirely original to me and was not turned in as part of a degree-related assignment at this university or any other educational facility. I understand that requests for the library to lend or duplicate this dissertation may be granted”.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ms Megan Timmons". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

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Megan Timmons

14<sup>th</sup> June 2023

## **Abstract**

This dissertation seeks to investigate the most effective techniques for teaching SEN students within mainstream classrooms based on the interpretivist research paradigm. Qualitative methods such as interviewing staff responsible for providing SEN provisions will be used in this study. Effective teaching strategies such as differentiated instruction and collaboration with professionals were identified from the research, but challenges related to curriculum adaptation were highlighted too along with limited awareness among teachers and stakeholders. Creating a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for students with SEN is possible by implementing these recommendations in schools.

## **Acknowledgements**

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My deepest appreciation extends to Diarmuid Mooney, my supervisor, whose direction, wisdom, and continuous support guided my study. Throughout the whole journey, Diarmuid showed outstanding professionalism and patience.

Thank you to the case study school's students, staff, and management for voluntarily participating in interviews and providing their time and insightful opinions. Their support and participation played a critical role in enhancing the study's findings.

For their steadfast kindness, support and understanding throughout the last year, my fiancé, parents, brothers, relatives, and friends deserve my sincere appreciation. Their encouragement, compassion, and belief in me have been invaluable.

Lastly, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation for the invaluable contributions made by my fellow students at Hibernia College. Throughout my journey, their unwavering support, engaging intellectual discussions, and invaluable guidance have been instrumental in enhancing both my research and personal growth. Above all, I am truly grateful for the enduring friendships that have enriched this experience.

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has been mentioned above for their contributions to my dissertation.

## List of Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CID	Contract of Indefinite Duration
CPD	Continued Professional Development
EAHCA	Education for All Handicapped Children Act
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IEP	Individual Education Plan
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
OCD	Obsessive-compulsive disorder
SEN	Special Education Needs
SENO	Special Education Needs Organiser
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
WSE	Whole School Evaluation

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

To achieve inclusive education, it is necessary to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, but especially those with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms (Slee, 2015). The aim of this dissertation is to study effective strategies that can help improve the learning experience for students with SEN in mainstream educational settings. The philosophy and teachings of ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius also influenced this dissertation. The famous quote attributed to Confucius, "Tell me and I will forget, show me and I will remember, involve me and I will understand," serves as a catalyst for investigating the efficacy of specific methodologies, particularly active approaches, in supporting students with special educational needs (SEN) across various educational settings (Muller, 2015). This quote underscores the importance of active engagement and participation in the learning process to promote better understanding and retention of knowledge. Thus, it inspires the exploration of how these methodologies can specifically benefit students with SEN in inclusive mainstream classrooms, where their inclusion and active involvement are of utmost importance.

### 1.2 Origin of the Dissertation

The origin of this dissertation can be traced back to the initial research question, which aimed to evaluate the impact of group work and collaborative learning on the learning experience and outcomes of students with SEN when paired with mainstream learners.

*'To evaluate how group work/collaborative learning affects the learning experience and learning outcomes of SEN students when the SEN learners are paired with mainstream learners (as opposed to being excluded and placed in a class with learners of equivalent academic abilities as they traditionally were).'*

However, with guidance from my research supervisor, the research question was refined to "*Exploring effective methodologies to support the learning of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom*".

### **1.3 Background to the Project**

The background of this dissertation is rooted in the importance of inclusive education for students with SEN. In the past, differently abled students have often faced unfair treatment and exclusion in educational settings (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Personal experience such as my own time in school as well as encounters throughout teaching placement during my Masters programme and witnessing instances of such treatment have further fuelled my passion for promoting inclusive practices.

### **1.4 Rationale**

The rationale for undertaking this dissertation is to contribute to the existing literature on effective methodologies for supporting students with SEN in mainstream classrooms. By exploring best practices, strategies, and approaches, this research aims to enhance inclusive education and promote equal opportunities for all learners regardless of their varying abilities (Ainscow, 2005). The significance of addressing the learning needs of students with SEN lies in ensuring their holistic development, fostering a sense of belonging, and maximizing their potential within the mainstream educational setting. This research seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing practical recommendations that can be implemented in real-world contemporary mainstream educational settings.

### **1.5 Dissertation Layout**

This dissertation is structured into several chapters to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of effective methodologies for supporting students with SEN in the mainstream classroom. The chapters include an introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, conclusion. The layout is designed to present a cohesive and logical progression of ideas, leading to a thorough understanding of the topic and the implications for inclusive education (Cohen et al., 2011).

### **1.6 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this dissertation, *‘Exploring effective methodologies to support the learning of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom’*, aims to explore effective methodologies that support the learning of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom setting. The motivation to undertake this research stems from personal experiences and observations of inclusive practices that prioritise equality and respect for all students regardless of their abilities. By examining existing literature, employing a robust research methodology, and analysing the

findings, this study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on inclusive education and provide recommendations for improving teaching strategies and practices (Farrell & Ainscow, 2002). Ultimately, the goal is to create inclusive and supportive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Inclusive education aims to ensure that all students receive a high-quality education in the mainstream classroom, regardless of their varied abilities and experiences (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou, 2017). This includes students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), who need extra assistance to access the curriculum, take part in educational activities, and achieve their full potential. According to Smith, Johnson, and Davis (2020), SEN in the mainstream classroom requires effective inclusive methodologies that consider their individual needs, strengths, and challenges. This literature review which is based on peer-reviewed sources aims to explore these inclusive methodologies for students with SEN in relation to their benefits and limitations, the background of inclusive SEN methodologies, how the inclusive methodologies are interpreted based on where in the world you are and examine the limitations within the research I have conducted and how this research then influenced my research questions.

### **2.2 Background**

It's important to note that the specific policies, practices, and terminology related to inclusive education and SEN may vary across countries and regions. The principles and objectives, however, remain consistent in striving for inclusive educational opportunities for all students. In Ireland, inclusive education is defined as a means of delivering high-quality instruction to all students, including those with a variety of backgrounds and abilities, in publicly funded schools. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act of 2004 serves as the legal policy foundation for inclusive education in Ireland and stresses students who have special educational needs (SEN) having the same access to suitable education as their classmates.

The ultimate objective of inclusive education in Ireland is to guarantee that students with SEN have the assistance they require to succeed in their unique school environments (which varies from integrated mainstream to specific purpose special schools) and reach their fullest potential; however, prior to the turn of the millennium there were few provisions in place to support students with SEN and encourage inclusive education in Ireland. Things changed when an independent statutory body known as The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in Ireland was established in 2003 to enhance the provision of education services to students

with special needs. The NCSE provide guidelines for appropriate supports, accommodations, and differentiated teaching as well as promoting equitable chances, encouraging social inclusion, and supporting the all-around growth of all pupils are the main goals. However, guidelines are merely just suggestions – there needs to be rules and regulations in place for any meaningful change to happen. And thus, in October 2005 the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act of 2004 (EPSEN Act) was born. This Act forms the legal basis of inclusive education in Ireland and sets a ‘minimum’ standard that schools must follow to obey the law.

Another key part of forming and influencing inclusive educational practices in Ireland is played by the School Self-Evaluation (SSE – established in 2012) and Whole School Evaluation (WSE – established in 1999) processes. The SSE model allows for schools to assess their own performance and decide on improvements based on that evaluation whereas the WSE model is administered by Ireland's Department of Education and Skills and its purpose is to assess the standard of education provided in classrooms – including the provisions made for inclusive education. These procedures work together with the legal basis of inclusive education (EPSEN Act) to support the continued growth of inclusive education in Ireland. Continuous reflection, tweaking and improving of these structures and legal frameworks has meant that inclusive education in Ireland has flourished in the past two decades.

