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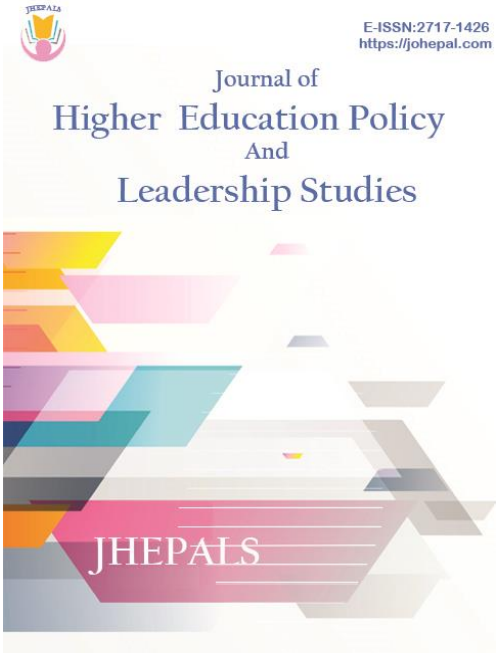

Newly Qualified Teachers and Inclusion in Higher Education: Policy, Practice and Preparation

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Abstract

Higher education policy in Ireland ensures that student teachers are prepared for all aspects of life as a future educator and this is underpinned by documents such the Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education (Teaching Council, 2011a); Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers, (Teaching Council, 2011b); and, Guidelines on School Placement (Teaching Council, 2013) and more recently 'Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education' (Teaching Council, 2020). Considering these policies, this paper draws on research for an undergraduate dissertation on the preparedness of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) for inclusive special education classrooms. The methodology employed is documentary research in the first instance, followed by the lived experience of one of the authors who is currently in her first year as an NQT. Her role is spread across five schools as both a mainstream and a special education teacher. This narrative reflects literature, highlighting commonalities of lack of confidence in knowledge and skills pertaining to aspects of special education, uncertainty around the practicalities of inclusion and general nervousness as a newly qualified teacher. It also highlights the supportive structures for NQTs such as leadership, collaboration and professional conversations for these teachers as they navigate busy and demanding school and classroom settings. Notwithstanding deep-rooted uncertainty in skills and knowledge, there is an overall sense of positivity and a feeling of optimism as an inclusive educator in the teaching profession.

Keywords: Newly Qualified Teachers; Inclusion; Special Education; Policy in Teaching; Practice of Inclusion in Schools; Preparation for Newly Qualified Teachers

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Introduction

This paper gives voice to the experience of a newly qualified teacher (NQT) in busy and demanding roles as a mainstream teacher and a special education teacher across five different schools. The work stems from a research dissertation undertaken by one of the authors (Erica) and supervised by the other (Miriam) on how NQTs are equipped to support learners with special educational needs (SEN) in primary schools in Ireland. Many tentative and exploratory conversations ensued around the ethical position of writing an article based on the research, including power relations (Foucault, 1980) as supervisor / student, and we agreed that aligning the study with a lived experience was perhaps most interesting for readers or researchers in inclusive education domains. The temporal context is, of course, highly significant as within nine months of completing the documentary research on NQTs, in September 2020, Erica became an NQT herself. This gives Erica the insight on being a very new NQT, on exploring the validity of her research and on aligning theoretical perspectives to practice.

From the dissertation, we noticed that while policy and legislation regarding inclusion for learners with SEN in Ireland constantly and consistently moves towards good practice for learners with SEN, practice and preparation for teachers, particularly NQTs, do not always align with policy demands. A year on from the research, this mirrors the lived experience of Erica as an NQT, detailed below in the findings. This paper explores, what we have aptly named, the three 'P''s of an NQT inclusive education continuum – Policy, Preparation and Practice. This is brought into stark relief by Erica's narrative and adds to a body of literature calling on the authentic voice and perspectives of research led practice (Connolly, Hall, Jones, & Procter, 2020).

