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



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## HIGHLIGHTS

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

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## ABSTRACT

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

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## 1. Introduction

Students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) present unique challenges for educators and policy makers alike due to social communication deficits, restricted interests and repetitive behaviours that can frequently characterise students with ASD. The fact that these difficulties can manifest in a multitude of ways compounds these challenges. While all children, in particular those diagnosed with special educational needs (SEN), can present unique challenges, those diagnosed with ASD are unique in that their challenges are often invisible to educators. This is particularly

the case if they are on the high-functioning end of the spectrum. Examining the progress and effectiveness of inclusive education in the context of meeting the needs of students diagnosed with ASD offers better insight into the challenges associated with this specific population. Given that the challenges for those with ASD who are otherwise highly functioning are often invisible to educators, their special educational needs can remain unnoticed, with adverse consequence for their educational experience.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 1.1. Theory of Planned Behavior

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

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

intention to include students with SEN can be analysed.

This theory was adopted as an analytical model because the focus of the study was on attitude, as well as knowledge and challenges because attitudes are an important predictor of behavior and is relevant to this theory. The authors, based on the insights provided by this theory, advocate that the development of more positive attitudes and subjective norms, coupled with meaningful perceived behavioural control could positively influence teachers having greater behavioural intention to include SEN students in their classrooms. Thus this research aims to identify and explore these attitudes and norms in the Irish context with a view towards the enhancement of teacher professional development specific to SEN inclusion.

## 1.2. Inclusion in Ireland

Historically, segregation was justified for reasons of practicality with consolidation of resources for therapies and specialised services espoused as a core aim (Winter & O'Raw, 2010, p. 6). In Ireland, there was distinct lack of any meaningful debate on the value of segregation and the potential of integration until the 1980's. This move in the 1980's towards acknowledging the need for integration was most likely influenced by the growing international trends towards integration at the time (Winter & O'Raw, 2010, p. 6). Though this did result in some policy change, as evidenced in the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) report which advocated for "as much integration as is appropriate and feasible, and as little segregation as necessary" (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 1993, p. 22). Clearly, pragmatism remained to the fore in Irish policy formulation in that while striving to create an inclusive system there is also recognition that there are some who require supports that may not be appropriately met in mainstream settings.

This pragmatic approach towards inclusion continued with the Government of Ireland (1998) which obliged schools to provide for the educational needs of all students, including those with special education needs. Providing further focus and reinforcement in the area of inclusion, the introduction of the Government of Ireland (2004) offered greater policy coherence and clarity, particularly in the area of provision of services but also in its emphasis on individualized education plans for all students diagnosed with SEN. As part of the Act, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was created in order to improve delivery of education services to those diagnosed with SEN, with a particular emphasis being placed on children. As part of this mandate Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) were employed to deal with applications for support from schools. These supports can include Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and additional teaching support. In an effort to further develop inclusive practice in schools the DES (2007) subsequently released guidelines for the implementation of inclusive practices to post-primary schools.

Proponents of 'full inclusion', who advocate for the inclusion of all students, regardless of their condition or its severity in mainstream classrooms (Rogers, 1993) may have difficulty with the policy as it currently stands which includes the proviso that the child shall be educated in an inclusive environment unless to do so would be inconsistent with "the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated" (Government of Ireland, 2004, p.7). Sapon-Shevin (2001, p. 38) argues that this abdicates responsibility for structural reform somewhat as "while placement options such as special classes or schools exist, educators will not have to address the restructuring of the system to meet the needs of all children. Where alternate placements are maintained, students

who challenge the existing system or who do not 'fit in' are simply removed from the mainstream, placed elsewhere, and the system does not have to change". Some contextual issues also exacerbate the challenges for authentic inclusion in schools, not least of which is the dominance of performativity in the Irish education system (Hennessy & McNamara, 2013). Teaching to the test ideologies, and increasing pressure on schools through publication of school performance in the national media serve to narrow the space for inclusive classrooms. It can be argued that the continuation of alternate placements facilitates in no small measure the abdication of responsibility for inclusion in schools in favour of an increasingly performative agenda. Despite some policy and legislative support, issues remain due to the complexity of inclusion, not least of which is teacher knowledge and skill.

Mishra and Koehler (2006, p. 1020) describe teaching as "a highly complex activity that draws on many kinds of knowledge." In recent years a focus has been placed on the concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) first posited by Shulman (1986). Describing teacher knowledge as the intersection between content knowledge of their subject area, what they teach and pedagogical knowledge, how to teach, highlights the complexities involved. Pedagogical knowledge itself encompasses "all issues of student learning, classroom management, lesson plan development and implementation, student evaluation . . . techniques or methods to be used in the classroom, the nature of the target audience and strategies for evaluating student understanding" (Mishra & Koehler, 2006, p. 1026). Pedagogical content knowledge requires more sophisticated application of pedagogical and content knowledges (Shulman, 1986). Then engaging with students with diverse and more complex learning needs requires even more. In effect, it requires knowledge of ASD and an adaptable approach to pedagogical content knowledge in order to more effectively meet the needs of these students in an inclusive environment.