Similar to Ireland, inclusive education on a global scale aims to provide all students a quality, equitable education, regardless of their abilities, limitations, or differences. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) demands for the elimination of obstacles that prevent access to school and has put legal framework in place to ensure that every child has access to an inclusive educational experience. Despite the legislative regulation in place there are some countries who are yet to conform to the orders of the UN. Research conducted by Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland found that a lack of leadership, awareness and understanding, and resources are key factors in the ability of countries being able to support SEN learners. A 2013 report by UNESCO uncovered the harsh reality of life for students with SEN; 34% of students under the age of ten with SEN in Thailand had not yet attended school while a staggering 51% of students with similar disabilities in Iraq had also not received any formal education. Five years later another, equally unsettling, report was released by UNESCO titled ‘Accountability in education’. This report, despite its hopeful name, showed that few countries, particularly developing countries, were being held accountable in providing

education. This report revealed a staggering 90% of students with disabilities were not in receipt of any education- they were forgotten. On the other end of the inclusion scale is Denmark, who have paved the way for inclusive education. The Danish commitment to inclusion of all in education is both admirable and remarkable with an epic 99% of students with SEN being educated in mainstream settings alongside their peers who do not have any learning difficulties (Holland, 2002). Another noteworthy country when it comes to inclusivity in education is New Zealand. In the early 1990's policy makers recognised the need for attitudinal and legislative change and since then education in New Zealand has undergone radical transformation with regards to '*vision, placement, curriculum, assessment, teaching, acceptance, access, support, resources, and leadership*' of inclusivity of students with SEN (Mitchell, 2016).

### **2.3 Definitions of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusive Methodologies**

The term SEN was introduced in the 1960's and is used to describe physical or cognitive disabilities that make it harder for students to learn than most students of similar age (Gulliford & Upton, 1992). Inclusive education is the teaching model in which both cohorts of students, those with SEN and without SEN, learn simultaneously in a solitary classroom environment (Schuelka & Carrington, 2021). For one to provide inclusive education to students with SEN a great deal of understanding and knowledge is required – you cannot teach in an inclusive way if you do not know who it is you are trying to include – which is where teacher knowledge plays a crucial role.

SEN involves the personal educational requirements of students with physical or cognitive disabilities such as learning disabilities like dyslexia, sensory impairments such as ASD, cognitive challenges such as ADHD, emotional or behavioural disorders such as OCD, physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy, etc. As each individuals requirements with SEN differ, so too should the approaches in which these students are taught. This idea was initially introduced in the United States of America in 1975 under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) where law mandated that students with disabilities have an individualised document which states their current academic performance, their personal educational goals, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and accommodations and supports that are unique to each student based on their ability (Congress.Gov 1975). This personalised document was branded as Individualised Education Programmes (IEP).

Inclusive education is an umbrella term used to describe pedagogical strategies that seek to give all students, regardless of their strengths or challenges, equal and accessible learning environments (Farrell, P., Ainscow, M., & Cologon, K. (2019)). The integration of SEN students into mainstream classes is encouraged by inclusive education, which also fosters social contact, a feeling of community, and academic advancement too. This method of inclusive education used by educators to support students with special educational needs in a mainstream classroom has been commended by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) who have carried out research that suggests that inclusive education is the most effective methodology to use when integrating students of varying abilities into the one classroom. Notable benefits of inclusive education include improved social relationships, increased confidence, and, higher participation rates. The results of the work carried out by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) highlights just how transformative inclusive education can be for all parties involved. It has the potential to be ‘inclusive, equitable and enriching’. The benefits far outweigh the challenges. Some ways that have been tried and tested to ensure an inclusive educational setting include: Differentiation, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Co-Teaching, Peer Scaffolding and Assistive Technology.

#### **2.4 Benefits of inclusive methodologies for SEN**

The goal of differentiation is to make learning accessible for all learners while also providing learning that is both challenging and engaging for each individual learner too. It acknowledges that learners are different in their backgrounds and learning styles. Differentiation includes various ‘accessibility’ tactics used by teachers such as adjusting teaching content, process, and product. The means in which these tactics are carried out depends on students’ readiness, interest, and learning profile (Tomlinson, 1999). Research carried out by Tomlinson suggests that when teachers differentiate instruction it allows for students with SEN to have greater access to learning experiences, it also enhances these experiences to make them more meaningful for learners with SEN. As well as that, Tomlinson found that differentiating instruction to meet learner’s individual needs, interests and abilities provides greater opportunity for engagement, understanding and skill development (Tomlinson, 2014). Wertheim et al., (1998) cited another benefit of differentiated instruction being that it can significantly improve academic outcomes for students with learning disabilities.

The next inclusive methodology and its benefits that will be discussed is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). While differentiation and UDL are similar in the fact that they both attempt to maximise the learning of students by offering multiple ways for students to learn content and skills, UDL is significantly different in that it is done when the curriculum is being designed as opposed to differentiation which is carried out during instruction when the teacher is made aware of the student's needs (Griful-Freixenet et al, 2020). Another difference between UDL and differentiation is that UDL builds resources and options into the curriculum whereas differentiation makes changes to the curriculum. The framework of UDL allows teachers to remove barriers to education by anticipating the needs of all students from the outset. Rose, Meyer, and Hitchcock (2005) have discussed the benefits of UDL and noted that enhanced engagement, optimisation of individual learning as well as nurturing independence and self-improvement of all students but especially those with SEN.

Collaborative approaches to teaching and learning such as co-teaching (also known as team teaching) and peer scaffolding involve the active participation of teachers and students (both SEN and non-SEN) working together to support learning and promote inclusion in the mainstream classroom environment. Cook, Friend and Schirmer have conducted extensive research into the field of collaboration and have praised the use of co-teaching as a learning strategy for students with SEN. They have commented that some benefits of this approach to teaching and learning include enhanced instructional delivery, differentiated learning and individualised support. It is also noted in this research that the common outcome of this approach is improved academic outcomes for students with SEN. Troia, Shankland and Wolbers have also highlighted the benefits of collaboration – specifically peer scaffolding. This type of teaching and learning methodology has multiple benefits including targeted support and feedback which in turn improves writing skills, self-efficacy, and social networking. As well as that, active engagement, shared learning experience, and a sense of belonging in an inclusive mainstream classroom are other advantages of collaboration with peers.

The last beneficial inclusive methodology for students with SEN that will be discussed is assistive technology. Assistive technology refers to tools, devices or software that have the capabilities to enhance the learning and communication abilities of students with SEN. A journal article by Edyburn (2006) has explored the various benefits of assistive technology in inclusive classrooms and concluded that when used appropriately, assistive technology has the ability to bridge learning gaps, foster independence and empower students with SEN to actively



participate in the learning process. Research carried out by Higgins and Raskind (2005) supports the findings of Edyburn and highlights that it is a key player in promoting inclusion in the classroom.

## **2.5 Limitations of inclusive methodologies for SEN.**

The knowledge and understanding of teachers about various learning needs, instructional strategies and effective accommodations are crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive methodologies in mainstream educational settings. However, restricted teacher knowledge in these areas can pose difficulties to achieving inclusive practices. In the year 2000 Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, released data from a survey they had carried out that explored teacher's attitudes and awareness towards the inclusivity of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms. The results of the survey illustrated very low morale amongst teachers as they felt they lacked knowledge and training to offer a truly inclusive classroom environment. The lack of knowledge and training also had effects such as teachers feeling inadequate, lessened confidence and heightened uncertainty in how to cater for students with SEN. As regards teacher training, the availability and quality of teacher training programs that focus on inclusive education practices can significantly impact the successful implementation of inclusive methodologies in mainstream classrooms. If teachers receive insufficient inadequate and insufficient training, it can hinder teachers' ability to cater to the diverse needs of students with SEN in their classrooms. The continued professional development (CPD) of teachers is covered in an article by Boyle, Topping, Jindal-Snape, and Belski (2013). It stresses how often inclusive education-focused teacher training programs have a narrow scope and may not provide teachers with the skills, knowledge, and continued support they need to adequately address the variety of SEN student's needs.

