

## Ready, willing and able? Attitudes and concerns in relation to inclusion amongst a cohort of Irish pre-service teachers

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Attitudes in relation to inclusive education have a direct impact on teaching behaviours, and are a significant factor in the success of inclusion policies. However, little is known about Irish pre-service teachers' attitudes and concerns in relation to inclusive education, nor about the factors that may influence these variables. In the current study, a cohort of second-level pre-service teachers completed the attitudes toward inclusive education scale, the concerns about inclusive education scale, the teacher efficacy scale and a school climate (SC) survey. Results showed that the student-teachers were generally positive about inclusion, and were only a little concerned about the implementation of inclusive practices in their classrooms. The participants were least positive about including students with behavioural difficulties. A more positive SC was associated with higher levels of personal efficacy, and lower levels of concern. Results are discussed in terms of the construal of behavioural difficulties within Ireland, the influence of the placement school and the implications for initial teacher education.

**Keywords:** attitudes and concerns; inclusion; efficacy; school climate; initial teacher education

The key principles of inclusion, encompassed in the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 1994) have been reinforced by international bodies, governments and advocacy groups across the globe (European Agency for the Development in Special Needs Education 2010). Despite there being a broad international impetus for inclusion, the success of inclusive policies relies heavily on the positive dispositions of individual classroom teachers, since it is the teacher, and not the policy-maker, who is at the forefront of implementing educational change (Avrimadis, Bayliss, and Burden 2000; Butler and Shevlin 2001). It is no surprise, therefore, that teacher attitudes and concerns in relation to inclusion are topics that have garnered increased attention in recent years.

It has been argued that the period of pre-service education represents an ideal time for altering negative attitudes and addressing any concerns that student-teachers may have in relation to inclusive education (Sharma et al. 2006). In recognition of the complexities associated with teaching an increasingly diverse student population, some have argued that entire aspects of initial teacher education

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(ITE) need to be reconfigured (Lambe and Bones 2006). As a starting point in this process, it was deemed important by the current authors to assess existing attitudes and concerns amongst student–teachers in relation to inclusive education. Thus, a primary purpose of the current study was to explore attitudes and concerns amongst Irish pre-service teachers, in order to inform the development of inclusive education components in our own ITE programme. A further purpose of the current study was to examine some of the key factors that impact upon pre-service teachers' attitudes and concerns, as highlighted in previous research (e.g. Avramadis and Norwich 2002; Soodak, Podell, and Lehman 1998). In the current study, we explored the impact of three types of variables on attitudes and concerns: demographic variables; student–teachers' efficacy judgements; and student–teachers' perception of the climate that pervades in their placement schools.

### ***The Irish context***

Within Ireland, government policy suggests a growing commitment towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN; Government of Ireland 2004) mandated the creation of inclusive learning environments and enshrined in law, the right of all students to attend mainstream schools. A five-year phased implementation of the provisions of the EPSEN Act (2004) was envisaged. At the current time, there are aspects of the act, such as the introduction of individual education plans, which have not been fully enacted. Existing research from within Ireland suggests that practising teachers, principals and support staff are generally positive about inclusion, but concerns are often expressed in relation to responding to challenging behaviours, as well as the challenges associated with inadequate time, training and professional support (Butler and Shevlin 2001; Shevlin et al. 2009; Travers et al. 2010). Other barriers to inclusive education include the sheer pace of social and educational change in Ireland (Drudy and Kinsella 2009), the model of resource allocation (Stevens and O'Moore 2009) as well as an overemphasis on academic results, which manifests in a pressure on schools to assist pupils in the race for points necessary for entry onto third-level courses (Travers et al. 2010).

There are no published studies on *pre-service* teachers' attitudes to inclusion in Ireland (see Travers, Butler, and O'Donnell 2011, for an inventory of relevant research). Within Northern Ireland, Lambe and Bones (2006, 2007) found that student–teachers showed positive attitudes towards the principles and practices of inclusion, but that many demonstrated a strong attachment to traditional academic selection as a preferred education model. These findings are, of course, specific to the Northern Ireland educational context. The current study, therefore, addresses a gap in our understanding of pre-service teachers within the Republic of Ireland.