Policy: Inclusive Education in Ireland

In order to provide a contextual backdrop for the educational landscape that newly qualified teachers working in primary schools in Ireland must navigate, we provide an overview of pertinent policy on inclusive education in Ireland. The catalyst for change in Special education was brought about by the Warnock report (1978), enshrined into U.K. law in the UK Education Act, 1981. The legacy of the Warnock Report (1978) is the introduction of the term 'special educational needs' (SEN), a nuanced (at that time) approach for identification, assessment and provision for students underpinned by statutory protections (Norwich, 2019). This remained the norm within the UK system up to the most recent changes as outlined in the Children and Families Act (2014). Essentially the Warnock report laid the groundwork for how we conceptualise and practice inclusion for children with special educational needs. Along with Warnock, reports such as the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD], United Nations, 2007) carved out a space for the rights of children with SEN. Despite being considered a 'latecomer' regarding legislation pertaining to inclusion (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2007, p. 289), Ireland responded with the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 1993), the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) and the Disability Act (Government of Ireland, 2005). The Education Act (1998) underlined the right of every child to an appropriate education, heralding a period of a rapid transformation from segregation to inclusion for learners with SEN (Ní Bhroin, 2017). Following this, EPSEN (2004) introduced individual education

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plans (IEP's) for learners with SEN and founded the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), a body that focuses on improving the delivery of education services for individuals with SEN. Furthermore, EPSEN (2004) emphasised the importance of mainstream schooling for children with SEN. Although it is widely acknowledged that the mainstream classroom is paramount for inclusion, some scholars argue that special school settings can be the optimal choice for some learners with SEN (Colum & McIntyre, 2019), particularly if there is a presence of additional challenging behaviours (Colum, 2020).

In mainstream classes, up to 2017, learners with SEN were supported through either a learning support model for learners with high incidence SEN or resource learning for those with low incidence SEN, facilitated through a General Allocation Model (GAM) (DES, 2005). A lack of autonomy was the main criticism of this model (DES, 2017a) as well as a reliance on a diagnosis, a medical model legacy, in order to access teaching support (DES, 2016). In 2017, Ireland introduced a new model and with it introduced Special Education Teachers (SETs), an amalgamation of the learning support teacher and the resource teacher, for learners with SEN (DES, 2017b). This model gave greater autonomy to schools in allocation of resources with emphasises on greater support for the greater level of needs and the model was praised for cutting the requirement for a diagnosis of SEN to access resources (Byrne, 2017). A 'spectrum of disability' is also identified in the new model whereby learners within the same category of SEN are recognised as having different needs (DES, 2017a). Howe and Griffin (2020, p. 46) acknowledge that further progress towards inclusive education is reflected in Ireland's ratification of the UNCRPD in 2018. Following this milestone event, an independent monitoring board will now evaluate schools' commitment to inclusive education and ensure that progress is being made (United Nations, 2007; Citizens Information Board, 2018).

The reality of these evolving policy considerations is that all schools in Ireland are duty bound to include all children of all abilities in all settings and as Erica attests to later, the reality of inclusive education for all means better supports for children in mainstream provision.

Preparation: Inclusion and Initial Teacher education (ITE) in Ireland and NQTs

In Ireland, initial Teacher education (ITE) is awarded through the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) or the Professional Masters in education degree. Hick, Solomon, Mintz, Matziari, Ó Murchú, Hall, Cahill, Curtin, and Margariti (2018) extrapolate the importance of pre-service training for teachers, and advocate that student teachers are encouraged to see themselves as a new generation of teachers who may be better placed than previous generations to promote inclusive practices in schools (Hick et al, 2018, p. 6). Inclusive education is offered as a module on both ITE programmes and research identifies mainly positive feedback from students who feel well prepared for inclusive teaching and in terms of developing appropriate attitudes (Hick et al, 2018). Hick et al (2018) highlighted that NQTs felt relatively under-prepared in terms of confidence in their knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in school contexts. We suggest that maybe the shortened experience of SEN on initial teacher education programmes and school placement may add to this unease; students are required to observe in an SEN setting for two weeks, which cannot be ample time to engage in special education considerations. This is not a criticism of third level provision; moreover, it prompts reflection on how to enhance the preparation of NQTs for entry into the special education field. A constraint for ITE in preparing teachers for inclusion remains the availability and nature of school placement opportunities. Despite the changes to ITE and the increased number and range of school placements offered to students, which contributes substantially to their range of experiences,

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it does not address significant variability in the capacity of schools and cooperating teachers to promote inclusive practices (Hick et al, 2018). Reflecting on time as an undergraduate, I (Erica) feel that more time spent in the classroom in a special setting would enhance my knowledge and skills.