## **2.6 Chief findings and main themes:**

### **2.6.1 Limitations within research**

One limitation that has been identified in the research that has been conducted for this Literature Review is the lack of depth in literature relating to inclusivity in a mainstream classroom for students with SEN. As a result of this a lot of the data that was collected is very general and therefore warrants further attention and consideration. Creswell (2014) suggested that small sample sizes, limited geographical coverage and reliance on self-report measures are other possible limitations to studies on the topic of

inclusivity and SEN and following extensive research into this topic this suggestion has proved to be true.

### **2.6.2 Focused research questions**

Focused research questions had to be developed by the researcher of this dissertation to properly investigate the efficacy of approaches used in assisting SEN students learning in mainstream classrooms. The purpose of these research questions was to form a set of guiding principles and provided a methodical investigation into certain aspects of the topic (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). The way in which the research questions for this dissertation were formulated was from gaps left after the research for the literature review had been conducted.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this literature review has looked at evaluating the available literature for effective teaching and learning strategies to include SEN students in mainstream education. The results of this evaluation have proved the value of assistive technology, collaboration by both teachers and peers, differentiation, and UDL in achieving inclusive education. The research has also stressed the importance of adequate and equal teacher knowledge and experience in order to effectively implement the aforementioned inclusive methodologies. However, it must be noted that in order to address gaps in existing literature and improve our knowledge as educators of inclusive practices that more research is required and should be conducted on a regular basis. This research has been continued somewhat via this dissertation as through interviews with practicing teachers, the aim is to explore the challenges and benefits of implementing the methodologies mentioned above in the classroom and also to provide recommendations for effective implementation.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Included within this chapter are the principal goals and research questions of the research. The research methods are also explained within this chapter as well as the reasons for choosing the selected approach. There is then a brief description of the candidates who participated in the study, a short review of the data collection methods that were used, a description of the data analysis process that was followed, and a summary of the ethical guidelines that the study was done in compliance with and a discussion of the study's limitations. The research paradigm used for this study is interpretivism as this best fits the goal of the research.

### **3.2 Purpose of the research**

The purpose of this study was to collect information on the most effective teaching strategies for students with SEN in mainstream classroom settings. The group of research participants consisting of teachers with varying levels of experience was chosen to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and insights into effective teaching strategies for students with SEN in mainstream classrooms.

To achieve the purpose of this study –

- A thorough analysis of the relevant research on the inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms was conducted.
- The researcher interviewed five teachers, consisting of teachers with varying levels of experience, both male and female and including a member of teaching staff responsible for the planning and implementation of accommodations for students with SEN.

The researcher wanted to find out:

- What current accommodations are made for SEN pupils in typical, mainstream classrooms?
- How do teachers work with others (colleagues and other relevant professionals) to help students with SEN?
- What difficulties do students with SEN encounter in typical, mainstream classrooms?

- What are the most effective teaching techniques and procedures for SEN children in typical, mainstream classrooms?
- What role does technology play in supporting SEN students autonomous learning?
- What are teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards supporting and including students with SEN?
- What are the attitudes and perceptions towards inclusion and support for students with SEN?
- What kinds of professional development and teacher training are available to serve students with SEN?
- How do teachers assess the efficacy of strategies for assisting those with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms?

Within the school, a case study was completed. The type of study that was done was qualitative. The researcher performed five semi-structured interviews with the aforementioned set of study participants in order to gather the research data.

### **3.3 Qualitative Research Method**

The goal of qualitative research, according to Opie (2004), is to dive into the lives, experiences, and understandings of the study participants in order to gather insightful knowledge and a deeper comprehension of the subjects being studied. However, qualitative research does have limitations, as the study's limited size means that the results might not be readily generalisable to a wider population.

### **3.4 Case Study**

A case study is a type of research technique that entails a thorough examination and analysis of an individual, group, or phenomena in the context of real-world events. It offers thorough and in-depth insights on the subjects being investigated (Yin, 2014, p. 16).

The case study took place in a post-primary school that serves approximately 800 students and employs around 60 staff members. This setting was chosen due to its diverse student population and the availability of resources and support services for students with SEN. The choice of a mixed-sex post-primary school aimed to capture a range of experiences and

perspectives across genders, considering the potential variations in learning needs and challenges that may arise.

The environment in which this research took place is familiar to the researcher. Familiarity with the research setting can offer advantages such as insider knowledge, access to relevant resources, and an understanding of the cultural and contextual factors at play (Creswell, 2013). This familiarity can enhance the researcher's ability to navigate the research environment, establish rapport with participants, and gain deeper insights into the phenomenon under investigation. However, there are possible disadvantages to contend with too. For example, the researcher needed to exercise caution so not to overlook alternative viewpoints or become influenced by preconceived notions.

### **3.5 Interviews**

Interviews are a valuable qualitative research method where researchers engage in direct conversations with participants to gather information and gain insights. One of the key strengths of interviews is their capacity to yield rich, detailed, and nuanced data, enabling a profound understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences (Rubin, 2011). By fostering an interactive and dynamic environment, interviews offer opportunities for clarification and probing of responses, facilitating an in-depth exploration of the research topics at hand.

Nevertheless, interviews do have certain limitations. One drawback is the possibility of response bias, where participants may modify their answers to align with social norms or meet the interviewer's expectations. Additionally, the biases and preconceptions of the interviewer can influence the interpretation of the collected data. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) have noted that despite these limitations, interviews continue to be a valuable approach for delving into participants' viewpoints and generating in-depth qualitative data.

In this case study, semi-structured interviews were conducted as they proposed greater freedom to respond than in a structured interview. Fontana and Frey (2005) found that semi structured interviews allow researchers to study a variety of topics while still adhering to the general interview guidelines. Essentially, semi structured interviews strike a balance between the perfect amount of structure and flexibility.

To corroborate the findings from the interviews, the researcher also examined the school's policy documents to determine the extent of their commitment to inclusive education for students with SEN. This involved a thorough review of various policy documents (Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, National Council for Special Education (NCSE) guidelines and Department of Education and Skills (DES) Circulars), such as those relating to how special education needs students are educated, the school's enrolment policy, and its assessment policy. These policy documents provided valuable insights into the school's approach to supporting students with special educational needs.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis approach was used as the method of data analysis in this dissertation study. Braun and Clarke (2006) have stated that thematic analysis is the foundational method for qualitative analysis as it aims to identify, analyse, and outline patterns and themes within the data that has been collected.

Thematic analysis involved searching for patterns of meaning in the collected data, which consisted of interviews with teachers and stakeholders. The researcher actively listened, made notes, read and transcribed the interviews to become familiar with the content. Continuous writing and the development of coding schemes helped identify emerging themes and meaningful patterns. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and its potential to inform policy development in inclusive education. However, it has limitations in terms of interpretative power and capturing continuity and contradiction in individual accounts. Overall, thematic analysis provided a comprehensive exploration of the data, revealing key themes and strategies to support students with SEN in mainstream classrooms.

### **3.7 Reliability, Validity and Trustworthiness Pilot Study**

Reliability refers to the consistency and accuracy of the data, ensuring that the findings are not influenced by accidental circumstances or variations in data collection methods (Anastas, 1999; Wellington, 2000). In qualitative research, establishing reliability can be challenging due to the subjective nature of interpretation and the potential for different researchers to arrive at different conclusions (Mays et al., 1995).

Validity, on the other hand, focuses on the accuracy and appropriateness of data interpretation (Anastas, 1999; Wellington, 2000). It is essential to make realistic decisions about what the data signifies and ensure that the research methods and tools actually measure what they are intended to measure. However, data validity can be influenced by the researcher's interests and biases, potentially leading to inconsistent interpretations across different researchers (Wellington, 2000).

To address these challenges in the interviewing process, conscious efforts should be made to reduce interviewer bias and preconceived notions (Cohen et al., 2000). Interviewers should be cautious of projecting their own perspectives onto the respondents and should strive for objectivity in questioning. The possibility of unintentional influence between the researcher and participants should also be considered, as participants may provide answers, they perceive the researcher expects (Cohen et al., 2000).

