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RESEARCH ARTICLE



ECCE teachers' attitudes in Ireland towards including children with special educational needs

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ABSTRACT

Significant international attention has been paid to teachers' attitudes and the variables affecting them, as these are considered crucial for successful inclusive education. This article reports on an investigation of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teachers' attitudes to the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in Ireland, and whether attitudes are affected by personal or setting characteristics, including State funded interventions. Until the recent development of the Access & Inclusion Model (AIM), children with a disability had variable access to the universally funded ECCE Scheme. Teachers in a random sample of 1,725 ECCE services across Ireland were surveyed, using an established attitude scale, yielding 173 responses. Statistical analysis found teachers with special-education qualifications have more positive attitudes. Teachers perceiving their inclusive experience as successful also have more positive attitudes, as have those who think buying in assistance is feasible with AIM funding. However, teachers unsure whether AIM improves their service's ability to include children with SEN have more negative attitudes. This study highlights the need to address the AIM in-class assistance model, teacher qualifications/training and successful inclusive experiences, to protect the positive attitudes which are critical to inclusive practice.

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KEYWORDS

Attitudes; ECCE; teachers; inclusion; SEN

Introduction and background

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (UN 2006) recognises, among other matters, children's rights to receive their education in mainstream settings. The Government of Ireland signed the Convention in 2007, and ratified it in 2018, the last European state to do so. The provision of inclusive education depends on a range of factors, underpinned by a child's right to education, and encompassing, for example, effective leadership, the structural environment, in-class support staff and teacher attitudes (Clough and Nutbrown 2005). Within Ireland, the launch of a universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme in 2010 and the

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development of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in 2015 have extended access to funded preschool for children with a disability, including those with special educational needs (SEN). Whereas the current model considers structural funding and supportive interventions, little is known about the attitudes of teachers within Ireland's ECCE scheme. This article reports on research investigating teacher attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN in Irish preschool settings. The study utilised an attitude scale developed by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) based on data from the United States of America, Australia and Canada. Adapted and employed by Cornoldi et al. (1998) in Italy and Logan and Wimer (2013) in the USA, the scale was administered during the 2017–2018 academic year, with minor adjustments for use in the Irish context.

Universal provision

In 2010, the State commenced its first foray into universal pre-primary education provision. The ECCE Scheme initially provided access to 38 weeks of preschool for all children in Ireland, qualifying by age. Extended in 2016, to allow for two years of early educational experiences, the Scheme is provided locally, by independent early years services, under contract to the State. Funding reflects child attendance and teacher qualifications within each setting.

Highly popular since inception, nearly full uptake by qualifying children has been reported (Pobal 2016). Although contractual criteria stipulate the provision of an inclusive service open to all children, early emerging evidence of non-participating children included those with SEN (DCYA 2013).

The access and inclusion model

Due to obligations under international conventions (UN 2006; UN 1989) and State legislation^{1 2 3}, and informed by evidence of access issues within the ECCE Scheme, the State initiated a consultation process with stakeholder representatives, including children's rights groups, parent representatives and ECCE providers, on how best to ensure the inclusion of all young children. The resultant report of the Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) (Government of Ireland 2015) proposed a wide-ranging framework of supports under AIM, designed to enhance access to ECCE for children with disabilities, including SEN.

AIM supports are offered over seven progressing 'levels', from universal (Levels 1–3) to needs-based (Levels 4–7). Universal supports include the establishment of Inclusion Co-ordinators (INCO) in individual settings, and a nationally centralised system of continuing professional development, including Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) and Diversity Equality and Inclusion (DEI) training. Applications for supports along Levels 4–7, submitted in collaboration between settings/teachers and parents/guardians, provide for in-service educational advice, support, and mentoring, grant funding for equipment and minor alterations and a centralised provision of the national Health Service Executive (HSE) Therapy Services (Level 6). When additional support is warranted, Level 7 funding allows for the reduction of the adult–child ratios. Based on family consultation, a needs-analysis of the child, and considering local contextual factors (i.e. setting size, waiting lists), qualifying settings decide whether to recruit additional in-class support or to reduce the number of attending children (DCYA 2016a)

The INCO is a graduate of LINC⁴, who works closely with parents and other external professionals, in order to lead inclusive practice, ‘cascading learning throughout the staff in the setting so as to foster an inclusive culture’, (DCYA 2017, 1). Developing inclusive practice is with reference to the national early childhood education and care (ECEC)⁵ curriculum and quality frameworks, Aistear and Síolta (NCCA 2015), and the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* (DCYA 2016c). ECCE services employing an INCO receive enhanced State funding regardless if a child with SEN attends. Funding increase is solely conditional on the presence of an INCO in the service.

Impact of the new model

Whereas the implementation of AIM, with its progressing levels of intervention and array of training and funding supports, has generally been welcomed, the impact of such a wide-ranging new programme has not been without criticism. Previously, regional services offered by or funded through Ireland’s HSE provided supports, training and additional classroom assistance to ECCE settings across the country. Local variances in the amount and types of support were noted in the IDG report: while some regions were identified as being under-served, others were described as ‘examples of models of good practice’ (Government of Ireland 2015, 18). Under previous models, the HSE or HSE-funded agencies employed classroom assistants who were deployed to settings for the period a child with an identified need attended. Now, under the national AIM programme, where additional in-class support is recommended (Level 7), the setting itself must employ the assistant, though these posts are State funded.

