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“Inclusion of all to the detriment of some?”: a study of Year 5/6 pupils’ perspectives on the inclusive classroom

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Abstract

This is a research proposal for a small-scale, mixed-methods research project in a rural 1.5 form entry primary school. The study is to be carried out among a composite Year 5/6 class to gain insight into pupils’ perceptions of their inclusive classroom. Following a literature review which present the inclusive classroom in an uncommonly negative light, this research hopes to answer the following questions: Does the inclusion of pupils with SEND/SEMHD have a negative impact upon the classroom dynamic? Do pupils notice a disparity in the allocation of time and resources between members of the class? The design includes the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to allow for pupils to share their own experiences and understandings of the inclusive classroom.

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Introduction

The inclusive classroom is an integral part of the British education system, with the benefits of integrating pupils with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) within the mainstream classroom widely reported on (Florian et al., 2016; Rangvid, 2018; Valiandes, 2015). However, research into the inclusion of pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties (SEMHD) is notably more critical, highlighting the difficulties faced by the pupils identified as having SEMHD when attempting to integrate with their peers (de Leeuw et al., 2019). Moreover, research has highlighted the issues experienced by teachers when faced with the task of creating an effective inclusive classroom (Cameron, 2013; de Boer et al., 2011).

I have worked and volunteered in primary school classrooms in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, and Spain – all of which have had an inclusive ethos with several pupils identified as having SEND and SEMHD. Across these experiences, I have witnessed first-hand both the benefits of the inclusive classroom as described in the literature, and the strain it seems to put on teachers to create an engaging environment where every child feels valued while a minority of pupils demand significantly more of their time and attention.

Despite the prevalence of debate around the benefits of inclusive education, there has been a repeated failure to seek input from a key source: the pupils. As de Leeuw et al. (2019) state, the question is not whether pupils’ perspectives should be included in educational research or not, but rather how their views can be acquired and incorporated into the research. Indeed, it is argued that research concerning children *requires* the inclusion of children, thus recognising that they are knowledgeable of their own experiences (Clark & Statham, 2005).

As I undertake my Initial Teacher Training, I am aware that part of my role as a class teacher will be to create an inclusive classroom, that is, an environment that is conducive to learning for every child

in my class. Acknowledging the importance of pupil perspective in research, I have chosen to conduct a small-scale research project in which I will research pupils’ perspectives on their own inclusive classroom. The pupils in question are members of a composite Year 5/6 class, in a school with a higher-than-average SEND register – one third of the class are identified as having SEND or SEMHD.

Considering the prevalence of critical literature, the primary research question (RQ) will be:

RQ. Does the inclusion of pupils with SEND/SEMHD have a negative impact upon the classroom dynamic?

The participants will be given a questionnaire to complete, the responses to which will be explored further through a follow-up semi-structured interview. During the study, a further auxiliary question will also be considered within the primary RQ above: do pupils notice a disparity in the allocation of time and resources between members of the class?

Literature Review

This section will provide a critical review of the existing literature surrounding the inclusive classroom both nationally and internationally, what SEND and SEMHD mean in the primary school setting, and the value of pupil perspective in educational research.

What is the inclusive classroom?

When discussing the concept of the inclusive classroom, the overarching sentiment amongst researchers is that it is not sufficient for children to merely be present in a classroom (Farrell, 2004), but be welcomed and accepted as “valuable and active participants of their learning community” (Tetler & Baltzer, 2011, p.333). The idea being, then, that children with diverse needs are not just physically integrated into the classroom, but mentally and emotionally included in all aspects of classroom life. Indeed, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2005, p.10) define the term “inclusion” as incorporating an ethos of “Education for All” by addressing the differing needs of all learners, drawing particular attention to those who are vulnerable to exclusion. The inclusive classroom, therefore, demands that all pupils are recognised and valued, and the same importance is given to both what is taught and how it is taught (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). As such, it is a “participatory community” in which all members can engage and participate fully (Sanahuja et al., 2020, p.113). Moreover, Black-Hawkins et al. (2021, p.2) call attention to the fact

that inclusive practice concerns “all learners [...] not only those identified as having special educational needs”.