While reliability and validity have traditionally been used to evaluate research quality, Lincoln, and Guba (1985) propose an alternative criterion of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, providing a comprehensive framework to assess the rigor and integrity of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Scaife, 2004).

In this dissertation, the researcher addressed reliability and validity concerns by ensuring consistent data collection and interpretation methods while acknowledging the potential influence of personal perspectives. The focus on trustworthiness further reinforces the commitment to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the research process.

A pilot study was conducted in this dissertation to ensure the clarity of questions and understand how the participants interpreted them. The pilot study involved presenting draft interview questions to a group of volunteer participants, including CID teachers, substitute teachers, school placement students, and a peer from Hibernia college. Interviews were conducted based on the draft questions, and feedback was obtained from the participants. This feedback helped in revising and finalising the interview questions for the study.

### **3.8 Ethical Issues and Considerations**

Ethical considerations are crucial throughout the research process to ensure the well-being of all involved (Sikes, 2004). In this study, permission was obtained from participants and school management as well as the Research Department at Hibernia College. Informed consent and confidentiality were assured, with all participants and the school being anonymised (Cohen et al., 2000). The right to withdraw from the study was respected, although no participants exercised this option. The researcher also considered the time demands placed on participants (Sikes, 2004). To maintain ethical standards, the researcher avoided misleading questions and allowed respondents ample time to formulate their own answers, ensuring their autonomy (Sikes, 2004).

### **3.9 Limitations of the Study**

The research conducted in this study was subject to time and resource constraints, as it spanned a period of one academic year and focused on a single school. It employed a case study approach that aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject matter without necessarily implementing changes based on the findings. As highlighted by Yin (2014), a case study does not typically involve intervention or direct action but instead seeks to provide rich insights and context-specific knowledge. Opie (2004) agreed with Yin and stated that while recommendations may arise from the study, they are not an inherent part of the research process itself. Despite these limitations, efforts were made to ensure the study's rigor and credibility, resulting in plausible and valuable findings.

### **3.10 Reflections on Research Methodology Chapter Summary**

The research employed a case study approach, focusing on a Post Primary School in North Tipperary and their use of effective teaching strategies for students with SEN in mainstream classroom settings. This approach allowed for an in-depth examination of interactions within a specific context, rather than relying on numerical data (Opie, 2004, p. 74). The sample selection was carefully considered, aiming to gain valuable insights into central issues of inquiry (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Four teachers and one member of staff involved in the provision of SEN students' education, were chosen as participants. Ethical considerations led to the decision not to directly involve the children themselves, and instead, observations were made by SNAs and teachers during their regular work (Opie, 2004).



The use of interviews provided rich and nuanced information, surpassing what could have been obtained through questionnaires alone (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 81).

In this chapter, we delved into the techniques employed to conduct the research and ensure its reliability and validity. Ethical principles were upheld throughout the study. A case study, preceded by a pilot study, was carried out at a Post Primary School in North Tipperary to investigate the school's use of effective teaching strategies for students with SEN in mainstream classroom settings. Through interviews and obtaining multiple perspectives, a clear picture was painted regarding the school's inclusivity. Every interview was transcribed, and thematic analysis was used to find recurrent themes and interpretations in the data gathered (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research findings are presented in subsequent chapters of Chapter Four (Findings) and further discussed in Chapter Five (Discussion).

## Chapter Four - Findings

### 4.1 Introduction to Findings

Five interviews took place in the research school, a Post Primary school, in North Tipperary. There were five groups of research participants who were interviewed - One male with more than ten years teaching experience, one male with less than ten years teaching experience, one female with more than ten years teaching experience, one female with less than ten years teaching experience and a member of the staff group responsible for the planning and implementing of provisions for students with SEN. All research participants have been given pseudonyms so that their anonymity is protected. Each of the five participants received the same common interest questions and were awarded the same time and conditions to answer.

### 4.2 Presentation of Findings

#### 4.2.1 Theme 1: Current supports for students with SEN in mainstream classrooms.

The interviews indicated that there are currently a variety of methods being used to assist students with SEN in mainstream classrooms. *Teacher A* spoke about IEP's, otherwise known as Individualised Education Plans, and emphasised that this method of inclusivity is a means by which teachers can personalise support to each student's individual needs. Collaborating with SENCO's, learning support teachers, SNA's and other external professionals was highlighted by *Teacher B* and *Teacher D* as being crucial in providing an inclusive education to students with SEN. *Teacher C* acknowledged the use of ICT as being beneficial while *Teacher D* said that differentiation techniques (i.e., scaffolding) and in class supports (i.e. use of iPad) were used and were advantageous in supporting SEN students in mainstream education. Other current supports that were mentioned by the interviewees included peer and cooperative learning.

#### 4.2.2 Theme 2: Collaboration with professionals in supporting students with SEN.

According to each of the interviewees, collaboration with other professionals was essential in supporting students with SEN. *Teacher A*, *Teacher B* and *Teacher C* highlighted that for effective coordination to happen there needed to be regular communication with various other staff such as SENCO's and support staff such as SNA's. *Teacher C* also highlighted the need for cross-curricular communication and cooperation when it comes to the effective planning and supporting students with

SEN. The importance of seeking the assistance of external expertise was underlined by *Teacher E* who also called attention to the importance of building partnerships with families and community organisations in order to benefit the learning experience of students with SEN.

#### **4.2.3 Theme 3: Challenges faced by students with SEN in mainstream classrooms.**

The interviews provided insight into the difficulties faced by SEN students when they are educated in typical, mainstream classroom settings. *Teacher A* and *Teacher D* both pointed out that the educational development of students with SEN has been significantly negatively affected in mainstream classrooms by academic challenges and learning gaps. The effects of COVID19 were alluded to but not specifically stated as reasons for these challenges. *Teacher B* and *Teacher E* spoke about the wellbeing of students with SEN and emphasised that peer acceptance and social inclusion are critical factors affecting the overall wellbeing of these students. Environmental distractions and sensory sensitivities were noted by *Teacher C* as potential barriers to inclusion and participation for students with SEN. The need to address mental health issues to ensure the holistic development of these students was also highlighted by *Teacher E* as a barrier to inclusion.

#### **4.2.4 Theme 4: Effective teaching strategies and approaches to support the learning of students with SEN.**

The interviews helped to identify a number of efficient teaching strategies and approaches for supporting students with SEN. Differentiation, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), multi-sensory teaching techniques, structured routines, and explicit instruction were identified as effective teaching strategies by the interviewees. The use of explicit instruction and guided practice was also highlighted by *Teacher E* as an effective strategy that supports inclusivity within the mainstream classroom. *Teacher A* and *Teacher B* spoke about catering to the needs of specific learners while *Teacher C* commented that predictability and a reduction in anxiety were shown to be enhanced by structured routines and visual aids.

#### **4.2.5 Theme 5: The benefits of technology and independent learning for students with SEN.**

All five teachers agreed that technology is an effective tool for encouraging autonomous learning amongst students with SEN in mainstream classroom settings. Almost all teachers were unanimous in the benefits of technology in supporting the learning of SEN learners in mainstream classrooms with *Teacher A* stating that assistive technology has become an efficient way to cater to the individual needs of all students and also provide modifications to the learning where necessary. *Teacher D* commended the use of technology as it made self-paced learning possible through various interactive educational learning applications. *Teacher E* spoke briefly of the impact of digital literacy and stated that it is crucial for empowering SEN students in the digital age.

#### **4.2.6 Theme 6: The attitudes and perceptions towards inclusion and support for students with SEN in mainstream classrooms.**

The importance of constructive attitudes and views towards inclusion and supporting students with SEN was highlighted by each interviewee as a key component in developing an inclusive learning environment. *Teacher D* acknowledged that creating a sense of belonging and acceptance requires embracing a culture of inclusion and diversity in a mainstream classroom for the benefit of all students. *Teacher E* highlighted that the promotion of empathy and dispelling misconceptions were crucial elements in fostering understanding and lowering the stigma around inclusion. *Teacher C* mentioned that allowing students the opportunity to voice their views is key to empowering students and encouraging them to actively participate in their learning journeys.