However, in Ireland the National Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001, p. 266) identified that a "high percentage of the teachers being employed had little or no knowledge of ASDs". Almost a decade later Travers et al. (2010) found little change with a significant number of barriers to inclusion remaining evident, including but not limited to assessment and resources at school level, differentiation skills, lack of time, teacher knowledge and attitudes. While teachers' in Ireland generally hold positive attitudes towards inclusion from a philosophical perspective, and see it as something worth achieving, in practice Irish teachers' implicit model of inclusion align more accurately with integration and having students 'fit in' (McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2014; Shevlin, Winter, & Flynn, 2013). Irish teachers perceive their initial teacher education as insufficient in preparing them to work with students with ASD (McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2014).

Despite this, studies suggest that pre-service teachers in Ireland hold positive attitudes towards inclusion of students with special education needs, however they are least positive with regard to students with behavioural difficulties which of course is of particular concern for students diagnosed with ASD (O'Toole & Burke, 2013; Tindall, MacDonald, Carroll, & Moody, 2014). There is growing evidence for the efficacy of positive behavioural support as a preferred approach in dealing with behavioural difficulties (Lowe et al., 2006). However, while positive outcomes are well documented for this non-aversive strategy (MacDonald & McGill, 2013), there is still widespread use of aversive strategies (Lowe et al., 2006; Robertson et al., 2005). This coupled with lack of understanding of the behavioural complexities for students with ASD and misinterpretation of their behavior makes inclusion more challenging and suggests some work is necessary in challenging teachers behavioural perceptions of students with ASD in their classrooms.

Clearly, teachers articulate needs in terms of professional

development for inclusion and additional supports/resources for its implementation. In examining teachers' perspectives of the implementation of inclusive practice for students diagnosed with ASD, this paper aims to identify any on-going trends in these areas and their underlying attitudes, in order to inform future ITE/CPD programmes and national policy.

### 1.3. Aims of the study

The aim of this interpretive study was to examine teachers' perspectives of the implementation of inclusive practice for students with autism spectrum disorders in Irish post-primary schools. The focus in this respect was to examine teachers attitudes towards inclusion, their initial teacher education and professional development opportunities and their experiences of working with students with ASD in inclusive mainstream settings. In doing so the study aimed to answer the following research questions.

1. What attitudes do Irish post-primary teachers hold regarding inclusion of students diagnosed with ASD in Ireland?
2. What are the experiences of teachers in facilitating inclusion of students diagnosed with ASD?
3. Are teachers equipped with the necessary knowledge and competencies to implement authentic inclusion?

## 2. Methodology

A qualitative, interpretative research design was adopted. Interviews were conducted on a semi-structured basis through phone calls with teachers across Ireland. In exploring teachers' perspectives on inclusion there were a number of specific areas targeted in the interview schedule. These included questions relating to their knowledge and experience of working with students diagnosed with ASD, factors that contributed to this such as continued professional development (CPD) and initial teacher education (ITE), their attitudes towards inclusion and subsequently factors they believe are necessary for it to be successful.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted with post-primary school teachers, lasting from 30 min to 1 h. The authors acknowledge the sampling limitations and do not seek to generalise from the data but rather they seek to offer some insight from the experiences of the teachers who participated in interviews. Post-primary teachers were studied as the specific challenges associated with ASD, are often exacerbated in the post primary environment as a result of a widening curriculum, greater independence, less structure, more frequent change, issues associated with puberty and social engagement.

Participants were identified using a combined voluntary random stratified sampling technique. A previous phase of this research involved the distribution of teacher surveys. There was a form on the back of these surveys which participants could detach, fill out and return should they be interested in participating in the qualitative study at a later date. An advertisement was also placed on the social media pages of two organisations who deal with teachers (one a teacher union social media page and the other an inclusion advocacy group). Both these sampling methods combined yielded 15 participants. The sample was stratified in that it aimed to include participants from different types of schools proportional to the number of teachers in Ireland teaching in those types of schools.

The data were thematically analysed according to the six phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2013). The approach used was deductive, in that the research questions were utilised to inform the analysis and constructionist in that theory-based

meaning as it related to TPB was sought. The research questions aim to provide a deeper understanding of teacher attitudes and conceptualization of inclusion and subsequently identify perceived barriers and supports currently in existence within the Irish education system. Analysis was conducted using NVIVO 10 software. Adopting Braun and Clarke's framework (2013), the first phase involved repeated reading and simultaneous listening to the data in order to familiarize with it and make initial notes. Phase two involved initial coding of the data, after which a comprehensive review was undertaken in order to ensure these codings related to the research questions. Similar codes were merged, while others, unrelated to the research questions were removed prior to commencement of phase three which involved searching for themes. These themes were then reviewed as part of phase four, in the context of accuracy to responses from participants but also in drawing connections between them. Phase five involved the definition and naming of these themes in order to clearly differentiate between them and to make clear the findings of the study, which led to phase six, producing the report, creating the findings of this study. These can be viewed in Table 1 linked with their associated research questions.

## 3. Findings

A demography of participants can be seen in Table 2. Participants came from a variety of backgrounds and career stage.