In terms of how the inclusive classroom is beneficial for schools and learners, the evidence is plentiful. As Florian et al. (2016) make explicit, inclusive pedagogy allows the teacher to plan lessons to allow for all abilities to access the learning through a range of options based on their knowledge of the different needs, abilities, and interests within their classroom. In their research, Pozas et al. (2021) indicate that differentiated instruction (DI) effectively serves the range of learners and their diverse needs. Furthermore, Valiandes (2015) found that students in classrooms where DI was implemented – that is, inclusive classrooms – performed better when compared with their peers who did not receive DI. In addition to benefitting all learners’ academic attainment, research also calls attention to the importance of more intangible achievements such as developing “self-esteem, self-efficacy, resilience, social skills, creativity, tolerance and empathy” which are fostered through inclusive education (Florian et al., 2016, p.20).

In contrast, research has revealed criticism surrounding the inclusive classroom, with the “problems and challenges” within the inclusive education setting being the focus of study (de Leeuw et al., 2019). A divisive debate exists around the concept, with a notable amount of criticism surrounding children with “different learning abilities and different emotional and social needs being taught together” (Herz & Haertel, 2016, p.1040). The controversy is reflected in the Education Order in Northern Ireland (DENI, 1998) which made provision for pupils with additional needs to attend mainstream schools “where it was compatible with the efficient education of other pupils” (Ryan, 2009, p.78). This policy can be argued to set a clear distinction between pupils with special educational needs and those without, with the latter’s education seemingly being prioritised. Such prejudices have been exposed when researching pupil relationships and acceptance within the inclusive setting. Research conducted by Santos et al. (2016, p.952) indicates that of students with a “mental disability” (MD), 68.3% are rejected by their peers, and 50% are not included in playground interactions. Furthermore, Taylor et al. (2010) also argue that inclusive settings may exacerbate bullying issues if students with SEND are not effectively integrated among their peers, and risk being without a supportive social network.

The research surrounding the inclusive classroom reveals mixed views. It appears to be widely accepted that children should not be excluded from mainstream education based on their need for

additional support to access the learning. Indeed, the benefits of incorporating a diverse range of needs and abilities within a classroom are commented upon frequently in the literature, such as encouraging pupils to be empathetic, respectful, and resilient. Despite the reported benefits, however, it is impossible to ignore the criticism that surrounds the inclusive classroom. Critics highlight the challenges faced by teachers to create an engaging environment suitable for every child, whilst trying to differentiate their instruction to make the learning accessible to all (Cooper, 2011; de Leeuw et al., 2019; Jull, 2008). Additionally, the difficulties faced by children with SEND and SEMHD in terms of being fully integrated and accepted within the classroom are also outlined as a cause for concern.

However, it is noteworthy that these views are based on evidence collected by the researcher through observations of the class and analysis of data. A key source of information about the inclusive classroom which has not been used to its full potential in much of the research is the perspectives of those who are at the forefront of the inclusive classroom: the pupils. As such, the use – or lack thereof – of pupils’ perspectives in educational research, particularly regarding the inclusive classroom, will be explored in greater depth following a review of the literature surrounding SEND and SEMHD within the primary education setting.

What does SEND mean for the primary education setting?

Creating and maintaining an engaging learning environment for all pupils is a challenge faced by schools across the UK and beyond. This challenge is even greater, however, for those who have an inclusive pedagogical approach as the environment that is suited to the average learner may not be sufficient for pupils with SEND (Rangvid, 2018). Furthermore, Rangvid (2018) argues that pupils with SEND must be engaged both behaviourally and emotionally in the classroom to fully benefit from inclusive education. Indeed, Rangvid claims that there is a “general agreement” (p.281) that pupil engagement is an important factor in the effective inclusion of both learners with SEND and their peers. Whilst conducting the research, pupils identified as having SEND’s relationships with their peers and feelings of belonging were used as indicators of their engagement with the learning environment, with the results of the study revealing that there were considerable gaps in both engagement and academic attainment between pupils with SEND and their peers (Rangvid, 2018).

