

# Promoting the inclusion of children with special educational needs in ireland



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### Introduction:

Research is about curiosity and inquiry which is conducted in a critical spirit. It is a process of systematic inquiry involving an explicit, systematic approach to finding things out, often through a process of testing out preconceptions. (www. hampshire. edu, 2018)

Research, in early years, is critical to provided information to professionals to help them achieve the highest quality of care they can provide to children. Research carried out by governmental officials has led to recent emphasis the needs of funding and assistance in the early years sectors across all of Ireland. From finding due to research, the Government and early years professional can now provide much-needed insights into the experiences of children with SEN and how to support them. It has resulted in increases in funding, government initiatives, course providers and the introduction of new policies to the sector in order to improve the quality of early childhood education. It was not the intention of the researcher however, to make generalisations but rather to portray the reality of inclusive education as experienced by a chosen group of participants, in this way allowing the reader to explore more “ subjective patterns of personal, group or organisational experience” (Davies 2007, p. 148).

### Research Rationale:

Inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood and how the government has become aware of the needs of the children with disabilities and their integration into early years settings.

The aim of this research is to promote the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the early years sector in Ireland. The aim behind this research is to highlight the importance of the efforts made by the Government, not just in recent years, but in the past and continuously to support children with SEN in early years. In recent decades increasing emphasis has been placed on rights and inclusion of children in relation to disability. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), for example, states that every child has the right to education, irrespective of disability and without discrimination of any kind. One objective is to explore the concept of inclusive education in early years, by paying particular attention to challenges faced by early years professionals to recognise disabilities over behaviour issues. Uncovering whether the reality of including children with disabilities in mainstream early years setting does in fact correspond with policy on inclusion is a principal objective of this research, as is the issue of the quality of educational provision for all pupils. In particular, this research proposal will focus mainly on the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities, especially disabilities that are overlooked or interrupted wrong, as it can be suggested that children with intellectual disabilities are more likely to experience educational exclusion and misdiagnosis than those with physical disabilities (Michailakis and Reich 2009; Mousley et al 1993). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) emphasises the rights of persons with disabilities to access lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, through reasonable accommodation of their disabilities (Minou 2011). Ultimately, from both the perspective of the early years professionals and children, challenges can

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arise if children with SEN can be disruptive causing barriers to achieving inclusion as these children are seen to be too much hard work and unfair on the other children. will be identified and explored, with a view to providing an informative platform for early years professionals and the Government to find ways to help those children with uncommon learning and development issues. Another One of the objectives of this research is to highlight issues professionals have in differencing behaviour problems with underlying misdiagnosed disorders amongst children. The recognition of these disorders can be advocated by the professionals once they are presented with useful information, support and funding from the government. Finally, the last objective is to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of children with SEN attending mainstream early years settings and the effect it has on those around them.

### Literature Review

This section will review literature related to the area of education of children with disabilities and special educational needs, with particular reference to inclusive education within the mainstream early years system. Matters pertaining the efforts made by the government will be investigated and debate surrounding the area of inclusive education for children with special educational needs and their impact on others will be examined. Reviewing issues and concerns that arise for parents of children with disabilities and the parents of the other children and for teachers who are responsible for implementing an inclusive environment will be highlighted. The literature review will also examine the challenges and barriers that exist, discussing

the positive or negative outcomes of mainstreaming inclusion and the impact on successfully achieving an inclusive education system for all children.

Are children being misdiagnosed, affecting their rights and inclusion in the early years?

Often children across Ireland being misdiagnosed due to their behaviour. Children tend to misbehave or lash out when they are frustrated or feel as though they are not being understood. Early years professionals do not have the acquired time that needs to be given to child to recognise other problems that may be the cause of this irrational behaviour. Should the early childhood sector question if maybe there is an underlying problem to this behaviour? Professionals are unwittingly turning a blind eye and not taking the time to observe the child and record why this child may be experiencing negative experiences in their early years, instead, classifying them as disobedient or bold. Behaviours are message, a symptom- not a diagnosis. If professionals do not see below the surface problem and understand the underlying problem in their early years it will be too late. (Kranowitz, 2005). Children are being misdiagnosed due to a lack of knowledge regarding different types of learning disabilities. Professionals need training and support to gain an understanding that even the slighted imbalance of the brain and mind can have a major impact on the child. Unless the underlying problem is addressed the behaviour will not improve. When a professional does not recognise the problem, they may mistake the child's behaviour or reluctant to participate in ordinary childhood experiences for hyperactivity or behavioural issues. (Kranowitz, 2005). Sensory Processing Disorder, a common but misdiagnosed central nervous problem could be the reason

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behind uncharacterised behaviours. Children are attending primary school being undiagnosed until they are six or seven. In the early years children brain develops rapidly at a young age, as the brain is more receptive to change, unless the problem is recognised at young age, professionals are anxious that if not treated early, the problem cannot be fixed (Adrienne L. Tierney, 2018) . This presents early childhood professionals with challenges to recognize the difference between behavioural problems and actual sensory processing disorder. From researching, tests can be found to help identify SPD however there is speculation to whether or not these tests are appropriate for such young children.

Subsequently, there are advantages and disadvantages to both the child with disabilities and those who surround them while trying to support an inclusive practice in an early years setting. But in striving for inclusive education, can be challenging and children can be unnecessarily removed from an early years setting? Inclusion in principle is the right sentiment but, at best, it can come at a high price and, at worst, it can be a complete injustice. Children are individuals so the solution needs to be individual. There are plenty of examples of children with SEN who are successfully integrated in mainstream schools to the benefit of themselves and their peers. Numerous efforts are being made, as mentioned above, to support children with SEN in an mainstream setting, but if professionals and parents want children with SEN to have the same opportunities to succeed as others, there should be guilt about admitting they may need a different environment in which to do this (the Guardian, 2018). Furthermore, it is the responsibility is to all children equally in an early years sector, not just those with SEN.