### ***School climate***

Previous research has highlighted the importance of the school placement in terms of its impact on student–teachers' attitudes and behaviour. For instance, Huang and Waxman (2009) found that autonomy, freedom, and collegiality at the placement school were associated with student–teachers' satisfaction and career commitment. School environment factors also impact upon attitudes towards inclusion. Weisel

and Dror (2006) found a strong correlation between school climate (SC) and practising teachers' attitudes. In particular, supportive leadership, autonomy and cooperation were noted as having a more pronounced association with positive attitudes. Similarly, using a SC survey, Soodak et al. (1998) found that amongst practising teachers, opportunities to collaborate were associated with more favourable responses to inclusion. Less is known about the impact of *pre-service* teachers' perceived SC on their attitudes and concerns. In the current study, we explored this issue using an adapted version of the Soodak, Podell, and Lehman (1998) SC survey.

### ***Teacher efficacy***

A further focus of the current study was to examine student–teachers' sense of efficacy, since it too has been found to predict attitudes towards inclusion (e.g. Soodak, Podell, and Lehman 1998; Weisel and Dror 2006). The concept of self-efficacy was first described by Bandura (1977), and refers to people's beliefs about their own capability to complete required tasks and achieve goals. A teacher's sense of efficacy has been shown to be a powerful mediating factor in predicting classroom performance and children's learning (Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy 2001). Relative to those with lower levels of efficacy, teachers with a strong sense of efficacy tend to exhibit greater levels of planning and organisation (Allinder 1994), to persist in the face of challenges (Gibson and Dembo 1984), to take more risks with the curriculum (Guskey 1988), to use new teaching approaches (Gibson and Dembo 1984) and to have greater job satisfaction (Morgan and O'Leary 2004).

There has been limited research in Ireland focusing on the construct of teacher efficacy (TE). Interestingly, however, the teaching and learning international survey (TALIS) of the organisation for economic cooperation and development (OECD 2009) found that levels of TE were stronger in Ireland than, on average, across 24 comparison countries. Only one other country – Norway – had teachers reporting stronger efficacy. It will be instructive, therefore, to examine current levels of efficacy amongst student–teachers in Ireland, as well as to explore the nature of the relationship between efficacy and attitudes and concerns in relation to inclusive education.

## **Method**

### ***Participants and setting***

Participants were 110 pre-service, second-level teachers who were undertaking a one-year professional diploma in education (PDE). Sixty-nine participants were females and 38 were males (3 participants did not list their gender). The majority (76%) were aged between 20 and 30 years. All participants were undertaking teaching practice as part of the PDE programme and taught in mainstream classrooms two days per week. Only 9% of participants indicated that they did not have any students with SEN in their classes.

Participants undertook a module in SEN as part of the PDE programme. This module was delivered in Semester 1 and consisted of a one-hour session per week over a 10-week period. Eighty-three per cent of participants reported that they had

attended seven or more of the sessions. The module began in the first week of the PDE programme so that, from the outset, students were encouraged to think about their school and classroom contexts and how these can be adapted to facilitate the inclusion of *all* students. It adopted a broad thematic focus covering both conceptual and practical issues. These included: legislation, policy and provision in relation to SEN; conceptual models of disability; categories of SEN; strategies for addressing behavioural difficulties and literacy and numeracy difficulties; differentiation; and working collaboratively. It also incorporated a range of school-based tasks. Although presented as a discrete unit, key themes raised in the module were revisited and expanded upon elsewhere in the PDE programme to facilitate infusion throughout the programme as a whole.

### **Materials**

Materials consisted of a questionnaire booklet which was comprised of five distinct parts. Part I was designed to gather selected demographic information including participant's age, gender, prior teaching experience, prior SEN experience and whether or not they had a family member or close friend with a special need.

Part II contained a SC survey, which was adapted from that employed by Soodak and colleagues (1998). As part of this survey, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement to five statements on a four-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (4). The statements were as follows: (1) the staff at my school are highly supportive of me; (2) I receive constructive feedback from school personnel on my teaching; (3) my school sets high standards for the academic performance of students; (4) I have many opportunities to collaborate with other teachers; and (5) The staff at my school generally work well together. Total scores ranged from 5 to 20 with lower scores indicative of a more supportive SC.

Part II also asked participants to indicate what type of school they were attending for their teaching practice (i.e. whether a vocational, community or voluntary school etc.) and whether or not their school was located within an area of socio-economic disadvantage (i.e. a DEIS school; Department of Education and Science 2005). However, preliminary analysis revealed no statistically significant results for these variables and they are therefore omitted from further discussion in this paper.