During the first few years of teaching, NQTs are required take part in Droichead, the mandatory professional development induction model for NQTs, developed by the Teaching Council. Every school will have a professional support team (PST), which is a team of experienced and fully registered teachers that works collaboratively to support and mentor the NQT during the Droichead process and his/ her entry into both the school and the teaching profession. All members of the professional support team (PST) are required to complete Droichead professional development provided by the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) (Teaching Council, 2018/2019). The Droichead process that supports the professional learning of NQTs during the induction phase lays the foundations for subsequent professional growth and learning for the next phase of an NQT's career (Teaching Council, 2018/2019).

The first year of teaching is an important one in every teacher's professional development, and it can be a demanding period for NQTs. I (Erica) have found this year to be a learning curve in relation to inclusive education and am constantly learning new skills and strategies to support all abilities. It has also highlighted how ill prepared I am in some instances and this is reflected in literature. Although, this is over a decade ago, Travers et al, (2010) outlined in their report that a number of studies point to the fact that many teachers lack the preparation and experience in supporting students with SEN and those from minority ethnic and /or minority language groups, in inclusive settings (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000; Winter, 2006). They also highlight an important point from Drudy and Kinsella, (2009) who report that there is the "belief that there are insufficient numbers of teachers in the (Irish) system who possess the expertise in special needs education to support mainstream teachers in discharging their responsibilities to all pupils" (Travers et al., 2010, p.695). While this emphasises the need for more skilled special education teachers to support mainstream teachers, their role would also be crucial in supporting NQTs as they enter the teaching profession.

Practice: Factors for Inclusive Education

Hick et al (2018) identifies three factors that make a difference how NQTs develop their identity as inclusive teachers: the ways in which the school approaches inclusive teaching; the school culture in relation to supporting the developing identity of NQTs as teachers; and how they approached issues of equality, diversity and inclusive education (p.xv). This section will align these to some facilitating factors for inclusive practice comprising effective leadership, teacher confidence, collaboration with colleagues, access to Special Needs Assistants (SNA) support, continued professional training opportunities and working with parents.

Leadership

Many scholars (Murphy, 2019; Mac Ruairc, 2013; Donnelly, 2011; King 2017) explore leadership and its importance for inclusive educational settings. "The recognition of the role of leadership in supporting inclusive learning for students and for teachers new to teaching or to the school is an important dimension of the Irish educational landscape" (Donnelly, Murchú, & Thies, 2016, p. 17). This suggests that leadership is one of the key factors in supporting NQTs in their experiences of working with children with SEN. The potential positive impact that teacher education (including

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leadership) can play in promoting inclusive learning is a frequently referenced point of discussion in both the published research and policy advice of the NCSE, (Hick et al, 2018). The role of leadership in schools is central to teachers' learning (Donnelly et al., 2016) where a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) is established that allows the continuum of learning to be part of teachers' daily lives.

Confidence

Navigating the school environment as a teacher and particularly as an NQT can be a daunting experience. Literature identifies high efficacy beliefs as a 'key ingredient' (Sharma, Loreman, & Florin, 2012) in the promotion of inclusive classroom environments as well -as fostering positive attitudes towards inclusion (Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014). Furthermore, there is a correlation between a teachers' positive attitude towards inclusive education and confidence in their ability to ensure effective inclusion for children with SEN (De Boer et al. 2011; Urton et al., 2014).

Collaboration

An important feature for NQTs is the collaborative relationships within the school community. Collaboration in supporting children with SEN in the classroom is an imperative and essential factor for an inclusive educational environment. One key collaborative relationship NQT's will encounter is one with Special Education Teachers (SETs). Equally, NQTs themselves may be employed in a SET post, providing additional teaching support can be provided in a variety of ways, such as working in the classroom with the class teacher or withdrawing pupils in small groups and/or individually for a period for intensive teaching of key skills (Circular, 13/17). The value of collaboration with colleagues as a facilitating factor for inclusive practice is evident in a wide body of literature (Travers, Balfe, Day, Dupont, Mc Daid, O'Donnell, Butler, & Prunty, 2010; Ware, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont, Harten, Farrell, McDaid, O'Riordan, Prunty, Travers, 2009; Lindsay, 2007; Smith & Leonard 2005).

SNA Support

One collaborative relationship that is pivotal in supporting children with SEN is that of a teacher/Special Needs Assistant (SNA) relationship. As a result of a policy of inclusion, the early years of the twenty-first century saw an unprecedented growth in numbers of students with SEN in Irish mainstream schools and consequently, an expansion in the number of SNAs within the educational system (Kerins, et al, 2017). While NQTs work with SNAs in their classrooms, many NQTs lack the skills, experience and understanding of how to collaborate with SNAs in the classroom.