Building upon the notion of engagement of pupils with SEND being key to the inclusive classroom’s success, further research highlights the challenges faced in the classroom when pupils with autism spectrum disorder’s (ASD) “qualitative impairments in social interaction, communication and

behaviour” interfere with positive relationships within the classroom community (Santos et al., 2016, p.951). In addition, the issue of acceptance of pupils with SEND by their peers is highlighted again in the case of children with MD and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Santos et al., 2016). Research shows that pupils with SEND often feel “lonely” in their classrooms (Hellmich & Loeper, 2019, p.157) and experience fewer and less stable relationships than their peers (Bossart et al., 2013). Indeed, research conducted by de Boer (2012) indicates that 15-25% of students with SEND struggle with social participation. A contributing factor of this lack of acceptance, or perhaps a consequence of it, could be the disparity in the amount of time and attention given by the teacher to pupils with SEND compared to their peers.

Pupils with SEND require additional assistance and/or resources in order to access the learning, resulting in “more direct teacher attention” and one-to-one interaction than their peers (Cameron, 2013, p.264). Research on teacher-student interactions in inclusive classrooms showed that “teachers strongly believed that students with disabilities required more attention than did non-disabled students” (ibid., p.268). In fact, a first-grade teacher who took part in the research claimed, “It’s just more. They need more help. They need me more than other students.” (ibid.). As such, another challenge to inclusive education that teachers face is the apparent balancing act between creating an engaging learning environment for a diverse range of needs, monitoring social participation and acceptance of pupils identified as having SEND, and sharing their time and resources with thirty or more children when a minority require more one-to-one interaction and assistance (Santos et al., 2016). As a result of the notably negative pictures painted by researchers, it perhaps is not surprising that the Department for Education and Skills (2001) in its guidance on inclusive schooling reinforced that all children should receive a mainstream education, if it is compatible with the efficient education of other children. The implication of this is that the needs of the many should be prioritised over the needs of the few (Florian et al., 2016).

The literature and research around SEND and what it means in a primary education setting is increasingly critical, reflecting the pressures faced by practitioners to juggle their responsibilities to meet the diverse range of needs within their classroom. Indeed, the term ‘additional needs’ covers a range of difficulties in learning, “from those resulting from impairments to those related to learning and behavioural difficulties” (Florian et al., 2016, p.22). As such, in addition to adapting their teaching and environment to support the learning of pupils with SEND, teachers of an inclusive classroom must also consider the wellbeing of students with SEMHD.

What does SEMHD mean for the primary education setting?

As with SEND, the literature and research surrounding SEMHD in the primary school setting is plentiful. However, where including pupils with SEND provides clear positives and negatives, when it comes to studying the inclusion of pupils with SEMHD in the mainstream primary school, the findings are overwhelmingly negative.

As has been the case with the study of pupils with SEND in the inclusive classroom, questions have been raised regarding the impact of including pupils with SEMHD in the classroom. For example, a widely used description when referring to pupils with SEMHD is a student who has difficulties with self-regulation, particularly with regards to social interaction, behaviour and emotions that interferes with the student’s own development and that of their peers (Cooper, 2011). The notion of the inclusion of pupils with SEMHD having an impact upon the learning of the other members of the class has also been explored, where worries regarding teachers spending valuable time de-escalating pupils’ behaviour have been cited for decades (de Boer et al., 2011). Indeed, in support of these concerns, research conducted by Cooper and Cefai (2013) shows that pupils identified as having SEMHD are more likely to engage in behaviours such as defiance, aggression, and hyperactivity. Consequently, the classroom environment is destabilised, and learning is disrupted for all pupils (Jull, 2008).