At the time of this research, 4248 of a total 4448 early years facilities in Ireland were providing the ECCE Scheme (Pobal 2017). Although the average number of children in each is 44 (ibid), up to 1,500 services cater for 11 or fewer children (Government of Ireland 2015). This indicates an estimated one-third of ECCE Scheme providers are single-handed, self-employed sole traders, not previously structured as employers. As already noted, under AIM Level 7, services may use the additional funding either to employ additional assistance, creating a 2:11 adult to child ratio, or reduce the ratio from the regulated ratio of 1:11–1:8 (Government of Ireland 2015; DCYA 2016b). The former option necessitates single-handed providers becoming employers, including being liable for any employment costs and employment legislation. The latter option, of reducing ratios, results in the service experiencing a loss of potential income. Due to the complex funding system, including a weekly payment per child, top up payments based on teacher qualifications and INCO criteria, a ratio of 1:8 is, counterintuitively, more costly for a setting than a 2:11 model. Based on these repercussions to smaller services it is remarkable that the IDG ‘strongly believes that the above capitation model is the most appropriate model when one considers the large number of very small ECCE settings across the country’ (Government of Ireland 2015, 43).

AIM was devised to increase access to ECCE for all children, even though funded settings may never actually enrol children with disabilities or SEN. A consensual view emerged during the IDG consultations that strict requirement to accommodate children with disabilities should be funding-linked (Government of Ireland 2015). However, the report expressed caution that such an approach would put ‘a lot of pressure on small

operators if appropriate supports were not also available' (ibid, 60). The IDG concluded by recommending the development and adoption of a national code of inclusive practice, and encouragement of every service to appoint an INCO, thus leading to a culture of inclusion emerging. It remains to be seen how effective this yet to be developed 'code' will be, as services are currently compliant and can receive additional INCO-related funding, without ever actually enrolling a child with a disability/SEN. Furthermore, while Equal Status Acts prohibit discrimination by preschool services, providers are only required to make special accommodation arrangements if the cost of doing so is 'nominal' (IHREC 2015, 10).

Literature review

Defining and operationalising inclusion

Irish educational policy defines SEN as 'learning difficulty that calls for special educational provision to be made' (DCYA 2016c, 84). Also referred to as mainstreaming, a core principle of the EPSEN Act is inclusion, 'to provide that the education of people with such needs shall, wherever possible, take place in an inclusive environment with those who do not have such needs' (Government of Ireland 2004, 5). A broad definition of inclusion currently guides practice in Ireland's ECEC field, as: 'a process involving a programme, curriculum or educational environment where each child is welcomed and included on equal terms, can feel they belong, and can progress to achieve his/her full potential in all areas of development' (DCYA 2016c, 83).

Stalwarts in the study of early childhood educational inclusion, Clough and Nutbrown (2005) defined inclusion as more than simply being in a setting; it is a comprehensive education which responds to the rights of all children to fulfil their own unique potential. At a European level, the 'ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers' (EASNIE 2015, n.p.). It is appropriate therefore that, in designing AIM the IDG wished to retain the idea that children and families have access to services wherever they live (Government of Ireland 2015).

Barton and Smith's (2015) view that preschools need to be ready for all children, rather than the child having to be ready, reflects an inclusive approach ensuring, as many argue, that ECEC settings should be inherently inclusive (Clough and Nutbrown 2005). In Ireland, such settings may be particularly suited to inclusion as the ECEC curriculum framework, Aistear, 'has been universally designed to ensure a wide range of learners can access it, including children with a disability' (Government of Ireland 2015, 28).

Factors affecting teachers' attitudes to inclusion

In the last two decades, the subject of ECEC teachers' attitudes towards inclusion has become a popular research topic. The theory of planned behaviour proposes that attitudes can be predictive of behaviour, depending on subjective and situational factors (Ajzen and Fishbein 2000). Teachers' attitudes and practices are found to be closely related (OECD 2009), and ECEC teachers' attitudes are formed and influenced by several personal and environmental factors (Avramidis and Norwich 2002; OECD 2009).

Factors affecting teachers' attitudes are varied and the relationships between them complex. This paper focuses on the most common teacher and setting characteristics emerging from the literature that can be examined in the context of AIM: qualifications and training, age and experience, personal experience and perceived success, and in-class support. Notwithstanding findings in the UK (Clough and Nutbrown 2005) and the US (Logan and Wimer 2013) that attitudes are affected by disability type, as AIM does not require a diagnosis for services to apply for supports, this specific factor was not measured in this study.

Qualification and training

Many agree the higher the qualifications of ECEC teachers, the more positive their attitudes to inclusion (Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz 1998; Kraska and Boyle 2014). Hsien, Brown, and Bortoli (2009) pinpointed special-education qualifications alone, that the higher the level of special education qualification, the more positive the attitudes towards inclusion.