Parents

Collaboration with parents is also a vital facet of inclusive education and parents must be consulted on all aspects of their child's education (EPSEN, 2004). Parents' views must be taken into account in planning appropriate provision for children with SEN. To create an effective individual education plan (IEP), parents, teachers and the student must be involved in designing an educational programme to help the student succeed (Winter & O'Raw, 2010, p. 64).

Continuing Professional Development / Teachers Learning

In the ever-growing area of SEN and inclusive education, new policies are frequently implemented, most recently the DES 2017 guidelines for supporting children with SEN in mainstream classes (DES,2017b), therefore it is crucial that teachers access necessary continuing professional

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development (CPD) to assist them with new developments (Shevlin et al., 2013). The Teaching Council adopted the phrase 'teachers' learning' in place of 'CPD' when rolling out its Cosán framework in 2016 / 2017 (Teaching Council, 2016). The framework is a teacher-led process underpinned by core values such as shared professional responsibility, professionally led regulation and collective professional confidence (Hick et al, 2018). The Teaching Council has stated that teachers' ongoing learning is both 'a right and a responsibility' and there is now a move to make such learning obligatory for continued registration (Hick et al, 2018, p. 22).

Overcoming Challenges to Inclusive Education

Ainscow and Booth (2002), state that inclusion is about minimising all barriers in education for all students. However, there are challenges for NQT's in promoting inclusive practices for children with SEN in the classroom. Significant barriers in this context comprise time, planning, lack of training, and lack of resources available in some instances, (Travers et al, 2010). Their report also highlights challenges for teachers when compiling and using IEPs as there is no training in this area as well as schools not complying with whole-school planning guidelines in relation to SEN (Travers, 2010). While this report is over a decade old, some of these challenges remain today with, as one example, a lack of clarity for NQTs on the drafting and using IEPs, and something that I (Erica) found difficult as I entered the classroom. To support teachers, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) adopted a continuum of support model that helps with this process and the resource packs available provides guidelines and structure for the individual planning process.

Methodology

For Erica's dissertation, the research question 'Are Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) prepared for inclusive education?' was addressed through a documentary research methodology. The documentary research comprised articles, journals and books within a twenty-year frame (1999 – 2019), policy and legislation documentation were exempt from these parameters. The sources were evaluated as relevant by adhering to four criteria: authenticity (genuine sources), representativeness (typical of its type), meaning (unambiguous) and credibility (free from bias) (Platt, 1981; Scott, 1990). Erica consulted Denscombe (2010) and followed advice to establish credibility, acknowledging, among other aspects, the length of time documents existed (twenty-year timeframe), national and international titles, professionalism of publishing association and expertise of authors and editors in the field.

The current paper is a viewpoint that aims to draw the research into the lived experience of Erica as an NQT. We followed the four consecutive stages of Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988) to cogitate about what was learned from the experience of being an NQT in special education and mainstream settings. Erica reports on her experience as an NQT (concrete experience), reflecting on the research from her dissertation as well as in practice (reflective observation), followed advice from school staff (abstract conceptualisation), and established a new knowledge and skills for inclusion (active experimentation). Erica is detailing the policy, preparation and practice experiences as an NQT in the findings. As a lecturer and researcher in special education and as Erica's former supervisor, I, Miriam, am aware of the power relations as noted in the introductory paragraph. We present her documentary research as the contextual background of the findings where Erica documents her lived experience as an NQT in an inclusive classroom.

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Ethical approval was not required for the documentary research and for this paper, we were not collecting any data and the research does not include human or animal participants, their material or data. We sought and received confirmation on this from the Marino Ethics Research Committee (MERC) in Marino Institute of Education. For this paper, no potential conflict is reported by the co-authors.

Findings

Erica's Experience

I am fortunate that my own experience of SEN/Inclusive Education in college began from the moment I accepted a place on the Bachelor of Education course in Marino Institute of Education in 2016. As a student with a long-term illness, the Disability Team at the college supported me, and my additional needs. The lectures throughout the four-year degree, incorporated modules on inclusiveness and differentiation methods for children with SEN. This transferred into lesson planning and preparation for school placement and it contributed to the conscious efforts I made in inclusivity on school placement. While these aspects of inclusion were addressed as part of the B.Ed degree, we only had SEN lectures in year two of the programme. Ideally, having lectures on SEN would have been beneficial every year.