To build upon these concerns, Cameron (2013) sought the testimonials of teachers when researching teacher-student interactions in inclusive classrooms. Referring to a pupil with a “behavioural disorder” (p.268), the teacher explained, “I kind of travel, if it’s math or whatever, to make sure that he’s on the right track” (p.268). Furthermore, she added, “I feel like a lot of my attention is taken away from the other kids” (p.268) because of the time that had to be spent dealing with the pupil’s inappropriate behaviour. Whilst it is undeniable that this teacher’s remarks support the sentiment in the literature that including pupils with SEMHD in the mainstream classroom can cause disruption to the whole-class learning, it must be highlighted that the perspectives of pupils and teachers who experience these challenges on a day-to-day basis are underrepresented, and further exploration into their perspectives and experiences is required (Brown et al., 2016). Indeed, research conducted in Clarawood Special School – a school for primary-age children with SEMHD who are supported “through outreach into mainstream schools or by placement in Clarawood” (Ryan, 2009, p.80) – demonstrated the differing interpretations of what it means to be excluded. The school availed of a

“time out” room, which allowed pupils to access a quiet environment when needed and which was interpreted in “a number of different ways” (ibid., p.81). For example, one pupil claimed, “You feel excluded when you are in it [as] you feel angry and confused” (ibid., p. 81) whilst another said it made him feel “excluded because [he] was never in it” (ibid., p. 81).

Whilst lacking pupil voice, the research around SEMHD in the primary school setting repeatedly highlights the difficulties faced by pupils identified as having SEMHD within the inclusive classroom. Firstly, it is believed that pupils with SEMHD struggle to sustain meaningful friendships (Avramidis, 2013) and are less socially accepted within the class group (Schwab et al., 2014). As a result, pupils with SEMHD have been reported as experiencing more loneliness and isolation than their peers (Bossaert et al., 2012). This notion is exemplified in the case study by Brown et al. (2016), where 29 boys identified as having severe SEMHD recalled their experiences of mainstream schooling before attending a residential school in New Zealand. Through semi-structured and focus group interviews, a key feature of their educational experiences was noted: bullying. The results of the study indicate a link between SEMHD, victimisation and bullying, with pupils with SEMHD being a higher risk of being bullied (ibid.). Moreover, it suggests that students with SEMHD are likely to experience an exacerbation of these problems when they are involved in bullying “either as victims, perpetrators, or both” (ibid., p.217). To help pupils who are struggling with their integration into the classroom, peer mentoring programmes are suggested as a beneficial implementation within the classroom to promote pro-social behaviour and foster relationships (Brown et al., 2016). As such, one may look towards the inclusive classroom as a place for peer mentorship programmes to thrive.

Overall, the literature surrounding the education of pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties presents it as a challenge for pupils and teachers alike. Teachers find themselves struggling to divide their time between the whole class whilst working to support pupils who need extra guidance and attention (Cameron, 2013). Pupils identified as having SEMHD appear to find it more difficult to integrate fully into the classroom and maintain strong relationships with their peers (Avramidis, 2013) and are more at risk from bullying (Brown et al., 2016). However, to understand the implications of SEMHD within the inclusive classroom, it is vital that more research is conducted in which the pupils’ perspectives are at the forefront of the findings.

Pupils’ perspectives of the inclusive classroom and their peers

Across the study of relevant literature surrounding the inclusive classroom, one element was repeatedly lacking: the pupils’ perspectives. The value of including pupils’ perspectives in educational research is clearly stated in de Leeuw et al.’s (2019) work on social exclusion within inclusive classrooms:

“The inclusion of the voices of children is not only right’s based, but a necessity in realizing an inclusive education system that meets the needs of children, with or without [SEMHD]. The question is not whether the participation of young children should occur within educational research and educational reform, but rather how this can be accomplished.”