There is international consensus that specialised training is linked to more positive attitudes towards inclusion among ECEC teachers, for example, from the US (Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz 1998; Ericzén et al. 2009), Australia (Cologon 2012), Seychelles (Main, Chambers, and Sarah 2016) and Zimbabwe (Majoko 2017). Many have revealed that training timing is impactful. ECEC teachers in the US said that pre-service training did not prepare them, and that in-service is better (Smith and Smith 2000). In Turkey, following in-service training, preschool teachers' beliefs about the advantages of inclusion became more positive and they agreed more that inclusion did not have a negative effect on children's development (Seçer 2010). In a study in Sweden in 2012, Engstrand and Roll-Pettersson (2014) reported teachers' attitudes were more positive when they completed training pre-service, but there was even more improved self-efficacy, or belief in their inclusive teaching ability, after in-service training.

Apart from timing, the format of training is also a noteworthy factor. Of the ECEC teachers who expressed the need for such training, they preferred it to be more practical than theoretical, 'authentic and relevant' (Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz 1998). Smith and Smith (2000) agreed that more practical and focused training is preferred by ECEC teachers. This is supported by Forlin and Chambers (2011) who found that studying a unit on inclusion policy, strategies, benefits and difficulties did not allay concerns of student teachers and served only to heighten their perceived shortcomings. In contrast, Cologon (2012) examined the attitudes of pre-service and in-service ECEC teachers before and after studying a unit on difference and disability. In addition to being more positive on most measures, the participants explained that engaging in self-reflection and the development of practical skills were the most important contributors to their learning and confidence.

Age and experience

Of studies examining attitudes of ECEC teachers to inclusion, age alone is usually found to be a non-significant factor. Rheams and Bain (2005) reported that age was not significant in either inclusion or special class settings in USA. Focusing on pre-service teachers, an investigation in Australia (Kraska and Boyle 2014), and another in both Turkey and USA (Rakap, Parlak-Rakap, and Aydin 2016), observed attitude scores increase as teacher

ages increase, but not to a significant extent. Revealingly, in a recent descriptive study by Majoko (2017), 'adulthood', or experience that comes with age, positively influences teachers' attitudes. Indeed, in most cases age is inextricably linked to experience.

When examining the latter, researchers looked at general experience and inclusive experience. The longer a preschool teacher's general experience, the more positive their attitude to inclusion (Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz 1998). Some have not revealed any difference between types of experience, for example, between ECEC teachers in either special classrooms or inclusive regular classrooms who had equally positive attitudes (Rheams and Bain 2005). Other research suggests inclusive experience has a negative effect. Dias and Cadime (2016) in Portugal reported that the more inclusive experience of ECEC teachers, the less likely they were to adapt their behaviour to implement inclusive practices. The authors speculated this may be due to the characteristics of the experience, more likely to have been negative when resources and training were yet to be improved following the expansion of the special education programme to preschool level in 2009. This is an important distinction. Galović, Brojčin, and Glumbić (2014), surveying ECEC teachers in Serbia, pinpointed that teachers who reported extremely positive inclusive experience had higher positive attitudes than those reporting negative inclusive experiences. Similarly, Hsieh and Hsieh (2012) stated that participant ECEC teachers in USA, who positively rated their past experiences teaching children with disabilities, had more positive attitudes to inclusion.

Personal experience and perceived success

Much research agrees, prior contact with a person with a disability positively increases teachers' attitudes towards people with disability. In Portugal, Dias and Cadime (2016) confirmed this is the case in ECEC teachers' attitudes. In Zimbabwe, both exposure to and interaction with individuals with special needs were identified as positively impacting attitudes (Majoko 2017). Positive personal and professional experiences disposed student teachers to being more positive about inclusion (Niemeyer and Proctor 2002), with researchers highlighting the role of teacher education institutions to ensure positive inclusive placements for pre-service ECEC teachers. Likewise, Main, Chambers, and Sarah (2016) measured the attitudes of ECEC teachers undertaking degree courses in Seychelles including a unit on inclusive education. Not only were their attitudes to inclusion more positive afterwards, but they said that greater positive interaction with people with disabilities throughout resulted in a higher sense of self-efficacy to teach inclusively and collaborate with other stakeholders in the child's education.

In-class support staff

Beyond the individual characteristics and experiences of the teacher, structural aspects of educational settings, particularly the presence of additional in-class support staff, influence attitudes. As already alluded to, confidence and positive inclusive teaching experiences are important. Smith and Smith (2000) showed that ECEC teachers in the USA perceiving themselves to be successful in inclusive settings had more positive attitudes towards inclusion. On further analysis, the authors concluded that teachers who rated themselves as successful tended to work in smaller classes including fewer children with SEN and more in-class support provided by hands-on personnel. It has been confirmed that teachers' attitudes are more positive when there is more availability of

in-class support staff (Rheams and Bain 2005). Whereas AIM supports are not conditional on the identification/diagnosis of a particular disability, Clough and Nutbrown (2005) proposed ECEC teachers' attitudes to inclusion depend on type of disability and in-class teaching support so that children could receive equal attention during lessons. AIM Level 7 supports are designed so that it is the group of children that is supported rather than the individual child.