In my final year, I chose inclusive education as I felt that there was a dearth of research and literature relating to the competence and confidence of NQTs in supporting children with SEN in the classroom. Additionally, I felt that I needed further preparation and support in the area. This was also due to only having two weeks of SET in a specialised setting in the second academic year. The experience of working with a supervisor who was an expert in the area of inclusive education, who guided and helped me in the dissertation process was imperative and I gained so much knowledge and understanding of SEN through the dissertation process of my B.Ed degree.

After qualifying from the B.Ed programme, I found the process of becoming an NQT a difficult one. One reason for this was the unavailability of subbing for the remainder of the academic year due to the Covid 19 pandemic. There were no opportunities to experience different school settings and acquire additional experience as a special education teacher (SET), before the application process commenced. Despite researching the competence and confidence of NQTs in supporting children with SEN for my dissertation, I myself still felt unprepared in terms of fully supporting children in SEN settings. As a result, I decided not to apply for positions in special classes and schools and instead, applied for a mixture of mainstream and SET positions. I felt that I needed to gain experience in the mainstream/SET setting before I would feel ready to apply for a position in a special school or special class.

The interviews during Covid – 19, took place in person as the majority of restrictions had eased during this period (July /August 2020). Certainly, my understanding of SEN policy positively contributed to the interviews. I was fortunate to get opportunities to discuss my dissertation and the research I undertook. When I was offered a job, it wasn't the job I had initially interviewed for, I had been unsuccessful in the first instance, so I was continuing with applying for jobs locally and in Dublin. I was contacted two weeks after my interview from the principal of my now, base school to inform me that a new position of a Principal Release Post was created to alleviate pressure on teaching principals as a result of the current pandemic for the academic year, and that based on my interview they were offering me the position. It meant I would be working across five schools in different teaching positions ranging from SET, junior and senior infants, third and fourth class, fifth and sixth

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class. Initially I was apprehensive, as I had always imagined my NQT year would be within the one school with either my own class or a SET position. However, I realised it presented a wealth of experience and learning for an NQT and there was a huge support network to guide me throughout the year. It took a while to find my feet and gauge the ways each school ran.

As restrictions were eased and schools were going back fully at the beginning of the academic year, I was prepared for face to face teaching. Online teaching was mentioned during interviews and how I would prepare for it were school closures to occur again and although we had no official module in college on remote online teaching, I was able to familiarise myself with the learning platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, DoJo, and SeeSaw that were used by teaching staff during the period of remote learning.

I met several members of staff due to being based across five school settings. I was lucky that each principal had informed the staff at each of the schools of the position I would be undertaking for the academic year. My base school principal has provided tremendous leadership and guidance for me as an NQT. He introduced me to each of the other four school principals and assisted me in outlining the roles I would undertake, clarifying any questions I had for each role and asking ones I may not have thought of to ensure that we were all on the same page and working collaboratively. Each of the schools staff members have been extremely welcoming, and although I am the only NQT in each of the schools I feel like I can ask for advice and help from any of the staff which has been a great relief. My first day as an NQT differed in each setting. In two schools where I am in the position of SET, I spent the first day analysing previous support plans and assessments for the children I would be supporting throughout the year. I worked alongside the class teachers to set up timetables and I sought advice from the children's class teachers and previous SETs on what assessments I should administer for the beginning of the year. I was nervous about this and I questioned my own skills and knowledge, but I had great help from the teachers.

I am in multigrade classes in the mainstream settings. On my first day, I spent the day getting to know each of the children and establish relationships with the classes. I consulted with the SNAs in my class on how best to support the children with SEN as they had been working with them the year previous. The SNAs were the most valuable support I had in a lot of the cases, their wealth of knowledge and care made my job much easier. I made notes of the books that are used and the ICT available in each of the classrooms and collaborated with each of the principals on what subjects, topics and planning I would carry out on my set days each week. In my role as SET in two of the schools I didn't feel confident in supporting learners with SEN initially. I was fortunate to have had fantastic guidance from the principal, SETs and SNAs in my base school in terms of the planning and preparation that is involved in establishing SET support in the school for the year. The leadership and support shown was second to none and I have never hesitated in contacting them for assistance at any stage. Some of the areas addressed were, the children that will be supported, the time allocation for each child, groups, in-class support, withdrawals, assessments, parental involvement, areas of support and much more.