The data analysis indicated an overall openness and value towards inclusive policy and practice, while also evidencing a quite significant lack of familiarity with or understanding of policy and/or key documents relating to inclusion. It is worth noting that five teachers were unable to name any specific policy documents, including the Government of Ireland (2004) which defines the conditions for inclusion as identified above. Schools clearly provided for inclusion in different ways, with a lack of a defined best practice model being evident. In some cases it would appear that individual "champions" drove inclusive practice in schools, but this came from more personal motivations rather than any coherent school agenda. It was also noteworthy that in some instances the nomenclature utilised by participants was more indicative of integration rather than inclusion. Participants articulated clear desire for further investment, resources and training in order to equip them to engage more effectively with authentic inclusion in their schools. They also were clearly aware of a significant number of perceived barriers to inclusion. These challenges will now be elucidated.

### 3.1. Teacher attitudes towards inclusion

#### 3.1.1. Benefits of inclusion

All teachers interviewed held positive attitudes towards inclusion, perceiving it as a system by which the needs of all children can be met while also avoiding unnecessary segregation of students. In particular teachers interviewed focused on perceived positive outcomes for the SEN student from an academic, social and personal perspective, for example:

It is good for their esteem, they see themselves as being normal and participating normally, they learn you know, social etiquette for want of a better word from their peers, what is socially appropriate, what is not. They are following the same syllabus as everyone else; they have the same opportunities as other students (Interviewee 4).

Emphasis was also placed on the independence that inclusion can facilitate for students which they perceived may otherwise be

**Table 1**  
Themes and subthemes.

Theme 1	Theme 2
Research Question (RQ) 1: What attitudes do Irish post-primary teachers hold regarding inclusion of students diagnosed with ASD in Ireland?	RQ 2: What are the experiences of teachers in facilitating inclusion of students diagnosed with ASD? RQ 3: Are teachers equipped with the necessary knowledge and competencies to implement authentic inclusion?
<b>Teacher Attitudes Towards Inclusion</b>	<b>Barriers to Inclusion</b>
Subtheme (ST) 1 - Benefits of Inclusion Academic, Social and Personal Outcomes	Subtheme (ST) 1 - The Curriculum and Assessment Time Consuming, Issues with Performativity and implementation of Assessment
ST 2 - Critiques of Inclusion "Inclusion for Inclusions sake", Question of Appropriateness	ST 2 - Lack of Time Time Constraints for Management, Planning and CPD
ST 3 - Factors for Successful Inclusion Proper Resourcing Required, ASD Units, Resources Teachers, SNA's	ST 3 - Teacher Training ITE Inadequate, Lack of Awareness/Opportunity for CPD
	ST 4 - Class Sizes Problematic Too Large for Effective Differentiation
	ST 5 - Levels of Resourcing Inadequate SNA and Resource Teaching Hours, Disparity in Funding between Primary and Secondary

**Table 2**  
Sample demographic table.

		n	n%		n	n%	
<b>Gender</b>	<i>Male</i>	5	33.30%	<b>Age</b>	20–28	3	20.00%
	<i>Female</i>	10	66.60%		29–38	7	46.70%
					39–48	5	33.30%
<b>School Type</b>	<i>Secondary</i>	4	26.67%	<b>Teaching Experience</b>	1–5	3	20.00%
	<i>Vocational</i>	3	20.00%		6–10	2	13.34%
	<i>Community</i>	3	20.00%		11–15	6	40.00%
	<i>Comprehensive</i>	1	6.66%		16–20	1	6.66%
	<i>Private</i>	4	26.67%		21+	3	20.00%

unavailable in a special school. Particularly for students with ASD the concept of self-management was identified in the sense of getting themselves to different classes and being responsible for their own work and its completion.

### 3.1.2. Critiques of inclusion

Interviewees were critical about the practicalities of implementing inclusive practice. There was a clear articulation of the need to avoid "inclusion for inclusions sake". In essence teachers articulated a perspective that inclusion is positive up to a point, but recognition is also required of the somewhat utopian view that all students can be included in mainstream classrooms, given the diversity of both the needs of the student with SEN and those of the other students in the class. This is consistent with Irish policy which advocates that the student will be educated in an inclusive environment with other children who do not have SEN unless to do so would be inconsistent with the best interests of the child, or the effective provision of education for the other children in the class (EPSEN Act, 2004, p.7). Some interviewees gave specific examples of particular students/situations where they personally believed inclusion was not the right option, and where students were eventually taken out of the school as a result of the behaviours they exhibited. In one case an admission panel allowed a student to attend despite professional reports recommending them not to:

There was 9 different reports from psychologists, teachers, occupational therapists, SENOs (Special Education Needs Organisers) all stating this is what is going to happen and the people sitting on the panel who are not qualified to sit on it and said oh absolutely we'll uphold this and allow him into school. He lasted

3 days. Very traumatic 3 days for him, there was no fault on the student but those kind of things. (Interviewee 11).

The vast majority of teachers (12) appeared to advocate for a pragmatic, realistic approach to inclusion, consistent with the [Government of Ireland \(2004\)](#) and policy in Ireland though inconsistent with advocates of 'full inclusion'. Comments included:

Inclusion up to a point yes, absolutely. There are some kids who can't be included (Interviewee 13).

I know students just because of their behaviour can be inside in a class and can behave perfectly. They won't learn a thing but they'll be able to sit there and then somebody will say 'oh look this is someone independent who can go into class by themselves' and I'm like, yeah, but if they're not learning what's the point? (Interviewee 11).