Summary

Internationally and domestically, educational trends promote universal provision for all children, ensuring all aspects of settings, including pedagogical approaches, are inherently inclusive by design. Such an approach underpins recent ECEC policy and reflects current practice guidelines in Ireland, such as Aistear and Síolta (NCCA 2015), AIM and the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* (DCYA 2016c).

Teachers' attitudes to inclusive educational practices are influenced by a range of factors, as this review has illustrated. Teachers with specialised training related to inclusive education, are more likely to have positive attitudes. Both pre-service and in-service training have been found to enhance positive attitudes, particularly where the training involves practical experiences, interaction with people with SEN, the development of specific skills and strategies, and opportunities for reflection. Research reveals higher qualifications tend to influence more positive attitudes, as does the higher age of teachers and longer careers in education, although some studies reveal more complex understandings of these factors is necessary. However, there is clear consensus that the presence of in-class support staff creates contexts in which both self-efficacy and positive attitudes in teachers can flourish.

Research design

This article reports on data collected as part of a mixed methods study, designed to score ECCE teachers' attitudes to including children with SEN in their mainstream preschool classes, and analyse possible differences in overall attitude score based on setting/teacher characteristics. Due to publication limitations, this paper focuses solely on the quantitative data. An online questionnaire to survey ECCE teachers in Ireland was the main data collection tool. Quantitative surveys incorporating attitude scales, used extensively to study teachers' attitudes to inclusion, represent a positivist approach to gather and measure objective facts. This approach employs valid and reliable methods, deducing relationship by isolating variables/subgroups consistently (Bryman 2012).

Survey design

When collecting data on attitudes, it is important that questions are not isolated but developed as a series of statements with which respondents are asked to agree or disagree. The statements are scaled, that is, selected and put together from a much larger number of statements according to statistical procedures to establish their validity (Oppenheim 1992). This survey employed an eight-item scale developed in Italy by Cornoldi et al.

(1998) and used more recently in the USA by Logan and Wimer (2013). It was based on central questions from a systematic research synthesis by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) of 28 surveys of teacher attitudes between at least 1958 and 1995 in the USA, Australia and Canada. They arranged common relevant topics into seven clusters summarised by a question. Cornoldi et al. (1998) added a question specifically about in-class assistance.

Each of these earlier surveys were of teachers of elementary and secondary pupils aged from 5 to 18 years. The present study is of early childhood teachers only. Arguably a bigger issue is the use of a scale based upon data gathered over many years and from several countries, with varying schooling and inclusion policies and practices. However, Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) found no relation between teacher attitudes and year of publication or geographical region. Analysing the published use of the scale, over time, indicates the measure of internal reliability consistency is remarkably similar. This reflects the view of Hyman, Lamb, and Bulmer (2006) that repeated use of scales makes reliability more likely. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) calculated an average reliability of .79 from 10 studies providing measures of internal consistency. Cornoldi et al. (1998) reported theirs as .78, and the figure is .79 for the present study.

In this study, independent variables addressed setting (location, type, group size, setting size, number of staff) and teacher characteristics (age, qualifications, personal contact, teaching experience, perceived success, and opinions about AIM). The dependent variable is the total attitude score from the following eight-item Likert type scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = uncertain, 2 = disagree, or 1 = strongly disagree). Reflecting the Irish practice and policy context, some terms used in the scale were changed, including: 'children' replaced 'student, and 'special educational needs' replaced 'learning problem'. 'Normally-achieving' was changed to 'typically-developing', a term used during the development of AIM (Government of Ireland 2015). Scale wording is shown in Table 1. The full survey is provided in Table 2.

Survey pilot

The survey was pretested as a pilot. A group of ten experienced ECEC teachers, the primary researcher's fellow students of a Masters (Early Childhood) programme, participated. Comments were encouraged related to the duration of time required to complete the survey, clarity of instructions, whether they objected to any questions or if any important topic had been omitted. Following a focus group discussion with the group, two questions specifically about AIM Level 7 funding were added, one on in-class assistance and the other on reducing ratios, to pinpoint any differences between the two.

Survey population and sampling technique

The survey population were teachers working within the ECCE Scheme in Ireland when the survey was conducted, February 2018. As 120,601 children attended ECCE (Pobal 2017), based on regulated teacher-to-child ratios, the number of teachers assumed was 11,000. At the time of this study, 4,448 services operated by 3,872 legal entities were listed in Pobal Maps.⁶ Of these, 3,187 ECCE provider emails were gathered/randomised by computer from Pobal Maps, and a 1,725 probability sample was drawn.

Table 1. Scale items and responses.