There are several factors that have so far shaped my experience as an NQT. The first one is the outstanding leadership that I have experienced from my base school principal and vice principal, this has also been reflected in the other schools and has made the rotating positions of SET and mainstream class teacher across different class groups straightforward. My own understanding of SEN policy has helped me in supporting children with SEN as a SET and as a mainstream class teacher. Additionally, each of the schools SEN policies have been made available to me, my base school in

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particular has advised me on the stages of the Continuum of Support in their own school which is consistently referred to when planning around each child's needs.

Collaboration has been an essential part of my role in Principal Release Post, I am in weekly contact with each principal for aspects such as weekly and fortnightly plans, topics, homework and also collaboration between myself as SET with children's class teachers. In two of my five school settings I am so fortunate to have the support of an SNA within the classroom. They have been crucial in what has been a positive experience as an NQT supporting the children with SEN in the classroom each week. On reflection of the research conducted as part of my dissertation, I grew to learn how beneficial CPD was in terms of developing my own competence and confidence as an NQT in supporting children with SEN and the necessary skills and strategies. I engaged with various SEN webinars with Middletown Centre for Autism and completed a DES approved CPD summer course ran through Marino Institute of Education - Inclusion and Special Education: A Practical Approach.

At the beginning of the academic year I wasn't working with parents due to the fact that I was only in each school one day a week. It wasn't until I began collaborating with principals and class teachers in my SET role to complete IEPs that I began working alongside parents.

Although I wrote about it in my dissertation, it was only through this practice that I realised how vital relationships with parents are. We learn so much from the parents, they are the experts when it comes to their children and it is imperative that they are part of the planning process. Likewise, planning has been pivotal in terms of navigating this role. Each of the schools conduct their planning in slightly different formats and templates however, the B.Ed programme more than prepared me for planning in every aspect. I would agree that as an NQT, the B.Ed programme could have placed further emphasis on planning and preparing IEPs and conducting regular planning in the role of a SET as this is something I am less confident and familiar with.

As an NQT I have had a range of feelings over the past six months. Initially, I was extremely anxious as this position covers both SET and mainstream. I have found SET the most challenging of the two positions, although it is fantastic to experience both SET and mainstream each week as an NQT and I think that ITE places a huge emphasis on SEN in mainstream classrooms and not as much on SET which is an imperative aspect of inclusive education. One of the challenges I feel I am facing as an NQT in terms of inclusive education, is working in the smaller, rural school setting. From communicating with fellow NQTs in urban schools they are often one of several NQTs and they work alongside each other to navigate the areas of inclusive education that may be unfamiliar or challenging for them. As mentioned, I am fortunate that the staff in my schools are approachable and supportive in guiding me through my inclusive education journey as an NQT. Initially, I wasn't going to complete Droichead, the mandatory probation period for teachers, this year as none of my schools were Droichead trained and I didn't think it would be possible to complete it across five school settings. However, one of the schools completed the training before Christmas and as a result I applied, and my application was accepted to start it which has been a great relief. From my own research of Droichead for my dissertation, it is evident how beneficial it is for NQTs in improving competence and confidence, your PST is there to support you, not criticize you and the elements of the process such as reflection and observation of other staff members teaching results in a very positive learning experience. Now, almost seven months into my role under a Principal Release Post, I believe that this particular post is ideal for NQTs and I am delighted that I have had the opportunity to experience it. If I am given the option next year having completed the Droichead process, I would ideally like to work in a mainstream teacher role in one school setting in an urban setting such as Dublin City to gain further insights into inclusive education in more challenging areas. Nonetheless,

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I do believe gaining more experience in the role of SET would benefit me greatly in supporting children with SEN in a mainstream class down the line.