Well ok, for me inclusion doesn't mean putting the student into everything because that is not inclusion. Inclusion is allowing the students to participate in classes that are going to be helpful to them. (Interviewee 5).

Two teachers spoke about inclusion and its purpose from largely an integrative approach whereby its purpose was to have students 'fit in' or to prepare them to lead "relatively normal lives out in society, which is mainstream really".

### 3.1.3. Factors for successful inclusion

Teachers were resolute however, that in order for any type of inclusion to be successful it requires adequate resourcing and

training for staff. In particular, teachers in schools with ASD Units/Special Classrooms found them beneficial, with resource teachers and SNA's described as invaluable. One teacher expressed a discomfort at the coinage of the term "unit" and what it implies such as "locked doors, bars, we're not part of the school", while another wanted to offer a clarification on ASD units in the wider inclusion debate, suggesting that it can't be inclusion because there is still separation:

There is a benefit to having an ASD unit stuck on to the school, even if it's separate but included, if that makes any sense. So there is some value to that, but nobody should kid themselves that that actually is inclusion. It just isn't inclusion. (Interviewee 9).

However one teacher described a change in their school culture, which resulted in the creation of a resource department, so that they could move away from units. They centralised all of their resources into this one school department which was open to all students and staff for support:

I feel in our school our whole culture has changed because of our resource department which is not like a special unit, it is very much a department of the school and it is open and a child doesn't have to have a report to get support . . . I don't think many schools do that, you know quite often a special needs unit is a unit separate from the school and whereas in ours, because it is an integral part there is inclusion more so and a support structure for everybody really. (Interviewee 3).

The importance of school culture in this respect was highlighted by another participant who described it as needing to be "tolerant, inclusive, have regard to the individual as well as the common good, but above all else, it has to be a school where every child feels that their self is affirmed." Another teacher alluded to a level of "fear" associated with inclusion of students diagnosed with SEN, as a result of older generations of teachers not being educated with children with SEN. They suggested that this and in the broader sense overall "acceptance" needs to be addressed in order to have a proper effect on the child within the whole of society, rather than simply placing them in a room with their peers.

There was a general consensus that adequate resourcing simply isn't there for all schools and that teacher training needs to be improved. In particular one teacher suggested it could be even more of a hindrance to the student, stating:

If the resources aren't there to help them access that mainstream education, then that's a major negative because then they think there is something wrong with them, that they are failing, but actually I think it's the system that's failing them, that's not helping them to access that education...I don't think there are enough resources no. (Interviewee 1).

Other teachers stated:

That is the advantage in our school, we can do that and then he can be in our resource department getting extra help at times, but otherwise he wouldn't have survived in school you know... and that is the problem that a lot of schools I think don't have the extra support (Interviewee 3).

If you say to anybody, "have you any objections to inclusion?" how could anybody say yes to that? Nobody could have any objections to inclusion. The question is the type of inclusion, and the extent of the inclusion and the resources available to

facilitate that inclusion...It's important to make a distinction between those special educational needs that can be included within a typical mixed ability classroom environment, and those SENs that really require their own specific interventions (Interviewee 9).

It [ASD] has to be on CPD and initial teacher training has to change I think as well, if they want this model of inclusion to be any way feasible (Interviewee 8).

### 3.2. Barriers to inclusion

#### 3.2.1. The curriculum and assessment

The current manifestation of curriculum and assessment thereof was identified by some teachers as a barrier due to the dominance of performativity focus nationally. This resulted in difficulties for some with its implementation. One teacher described the process as very transmissive stating:

I would love to say that every classroom is a constructive classroom you know...but the reality is that is not the case. A lot of classes are transmissive and the information is passed on in such a way as to enable the students to pass the exam. (Interviewee 2).

Time constraints as a result of the curriculum made it difficult to provide individual help to the students who required it. One interviewee stated:

I mean you are so caught with time restraints in secondary school, the bell goes every 40 minutes, you move onto next class and the next new group of students. And you are having to adapt very quickly and because you have a big course to cover, you just don't have the time to give individual help when you got 26 thereabouts. (Interviewee 14)

This was not a view which was shared by all participants, with some differentiating between curriculum (as not the issue per se) and its implementation (where the problem rests).

Any curriculum will be fine if you know how to teach it to a particular student that kind of way. (Interviewee 6).

I think the core curriculum is a good thing. But I also think that teachers should be trained properly, so that, when they go into a classroom, they can differentiate properly and have a knowledge of the child's needs. (Interviewee 9).

Two teachers specifically highlighted assessment as an issue. The first in relation to the methods of assessment adopted while the other in relation to a lack of resources for special arrangements, providing a specific example from his experiences:

Even trying to get special arrangements for the exams, with cutbacks that can become difficult but even you know to accept a verbal exam, an oral exam in mainstream subjects that would be more flexibility for certain individuals because to ask certain kids with Asperger's to sit down and do a three hour written exam, when you've spent six years adapting his education and then the terminal exam is the same as for another individual, that's where I would see the difficulty. (Interviewee 12).