#### **4.2.7 Theme 7: Stakeholders perspectives and alignment with policies.**

All five interviewees emphasised that cooperative decision making, and shared objectives of all stakeholders are crucial for ensuring that the school achieves their common purpose of inclusivity. *Teacher B* stated that it is essential for parents and caregivers to be involved in the educational process in order to effectively cater to the needs of students with SEN.

#### **4.2.8 Theme 8: Teacher training and professional development to support the learning of students with SEN.**

The respondents made it abundantly clear that adequate teacher training and continued professional development are crucial in the provision of appropriate supports for students with SEN. Specific SEN training on SEN identification and support was highlighted by *Teacher A* as a corner stone to providing inclusivity for SEN students in mainstream education. The promotion of continued growth was addressed by *Teacher D* who spoke of the positive impact that reflective practice and self-evaluation can have on effectively implementing inclusive practices.

#### **4.2.9 Theme 9: Efficacy of evaluation approaches.**

It was acknowledged by *Teacher A* that regular progress monitoring and data collection is key to tracking student development and then making informed planning decisions based on the results of this monitoring and data collection. *Teacher B* agreed but added that to guarantee that students' individual needs and goals are met, personalised goal setting and tracking are required. *Teacher D* expanded on this idea of individualisation of assessment by saying that using a range of assessment techniques was crucial for capturing diverse aspects of students' abilities and progress. The use of formative assessment and giving students regular feedback were mentioned by *Teacher C* as effective methods to promote continued growth of students with SEN in mainstream education. *Teacher E* felt that the promotion of metacognitive skills of students and helping them foster a sense of independence was a direct result of having students engage with self-evaluation and reflection post assessment.

### **4.3 Critical Analysis of Findings**

#### **4.3.1 Strengths:**

The interviews have pointed out numerous positive aspects of supporting students with SEN within mainstream classrooms, including the use of specialised worksheets as well as access to a special needs assistant (SNA) and a team-teaching approach. The purpose behind these approaches is to accommodate individual needs while promoting a comprehensive education environment. Engaging in conversations with

colleagues and SENCOs was one of the strengths identified among teachers for their collaborative skills with other professionals. Apart from taking part in professional development activities, they also relied on external experts for assistance if required. With the enhancement brought about by this collaboration in the sharing of knowledge and best practices, students with SEN benefit ultimately. In the interviews it was mentioned that effective teaching strategies such as differentiated instruction and scaffolding along with technology integration show a commitment to meeting diverse learning needs. These strategies have the potential to improve student engagement levels along with their comprehension and overall academic achievements.

#### **4.3.2 Weaknesses and Areas for Improvement:**

Students with SEN continue to experience difficulties in mainstream classrooms despite the presence of support. Some interviewees pointed out that there is a lack of understanding among teachers and stakeholders because of their limited awareness. Essential for fostering inclusive practices is addressing the knowledge gap with targeted education and awareness initiatives.

Challenges related to discrepancies between curricula along with difficulty comprehending content and note-taking issues were uncovered during the interviews. Making further adaptations and accommodations is necessary in order to ensure that students with SEN have equitable access to the curriculum. There are varying attitudes among stakeholders regarding inclusion and support. A few interviewees admitted to recognising how important inclusivity can be when applied to different areas, but they also voiced their concerns over how much harder it is for educators to customise lessons and meet individual needs. Overcoming these attitudes and fostering an all-encompassing perspective is essential for creating an unquestionably comprehensive learning environment.

The enhancement of teacher training and professional development is essential despite some interviewees mentioning that these specific training opportunities are often limited. There is still a requirement for comprehensive as well as ongoing professional development so that teachers can be equipped adequately enough in

terms of their knowledge and skillset which will enable them to extend their support towards SEN students most effectively. The evaluations of approach and effectiveness differed from interview to interview. However, the significance of regular assessment as well as feedback was pointed out by some interviewees whereas others underlined the need for personalised goal setting along with its tracking. Teachers will be able to measure the effectiveness of interventions and make necessary adjustments by implementing clear evaluation processes and criteria.

#### **4.3.3 Recommendations:**

Enhancing teacher training and professional development programs through a concentration on identifying SEN students as well as implementing support strategies will allow educators to better cater for the diverse needs of those with special educational needs. Awareness of SEN needs to be raised amongst all stakeholders such as policymakers, administrators and parents in order to create a supportive and inclusive educational environment. Through the use of targeted awareness campaigns coupled with professional development sessions and open dialogues, achieving this is feasible. It is important to explore further adaptations and accommodations which will help address any mismatches in the curriculum so that students with SEN can engage meaningfully with its content. To make it work properly one might need to use assistive technologies as well as differentiated assessments and flexible learning materials. Incorporating regular progress monitoring and personalised goal setting in a consistent and comprehensive evaluation process can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of support approaches. Making decisions based on a data-driven approach can facilitate continuous improvement. The key to effectively supporting students with SEN is promoting collaboration and communication among all stakeholders. Encouraging regular communication between parents, teachers and students can help foster a more coordinated approach to inclusive education.

#### **4.4 Conclusion of Findings**

The findings from the interviews shed light on various aspects of supporting students with SEN in mainstream classrooms. The strengths identified included personalised instruction, specialised worksheets, collaboration with professionals, effective teaching strategies, and the positive role of technology. However, the study also revealed areas for improvement, such as

limited awareness among teachers and stakeholders, challenges related to curriculum adaptation, varying attitudes towards inclusion, and the need for enhanced teacher training. Based on these findings, it is recommended to raise awareness about SEN, improve teacher training programs, address curriculum mismatches, implement regular assessments and personalised goal setting, and promote collaboration among all stakeholders. These measures aim to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for students with SEN.

Bridging the knowledge gap, catering to diverse needs, and fostering a collaborative approach are crucial in ensuring that every student receives the necessary support. By implementing these recommendations, schools can strive towards providing inclusive education that benefits all students, regardless of their abilities.



## **Chapter Five – Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter's main objective is to give a thorough analysis of the research findings and their relationship to the original research questions posed in Chapter One. It also analyses the secondary source material that was looked at during the Literature Review. The discussion that follows attempts to provide a thorough and in-depth comprehension of the results by identifying their relevance from the data gathered through interviews. In addition, it seeks to understand their importance in light of key issues covered in the literature. This chapter has two primary objectives: first, I want to highlight repeating themes and significant data finds while exploring how they affect policy and practice; secondly, I want to look at areas where the results diverge from earlier research. It is also important to highlight that, based on the data gathered and analysed for this study, there are some limitations that call for more research in order to get a more thorough understanding of this research topic.

### **5.2 Interpretation of Findings**

The benefits and limitations of inclusive methodologies for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms are highlighted by this research. The study aimed to explore diverse inclusive methodologies such as differentiation, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), co-teaching, peer scaffolding, and assistive technology. These strategies are designed to foster an interactive and accessible learning environment for every student irrespective of their capabilities or challenges.

The findings of the research that was carried out suggests that differentiation can be effectively used as an approach towards meeting the unique requirements of students with SEN. This discovery aligns with existing literature from Tomlinson which states that the method of differentiation provides greater access to learning opportunities while improving engagement and comprehension leading towards better academic outcomes (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Research conducted by Tomlinson et al. (2003) has shown that teacher knowledge and training in differentiation strategies play a vital role in successfully implementing these inclusive practices.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has emerged from the research findings as another inclusive methodology that provides notable benefits when used in the mainstream classroom.

When incorporated into the curriculum, UDL allows for anticipating student needs at the outset and removing education barriers which teachers identified via the interviews. UDL has been shown to enhance engagement while optimising individual learning for students with SEN. Meyer, Rose, and Gordon (2014) provided significant research contributions by defining the multifaceted features of the UDL theory. Their thorough research endeavours have not only established the fundamental principles and practical applications of UDL, but have also revealed its countless advantages and benefits, which the research subjects of this study noted and expressed genuine appreciation for.