		Survey Responses in %			n	Mean	Standard Deviation
		Strongly Agree / Agree	Uncertain	Disagree / Strongly Disagree			
1	I support the concept of teaching children with special educational needs in mainstream classes.	86.7	12.7	13.3	173	4.36	3.89
2	I am willing to teach children with special educational needs in my class.	94.2	4.6	5.8	173	4.58	4.10
3	Children with special educational needs benefit from being included in mainstream classes.	87.3	12.1	12.7	173	4.38	3.91
4	Typically-developing children benefit from being taught in the same classes with children who have special educational needs.	90.2	8.7	9.9	173	4.39	3.92
5	I have/would have sufficient time for teaching children with special educational needs in my class.	46.8	20.2	53.2	173	3.46	3.11
6	I have sufficient skills and training to teach children with special educational needs in my class.	66.5	17.9	33.5	173	3.66	3.28
7	I have/would have sufficient assistance for teaching children with special educational needs in my class.	50.9	12.1	49.1	173	3.17	2.90
8	I have sufficient resources (teaching materials, etc.) for teaching children with special educational needs in my class.	41.6	16.8	58.5	173	2.97	2.70

A link to an online anonymous self-completion survey was emailed to this sample, inviting participation in the survey. This approach provided a large cross-section of teachers, and can reduce the interviewer effect or social desirability bias (Bryman 2012). As emails were not personalised and some teachers received them indirectly, a low response rate was expected; 173 responses (10% of services emailed) were received.

Ethics and consent

This study was undertaken as part of a Master's Degree. The research design received ethical approval under the auspices of the university. Participants were informed of the scope of the research as an aspect of the survey design; they were required to provide consent to their anonymised data being used in the research, prior to commencing the survey. The researcher ensured the management, storage, analysis and interpretation of the data was undertaken with integrity, providing for a robust and ethical reporting of results. The ethical norm of voluntary participation applies to all parts of the survey. To satisfy this principle, while the survey required all questions to be answered, respondents were given the options 'don't know' or 'not applicable' where appropriate.

Data analysis

Frequencies were run for each question using the statistical software for quantitative data, SPSS (IBM Corp. 2016) and compared with *Early Years Sector Profile, 2016/2017* (Pobal

Table 2. Survey questions.

1. In which county is your early-years setting based? (choose one of twenty six counties listed)
2. Type of setting (Community/Private)
3. How many children do you currently teach? (5/6-11/12-22)
4. How many ECCE children can your service cater for? (5/6-11/12-22/23+)
5. How many staff work in your service in total? (1/2-4/4+)
6. What age are you? (18-23/24-30/31-35/36-45/45+)
7. What is your highest qualification in early-childhood education? (Level 5/Level 6/Level 7/Level 8/Level 9)
8. How many years of teaching experience do you have? (1-4 years/5-9 years/10-14 years/14+)
9. Do you have a qualification in special education? (Yes/No)
10. Are you a student or graduate of the Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) course? (Student/Graduate/Neither)
11. Have you received Diversity Equality & Inclusion training? (Yes/No)
12. Outside of your professional life, do you know a person with special educational needs? (Yes/No)
13. How many years of teaching experience do you have in classes including children with special educational needs? (None/1-4 years/5-9 years/10-14 years/14+)
14. How would you describe your experience teaching classes including children with special educational needs, generally? (Successful/Unsuccessful/Not applicable)
Please tick a box for the following statements (15-22)
15. I support the concept of teaching children with special educational needs in mainstream classes (Strongly agree/ Agree/Uncertain/Disagree/Strongly Disagree)
16. I am willing to teach children with special educational needs in my class (Strongly agree/Agree/Uncertain/Disagree/ Strongly Disagree)
17. Children with special educational needs benefit from being included in mainstream classes (Strongly agree/Agree/ Uncertain/Disagree/Strongly Disagree)
18. Typically-developing children benefit from being taught in the same classes with children who have special educational needs (Strongly agree/Agree/Uncertain/Disagree/Strongly Disagree)
19. I have/would have sufficient time for teaching children with special educational needs in my class (Strongly agree/ Agree/Uncertain/Disagree/Strongly Disagree)
20. I have sufficient skills and training to teach children with special educational needs in my class (Strongly agree/Agree/ Uncertain/Disagree/Strongly Disagree)
21. I have/would have sufficient assistance for teaching children with special educational needs in my class (Strongly agree/Agree/Uncertain/Disagree/Strongly Disagree)
22. I have sufficient resources (teaching materials, etc.) for teaching children with special educational needs in my class (Strongly agree/Agree/Uncertain/Disagree/Strongly Disagree)
The following questions relate to the Access & Inclusion Model (AIM)
23. Do you think AIM has improved the ability of your service to include children with special educational needs? (Yes/No/ Unsure)
24. In your opinion, what are the STRENGTHS and/or WEAKNESSES of AIM? Your answer
The final two questions relate to AIM Level 7 (additional assistance in the pre-school room)
25. Is it feasible for your service to buy in additional assistance if required? (Yes/No/I don't know) If 'No', please outline why Your answer
26. Is it feasible for your service to reduce adult-child ratios instead of buying in additional assistance if required? (Yes/No/ I don't know) If 'No', please outline why Your answer Any further comments you would like to add Your answer

2017) where these were available and comparable (location and setting type). Where not, respondent characteristics (age group, ECEC qualification level, and general teaching experience) were compiled and summarised. Attitude scale responses, by statement frequencies in percentages were calculated.