### 3.2.2. Lack of time

It was felt by participants that they are significantly lacking in time to fully dedicate themselves to the process of inclusion by means of classroom interactions, collaboration with colleagues and in participating in CPD or in-service training. Teachers stated:

One of the things about teaching is, while we're doing 22 hours in the classroom and that doesn't sound like very much, all the other stuff does add up. People say "well look, you prepare your lesson and that's it, you don't ever have to do it again", but actually the reality is you have to adapt. You still have corrections and reports and meetings and stuff. I think most people say they just had enough you know? So when it comes to doing in-service, it's really hard. (Interviewee 9).

Teachers don't have a lot of time to meet and so they don't. (Interviewee 2).

Some teachers saw opportunity in the current political situation. In particular they identified the two national agreements made between public service management and the teacher unions in Ireland, (commonly referred to as the Croke Park and Haddington Road agreements). Teachers are required to work additional hours as part of these national wage agreements, and during interview it was suggested that extra hours they are required to work as part of these agreements could be used to attend professional development courses in SEN, however they identified resistance on the part of the department of education to this model.

At the moment times are fairly fractious with Croke Park and Haddington Road hours and all that so none of those [professional development courses] get any credit with the department and all of those courses are on in the evening at about 7 o'clock. (Interviewee 13).

### 3.2.3. Teacher education

Across the range of years of experience all teachers interviewed felt that their initial teacher education was inadequate. Some described covering SEN in very little detail, with one or two hours dedicated to it as part of another module in University, while others recalled no exposure to SEN topics. Teachers in earlier stages of their careers tended to have covered SEN topics as part of their ITE, but in no great detail. However one teacher with less than five years experience stated they had "absolutely none, zero. Mine was one year and I had none". Another teacher stated "Teacher education was no help whatsoever".

When discussing CPD, some teachers described a lack of awareness of training programmes, specifically in relation to ASD, and where to find information on them. Others highlighted accessibility issues towards the training, both from a time and travel perspective. While participants spoke of a variety of benefits in relation to CPD, particularly from a networking and collaboration perspective, others were critical, with one participant describing it as a "tick the box exercise". Further critiques tended to focus on the delivery of such programmes:

You know some of the CPD things are waffle sessions and you come away thinking that was a waste of time. (Interviewee 13).

An ordinary general teacher like me would have received the odd half day or day in-service you know, very random, very ad hoc, no follow up and em usually very sort of transmissive. (Interviewee 2).

### 3.2.4. Class-sizes problematic

A majority of teachers (9) felt that class sizes were problematic in the contexts of inclusion. Those who had exposure to smaller class sizes tend not to think of it as an issue within their own context. Those deeming them problematic however, did so from the perspective of being able to meet the needs of all students in their class. Some expressed day to day difficulty with this without even taking into consideration having an ASD/SEN student in their class. One teacher described the dilemma of a colleague:

The divide between higher level and ordinary it's very difficult. He would teach in a class of 30 and he has four ordinary level students in that class. He felt he was almost neglecting those students so he decided he had to stay back for an hour a week after school to try and help them, because he felt they were not getting the care or they were not getting the teaching they deserved during the week. Now you can imagine if you have kids with a high level of needs in that class, are they going to suffer also within that class? (Interviewee 8).

Multiple junior cycle classes with 30 students were reported by one teacher, but most other participants ranged from 25 to 28 students. One teacher from a private school, who taught a student on the spectrum in a class of 10 students stated:

The fact that I had only 10 meant that I had more time to spend with him. If I had like 24 or 28 kids in the class, there is no way I would have been able to spend great time you know going through stuff with him, doing a bit of extra at home. (Interviewee 6).

Another teacher felt that this was simply the way things are, stating "that is the reality of teaching I think in second level, class sizes have increased and supports have been reduced." This same teacher described the situation as a "very significant challenge" and expressed concern at the situation because they "deal with big numbers [of students], that student [ASD/SEN], it might be through the best will in the world that they might never get all the support and the attention that they deserve or that they need."

### 3.2.5. Levels of resourcing inadequate

As stated previously with reference to attitudes to inclusion, there is a general consensus among participants that current funding and resourcing levels are not adequate in the Irish post-primary education system. One teacher stated "I don't think a lot of mainstream secondary schools have the resources to manage inclusion properly". Some comments were made specifically with reference to the number of SNA's and resource teachers schools have:

Not having the SNA's in class regularly enough, that's another challenge. (Interviewee 14).

We have an allocation of two SNA's per six students. So as you can imagine, trying to do math there and divide them out amongst the students is difficult. (Interviewee 10).

Others focused on funding for effective teacher training and in particular an ability for schools to be flexible in their timetables for students diagnosed with ASD. Another teacher chose to focus in on an apparent disparity in funding for students in an ASD class in primary and post-primary education:

Students in an ASD class in secondary are massively underfunded compared to primary. Students in a primary class get just



over €800 a year, that's what the school gets for that student. In secondary it's just over €130...Funding wise it should be the same as primary. At the very least it should be equal. (Interviewee 11).