Co-teaching and peer scaffolding were identified as collaborative approaches that actively involve teachers and students, both with and without SEN, in supporting learning and promoting inclusion in a regular classroom environment. The research findings indicated that co-teaching enhances instructional delivery, facilitates differentiated learning and individualised support, and leads to improved academic outcomes for students with SEN. The literature concerning co-teaching and peer scaffolding unequivocally demonstrates strong support for the methodology, as exemplified by Friend and Cook (2016), who underline the vital role of collaborative skills not only in young people's education but also in their lifelong learning endeavours.

Assistive technology emerged as a beneficial inclusive methodology for students with SEN from both the research findings of this study and from relevant literature. The research findings specific to this study suggest that when used appropriately, assistive technology bridges learning gaps, fosters independence, and empowers students with SEN to actively participate in the learning process (Beard et al., 2011). It plays a significant role in promoting inclusion in the classroom according to both literature and the research participants of this study. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the notable advantages of integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in educational settings, emerging scholarly works indicate that extended exposure to screen time, whether for home or educational purposes, could potentially give rise to future concerns regarding parent-child interactions, child development, and socioemotional well-being (Radesky et al., 2016). It is worth noting that the literature addressing these concerns is relatively new, reflecting the fact that ICT is a more recent phenomenon.

### **5.3 Critical Examination and Comparison with Literature**

The findings of this research align with the existing literature on inclusive education and SEN. The literature review highlighted the importance of inclusive methodologies that consider the individual needs, strengths, and challenges of students with SEN (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2005). This piece of literature, a practical guide to supporting diversity in the classroom, provides a comprehensive overview of inclusive education – essentially showcasing what our inclusive education goals should look like. It emphasises the significance of teacher knowledge and training in implementing inclusive practices, echoing the assertions made in the teacher interviews that were carried out for the purpose of this study. Moreover, the research findings of Avramidis et al., (2000) support these assertions and provide further evidence of the benefits of inclusive methodologies in creating equitable and enriching learning environments for all students.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations within the research conducted for this study. One limitation is the lack of depth in literature specifically focusing on inclusivity in mainstream classrooms for students with SEN. This limitation suggests a need for further research and attention to this important area (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). An article by Florian and Black-Hawkins “*Exploring inclusive pedagogy*” addresses this issue by discussing the scarcity of in-depth studies and emphasises the need for more research in this specific context. Additionally, the literature identified small sample sizes, limited geographical scope, and reliance on self-report measures as potential limitations in the existing literature. Norwich (2008) also sheds light on these limitations, contributing to a deeper understanding of the challenges in the field. It further supports the need for future research to overcome these limitations and provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusivity in mainstream classrooms for students with SEN.

### **5.4 Significance of the Findings and Implications for Policy and Practice.**

The discoveries of this study have important ramifications for inclusive education policy and practice. This research stresses the need of using inclusive teaching practices in typical classrooms to provide equitable opportunities for students with SEN. For students with special educational needs, these methods can foster academic success, social integration, and overall well-being.

#### **5.4.1 Policy Implications:**

1. Inclusion as a guiding principle: The findings emphasise the need for Irish policy frameworks that prioritise inclusion as a fundamental principle in post-primary education. Policies should align with national guidelines such as the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Policy Advice and the Department of Education and Skills' Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines (Department of Education and Skills, unknown). These policies, both on paper and in reality, should promote inclusive practices and provide support and resources to post-primary schools and teachers to effectively implement inclusive methodologies.
2. Teacher training and professional development: The research underscores the importance of comprehensive teacher training and ongoing professional development in inclusive practices within Irish post-primary schools. Policies should prioritise the provision of training opportunities that align with national frameworks such as the NCSE's Continuum of Support and equip teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies to effectively support students with SEN in post-primary mainstream classrooms. Policy efforts should ensure that teachers have access to relevant training programs, workshops, and resources tailored to their needs (Desimone et al., 2002).
3. Collaboration and support structures: Policies in Ireland should encourage collaboration and establish support structures within post-primary schools to facilitate the successful implementation of inclusive methodologies. This may include promoting co-teaching models, encouraging collaboration between special education and general education teachers, and ensuring access to specialist support staff or resources as outlined in the NCSE's Continuum of Support. Policies should provide clear guidelines on how schools can establish collaborative structures and allocate necessary resources to foster an inclusive learning environment for all students in post-primary settings.

#### **5.4.2 Practice Implications:**

1. **Differentiation:** Teachers should use methods of differentiation to meet the various needs of students with SEN in accordance with Irish policies that are applicable to post-primary schools. This method is consistent with the Department of Education and Skills' policy on Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines, which demonstrates the value of modifying teaching strategies, resources, and assessments to make sure that each student can access and participate in the curriculum at their own pace.
2. **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** According to Irish policies, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) concepts should be incorporated into curriculum design in post-primary schools. These principles focus on providing numerous modes of representation, engagement, and expression to help students with different disabilities, which is in accordance with the National Council for Special Education's (NCSE) Continuum of support. Teachers may anticipate and immediately meet the various requirements of pupils by adhering to UDL principles.
3. **Co-teaching and peer scaffolding:** Irish policies recognise the value of collaborative approaches such as co-teaching and peer scaffolding in promoting inclusive practices in post-primary schools. Policies encourage the sharing of expertise and resources between special education and general education teachers, as well as fostering social interaction and mutual support among students. Implementing co-teaching models and peer scaffolding strategies aligns with the Department of Education and Skills' commitment to inclusive education and the promotion of collaboration within the classroom.
4. **Assistive technology:** In accordance with Irish policies such as the 2017 publication by the DES on 'Assistive technology in education', teachers in post-primary schools should effectively integrate assistive technology to benefit students with SEN. Policies highlight the importance of exploring and utilising appropriate assistive technologies that enhance accessibility, independence, and participation in the learning process. These efforts align with the Department of Education and Skills'

Assistive Technology in Schools Policy, which aims to provide students with SEN access to suitable assistive technology tools and support.

5. Individualised support: Irish educational policies underscore the significance of providing individualised support and accommodations to ensure equitable learning opportunities for students with SEN in post-primary schools. These policies recognise the unique strengths and challenges of each student and advocate for personalised approaches to support their educational needs. Implementing individualised support aligns with the Department of Education and Skills' commitment to inclusive education and their focus on meeting the diverse needs of students with SEN.

In addition to the practice implications mentioned above, it is important to acknowledge the influence of the Sinnott and O'Donoghue cases on inclusive education in Ireland's post-primary schools. These landmark cases emphasise the legal rights of students with special educational needs to receive appropriate supports and access to education in mainstream settings. In response to these cases, Irish policies prioritise inclusive education and advocate for practices such as differentiation, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), co-teaching, peer scaffolding, and the integration of assistive technology. These policy implications align with the principles of inclusive education established by the Sinnott and O'Donoghue cases, reinforcing the commitment to providing equitable and accessible education for all learners in post-primary schools in Ireland.

### **5.5 Areas for Further Research**

While this research has provided valuable insights into the benefits and limitations of inclusive methodologies in mainstream classrooms for students with SEN, there are areas that warrant further investigation:

1. Long-term impact: The long-term academic and social effects for students with special needs who have received inclusive education in mainstream classes require further study. An improved knowledge of the long-term impacts of inclusive behaviours might be obtained by longitudinal research. (Shogren et al., 2018).

2. Effective implementation strategies: Future studies should examine the particular methods and processes that enable the successful use of inclusive approaches like UDL, co-teaching, and peer scaffolding (Friend & Cook, 2016). Identifying best practices can guide teachers and schools in implementing inclusive approaches.

3. Contextual factors: Insights into the barriers and facilitators of inclusive education may be gained by examining the influence of contextual variables, such as school culture, resources, and support networks, on the successful implementation of inclusive practices (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

4. Student perspectives: The experiences and points of view of students with SEN themselves should be included in future studies. Understanding their perspectives and voices can help us better understand their experiences and guide our inclusive practices (Mock & Joshi, 2016).