(Leeuw et al., 2019, p.325)

This view is supported by other educational researchers such as Clark and Statham (2005), who claim that as members of society, regardless of their age, children are a valuable and knowledgeable social group. Moreover, the status of children as active participants in their education has been highlighted by Black-Hawkins et al. (2021). They indicate that the involvement of pupils in the evaluation of “learner diversity” (p.3) in their classroom should be sought after in educational research, not ignored.

However, there is some controversy around the topic; researchers have raised concerns about the ethicality of using children in research. Tetler and Baltzer (2011) cited the risk that some of the children do not properly understand the matter, or that they “try to please” (p.334) the adults working with them. Considering their concerns, they conducted research into the appropriateness of interviewing children using various strategies, with a focus on children identified as having “learning disabilities” (ibid., p.334). The results of their study concluded that pupils with disabilities are in fact able to participate in a classroom-based interview (ibid., p.341) and their input served as “rich sources for achieving an understanding of their self-perception as pupils and experiences about their learning environment and classroom climate” (ibid., p.334). Indeed, the benefits of incorporating pupils’ perspectives into educational research is evident throughout Ryan’s (2009) work on inclusive classrooms in several Belfast schools, where the views and experiences of pupils at the heart of inclusive education were actively sought out and explored.

Despite the benefits of seeking pupils’ perspectives in educational research, in the context of inclusive education, there are very few studies that have included pupils’ views in their design (Pozas et al., 2021). In particular, concerns have been raised regarding the more distinct lack of perspectives from pupils with behavioural difficulties (Herz & Haertel, 2016). Indeed, the views of children with

SEMHD are “among the least heard” in educational research (Michael & Fredrickson, 2013, p.408), despite numerous researchers arguing for the insight they can offer into what constitutes an effective inclusive learning environment (Michael & Fredrickson, 2013).

Overall, it is evident that incorporating pupils’ perspectives into educational research provides invaluable insight into what goes on in the classroom, and how it is experienced by those that matter most. Indeed, in the context of research in the inclusive educational setting, including pupils’ perspectives from a diverse range of learners is paramount if an accurate representation of pupils’ experiences is to be explored. However, despite their value, pupils’ perspectives are notably lacking throughout educational research – particularly in the context of learners with SEMHD within an inclusive classroom.

Conclusion

Overall, the literature surrounding the inclusive classroom is mixed. Whilst some researchers speak of the challenges faced by pupils both on and off the SEND/SEMHD register within the inclusive educational setting (de Leeuw et al., 2019; Herz & Haertel, 2016), others praise the success of the inclusive classroom in creating an environment in which all learners are given the opportunity to engage and make progress (Florian et al., 2016). Despite the controversy surrounding the effectiveness of the inclusive educational setting, a crucial source of information is found to be lacking throughout the literature – the perspectives of teachers and pupils alike who experience the inclusive setting first-hand. As a result, it is my intention to seek out the perspectives of the pupils who experience the inclusive classroom day-to-day, subsequently gaining invaluable insight into a controversial issue which has arguably not been explored through the most valuable sources of information.

Methodology

The research into pupils’ perspectives on the inclusive classroom will be carried out in a composite Year 5/6 class. All willing participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire, then I will conduct a semi-structured interview with six pupils from a range of abilities as identified by the class teacher to further explore the results from the questionnaire. Said questionnaire will provide quantitative data, and the semi-structured interviews will provide qualitative data as well as an opportunity for pupils

to elaborate on the answers that they have given on the questionnaire. The decision to carry out a mixed-methods approach has been guided by the primary RQ: “Does the inclusion of pupils with SEND/SEMHD have a negative impact upon the classroom dynamic?”.