Part III of the survey consisted of an adapted version of the attitudes toward inclusive education scale (ATIES) developed by Wilczenski (1992). This 16-item scale is designed to elicit participant's attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream classes. The ATIES has been tested for validity and reliability and an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86 has been reported (Wilczenski 1995). In the current study, a five-point Likert scale was used in which, 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *disagree somewhat*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*. Total scores could range from 16 to 80, with higher scores indicating more favourable attitudes towards inclusive education.

Part IV consisted of the concerns about inclusive education scale (CIES), developed by Sharma and Desai (2002). The CIES contains 21 items and was designed to establish teachers' concerns regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. It consists of 21 statements to which participants respond on a Likert scale with responses varying from *extremely*

*concerned* (4) to *not concerned at all* (1). Total scores on the CIES can range from 21 to 84, with lower scores indicating lower levels of concern. An internal reliability coefficient of 0.91 has been reported (Sharma and Desai 2002).

The fifth and final part of the survey consisted of a TE Scale (Woolfolk and Hoy 1990), which is based on a previous scale developed by Gibson and Dembo (1984). This scale consists of 22 statements that relate to a teacher's beliefs about his/her ability to bring about positive educational outcomes for students. Participants respond to the statements by circling a number from 1 to 6 where 1 indicates *strongly agree* and 6 indicates *strongly disagree*. The scale measures two independent dimensions of efficacy: *teaching efficacy and personal efficacy* (PE) (Gibson and Dembo 1984; Soodak, Podell, and Lehman 1998; Woolfolk and Hoy 1990). Teaching efficacy refers to a general belief about the power of teaching to reach students, including those who might be 'difficult' or unmotivated. PE relates to teacher's own feeling of confidence with regard to their teaching abilities. Scores can range from 12 to 72 on the PE scale and from 10 to 60 on the TE scale. For both dimensions, a higher score indicates greater efficacy. Woolfolk and Hoy (1990) report reliability coefficients of 0.74 for the teaching efficacy scale and 0.82 for the PE scale.

### **Procedure**

The paper and pencil survey booklet was administered to participants in the final 20 min of a lecture, midway through the PDE programme (and after the completion of the Special Needs module). Participants were informed that the questionnaires related to their experiences, attitudes and concerns in relation to the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools. They were informed that the data were for research purposes and that their participation was entirely voluntary. A total of 143 students were completing the PDE and of these, 110 completed the questionnaires. They were asked not to record their names on the questionnaires and to respond honestly to all statements. The questionnaires took approximately 15 min to complete.

### **Results**

Descriptive Statistics relating to participant demographics are presented in Table 1. Total mean scores for each of the study measures were calculated by summing the Likert scale responses for each participant. On the ATIES, scores ranged from 42 to 79 (mean = 57.25, SD = 7.7). The most frequently selected response for individual items on the scale was option 4: *agree* (mean = 3.6; median = 4; SD = 1.01). This indicates that participants in this study held generally positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special needs.

The mean responses to individual items on the ATIES are presented in Table 2 in ascending order, with higher mean values indicating more favourable attitudes toward inclusion. Items 2, 12, 8 and 15 relate to students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. These items are all clustered at the top of the Table, indicating that participants were less positive about including these students in mainstream classrooms. In contrast, items 9, 6 and 4, which appear at the bottom of the Table, relate to students with speech and language difficulties. The high mean values for these items indicate that participants were strongly in favour of including

Table 1. Demographic variables pertaining to participants.

Demographic factors	Respondent subgroups	Total	Percentage
Gender	Male	38	34.5
	Female	69	62.7
	No response	3	2.7
Age	20–30	84	76.4
	31+	26	23.6
Family member/close friend with disability	Yes	33	30
	No	76	69.1
	No response	1	0.9
Previous teaching experience	Yes	54	49.1
	No	56	50.9
Previous SEN teaching experience	Yes	35	31.8
	No	75	68.2

$N=110$ .

Table 2. Mean scores for individual items on ATIES. Scores are presented in ascending order with higher scores indicating more favourable attitudes.