Critically- we are left to question, if inclusion requires a child to be excluded from the same experiences and boundaries as everyone else just to remain on the premises, then is it actually inclusion.

Overtime, The Government has invested more time and money to help support children with special educational needs in the early years.

Following the Budget in 2016, The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Dr James Reilly introduced a new government-funded programme aimed to provide support for children with disabilities. He states that supports to enable children with disabilities fully participate in free pre-school in mainstream settings alongside their peers (formulary. ie, 2018.) the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 and provides a framework for developing the strong partnerships between parents, schools, Local Education Authorities, health and social services and voluntary organisations that are crucial to success in removing barriers to participation and learning. Unfortunately, like many countries, Ireland's system of education involved segregation of schooling for children classified as 'handicapped'. Generally, these children were sent to special schools or institutions (Lodge and Lynch 2004). However, international trends and the growing debate around integration versus segregation have influenced significant change in Ireland in recent years (Lodge and Lynch 2004). Critically - as mentioned above, many children don't have a formal diagnosis when they start pre-school or get over looked and do not get a diagnosis until primary school. Following the Budget in 2016, The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Dr James Reilly introduced a new government-funded programme aimed to provide support for children with disabilities. He states that supports to enable

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children with disabilities fully participate in free pre-school in mainstream settings alongside their peers (formulary. ie, 2018.) Luckily, the programme “ the seven level programme” set up by the Minister, does not rely on diagnosis, alternatively, focuses on children’s developmental level, their abilities and their needs. (formulary. ie, 2018). AIMS- the Access and Inclusion Model is a model set up to empower professionals to ensure every child can reap the benefit of positive early years. (Aim. gov. ie, 2018).

This is a model of support that is built up around the needs and abilities of each child, and their parents. From this new programme, early years professionals are offered targeted support and provided them with the opportunity to do National training in relation to the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines, as well as in relation to disability and inclusion more generally.

#### Research Questions:

The main research question for this proposal is “ The importance of Inclusion in the early years.” Questions that can be drawn up from the research present above are “ *Are children being misdiagnosed, affecting their rights and inclusion in the early years?*”, “ and “ *If inclusion requires a child to be excluded from the same experiences and boundaries as everyone else just to remain on the premises, then is it actually inclusion*” and

#### Research Methods:

Unequivocally, choosing an appropriate methodology for a research can enhance the quality of its results. According to Hancock and Algozzine

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(2006), the selection of a research design is determined by how well it allows full investigation of a particular research question. In order to conduct a fair, non-bias research, the researcher must carefully select the correct methodology, which can portray the results effectively. To undertake this research, the researcher opted to use both qualitative and quantitative research methods. In data collection, the principal of triangulation aims to find various kinds of sources in order to confirm the relevant information (Rahim & Daud, 2015) (Onlinesciencepublishing. com, 2018)

Qualitative research too can elucidate the “ how” of a quantitative result. For example, quantitative research indicates that staff qualifications are strongly associated with better child outcomes, but it is qualitative work that shows that it is not the qualification per se that has an impact on child outcomes- rather it is the ability of staff to create a high quality pedagogic environment . Qualitative research will be carried out by conducting an interview with early year professionals in the south of Ireland. In educational settings, qualitative research is particularly useful where the research question involves one of the situations below and people’s experiences and views are sought. Using an interview, the data recorded will be real life information from a primary source working directly with children with SEN. The qualitative methods employed in this study are primarily phenomenological in nature, whereby human ‘ lived experience’ is examined.(Creswell, 2011). Hancock and Algozzine (2006) describe phenomenological studies as those which “ explore the meaning of several people’s lived experiences around a specific issue or phenomenon”. The research interviews parents of children with SEN and disabilities and early

years professionals. Questions that were asked include, “ *Do you think children with SEN should be integrated into the mainstream of early years?*”, “ *Do you think some children’s outbreaks and bad behavioural problems are classified under a disruptive personality, instead of searching for underlying problems?*”, “ *Would you agree some children are misdiagnosed or sent to special units as professionals do not want or have the time to tailor the curriculum to their needs?*”. The researcher used broad questions while conducting the interview to get a personal response regarding their own child’s individual needs.

The researcher conducted a small sample to obtain data and information for this proposal. The researcher required insights from parents who had a child with additional needs and parents with children who did not have additional needs, in both cases where the child is attending the same early years setting. Contact was made with the parents through the early years setting. Research consent forms were distributed to the each person who took part in the research and the researcher stressed the voluntary nature of participation and assured confidentiality to all research participants.

### Ethics

Without a doubt, there were ethical considerations and limitations to this research proposal. Primary data was selected from conducting interviews, surveys and samples. All data recorded was completely confidential. All secondary data sources used in the research proposal was carefully selected and is referenced throughout, avoiding plagiarism. Participants’ rights to anonymity, confidentiality and privacy, and give participants clear

information regarding the study were also taken into consideration. No children were interviewed for this study. The researcher was very much aware however, that a respectful and sensitive approach was appropriate when approaching and speaking with parents, particularly where children may be in a vulnerable position.

### Conclusion:

The main reason to conduct this research proposal was to provide data and information to explore inclusion in early years settings. The main objective was to use research methods to discover whether or not children with SEN should be integrated into the mainstream of early years. On the other hand, it is used to portray the effects a child with SEN can have on the teacher and the other children. It can be said that the Irish government has invested large amount of time and money to support the inclusion of children with additional needs into mainstream settings. However, on behalf of the benefit of all the children in the setting, it is important for parents and professionals to know when a child needs a special school to be included as they are excluded the other children from learning.

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