Research design

The research will be conducted by mixed-method case study methodology, as this is a method held in high regard when compared to other social science methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In choosing a case study, one must also make the choice of using qualitative or quantitative methods of obtaining data, or combining the two, as they are two ends of a continuum ranging from holistic to reductionistic (Verschuren, 2003). For my research, I will use both quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve a more holistic understanding of pupils’ perspectives on the inclusive classroom by working with participants “in their natural context in an open-ended way” and “avoiding [...] tunnel vision” (Verschuren, 2003, p.137). Furthermore, it has been argued that by combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the researcher can use their strengths and avoid their weaknesses respectively (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). In addition, a mixed-methods approach is deemed “more effective for research with vulnerable groups than quantitative or qualitative in isolation” (Lund, 2012, p.162). To obtain quantitative data, I will distribute a short questionnaire to all willing participants in the class. The quantitative data received through this questionnaire will then be explored further through semi-structured interviews, during which qualitative data will be gathered, allowing more detailed information to be collected “through a variety of data sources” (Campbell, 1997, p.125). It is important to note that, while allowing for a more holistic view of pupils’ perspectives on the inclusive classroom and providing greater amounts of contextual data, interviews risk questions and subsequent data being misinterpreted due to cultural differences (Campbell, 1997). In an attempt to overcome this, the interview will be semi-structured, and I will pose straight-forward questions to which the children will know they can answer honestly without any consequences or skip if they prefer not to answer. The mixed-method approach will be outlined further below.

School context

The research will be carried out in a village school with a 1.5 form entry and an attached pre-school and playwork facility; there are approximately 320 pupils across 10 classes. The majority of pupils are White British, the proportion of which is above the national average. Pupils on the register with

EAL and those in receipt of Pupil Premium are below national average, whilst the number of pupils on the SEND register is significantly above average.

The class in which the research will be carried out has 31 pupils: 19 Year 6s and 12 Year 5s. The class has a considerably high proportion of SEND, with 11 children on the SEND register and 3 children who have an EHCP – each of which includes approximately 20 hours of one-to-one provision. According to the teacher, the class are particularly dependent on adults and lack resilience in their learning.

Participants

The participants of the research will come from a composite Year 5/6 class. Before beginning the research, the class teacher will be consulted to ensure that only children believed to be sufficiently informed and happy to participate in the research are included (Caslin, 2019).

For the quantitative data collection, a short questionnaire will be distributed amongst all informed and willing participants in the class. Following the return of these questionnaires and subsequent analysis of the data, a sample of children will be selected for qualitative data collection, in the form of a semi-structured interview. Obtaining an “adequate and representative sample” is an important aspect of the interview process (Williams, 2003, p.245); this will be assured by working with the class teacher to select a sample of 6 children, 2 of whom are on the SEND/SEMHD register, 2 of whom are noted as high achieving, and 2 of whom are working at expected levels. This aspect of the data collection is more complicated, as 1:1 interaction between researcher and participant is involved which may affect responses. In the context of this research, this is a greater concern as the interaction is between adult and child (Einarsdóttir, 2007). Therefore, to overcome the power-imbalance that may impact the validity of the responses, time will be spent in the classroom observing and talking informally with children to build relationships prior to any formal data collection (Caslin, 2019).

Data collection

Questionnaires

Firstly, questionnaires have been chosen as a form of quantitative data as they allow for a large amount of data to be collected relatively quickly compared to interviews and have the benefit of

avoiding any direct interaction with the researcher which may influence participants’ responses (Rowley, 2014). The questionnaire will be made up of closed questions, with answers on a scale of A-C (A = Yes, B = Unsure, C = No). As the questionnaires will be distributed throughout a class with a range of abilities and needs, this scale will also have a visual prompt of a smiling, straight and unhappy face. The choice of closed questions was made with the understanding that more children will feel able to participate. Although this does not allow for detailed responses, the quantitative data gathered through this method will then be explored further through the semi-structured interview, where questions will be based around the children’s questionnaires and invite elaboration (Terrell, 2012). For the questionnaire to be accessible to all willing participants in the class, care needed to be taken when constructing the questions; all questions are short, simple, and specific, and have been kept under 20 words (Williams, 2003). In addition, effort has been made to make the questionnaire as successful as possible; non-personal questions precede more specific questions to achieve a better response rate (ibid.).