Item	Statement	$N$	Mean	SD
2	Students who are physically aggressive towards their peers	109	2.75	0.87
12	Students who cannot control their behaviour and disrupt activities	110	2.97	0.92
8	Students who are verbally aggressive towards their peers	110	2.97	0.86
1	Students whose academic achievement is 2 or more years below peers	108	3.14	0.89
15	Students who do not follow school rules for conduct	110	3.18	1.09
14	Students who cannot hear conversational speech	109	3.23	0.97
13	Students who need an individualised academic programme	109	3.52	0.92
7	Students who cannot read standard print and need to use Braille	109	3.53	1.07
11	Students who use sign language or communication boards	110	3.58	0.95
16	Students who are frequently absent from schools	109	3.79	0.96
10	Students who need training in self-help skills	109	3.9	0.86
3	Students who cannot move without help from others	110	4.09	0.81
5	Students whose academic achievement is one year below peers	110	4.1	0.77
9	Students who have difficulty expressing their thoughts verbally	108	4.15	0.72
6	Students whose speech is difficult to understand	110	4.17	0.69
4	Students who are shy and withdrawn	110	4.48	0.59

these students in mainstream classes. The hierarchy of scores also suggest that participants were more positive about including students with physical disabilities (item 3) than they were about including those with sensory difficulties, such as hearing and visual impairments (items 14, 7 and 11), or those with significant learning difficulties (items 1 and 13). This pattern of responses is similar to those reported by Subban and Sharma (2006).

Total mean scores on the CIES ranged from 25 to 63 (mean=43.28, SD=8.3). The most frequently selected response for individual items on the scale was option 2: *a little concerned* (mean=2.06; median=2; SD=0.9). The mean responses to individual items are illustrated in Table 3 in descending order, with higher mean values indicating higher levels of concern. Items 7, 8, 12, 13, 14 and 20 relate to concerns about resources (see Sharma and Desai 2002 for factor analytic

Table 3. Mean scores for individual items on CIES. Scores are presented in descending order with higher scores indicating higher levels of concern.

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD
8	Inadequate para-professional staff available	109	2.72	0.89
14	Inadequate special education instructional materials	110	2.66	0.94
18	Difficulty giving equal attention to all students	109	2.65	0.85
13	Inadequate resources/special teaching staff available	110	2.56	0.89
19	Coping with students who have inadequate self-care skills	110	2.51	0.82
1	Insufficient time to plan educational programmes	110	2.5	0.66
3	Inadequate knowledge and skills	110	2.35	0.80
20	Inadequate administrative support	110	2.33	0.89
7	Insufficient funds for implementing inclusion	110	2.3	0.95
2	Difficulty maintaining discipline in class	110	2.15	0.78
12	Inappropriate infrastructure	110	2.02	0.94
21	Personal anxiety and stress	110	1.86	0.71
5	Acceptance of students with disabilities by peers	110	1.8	0.66
17	Academic achievement of students without disabilities	109	1.79	0.76
10	Increase in workload	110	1.75	0.80
11	Stress amongst staff members	109	1.66	0.77
6	Parents concerns	110	1.64	0.71
16	Personal performance as a classroom teacher	110	1.64	0.71
4	Additional paper work	110	1.61	0.78
9	Insufficient incentives (e.g. remuneration)	110	1.46	0.80
15	Decline in overall academic standard of the school	109	1.45	0.60

groupings). These items are all positioned in the upper half of the table with mean values  $> 2$  indicating that a lack of resources and supports was a particular concern for participants. Items 4, 9, 10 and 11 relate to workloads and incentives. These items appear at the bottom half of the Table indicating that participants were unconcerned about the possibility of inclusive education bringing about an increase in their workloads.

### ***Impact of demographic variables on attitudes and concerns***

Five separate one-way between-groups MANOVAs were performed to investigate the effect of the demographic variables (gender, age, prior teaching experience, prior SEN experience and family member/close friend with SEN) on the ATIES and CIES measures. Preliminary analyses were conducted to check for normality, linearity, homogeneity and multicollinearity. No serious violations were noted. An analysis of the groups in terms of whether or not participants had a family member or close friend with special needs revealed a significant multivariate effect, ( $F[2, 106] = 3.26, p = 0.042$ ; Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.94$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ ). A univariate test, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of 0.025, revealed a significant difference on the ATIES ( $F[1, 368] = 6.4, p = 0.013, \eta^2 = 0.06$ ), indicating that participants who had family member or close friend with special needs ( $M = 60, SE = 1.3$ ) held more favourable attitudes toward inclusion than those without ( $M = 56, SE = 0.87$ ). There were no significant differences between the groups in terms of their concerns about inclusion.

