“Their behaviour is a lot more extreme but I quite like the challenge”

The experiences of a special education teacher

2018

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Cardiff Metropolitan University for the degree of Bachelor of Science
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own independent investigation under the supervision of my tutor. The various sources to which I am indebted are clearly indicated. This dissertation has not been accepted in substance for any other degree and is not being submitted concurrently for any other degree.
Acknowledgements-

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, for her unwavering support and guidance throughout this project. Without her motivation and knowledge this project would not have been possible.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my mum for her continuous support, inspiration and love, I would not be where I am today without her and I will always be forever grateful to her for all her help and guidance she gives me. I would also like to thank my Dad, Brother and the rest of my amazing family for their constant encouragement and love through everything. To my boyfriend for his help through everything and support in all that I do.

I would like to thank all my friends and my study partner for making this that bit more enjoyable.

Finally, I would like to thank all my teachers who took part in this study and the head teacher of the school for without them this would not have been possible and for being so helpful and welcoming.
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The experiences of a special education teacher
Abstract -

Special education is renowned for being one of the most difficult yet rewarding sectors to work in education, nevertheless teachers experience in this field remains marginalised in current literature. Teachers have a large impact on child development, with this suggested to be of even larger importance for children with special educational needs (SEN). Teacher pupil relationships have important implications on the behaviour of SEN children and their development. The children’s behaviour is often unpredictable and can cause emotional exhaustion for teachers, despite this the experience of special education teachers is frequently being overlooked by empirical research. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to investigate the experiences of teaching children with SEN, this looked at teachers who worked in an SEN school. The present study focuses on factors which include looking at the relationships and how they are built, the support they had from their workplace and the rewards and challenges they face. In doing so five special education teachers between the ages of 25-60 took part in semi structured interviews. A thematic analysis of the interviews revealed five core themes; social/emotional support to pupil, teacher pupil relationship is vital, violence, interests and supported in the workplace. Some of the current finding became incongruent with the current literature beliefs, such as that special education teachers do not feel supported by their workplace. However, some supported the finding of current research such as the importance of a good relationship. Directions for future research are also discussed.
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Introduction-

The Department for Education (2017) estimates that 14% of children living in the UK have special educational needs (SEN). For the purpose of this study SEN refers to a child’s difficulties learning when compared to children of a similar age, these can be from barriers such as psychological, social factors, behavioural problems or a combination (Garner 2009). Examples of these are autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), Asperger syndrome, cerebral palsy and conduct disorder. It is estimated that 2.8% of children with SEN have received a statement of SEN or education and health care plan (EHC) (DFE 2017). These are documents given to children diagnosed with psychiatric disorders which results in a child having SEN. Statements and EHC’s outline their diagnosis/s and needs alongside any additional help they require (DFE 2017). A statement of EHC is required when the needs of a child are too great to be met by mainstream school resources. This also grants acceptance into SEN schools however, it is suggested only 43% of children receiving a statement or EHC attend a SEN school (DFE 2017).

Special education teachers have a reputation for being in one of the most difficult areas of education, whilst also being deemed as very rewarding. Their training entails attending further education, acquiring a degree and PGCE or going on a qualified teacher status (QTS) course. All training is on the job provided by the workplace which often include specialist courses provided on inset days (GOV 2015). Psychological research has not devoted large amounts of attention to school teachers in regard to SEN. However in broader fields Little (1984) argues that in order to increase the capability of a child there needs to be an understanding of their teachers to improve conditions they work in. With a large literature search conducted, MacBeath, Galton, Steward & Page (2006) is one of the only to discuss the emotional nature of teaching SEN children describing it as taking place in the heart with both cerebral and emotional activity. Concern over SEN in children has been heightened by The Every Child Matter Programme (2003). Alongside this came Every Disabled Child Matters Campaign (2011) helping secure extra funding for SEN children. These campaigns have conducted the biggest change in SEN legislation to date (Gov 2018).