**4. Discussion and conclusion**

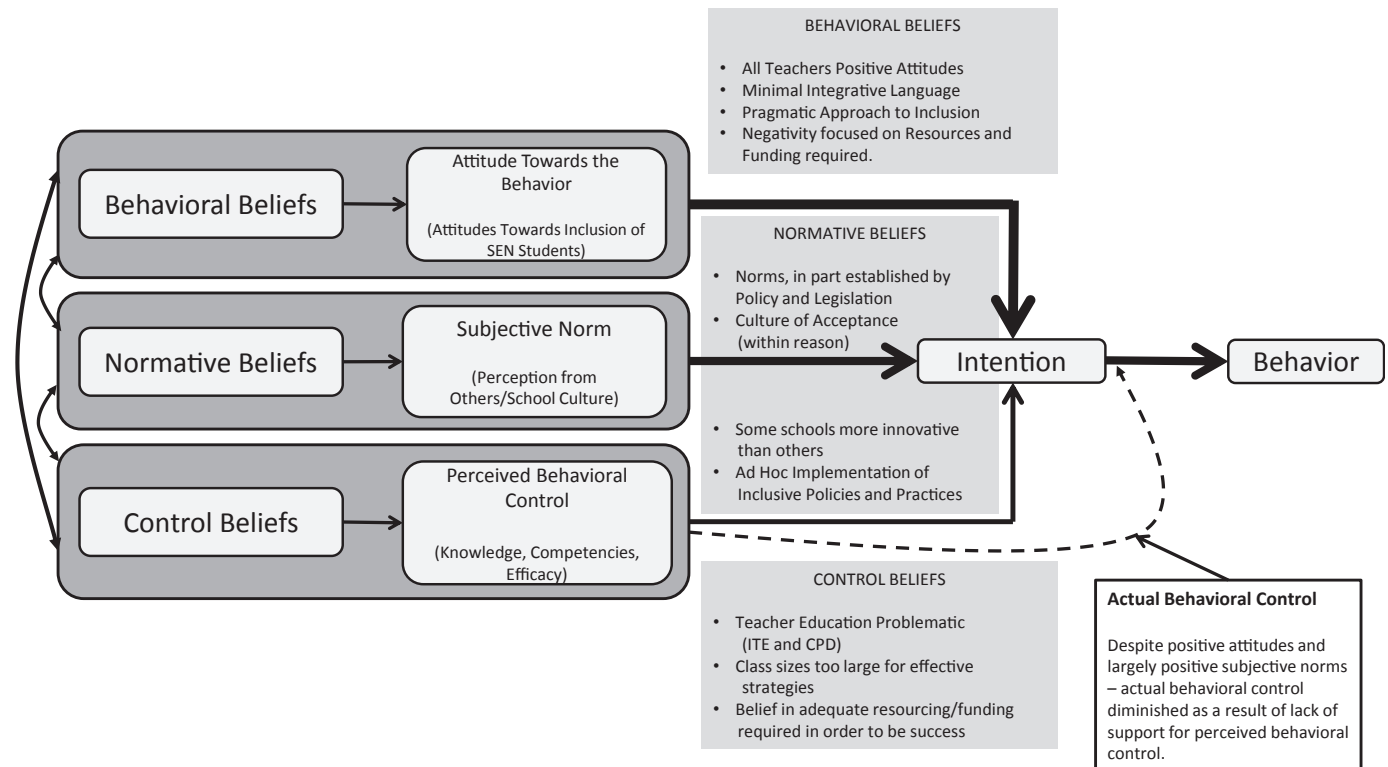
The present study utilised the TPB, as an analytical model for examining teacher perspectives of inclusion in Ireland. A graphical representation of the framework synthesised with the relevant research findings can be seen in Fig. 1. The weight/thickness of the arrows leading to “Intention” is a representation of the strength of the corresponding beliefs. The data indicates that although all teachers hold favourable attitudes towards inclusion as a concept, and dependent on the individual school favourable or more favourable subjective norms, their perceived behavioural control (knowledge, competencies, efficacy) and their wider concerns regarding what is required to make inclusion work suggests that their behavioural intention is not as developed or supported as it could be, with their actual behavioural control being diminished as a result. The general consensus would appear to be that teachers are supportive of inclusive education, however systemic barriers are preventing implementation of authentic inclusion, resulting in more quasi models being practised and as a result inclusive effectiveness needs to be more fully examined.

These findings are reflective of the literature available from Ireland. McGillicuddy and O'Donnell (2014) and Shevlin et al. (2013) found that teachers in Ireland generally hold positive attitudes towards inclusion as a concept, despite their implicit model aligning more accurately with integration and having students “fit in”. While in the present study the occurrence of integrative

language from participants was minimal, what was clear is the impression from participants that there simply isn't enough investment or support to make inclusion an authentic reality. This has been evidenced by the variety of identified barriers that emerged from the data. However despite this, teachers do hold positive attitudes towards inclusion and as a result their behavioural beliefs are weighted the largest with regards to influence on their behavioural intention (Fig. 1).

The implementation of inclusive policy varied from school to school. The data evidenced little if any negative subjective norms. In part, the subjective norms appeared to be influenced by established policy and legislation. There was no evidence of anti-inclusive school culture. Rather the community perception and culture surrounding inclusion was influenced by the communities belief that they could actualize it and a desire for the tools to do this. Some schools had ASD units, others did not. Some showed visible efforts to positively affect school culture by means of appropriate policies and plans for students. One school had reorganised all resources relating to SEN into a single Resource Department. Some teachers had opportunities to participate in CPD, particularly relating to ASD and yet again, others did not. There is no defined best-practice model for the implementation of inclusive policy, which is contributing to the ad-hoc implementation of inclusive practice. Participants subjective norms on this basis are largely favourable, if in part impeded by a perceived lack of support at whole school level.