5. Comparative studies: A deeper knowledge of effective inclusive approaches and their cultural and contextual differences may be gained via comparative studies that look at inclusive education practices in various educational systems or across different nations (Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009).

## **5.6 Conclusion**

By addressing these areas of further research, educators, policymakers, and researchers can continue to enhance inclusive practices in mainstream classrooms and promote the educational rights and opportunities of students with SEN.

## **Chapter Six - Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The primary objective of this dissertation was to investigate effective strategies aimed at improving the learning experience of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream educational settings. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of relevant research and engaging in interviews with teachers, this study aimed to explore key research questions related to accommodations, teacher collaboration, teaching techniques, technology integration, attitudes towards inclusion, teacher training, and efficacy of assessment. In a similar vein, Bunch, Valeo, and Cormier (2016) conducted a comparable study in Ontario, Canada, and their findings aligned closely with the results obtained in this dissertation conducted in North Tipperary, Ireland. This cross-referencing of results across different geographical locations underscores the global perspective on SEN and its implications for educational practices worldwide.

### **6.2 Limitations**

This study was subject to certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The research spanned a period of roughly one school year and focused on a single school, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings (Yin, 2014). The narrow scope of the study limits its ability to capture the diverse range of experiences and contexts found in other educational settings. Additionally, the case study approach employed in this research did not involve direct intervention or implementation of changes, as its primary aim was to gain in-depth understanding rather than enact immediate transformations. While this limited the ability to measure the direct impact of specific interventions, it allowed for rich insights and context-specific knowledge from teachers on the ground (Opie, 2004). Despite these inherent limitations, rigorous efforts were made to ensure the credibility and validity of the study. The research design incorporated multiple data sources, employed rigorous data analysis techniques, and adhered to ethical considerations. As a result, the study provides valuable insights into effective strategies for supporting students with SEN in mainstream educational settings, offering a foundation for future research and practical implications.

### **6.3 Areas for Further Research**

While this research has provided valuable insights into the benefits and limitations of inclusive methodologies in mainstream classrooms for students with SEN, there are several areas that



warrant further investigation. Future studies could focus on examining the long-term impact of inclusive education on academic and social outcomes for students with special educational needs (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Moreover, identifying effective implementation strategies, understanding contextual factors, considering student perspectives, and conducting comparative studies across different educational systems can contribute to a deeper understanding of inclusive practices.

#### **6.4 Recommendations**

To enhance inclusive education, it is recommended to improve teacher training and professional development programs, with a focus on identifying and supporting students with SEN. Raising awareness of SEN among all stakeholders, including policymakers, administrators, teachers, and parents, is essential for creating a supportive and inclusive educational environment. Additionally, adapting the curriculum, utilising assistive technologies, implementing differentiated assessments, and providing flexible learning methods and materials can address curriculum divergences and cater to the diverse needs found in the modern classroom environment. Incorporating regular progress monitoring and individual goal setting can facilitate continuous improvement and data-driven decision-making. Finally, promoting collaboration and communication among all stakeholders is crucial for effective support and overall inclusive education (Forlin, Chambers, & Loreman, 2014).

#### **6.5 Final Remarks**

In conclusion, this dissertation has explored effective methodologies to support the learning of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom setting. The findings have provided valuable insights that resonate with me as a newly qualified teacher (NQT) and will significantly enhance my teaching practice moving forward. Understanding the importance of inclusive practices, collaboration, and individual support, I am now equipped with practical strategies to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all my present and future students. Furthermore, I now recognise the importance of collaboration with other teachers in implementing these strategies effectively. I am eager to share my learnings with colleagues, engage in collaborative planning and problem-solving, and contribute to a supportive professional learning community, wherever that may be. By working together, we can create a collective impact and ensure that all students, those with and without SEN, receive the support they deserve and need to thrive, in my classroom, your classroom and beyond.

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# Appendix One – Principals Letter



Student Researcher: Megan Timmons

Hibernia College Dublin

5<sup>th</sup> December 2022



Dear [REDACTED]

As part of my Professional Masters in Post-Primary Education with Hibernia College, I am investigating the role that effective methodologies play in supporting students with SEN in mainstream education. The title of the research project is:

*'Exploring effective methodologies to support the learning of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom'*.

From my experience so far I have learned that classroom teachers are key stakeholders in identifying and implementing effective methodologies that ultimately support and enhance the learning of SEN learners who are based in a mainstream educational setting, so, this is why I have chosen to interview practicing teachers as part of my research studies.

This letter aims to provide you with an introduction to the research project that I have undertaken and to seek consent from you for the project to move forward in order to inform my future professional practice as a teacher.

With your permission, I would like to interview five classroom teachers from [REDACTED]. The staff will be asked to partake in semi-structured interviews to gain an insight into the aims of the project. Please find enclosed for your perusal, a copy of the information and consent forms. Only those respondents who return a signed copy of the consent form will be purposely selected to take part in the study. Any data gathering will strictly be underpinned by the school's ethical code of conduct. No students will be interviewed. Information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. The school's name will not appear on any research findings. Interviews will be recorded, and the data will be securely held under Hibernia College Research Ethics guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my research project and may be disseminated through professional publication.

I would appreciate your cooperation in providing access to the staff at the school over the coming weeks.

If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me via the following:

Researcher: Megan Timmons  
Mobile: [REDACTED]  
Email: [REDACTED]

This research study has received Ethics approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact the School of Education, Hibernia College Dublin by letter or by telephone on (01) 6610168.

Researcher's Signature:

Date: 5/12/2022

## Appendix Two – Participant Information Letter



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Megan Timmons

Hibernia College Dublin

### Research Information Sheet

#### FAO: Prospective Participants

**Researcher's Name:** Megan Timmons

**Organisation:** Hibernia College Dublin

**Title of Dissertation Project:** *'Exploring effective methodologies to support the learning of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom'*

**Why have I chosen this topic?** My initial research question was *'To evaluate how group work/collaborative learning affects the learning experience and learning outcomes of SEN students when the SEN learners are paired with mainstream learners (as opposed to being excluded and placed in a class with learners of equivalent academic abilities as they traditionally were)'* but after some guidance from my research supervisor we came to a more condensed and straightforward question of *'Exploring effective methodologies to support the learning of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom'*. It is clear from the above that I have a keen interest in SEN and the reason behind that is largely down to the school I underwent my first school placement in. I was absolutely blown away by how inclusive and progressive this educational setting was not just for students with SEN but for all students regardless of their interests and abilities (academic or otherwise). I remember writing one of my daily reflections during that first school placement and being so emotional that I could barely write – why? Because it was the first time I had seen students of all abilities being treated as equal. I have heard the stories of how unfairly differently abled students have been treated in the past in education in Ireland and I have also unfortunately seen it first-hand too (I remember being in a setting and a child being described as B-O-L-D by an adult who didn't 'believe' this child's recent diagnosis of ASD. I was young enough to not feel that I was in a position to speak up but wise enough to know that what had happened was wrong and to this day I feel guilty for not speaking up). So, to say I was flabbergasted by how inclusive that school setting in my first placement school was would be an understatement. There was one teacher in particular who had the most infectious adoration of all students, but held a special place in their heart for those students with SEN. The way they included, nurtured and respected each of those students regardless of academic, behavioural or other differences was so commendable and is a large part of the reason which I came to choose the above research topic.