Semi-structured interviews

The qualitative data will be collected by semi-structured interviews, which works well with small groups for more in-depth study (Denscombe, 2007) where the researcher is personally involved and “seeks the insider’s point of view” (Campbell, 1997, p.123). Although the purpose of these is to give the participants the opportunity to elaborate on their responses (Terrell, 2012), it is useful to begin with a few closed questions regarding subjects they are interested in and feel comfortable speaking about to help them relax (O’Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Furthermore, closed questions can be used to “clarify understanding of details given in response to previous open questions” (ibid., p.9). The interview will then move on to more open questions which will encourage deeper exploration of the relevant issues for the research question (O’Reilly & Dogra, 2017). The interview schedule will guide the interview, but flexibility to allow discussion of other themes that arise is key (Choak, 2012). The decision to interview six pupils on a one-to-one basis was made so that their responses are not influenced by their peers, as questions and prompts will be related to their classroom environment and subsequently their classmates. Semi-structured interviews have been chosen instead of a more structured approach to allow for participants to “open up and provide a narrative about the issue”, thus widening the “scope” of the study (O’Reilly & Dogra, 2017, p.10).

Data Analysis

All data retrieved during the research process will be analysed considering my primary RQ: “Does the inclusion of pupils with SEND/SEMHD have a negative impact upon the classroom dynamic?”.

The quantitative data retrieved from the closed questions in the questionnaires will be coded and entered into the database for analysis (Williams, 2003). This will not be time-consuming as the questionnaire includes numbered questions and three possible responses, labelled A, B or C. Any interesting responses to the “extra information” column that are deemed to be insightful to the research question will be quoted verbatim in the final report (*ibid.*), however these questions are intended mostly as a thinking point for further exploration through the semi-structured interviews. The participants’ responses to each question will be entered into the data analysis table and the percentage of participants that share the response will be calculated. A column is available for any additional information of note.

The qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews will be analysed through a thematic approach. In this way, transcripts and responses will be scrutinised to identify recurring themes which link to the research question (Evans, 2018). Once these themes are identified, I will move from the semantic level of analysis to the latent level of analysis; this will enable me to progress from describing the data to interpreting it through consideration of the wider ideas and context (*ibid.*) to find meaning in relation to the research question. The data will be entered into a table with four columns for each question. A column will be available for any identified positive themes, and beside it a column to input the number of children who mentioned said positive themes. Similarly, there is a column for any negative themes identified in response to each question, and a column to specify how many children expressed said negative themes.

The purpose of the mixed-methods approach is to obtain a more holistic insight into pupils’ perspectives of the inclusive classroom, focusing on my primary RQ: “Does the inclusion of pupils with SEND/SEMHD have a negative impact upon the classroom dynamic?”. The responses to both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview will give invaluable insight into the issues facing the inclusive classroom and help to indicate whether the strive for inclusion is a positive experience for all learners, or only beneficial to the few.

Ethical considerations

For research to be ethical in both its design and execution, participants must be put at ease and excessive demands of them should be avoided (BERA, 2018). Therefore, whilst designing the research study, consideration has been given to the duty of care towards the participants to “minimise and manage any distress or discomfort that may arise” (ibid., p.19). As such, whilst conducting the research, I will take care to immediately stop/adapt any actions or questions that appear to cause any such discomfort – as the participants are children, the responsibility is even greater (BERA, 2018). A risk assessment will be undertaken to identify any potential risks both to myself as the researcher and to the participants (O’Reilly & Dogra, 2017).