The international literature has demonstrated a number of key factors which are required for “inclusion” to be implemented successfully, ranging from resources/funding, to an accessible curriculum, to teacher knowledge, beliefs and attitudes (Thomas et al., 2006; UNESCO, 2009). Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996), focusing on teachers' needs, identified time for planning, training, resources



**Fig. 1.** Theory of Planned Behavior & Findings. Our findings are presented here in the context of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) with the strength of beliefs visualised by the weight/thickness of the arrows.

and appropriate class sizes as being required for successful implementation of inclusive policy. However these factors required for success have emerged as specifically identified barriers from the perspective of teachers.

As early as 2001 the Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001) identified that a significant number of teachers employed in Ireland, had little or no knowledge of ASD. Travers et al. (2010) identified barriers to inclusion which once again resonate with those identified in this study six years later, most notably, that of assessment, resources, lack of time, teacher education/CPD/competence and teacher attitudes. The same issues and barriers have been consistently emerging from the data in Ireland for last number of years. Specific to the post-primary context, the issues highlighted above are deeply problematic based on the difficulties which arise specifically for students diagnosed with ASD. Difficulties relating to: preferred teaching styles for students diagnosed with ASD (Carrington & Graham, 2001); curriculum complexity (Shevlin et al., 2009); increased risk of anxiety due to exam pressures (Spiker et al., 2012); bullying and lower levels of social support (Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

A contributing factor to this is the issue of resourcing and funding. As it stands primary schools in Ireland receive €670 additional funding per student diagnosed with ASD (provided there is a sanctioned ASD class in the school), while in post-primary schools they receive no additional funding to support their needs (DES, 2016). The findings of this study suggest that teachers feel their undergraduate preparation is significantly lacking and they articulate clear beliefs that there are not enough opportunities for CPD available to them to upskill. However, when these opportunities do become available teachers were frustrated at being unable to use them as credits towards the professional development requirements they must now evidence as a result of national wage agreements (namely the Landsdowne Road and Haddington Road agreements). Class sizes in Ireland are now in many cases at an unsustainable level most especially if there are children with SEN and in particular students diagnosed with ASD in the class.

In consideration of these barriers towards teachers' perceived behavioural control, it is evident that this is the weakest of each of the components contributing to teachers' behavioural intention. While nothing in the present study suggested that teachers' do not hold the behavioural intention to include students diagnosed with ASD, it has suggested that their actual behavioural control is being diminished, in part, as a result of a weak perceived behavioural control.

Despite progress from a policy perspective, through the Government of Ireland (1998), the Government of Ireland (2004) and the establishment of the NCSE, on the ground, within schools themselves there is a consistent deficit of support which is constantly emerging from studies relating to the subject (DES, 2001; McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2014; Shevlin et al., 2013; Travers et al., 2010), which are reinforced by the present study. The issues for implementation of inclusive practice as highlighted above are not unique to Ireland. They have been identified and discussed across the international literature for the last number of years (Avramidis et al., 2000; Chitiyo et al., 2016; Mäkinen, 2013; Singal, 2008; Tiwari et al., 2015). However, what is noteworthy in Ireland is the historical use of equality rhetoric that is not followed through in terms of implementation in practice (Lynch, 2013). While clearly policy exists, implementation appears hampered in practice by distinct lack of commitment to equalising conditions of life for those who are at a disadvantage. Lynch (2013) is searing in her critique of same and reasons that equality of opportunity in Ireland has been historically promoted with overreliance on the charity of others. This has in effect meant that governments can abdicate their implementation responsibilities to charitable

agencies. The historical context of Irish schooling is that the government have relied heavily on religious orders to provide education in the state (Neary, 2013; O'Sullivan, 1996). This has created some interesting tensions in the profession and has left some challenges in terms of creation of policy on the one hand and actual implementation in schools on the other.

At times this has meant that many teachers identify more closely with the school as their employer rather than the DES per se, and thus policy may not have the same impetus or impact on their practice. Specific to inclusion, this can be evidenced through the lack of teacher development in relation to ASD, recognised as an issue as early as 2001 (DES, 2001) and remaining an issue almost a decade later (Travers et al., 2010), despite the introduction of inclusive legislation. More worryingly, the systematic deconstruction of equality infrastructure in the country between 2000 and 2013, particularly the disbanding of the People with Disabilities in Ireland advocacy group among others (Lynch, 2013) means that the space to advocate for inclusion as an equality issue is now more restricted.

Curiously for the teachers in this study, issues related to inclusion were positioned as external and outside their control. In principle participants held positive beliefs towards inclusion, but in practice most evidenced little appetite or agency with regard to what they could personally do to in order to further an inclusive agenda. This lack of agency, may in part be linked to weak perceived behavioural control evident in the data. However, in one school some good inclusive practice was evident, in that the interviewee identified a concerted effort among all staff to make inclusion work, resulting in what they had described as a change in school culture. Clearly, they indicated the importance of working together and a cultural shift that placed SEN on all teachers' agenda as an important dynamic in their success. The commitment and the success they described to make inclusion an authentic reality may be worthy of closer examination. This would also be an area within which resources could be allocated in order to affect change in school culture and working relationships among teachers.