A total attitude score was calculated for each respondent by adding together the values assigned (1-5) to 8 items, producing a single number ranging from 8 to 40; the higher the number the more positive the attitude. The total attitude score is assumed to be a continuous variable; SPSS automatically generated standard deviations for the attitude score means (the arithmetic or weighted averages). A standard significance level of

$p.05$ was observed. To study the relationships between variables, one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) or independent samples t -tests were used. F -ratios were calculated, and Levene's test of homogeneity to ascertain any differences are attributable to differences between rather than within variables, in which case a Tukey post-hoc test pinpointed where significance lies.

Results and discussion

Demographics

Because a large portion of emailed services (90%) were not represented in the responses, an examination of frequencies was needed to compare the obtained sample with the total population. This showed the spread of respondents by county and setting type had a very similar demographic span to the ECCE teaching population of Ireland, indicating the research was representative of this population. For example, in both this survey and Pobal's (2017), 26.6% of responses were from Dublin. Demographics by setting type were also closely aligned. Of respondents, 25.4% were in a Community setting while 74.6% were in a Private setting. In the total population, the breakdown was 24.4% for Community and 75.6% for Private (Pobal 2017).

Respondent characteristics by age, qualifications and experience were not directly comparable with the ECCE teaching population of Ireland (Pobal 2017), partly because categories differed. Even so, respondents generally tended to be older; 52% were aged 45 + years compared to 31% of the total population (*ibid.*). They were more experienced; 56.6% had 14 + years' experience while 31% of the total population stated they had worked in the sector for 11 + years (*ibid.*). They also had higher qualifications; 30.6% had honours degrees and 8.7% had masters' degrees compared to 13% and 1% respectively in the total population (*ibid.*).

Attitudes overall

Table 1 presents attitudes of survey respondents representing ECCE teachers in Ireland, by statement frequencies in percentages.

Participating ECCE teachers in Ireland were positive in their attitudes to inclusion. Out of 40, the average total attitude score was 30.71 ($SD = 4.88$). However, on further analysis of items, respondents agreed more with the first four statements, referred to collectively as 'personal acceptance' (Cornoldi et al. 1998), than the remaining four statements, referred to as 'personal support' (*ibid.*). At 89.6% and 51.5% respectively, teachers in the current research were 43% less positive about support than acceptance. As Cornoldi et al. (1998) highlight, preferred levels of support are indicative of teacher attitudes, and far more support is required than schools are providing.

Effects of characteristics on attitude score

The results indicate the following variables did not significantly affect overall attitude scores: location (county), setting type (community/private), group size, setting size, number of staff, age, general teacher qualification, length of general teaching experience,

personal contact, length of inclusive teaching experience, or opinions about the feasibility of using AIM funding to reduce adult-child ratios. The factors which did significantly influence overall attitude scores were special-education qualifications and training, perceived success, opinions about AIM and in-class support.

Setting characteristics

Neither location (Q1) nor type of setting (Q2) affected attitude score, but provided useful demographics, as outlined above. There was no statistically significant difference based on group size (Q3) service size (Q4) or number of staff (Q5). However, it is interesting that scores increased as the number of children in the teacher's group increased, the opposite to what might be expected, as other research links perceived success with smaller class sizes (Smith and Smith 2000). For service size and number of staff, results were similar to the previous question, though there is a fall in attitude score for the highest numbers of children and staff. This perhaps suggests an optimal setting size of 12–22 children with 2–4 staff, warranting further examination, in light of significant findings about in-class assistance and ratio reduction, detailed below.

Qualifications and training

The literature delineates between general teaching qualifications and special needs qualifications. The results of this study were significant in the latter, with a further distinction that LINC was correlated with more positive attitudes, as follows.

On general qualification, the lowest attitudes were linked with Level 5 and the highest with Level 9. Though not statistically significant this trend is in keeping with previous findings that the higher the qualifications of ECEC teachers, the more positive their attitudes to inclusion (Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz 1998; Kraska and Boyle 2014).

Significantly, respondents who had a special-education qualification (Q9) had a more positive attitude score ($M = 31.65$, $SD = 4.33$) than those who did not have a special-education qualification ($M = 29.55$, $SD = 5.28$), reflecting the findings of Hsien, Brown, and Bortoli (2009) who pinpointed special-education qualifications alone. Conditions of Levene's test were fulfilled. Under 'equal variances not assumed', the t-test was significant ($t(148.54) = 2.82$, $p = .005$). On LINC (Q10) and DEI (Q11) specifically, the ANOVA revealed a significant effect ($F(2,170) = 3.686$, $p = .027$). Students/graduates of LINC had significantly more positive attitudes ($M = 31.84$, $SD = 4.46$) than those who had neither LINC nor DEI training ($M = 29.00$, $SD = 6.06$). Those who only had DEI training were not significantly more positive than those who had neither.