My research project will adhere to the BERA Guidelines. This means that students such as myself must adhere 'to an ethic of respect' that includes the following responsibilities on the part of students:

1. **Harm Arising from Participation in Research:** Any research needs to be performed with the explicit consent of participants and must not result in any risk of harm or detriment to them. Educational interventions must not result in any educational disadvantage, for example, students must ensure the tasks that children may complete as part of an action research project are not detrimental to the children's progress in the topic. In cases where harm arises, 'Students should immediately reconsider any actions occurring during the research process that appear to cause emotional or other harm, in order to minimise such harm' (p.19 of BERA guidelines).
2. **Distress Protocols and Student Sensitivity in Data Collection:** The issue of sensitivity is central to data collection procedures (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Brayda and Boyce, 2014; Howard and Hammond, 2019). This is particularly the case when gathering data from potentially vulnerable groups or when exploring topics that have the potential to generate distress or discomfort in participants. To mitigate discomfort, students must ensure that they approach data collection in a thoroughly responsible, sensitive and affirmative manner. This involves checks on the appropriate wording of questions (i.e. use of person-first language), the style of delivery and how the student-student may respond to the appearance of distress or discomfort in participants during data collection. To ensure that each student complies with their duty of care to participants, all students must forward a copy of all data collection documents (Letter of Information about the study, Letter of Consent to Participate in Research, Consent Letter for School Principals and so on) to their research supervisor before carrying out any data collection. Students can only proceed with the explicit consent of their research supervisor.
3. **Informed Consent:** All participants in any educational research must understand the significance of their role (i.e. be informed) and their consent must be sought for their involvement in the study or intervention. The principle of informed consent arises from the participant's right to freedom and self-determination. Students need to clearly explain to participants in the Research Information sheet and Letter of Consent that any identifiable data collected and retained are limited to the current research project and will not be used beyond this original purpose.



4. **Right to Withdraw:** Hibernia College advocates an opt-in rather than an opt-out procedure. Participants of all research must be provided with details of the research through the provision of a Research Information Sheet and Consent form Letter. They must be advised of the reasons for the study, how the information is gathered and who will have access to the data. It must be explained that their participation is completely voluntary and they may withdraw at any time.
5. **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** All submitted data and results must be confidential and must not include the identification of any individuals (for example, pupils/students or teachers) or institutions (for example, schools or colleges). Pseudonyms must be used for all persons and institutions, and this needs to be stated in all research documentation. Individuals must never be named. Furthermore, students must not name the location of the study (for example, 'school in Cork') as this may lead to identification. It is sufficient to say, for example, 'a school in a city in southern Ireland', 'an urban school in a large city', or 'a DEIS Band 1 school in an urban setting'.
6. **Data Storage:** All soft copies of data must be stored in an encrypted folder/directory that is password-protected on the student's laptop or computer. All hard copies of data must be stored in the student's secure filing system. All data will be stored for one year after data collection in line with Hibernia College's Privacy Policy, after which all data must be safely and securely destroyed in line with GDPR. The student will have primary custody of the data, but access must be given to the student's supervisor upon request. All data transmitted between student and supervisor must be via a secure method. Participants are also entitled to ask for a copy of their personal data, and students must consult with their supervisor before issuing such data.

Link to BERA Guidelines: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/resources/all-publications/resources-for-researchers>

**Participant Selection Process:**

- With permission of the school principal, I would like to interview five classroom teachers. The staff will be asked to partake in semi-structured 20-30 minute interviews to gain an insight into the aims of the project. Please find enclosed for your perusal, a copy of the information and consent forms. Only those respondents who return a signed copy of the consent form will be purposely selected to take part in the study. Any data gathering will strictly be underpinned by the school's ethical code of conduct. No students will be interviewed. Information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. The school's name will



- not appear on any research findings. Interviews will be recorded, and the data will be securely held under Hibernia College Research Ethics guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my research project and may be disseminated through professional publication.
- To gauge interest of possible participants I will place a ballot type box in the staffroom and have teachers put themselves forward. I know from experience that teachers do not like to be headhunted for research like this because they feel they are obliged to say 'yes' and I do not want to add to an already very busy schedule of you, my colleagues. It is entirely up to my colleagues if they want to put themselves forward. Beside the ballot box in the staffroom, I will have an information card all about my research and inform the staff of what it is I am looking for (One male with more than ten years teaching experience, one male with less than ten years teaching experience, one female with more than ten years teaching experience, one female with less than ten years teaching experience and a member of school management or a member of the staff group responsible for the planning and provisions for students with SEN.). I will also leave my contact details in case anyone has any queries. On the information sheet I will include all the information about my research topic as well as information about data collection and storage too. I will give maybe two weeks for staff to put themselves forward and after that I will split the submissions into the five categories (One male with more than ten years teaching experience, one male with less than ten years teaching experience, one female with more than ten years teaching experience, one female with less than ten years teaching experience and a member of school management or a member of the staff group responsible for the planning and provisions for students with SEN.). I will then chose, at random, the four qualifying candidates and approach them.
  - I want to make it clear to candidates that they can pull out of the research project at any time and emphasize that I do not wish to add to anyone's workload but that I would be most grateful for participation to enhance my teacher training experience.

### **What's Next?**

Should you wish to put yourself forward to participate in this research project the next step is to fill out one of the consent forms beside the ballot box in the staffroom. There will then be a short two week wait to gather all possible participants entries and then I will place the entries in the five bundles and randomly select one from each. If I happen to select you I will make contact to see whether you are still interested in participating. If you are no longer interested I will randomly select another participant from your group until the five interview slots are filled.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Warm regards,

Ms Megan Timmons

## Appendix Three – Consent Form



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Megan Timmons

Hibernia College Dublin

### Consent Form

**Researcher's Name:** Megan Timmons

**Organisation:** Hibernia College Dublin

**Title of Dissertation Project:** *'Exploring effective methodologies to support the learning of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom'*

**Consent (to be completed by the participant)** (circle your answer below for each of the following seven questions):

1. Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study?

**Yes / No**

2. Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?

**Yes / No**

3. Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?

**Yes / No**

4. Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason for withdrawing and without your withdrawal having an adverse effect for you?

**Yes / No**

5. Do you agree to take part in this study, the results of which are likely to be published or presented at a conference?

**Yes / No**

6. Have you been informed that a copy of this consent form will be kept by the researcher?

**Yes / No**

7. Are you satisfied that any information you give to the researcher will be kept confidential? Your name and the name of the school will not appear in the research report.

**Yes / No**

Participant's name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participants name (Signature): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix Four – Interview Questions

1. How are students with SEN currently supported in mainstream classrooms?
2. How are teachers currently collaborating with other professionals to support the learning of students with SEN?
3. How is the progress of students with SEN currently tracked and monitored?
4. How is the curriculum currently adapted to meet the needs of students with SEN?
5. How are challenging behaviours of students with SEN currently addressed in the classroom?
6. What are the most common challenges faced by students with SEN in mainstream classrooms?
7. What types of accommodations and modifications are most effective for students with SEN?
8. What types of professional development would be most useful for teachers in supporting students with SEN?
9. What teaching strategies and approaches have been found to be most effective in supporting the learning of students with SEN?
10. How can technology be used to better support the learning of students with SEN?
11. How can teachers create a more supportive and inclusive classroom environment for students with SEN?
12. How can students with SEN be better supported in developing independent learning skills?
13. What are the attitudes and perceptions of teachers towards the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms?
14. In your experience, what are the attitudes and perceptions of students with SEN towards their own learning experiences in mainstream classrooms?
15. How can the perspectives of different stakeholders be better aligned to support the learning of students with SEN?
16. What types of support would be most useful for students with SEN in advocating for their own needs?
17. How do you as a teacher feel about your ability to support the learning of students with SEN?
18. In your opinion, what types of teaching strategies and approaches have you found to be most effective in supporting the learning of students with SEN?
19. How effective is the use of technology in supporting the learning of students with SEN?
20. How effective are independent learning interventions for students with SEN?
21. What factors contribute to the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching and learning for students with SEN?
22. How can the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching and learning be measured and evaluated?
23. How has SEN teaching changed over time?
24. What are the causes of inequality in school communities amongst SEN and mainstream students do you think?
25. How have you dealt with SEN since you began teaching?
26. What is the role of a teacher in SEN?
27. How do school policies influence SEN?
28. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of an exclusive SEN classroom in a school environment?
29. How effective is having students with SEN in mainstream education? Are there any changes you would make?

30. In your opinion, does teacher training offer enough in terms of preparing students teachers for dealing with learners of all abilities? Explain your answer.
31. Do you think having a staff led focus group that focuses on the enhancement of effective methodologies for students with SEN (like in this school) is effective? Explain your answer.