Along with these campaigns it is argued that greater government attention and funding has been given to SEN. DFE (2017) reports suggest that an increase of £23 million of government funding was given to local councils SEN provisions last year. In addition a further £215 million designated for improvement of facilities and resources of SEN pupils (DFE 2017). In support of this notion the BBC (2017) reported an increased £90 million of government funding given to the SEN sector. Despite this, controversy surround the government funding given to SEN, with dispute over current shortages. The Guardian (2017) reported that there are more than 4000 children with a statement of SEN or EHC that are not receiving the extra support and resources that are outlined in their plans. This is due to current financial shortages in SEN, which has significantly increased in recent years. On the account of financial shortages mainstream school are becoming reluctant to take SEN pupil into their classes, which in turn is putting a strain on SEN schools (The Independent 2018). Pupils attending SEN school have increased significantly in recent years, however there is a remarkable difference in cost to fund a SEN school place. The average cost of educating a child at a mainstream primary school is £3,888, where as a special school place costs around
£10,000 (Guardian 2017). Due to the increase in pupil attendance, financial strain has now been imposed on SEN schools. Despite this there has been no evidence of extra government funding given to them. This has resulted in a significant increase in class sizes not appropriate for SEN pupils, as the support of the teacher cannot be sufficiently spread throughout a large class, with teaching assistants also being cut (The Guardian 2018).

The current strain on SEN teachers contributed by the current funding crisis and the unpredictable environment calls for thorough investigation into teachers in this field. A literature search found investigations into special education teacher’s professional development (Hardy 2012) but limited on the personal impact this vocation has on the teachers. Special education teachers experience more extreme behaviour, they gain exposure to aggression and hostility whilst having more active, distractible pupils in their classrooms (Pepe & Addimando 2013). The current literature highlights how special education has been particularly vulnerable to losing its teaching staff (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns 2013). Whilst evidence shows special education teachers experience high level of stress (Kokkinos & Davazoglou 2009; Stempfen & Loeb 2002), indication in to what causes this has also been investigated. One of the most frequently documented reasons for the attrition of special education teachers is the lack of support felt in the workplace (Prather-Jones 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2007). Lack of support in the workplace is defined as those at the top of the school hierarchy having different priorities and being unable to attend to teacher’s needs (Bays & Crockett 2007). In addition, studies suggest that those with more than five years’ experience of special education teaching perceive their workplace as supportive compared with those who have worked less than five years in the sector who do not feel they have enough support (Otto & Arnold 2005). Furthermore Langher, Caputo & Ricci (2017) found special educational teachers feelings of support negatively correlated with the risk of emotional exhaustion. They also suggest that a lack colleague support is one of the main causes of stress for special education teachers. Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns (2013) suggests adding in support interventions in SEN schools could reduce the stress felt whilst tackling factors such as job design and leadership roles.

The impact teachers have on pupils is clear in the current literature context. Whilst many studies have documented the teacher’s effect on pupil achievement (Gershenson, Holt & Papageorge 2016; Muijs & Reynolds 2002), more indicative findings focus on what effects the pupils, such as the relationships built between themselves and their teachers. Research indicates that positive features in a teacher pupil relationship such as trust and a perception of care is of particular importance for an understanding of pupil function and engagement (Klem & Connell 2004). Whereas, negative features such as conflict and disagreement suggest a correlation with problem behaviour (Murray & Murray 2004). This concept is in support of various psychological theories such as motivational theories (Wentzel, 1998) and social support theory (Malecki & Demaray, 2003) which both emphasise the importance of adult child relationships on performance, confidence and security. Moreover, these relationships can be beneficial for all types of children by giving them the right social supports to thrive in school (Krane, Ness, Holter-Sorensen, Karlsson & Binder 2016). However ongoing research suggests SEN pupils require more strength and attention in their relationships with their teachers (Lind, Poppen & Murray 2017). Willis (2009) expands on this notion suggesting that due to many children with SEN having volatile relationships with family and peers an emphasis should be put on a healthy relationship with their teacher.
Lopez & Corcoran (2014) study was one of the only found which focuses on the teacher’s perspective of their relationships with SEN pupils. Their study used thematic analysis to gain several themes. One of the main themes suggested an importance of a teacher pupil relationship with regards to SEN pupils. Their participants used the term ‘loco parentis’ which describes a teacher as a temporary guardian of the children whilst they are at school (Power-deFur& Orelove 1998). Their study also emphasising the importance of individuality when building relationships. Students relationships with others was also a key theme suggesting teachers importance of monitoring pupil’s relationships with their families and peers, whilst also creating an environment to give SEN children the ability to interact positively with each other. This study is of great importance to the future of SEN literature, although it uses focus groups to obtain participant responses, this questions the detail of the responses they were able to obtain which could also overlook the individuality of the teacher’s experience.