An analysis of groups in terms of prior SEN experience indicated a significant multivariate effect ( $F[2, 107] = 4.78, p = 0.010$ ; Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.92$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.08$ ). A univariate test revealed a significant difference on the ATIES ( $F[1, 520] = 9.4,$

$p=0.003$ ,  $\eta^2=0.08$ ) indicating that participants with prior SEN experience ( $M=60.42$ ,  $SE=1.2$ ) held more favourable attitudes towards inclusion than those without SEN experience ( $M=55.76$ ,  $SE=1.3$ ). In addition, those with prior SEN experience had less concerns about inclusion ( $M=41.71$ ,  $SE=1.4$ ) than those without ( $M=44.01$ ,  $SE=0.96$ ) but this difference was not statistically significant. The MANOVAs for prior teaching experience, gender and age, were non-significant. Thus, the only demographic variables that produced significant effects were those that related to experience and contact with individuals who have special needs.

### **Correlations between study measures**

A series of correlational analyses were conducted to explore the relationships between the ATIES, the CIES, SC, Teaching Efficacy and PE. Preliminary analysis indicated no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity or homoscedasticity. The results are presented in Table 4. As illustrated, the ATIES produced a significant negative correlation with the CIES ( $p=0.002$ ) indicating that negative attitudes toward inclusion are associated with greater concerns. A significant positive correlation was recorded between Teaching Efficacy and the ATIES ( $p<0.001$ ), highlighting that participants who had a strong belief in the influence of teachers, tended to have more positive attitudes towards inclusion. Participants with a high sense of teaching efficacy also had fewer concerns about inclusion, although this correlation was somewhat weaker ( $p=0.048$ ).

PE produced significant negative correlations with the CIES ( $p=0.007$ ) and with SC ( $p<0.001$ ), indicating that a stronger sense of PE was associated with fewer concerns about inclusion, and a more positive SC. A positive SC was also associated with lower levels of concern ( $p=0.03$ ).

### **Discussion**

The results showed that the current cohort of student-teachers held generally positive attitudes toward inclusion. Least positive attitudes were expressed in relation to pupils with behavioural difficulties. The student-teachers generally reported being 'a little concerned' about the implementation of inclusion in their classrooms, with relatively higher levels of concern expressed in relation to having inadequate resources to support inclusive practice, and lower levels of concern about the possibility of inclusive education increasing workloads. Consistent with previous research (e.g. LeRoy and Simpson 1996), those who had prior experience

Table 4. Correlations and descriptive statistics for study measures.

Measures	ATIES	CIES	TE	PE	SC	Mean	SD	Range
ATIES	–	–	–	–	–	57.25	7.7	42–79
CIES	0.29**	–	–	–	–	43.28	8.36	25–63
TE	0.35**	–.19*	–	–	–	32.83	7.6	14–54
PE	–0.04	–0.26**	–0.04	–	–	50.18	7.04	32–72
SC	–0.10	.21*	–.080	–0.37**	–	9.02	2.21	5–15

\* $p<0.05$ . \*\* $p<0.01$ .



teaching students with special needs and those who had a family member or close friend with special needs, were found to have more positive attitudes towards inclusion.

### ***Attitudes toward pupils with behavioural difficulties***

The finding that the current cohort of student–teachers were least positive about including children with behavioural difficulties is consistent with previous research. Indeed, this finding has been replicated in Ireland and internationally across qualitative (Shevlin et al. 2009) and quantitative (Forlin, Au, and Chong 2008; Subban and Sharma 2006) studies. Although not specific to the Irish educational landscape, it might be useful to consider this finding in the context of additional research relating to the construal of behavioural difficulties in Ireland. Understanding how behavioural difficulties are identified and construed may be critical in terms of working towards the shaping of more positive attitudes and more effective responses to children with behaviours that challenge.