The TPB framework demonstrates how behavioural, normative and control beliefs can influence one another and this is particularly evident with reference to resources and funding. Teachers associated this largely with their own efficacy to actualize inclusive policy and practice, however it was evident that this was negatively influencing both their attitudes towards the feasibility of inclusion and the subjective norms of their work environment on the basis of implementation of policy and practice. Notwithstanding the externalisation of all issues in this state of quasi-inclusion, it is clear that inclusive policy is enacted without the requisite investment, infrastructure and perhaps from the teachers' perspective the motivation and drive to see it truly succeed. The authenticity of inclusion in such contexts must be examined rigourously, particularly in terms of outcomes for the students diagnosed with ASD and SEN more generally.

The international literature gives excellent insight into the conditions which must be satisfied in order for inclusive policy and practice to be authentic (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Thomas et al., 2006; UNESCO, 2009). In the absence of satisfactory conditions, quasi models of inclusion will continue to dominate. Access to adequate and consistent resources is obviously a necessary first step. This will not serve to change the disposition of teachers towards inclusion at the deeper level. Authentic inclusion requires attitudinal change, change that captures the hearts and minds of teachers, so that they place inclusion at the center of their practice. Lack of access to external resources should not necessarily impede teachers from exercising their professional agency to advocate strongly for resources in the first instance, however few teachers in the study evidenced this type of agency. Conversely, the majority

articulated a resignation to lack of external resourcing and training as impeding their espoused inclusive dispositions. That the resources necessary to implement inclusive practice in schools did not follow national policy is clearly not acceptable, however, teacher agency with regard to advocating for this as an equality issue for their students is within the professional preserve.

## 5. Implications and recommendations

It is important that the NCSE and DES in Ireland carry out a needs based assessment on the resources and infrastructure required for the authentic implementation of inclusive policy. This should be carried out with all stakeholders involved (parents, professionals etc) so that an accurate representation can be obtained. In line with this, teachers' concerns need to be identified and dealt with, both from a training perspective but also with regards the resources they feel are required to aid them in its implementation. While in a time of economic recovery, every effort should be made to provide as much of this support as possible. Affecting shifts in school culture to those more cognisant of the aims of inclusion may benefit from additional resources in this sense.

In order to address the apparent weak perceived behavioural control, it would be suggested that appropriate educational interventions and teaching practices for working with students diagnosed with ASD and other SEN be identified and provided to teachers. This would include knowledge specific to ASDs and training in positive behavior support (Lowe et al., 2006; MacDonald & McGill, 2013), which in turn may also challenge attitudinal concerns as a result of behavioural issues identified in the Irish literature (O'Toole & Burke, 2013; Tindall et al., 2014). It would also be suggested that the development of PCK (Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Shulman, 1986) take cognisance of ASD sensitivities. Following the publication of Salt Review (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010), the Teaching Agency in the United Kingdom commissioned a set of training resources to be accessible online for working with a range of students with severe/complex learning needs. Teachers could access and utilise these as they saw fit and the availability of this basic training may be an area worthy of resources into the future.

A review of ITE in this respect should also be undertaken as it would appear that at the present time it is wholly inadequate in preparing newly qualified teachers to work in diverse, inclusive classrooms. A specific SEN placement as part of ITE programmes may hold significant merit in this regard. This review should be cognisant of issues related to occupational socialization (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Gleeson, O'Flaherty, Galvin, & Hennessy, 2015), particularly in dealing with issues surrounding school culture. While traditionally, students become "increasingly more progressive or liberal in their attitudes towards education during their stay at the university [they] shift to opposing and more traditional views as they move into student teaching and in-service experience" (Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981, p. 7). ITE needs to ensure that it is not reproducing existing cultures, but is in fact a cornerstone in facilitating more favourable changes, informed by best practice in dealing with issues of occupational socialization and theory covered at university.

DES guidelines (2007) on inclusion of SEN students should be reviewed from an implementation standpoint. On that basis a best practice model for implementation of inclusive policy, based on a variety factors such as school enrollment, diversity of needs, location, school size and personnel should be developed and disseminated to schools to aid them in the development of their own inclusive environments. This could be overseen by someone with specific responsibility for inclusive policy and practice, or a

"champion" in individual schools.

## 6. Limitations and future research

This study was limited to 15 participants, which is a relatively small sample and is not representative of all teachers. While there are many other stakeholders involved in the process such as parents, principals, policymakers and students this study focused solely on teachers. Despite this a variety of experiences and geographical locations were covered all across Ireland. Recommendations with regards future research would include an assessment of outcomes for ASD students (or more generally SEN students) in schools that have varying levels of infrastructure and resources to include them. As part of this a measurement of the effectiveness of inclusive strategies adopted in these schools should be taken. Perspectives from other key stakeholders with regards their perceptions and attitudes towards inclusion would also be beneficial in establishing a clearer image of the quasi-inclusive landscape across Ireland, to better inform policy makers moving forward. As part of this a more detailed and critical analysis of teacher attitudes and their corresponding practice in class may also yield useful data that could serve to deepen understanding of the barriers for inclusive education in schools.

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