This is partly in line with international consensus that specialised training is linked to more positive attitudes among ECEC teachers (Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz 1998; Majoko 2017). Many, such as Engstrand and Roll-Pettersson (2014) examined the timing of training and found in-service better than pre-service. LINC is in-service training, and the significant relationship with positive attitudes accords with international trends. However, although part of the role of the INCO is to 'cascade learning' to other staff (DCYA 2017), those without LINC were *not* more positive, even when they had completed DEI training. As the more specific and practical the training, the more positive the attitude (Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz 1998), there may be a role for INCOs in on-site training. Further to this, there is also a role for teacher education institutions, to provide opportunities to develop practical skills (Cologon 2012) and have

positive interactions with people with disability throughout the course (Main, Chambers, and Sarah 2016) with an aim of graduates attaining a higher sense of self-efficacy to teach inclusively.

Teacher's age and teaching experience

As with earlier research (Rakap, Parlak-Rakap, and Aydin 2016), age alone (Q6) was not a significant factor and may be inextricably linked with experience. Previous studies distinguish between general experience and inclusive experience. The present study examined each. Those with the least general experience (Q8) were the most positive, followed by the most experienced, though not to a statistically significant extent. For inclusive experience (Q13), it is interesting to note that attitude scores increase as the amount of inclusive experience increases, though not statistically significant. Previous studies have varied. On closer examination, some found that differences were related to teachers' perception of how positive this experience had been (Galović, Brojčin, and Glumbić 2014).

Perceived success

Smith and Smith (2000) used teachers' perceptions of their success to rate their inclusive experience. The present study (Q14) found those who perceived their experience as successful (86.7%) had more positive attitudes to inclusion ($M = 31.31$, $SD = 4.56$) than those who perceived their experience as unsuccessful ($M = 24.82$, $SD = 5.53$). The ANOVA revealed a significant difference ($F(2,170) = 11.686$, $p = .000$). This finding is arguably the most important and all-encompassing. To protect the positive attitudes of ECCE teachers in Ireland, they should be helped perceive their inclusive experiences as successful and see they already have the skills required. This can be achieved, as suggested by Berry (2010), by showing that teaching strategies for children with SEN are effective for all children, that they already know many of these strategies, and that support will be provided.

Personal contact

In response to Q12, those who answered 'Yes' were more positive than those who answered 'No'. Though not statistically significant, this seems to agree with previous research on in-service ECEC teachers (Dias and Cadime 2016) and pre-service ECEC teachers' attitudes, citing positive interaction with people with disabilities throughout their course (Main, Chambers, and Sarah 2016).

Opinions about AIM

Three closed questions about AIM were useful to examine the influence of AIM on all participants regardless of characteristics. On whether AIM improves their service's ability to include children with SEN (Q23), the vast majority (63%) answered 'Yes' but were not significantly more positive ($M = 31.81$, $SD = 4.21$) than the 8.7% who responded 'No' ($M = 31.00$, $SD = 5.22$), however the remaining 28.3% of respondents who chose 'Unsure' were significantly less positive ($M = 28.16$, $SD = 5.30$), the ANOVA showed ($F(2,170) = 10.499$, $p = .000$). As is the nature of quantitative data, reasons for these results can only be speculated upon, not least a possible confusion in language.

In-class support

The UNCRPD recognises every child's right to be supported to receive their education in mainstream settings. While children can be supported in various ways, direct and indirect, this study focused on in-class assistance. In relation to AIM Level 7 funding, respondents were more positive when they thought it feasible to buy in additional assistance (Q25), the ANOVA revealed ($F(2,170) = 5.383$, $p = .005$). However, the majority 52% answered 'No' and were significantly less positive ($M = 30.33$, $SD = 4.94$), as were the 18.5% responding 'I don't know' ($M = 29.06$, $SD = 4.77$), than the 29.5% who answered 'Yes' ($M = 32.39$, $SD = 4.42$).

This partly aligns with Smith and Smith (2000) who found the smaller the group and the more in-class support, the more positive the attitudes of ECEC teachers. However, trends noted in earlier questions relating to number of children and staff seem to contradict this. In relation to reducing ratios instead of buying in additional assistance (Q26), while answering 'Yes' indicated a more positive attitude, this was not statistically significant. It may be more noteworthy that only a small minority (13.9%) answered 'Yes; the vast majority (64.2%) answered 'No' and 22% answered 'I don't know'. Presently, within the Irish context, small services run by self-employed teachers, structured as sole traders and not employers, are limited to use Level 7 funding to reduce ratios, rather than the option to fund a second teacher/assistant through AIM, potentially impacting on the experiences of children attending. A possible optimal number of children and staff requires further examination as suggested already.