Of particular relevance is the observation that teachers appear to disproportionately identify behavioural difficulties in students of lower socioeconomic class. McCoy, Banks, and Shevlin (2012) revealed that primary school children attending highly disadvantaged schools were far more likely to be identified with behavioural difficulties than children with similar characteristics attending other schools (see also Banks, Shevlin, and McCoy 2012). These findings highlight important variations across school contexts in the perception of what constitutes inappropriate behaviour. They are also reflective of similar patterns of over-identification internationally (e.g. Skiba et al. 2008), and they raise concerns about the lowering of expectations (Lupton 2004; Rosenthal and Jacobson 2000) and the creation of rigid, controlling school environments, which may serve to perpetuate rather than ameliorate behavioural difficulties (Sulzer-Azaroff and Mayer 1994).

Variations in the perception of what constitutes inappropriate behaviour are only part of the problem. Much also depends on teacher's attributions for the cause of the perceived difficulties. For instance, teachers who perceive that a student is intentionally misbehaving are more likely to adopt punitive strategies than positive interventions (Poulou and Norwich 2000). Furthermore, research suggests that there is a tendency to attribute misbehaviour to within-child variables or factors associated with parental influence and home environment, rather than factors related to the school or classroom environment (Brophy and Rohrkemper 1981; Christenson et al. 1983; Mavropoulou and Padelidiu 2002; Miller 1995).

With reference to the Irish context, Gibbs and Gardiner (2008) studied the perceptions of the causes of student misbehaviour amongst primary and secondary teachers in England and the Republic of Ireland. Although national comparisons should be treated with caution (due to methodological issues), there were indications that English primary teachers rated their own classroom management strategies, along with adult behaviours more generally, as more important determinants of behaviour than did their Irish counterparts. Thus, it appeared that Irish teachers were less likely to focus on factors within the classroom context when considering the cause of behaviour problems. These data suggest a need for further research within Ireland to investigate how behavioural difficulties are identified and construed, including how such construals are influenced by different school

contexts, and how they impact upon teachers' attitudes and responses to students. An understanding of these issues may be critical for the development of effective school-based interventions for promoting and sustaining positive learning environments.

### *The impact of SC and TE*

Previous research has demonstrated positive correlations between SC and attitudes toward inclusion (e.g. Weisel and Dror 2006). In the current study, no such correlations were found. Thus, the current cohort of student teachers held generally favourable attitudes towards inclusion regardless of the perceived climate that pervaded their school placements. However, a more negative SC was associated with increased concerns about the implementation of inclusive practices in the classroom. In addition, those who perceived their school placement more negatively demonstrated lower levels of PE. While these findings cannot be taken to imply a causal relationship, they do highlight that the climate that pervades the school placement *matters*, and that student–teachers' beliefs can be context-dependent.

In the current study, significant correlations were found between teaching efficacy and attitudes about inclusion, and between PE and concerns about inclusion. Thus, those who believed in the power of teaching to overcome educational barriers held more positive attitudes towards inclusion, while those who had a strong sense of their own ability as teachers demonstrated fewer concerns about the implementation of inclusion in their classrooms. These findings may be considered relatively intuitive and indeed they are generally consistent with previous research in the area (e.g. Soodak, Podell, and Lehman 1998).

Levels of efficacy, particularly PE might be considered relatively high amongst the current cohort of student–teachers (scores on PE were at the higher end of the scale ranging from 32 to 72, out of a possible range of 12–72). This observation dovetails with the finding of the TALIS report (OECD 2009), mentioned in the Introduction, which showed Irish teachers reporting higher than average levels of efficacy. One possible reason for high levels of efficacy amongst Irish educators is that within Ireland, teaching is considered a high-status profession. Consequently, the caliber of applicants to ITE courses is impressive, especially in terms of their levels of academic attainment (Clarke, Lodge, and Shevlin 2012). Perhaps these high achievers quickly experience success in the classroom and develop a sense of confidence in their capabilities as teachers. This possibility would be consistent with Bandura's (1997) framework, which suggests that mastery experiences have the most powerful influence on efficacy beliefs. Future research might examine the development of efficacy judgements amongst Irish educators and how these judgements may be underpinned by teachers' own abilities and competencies on entering the profession, as well as by aspects of the school and professional development contexts that they experience during their professional training and subsequent career.