An aspect of the research design which is a risk for causing discomfort amongst participants is the power-imbalance between participant and researcher, which may impact their ability to tell the researcher that they do not want to take part or wish to withdraw (Einarsdóttir, 2017). To tackle this issue, their consent will be treated as an “ongoing process” (ibid., p.205) and reviewed before and after both questionnaire and interview. Furthermore, children will be given sufficient information about the purpose of the research and what it involves in a way that is accessible for them so that they can give verbal informed consent (Einarsdóttir, 2017; Mortari & Harcourt, 2012). In addition, letters will be distributed to parents/carers detailing the research. Said letters will be distributed to the entire class, so all parents/carers are aware of the research being carried out and can consent to their child’s participation. However, if a parent gives consent but a child does not give verbal consent, the child’s decision is the final one and they will be removed from the study and any relevant data will be deleted.

Furthermore, the nature of the primary research question requires participants to express how they feel about aspects of their classroom and subsequently, their peers. A concern in the planning of the research was that if participants were put in groups for the semi-structured interview, they would feel pressure to respond in a way that would not offend any of their fellow participants, resulting in skewed results. To avoid this, the decision was made to carry out the interviews on a one-to-one basis, after time had been spent with the class to build relationships and a sense of trust between participants and researcher.

In addition, care must be taken with regards to confidentiality. The participants’ data will be treated with confidentiality and anonymity, as is expected within the conduct of research (BERA, 2018). Therefore, in the write up of the research, all participants’ names will be pseudonyms and the school

will remain anonymous. In this instance where the participants are children, particular caution must be taken not to explicitly promise confidentiality as safeguarding issues may arise resulting in information needing to be passed onto authorities inside or outside of the school (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Mortari & Harcourt, 2012).

Implications for future practice

After extensive critical reading of the literature surrounding SEND and SEMHD in the inclusive primary school setting, along with that of appropriate research methodology, I have gained a greater insight into the role of the inclusive classroom in educating 21st century children.

Firstly, a key implication for my future practice is the benefits of differentiated instruction for all learners in the class, ranging from those with additional needs to the high attainers (Pozas et al., 2021; Valiandes, 2015). Differentiated instruction is time consuming for teachers who are already juggling an increasing workload but reading about the explicit benefits for all the children in my class is extremely encouraging.

Secondly, I have developed a greater understanding of the implications of having pupils with SEND or SEMHD in my class. Their presence in the class is not only something a teacher must prepare for in terms of planning for learning, but in fact an important aspect to consider when creating classroom rules and establishing the learning environment. Key to creating an environment conducive to learning is a culture of empathy within the classroom, where pupils are aware of differing needs and respectful of these. Subsequently, the distribution of resources and attention is not interpreted as unfair, but instead is understood and accepted. Whole class discussion is required to form a climate of mutual understanding that all the adults in the room want the best for every individual child, and that this will look different for every individual child.

Furthermore, an implication of the inclusive classroom that I had previously not considered is a sense of belonging, despite the efforts for inclusivity. Research suggests that pupils with SEMHD are at a higher risk of bullying, both as victims and perpetrators (Brown et al., 2016). In addition, pupils identified as having SEND are also more likely to be bullied than their peers if they are not effectively integrated with appropriate social support networks (Taylor et al., 2010). As such, efforts must be made not only to create the previously mentioned climate of empathy and respect, but indeed of supportiveness. Therefore, when I have my own class, I will design seating arrangements with

inclusivity in mind; a range of needs and attainment will sit at mixed tables, and collaboration will be encouraged and incorporated through classroom management strategies which value teamwork.

Overall, I have acquired invaluable insight into the context of the inclusive classroom both for teachers and pupils alike. Despite the prevalence of literature on the topic, a recurring theme throughout the proposal was the notable lack of pupils' perspectives. Consequently, in my own inclusive classroom, I will actively seek out pupils' thoughts and feelings regarding their experiences within my classroom and use these to help to inform my practice. Regardless of whether they are identified as having SEND or SEMHD, are high attainers or somewhere in the middle, their opinions and experiences matter.

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