As an NQT who has developed huge interest in the area of inclusive education and SEN over the duration of my B.Ed degree and indeed my dissertation process, I felt the need to continue my research and gain further insights around the area of SEN and the NQT. I have been so fortunate for my supervisor's guidance and assistance not only throughout writing this paper but also for my own dissertation in the area of SEN. It has been so insightful to continue learning from an expert in the area of inclusive education and SEN who also shares an interest in researching this topic. I feel like my experience as an NQT has reflected what I gathered in the research, although I believe it depends on the role you are working in as an NQT. There is no doubt that more could be done in ITE to prepare the NQT for inclusive education and supporting children with SEN. Although I possessed the skills and strategies from our inclusive education modules, school placement experience and even my dissertation research, I believe that the implementation of these skills and strategies and the alternative roles other than mainstream class teacher needs to be emphasised further in ITE. More school placement time could be placed on the SET role and the assessments, planning and preparation that is involved for catering each child's needs in SET. As opposed to feeling prepared for this role from the beginning, it is only now, six months in with fantastic guidance and support from my principal and vice principal that I am now comfortable and becoming more confident in the role. It must be noted however, that the Droichead process and CPD available for NQTs is superb in filling the gaps and assisting in developing competence and confidence in supporting children with SEN. There is always going to be elements that ITE can never prepare you for and indeed one must take the initiative to further educate themselves.

Discussion and Conclusion

In Higher Education in Ireland, ITE programmes are underpinned by policies such as the Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education (Teaching Council, 2011a); Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers, (Teaching Council, 2011b); and, Guidelines on School Placement (Teaching Council, 2013). This ensures that programmes are committed to the development of teachers as competent, reflective, life long learners and 'teaching is viewed as involving technical, professional, ethical and academic expertise enabling the qualified teacher to exercise discretion and judgement in the classroom and to adjust teaching to meet the varied needs of all learners' (Hick et al, 2018, p.18). However, this ideal is not always transferred into practice and as an NQT, I (Erica) have felt at times unprepared and overwhelmed as a SET and while supporting children with SEN in the mainstream classroom. This is mainly because of my own confidence or a feeling of a lack of preparation. While college offers theoretical perspectives and policy requirements, it takes longer than one year of lectures and a few weeks on placement to come to understand the complexities of special needs education. It would be ideal to have more input in SEN, SET and inclusive practice in ITE but I am forever grateful for the lectures and the dissertation process that really ignited my love for inclusion and ensured that I will implement best practice in my classroom at all times.

My (Miriam) own experience as a teacher in a special school lends itself to my now understanding of inclusive special education yet reflecting back on embarking on that journey I too recall the nervousness and lack of confidence as an NQT. I went into special education very early on in my teaching career and was fortunate to join a special school whose philosophy is always children first and needs second. This informs my current practice as a teacher educator and a philosophy I

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promote. Reflecting on the dissertation research and subsequent narrative, I can align my own experience to much of what is reported. In some ways this is concerning as it is over a decade ago since I was an NQT so reflecting on the Travers et al (2010) report, I ask how have these issues remained? The lack of confidence I experienced as an NQT still remains for some NQTs (Hick et al, 2018). I too felt confident in the theory and knowledge that I gained in my initial teacher education programme, but it was an uncertainty at practice level that impacted upon my own self-efficacy as an educator in SEN realms. With supportive school leadership, essential for inclusion (Murphy, 2019; Mac Ruairc, 2013), I undertook much teacher professional learning, availing of in-service, education centre courses, a post graduate diploma and a masters in special education to deepen my knowledge, add another layer of skills and strategies to support learners with additional needs. Ironically, although I learned so much and thought I was very skilled in the area of SEN, I am now questioning everything as I view it through a Foucauldian lens for my doctoral studies and have the joy in problematizing everything I know / knew. What I do know for certain is that we can only strive for effective inclusion and keep evolving, we can strive for equality and equity in our policy, preparation and practice at pre service and in-service levels, working towards a better inclusive education system for our learners of all abilities. This has begun more recently in Ireland with the development 'Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education' (Teaching Council, 2020).

This policy for Higher Education institutes (HEIs) and beyond 'sets out the requirements which all programmes of qualification for teaching in Ireland must meet in order to gain accreditation from the Teaching Council' (Teaching Council, 2020). HEIs providing rich, innovative, research based, holistic and quality ITE programmes and school placement experiences will also harness existing good practice in inclusive education for student teachers and pupils. The standards requests that by the end of their ITE programme student teachers will be able to 'collaborate with Special Education Teachers by referring students for specialised educational support as required and participating in the provision of that support, as appropriate' (Teaching Council, 2020, p.23). Driven by policy such as this, HEIs endeavour to support student teachers like Erica, who are steadfast in their belief of inclusive practice for all learners and feel duty bound to find and promote a sense of belonging for all children in our schools and classrooms.

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