### *Implications for teacher education*

As highlighted in the Introduction, one of the primary objectives of the current study was to explore the attitudes and concerns of pre-service teachers as a starting point for the enhancement of aspects of our own ITE programme. This focus is

timely, especially considering a decision by the Irish Minister for Education to extend the length of all ITE programmes (Department of Education and Skills 2010). As part of this decision, the PDE will shift from a one-year to a two-year full-time programme, from 2014, thus presenting a unique opportunity for restructuring the programme. Other studies have focused more extensively on the role of ITE in preparing teachers for inclusive education (see EADSNE 2010; Forlin 2012 for reviews). Although local and small-scale in nature, the current study offers some suggestions to build on previous work.

The current findings suggest a need to focus on how student–teachers are prepared for the complexity of behavioural issues that they encounter in schools. Indeed, previous research from within Ireland highlighted that issues of behavioural difficulties are a major concern for student–teachers (Clarke, Lodge, and Shevlin 2012) and are a key priority in terms of the support requirements for newly qualified teachers (Killeavy and Moloney 2009). In a recent international review of best practice for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, Cooper and Jacobs (2011) called for minimum standards of competence for all teachers, to include basic knowledge of behavioural and cognitive behavioural principles and their application in the promotion of positive behaviour, social and emotional competence, and well-being. Although there has been criticism of competency-oriented approaches (e.g. Edwards, Gilroy, and Hartley 2002), many would argue that certain key skills are required in order for teachers to become effective in the classroom (Stronge, Ward, and Grant 2011). It may be important to emphasise, however, that the teaching of knowledge and skills in ITE must be grounded in the realities of classroom settings. Methods which promote the integration of knowledge and practice, such as rich case vignettes and video analysis, may be useful in this regard (Emmer and Stough 2001; Shuell 1996).

The foregoing underscores the importance of a dual approach in ITE targeting both positive attitudes, and improved knowledge and skills. While there is strong support for the argument that ITE programmes must be concerned with the promotion of positive attitudes (Andrews 2002; Clarke, Lodge, and Shevlin 2012; Reinke and Moseley 2002), emphasising the skill-sets required for teaching students with SEN has invoked debate, especially in cases where specialised skills are advocated for certain groups. The concern is that when specialised knowledge is deemed essential, the education of particular groups can be assumed to be the responsibility of only those who have undertaken the relevant specialist courses, a situation which can serve to reinforce notions of separation and difference, and undermine the values of inclusion (see Florian and Rouse 2009, for further discussion of the issues). However, while working to promote inclusive values and practices, it is also important to consider the effectiveness of teaching practices for those with SEN. There has been considerable discussion surrounding the necessity for specialist pedagogies in ensuring the effective education of various groups with SEN (e.g. Lewis and Norwich 2005). Such discussions and the accompanying research must continue. Within the context of ITE, however, it is important to note the value of ensuring that teachers are equipped with pedagogies and principles, which are strongly grounded in evidence-based research and which have universal applicability (such as cognitive behavioural principles mentioned above). Such practices have the potential to benefit all children but are likely to be particularly beneficial for students at risk of educational failure and exclusion (e.g. Cooper and Jacobs 2011).

As highlighted earlier, the current results showed that a negative SC predicted lower self-efficacy judgements and increased concerns about the implementation of inclusive practices. These findings suggest a need to focus on the quality of experiences and supports that student–teachers receive in their placement schools. Research in the area of TE suggests the need for gradual increases in student–teacher responsibilities rather than the ‘sink-or-swim’ experiences that many student–teachers are familiar with (Woolfolk Hoy 2000). The importance of the school placement is also underscored by the finding that the main sources of guidance for pre-service teachers are other teachers in schools, not university lecturers (Clarke, Lodge, and Shevlin 2012). Although there is broad consensus within Ireland surrounding the need to develop collaborative partnerships with schools (e.g. Conway et al. 2009; The Teaching Council 2011), it remains to be seen how such partnerships might be effectively developed and sustained as we move forward.

Overall, the current study provides a unique insight into Irish student–teachers attitudes and concerns in relation to inclusion, as well as their perceptions of their SC and their efficacy judgements. Considered in the context of previous research, the current study suggests a need for further understanding of the construal of behavioural difficulties and further reflection on the way in which student–teachers are prepared for the complexities of behavioural issues that they are likely to encounter in their teaching career. The current findings also highlight the importance of student–teachers’ school experiences and they support the need for more collaborative partnerships between ITE providers and placement schools.

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