Limitations and recommendations

Limitations

As a small-scale study, this research is not without its limitations. As suggested, wording of some questions may have been flawed. 'Uncertain' is arguably not a neutral word and could imply a somewhat negative attitude. Equally, 'unsure' could be neutral or doubtful. Further in relation to wording, the apparent underrepresentation of small services raises further concerns. Although about one third of services cater for 11 children or less (Pobal 2017) only 9.9% of respondents to this study reported a setting size of 11 or less, and those reporting to be single-handed was only 6.4%. Participants may have counted staff supernumerary to ratios, such as those not working directly with children. Also, services operating two sessions for 11 children or less may have selected the 12–22 response. Wording should have referred to number of children 'at one time' so that small services with one single-handed staff member would be correctly categorised and their attitudes measured accordingly.

Though representative of services countrywide, the results may not equally represent teachers within services. Based on about 11,000 ECCE teachers, an assumed average of three teachers per service was accessed by one email address. The email invitation, titled 'Survey of teachers' attitudes to inclusion of children with special educational needs', requested the recipient to pass on the survey to other teachers in the service. This is somewhat similar to 'snowball sampling' referred to by Bryman (2012), with the chance that the email did not reach other teachers in those services, or a risk of potential bias on the part of the recipient of the email who may have selected teachers based on

their opinions about inclusion. This could lead to strong views coming to the fore which do not exactly represent the whole population. It would be worth accessing all teachers directly, however at this time, no such database operates in the Irish context.

Demographic data indicate that, compared with the ECCE teaching population (Pobal 2017), respondents were somewhat older, more experienced, and more qualified. However, though qualifications are many and varied, they were not classified other than their level, nor their content described. Likewise, relationships between variables have not been examined; each group is assumed homogenous for the purpose of quantitative analysis within the scope of this study. As such, caution must be exercised when making inferences about findings.

Recommendations

This research bodes well for the Irish ECEC sector, in terms of its current approach to inclusion of children with SEN in ECCE Scheme programmes. These results underpin recommendations for the continuation of the LINC training, as a standalone special purpose award and/or integrated into current training programmes in the field. In addition, it is recommended that the role of INCO in local settings be extended to include peer-training, building on the AIM model, to create a culture of inclusion in localised contexts. Further research into the timing of training in the local context and the resultant impact on teacher skills, attitudes and practices, is recommended.

The finding that teachers have more positive attitudes towards inclusion, if they perceive their inclusion experience as successful rather than unsuccessful, deserves further attention. Continued support locally through the AIM model, building in methods to recognise teacher achievements and successes, with the continuation of enhanced local funding, are warranted. Literature suggests the need for a strong practical element, with opportunities for interactions with children with SEN, should be included in all ECEC teacher education programmes. This study indicates some agreement on personal contact, though not statistically significant, suggesting further examination of teacher education programmes.

Since the enactment of the Child Care Act in 1991 (Egan and Garrity 2022), ECEC in Ireland has experienced ongoing policy, regulatory and professional change; the period since this research was undertaken, has been no different. In recent years, strategies related to pre-service (DES 2019) and in-service training (Ireland 2021) now include skill development for working with children with SEN. A recent evaluation of the first year of AIM refers to the success of LINC, with settings saying learning from it had been efficiently shared, that AIM helped them to include children with disabilities, and they were highly satisfied with Level 7 support (RSM 2019). An in-depth review of LINC and a three-year review of AIM is awaited.

This article has highlighted the challenges posed to single-handed service providers, who make up a third of all ECCE Scheme providers. The top-down policy pressure to employ in-class assistants, in order to access AIM Level 7 support for children within these settings is impractical, creating an unnecessary burden on small-setting providers. This study strongly recommends the development of a model of State-funded in-class assistance, facilitated through an existing organisation, such as the Better Start service, or the locally placed County Childcare Committees. This significant issue must be

addressed if all children are to receive the same level of support, and if the ethos of a truly accessible ECCE Scheme in Ireland is to be realised.

Conclusion

Attitudes are crucial for the implementation of inclusive practice. This study revealed ECCE teachers in Ireland have positive attitudes towards inclusion. Together the funded ECCE Scheme and the development of AIM, including LINC training and the position of INCO in settings has initiated a shift in culture towards one of access for all children, supporting teachers and progressing the inclusion of children with SEN. However, critiques of the model remain, and have been highlighted herein, including the difficulties posed to single-handed service providers. Further attention to the details of the AIM model is required to ensure all ECCE services are positioned to engage with all levels of AIM and serve all the children in their communities equally. As Ireland has now ratified the UNCPRD along with the UNCRC, it is important the issues raised by this research are addressed as an urgent matter.

Notes

1. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004).
2. Equal Status Acts 2000–2018.
3. Education Act (1998).
4. LINC: *Leadership for Inclusion* Programme, an element of AIM, is a Vocational Level 6 Special Purpose Award, equivalent to Level 5 ISCED, qualifying existing teachers to undertake the role of INCO in local settings.
5. In this article, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to the Irish State's funded preschool programme and ECCE teachers are those professionals specifically working in that scheme. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) refers to the wider sector, both internationally and domestically, with ECEC inclusive of ECCE in Ireland.
6. Pobal Maps website: <https://maps.pobal.ie/Web/Apps/TuslaInspectionReports/index.html> (Accessed February 8 2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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