Whilst the relationships with pupils is of significance, the process in building these is also of importance to a teacher’s experience. When building relationships with pupil’s Baker (2006) found that SEN pupils often displayed aggressive and hostile characteristic making it difficult for a teacher to initially obtain any conversation to start building a relationship. In addition, Yoon (2002) suggest it could be the teacher who makes building a relationship difficult as they may get frustrated when a pupil takes longer to learn material. Gaining a strong relationship with a pupil can in turn offer security to a child. Little & Kobak (2010) compared both SEN children and non-SEN children reactions to negative and positive teacher and peer interactions. Negative peer and teacher’s interaction were twice as frequent in SEN children, they also had half the amount of positive peer interaction to the comparison group. Additionally their analysis showed that they were more reactive to negative interaction with their teachers, their sensitivity led to the conclusion of a higher emotional dependability on their teachers. Little & Kobak (2010) also suggest that SEN children rely on teachers for their self-esteem whilst also for emotional security against negative peer interactions.

When investigating experience, a qualitative technique is deemed the most appropriate method. This allows the researcher to gain detail on the feelings attached to the participants experience (Sutton 2005). Using semi structured interviews to gain the data set is suggested to be the most successful technique, as this allows for maximum detail of the individuals experience which can be proven difficult using techniques such as questionnaires or focus groups (Kvale 2003). Using an unstructured interview allows greater flexibility to both the interviewer and participant whilst also allowing the interviewer to follow up any interests in the participants responses (Gubrium & Holstein 2002). Therefore, this study aims to qualitatively explore special education teacher’s experiences teaching SEN pupils. In addition, this study hopes to explore several aspects of the teacher’s experiences such as workplace support, relationships with pupils and personal impacts. This hopes to not only bridge the gap in the current literature context but also to expand on current studies such as (Langher, Caputo & Ricci 2017; Lopez & Corran 2014) to gain a greater understanding into the experiences special education teachers have when facing challenges from SEN pupils on a daily basis. Much of the current literature focuses on mainstream teachers experience with SEN pupils in their classroom (Little & Kobek 2003; Lopez & Corcoran 2014) overlooking special education teachers who teach full classes of SEN pupils. This may be due to the
assumption of their ability to cope with the stress due to their training, however the minimal existing literature expresses the shortages of special education teachers is due to stress related problems. There current shortage in special educational teachers which has been ongoing for several years suggests the need of further investigation into their experience. Therefore in using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) this study will conduct five semi structure interviews with special education teachers in a special school, in the hopes of investigating the aim of this study to explore the experiences of teaching pupils with SEN. Exploring aspects such as building relationships, challenges and rewards and the personal impact and support a teacher has.
Chapter 2 – Method

Design of Study –
This study adopted a qualitative design using semi structured interviews. This allowed a detailed exploration of teacher’s experiences teaching SEN pupils. A qualitative approach is most appropriate when investigating experience as it has the potential to add depth to a study (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey 2016) therefore this design was deemed most suitable.

Sampling Procedure-
This study recruited five special education teachers between the ages of 25-60, who are currently working in a SEN school in the South West of England, in which three were female. The teachers were recruited through their place of work, where the head teacher was approached initially to determine their willingness to take part. The head teacher then sent out an email on behalf of the researcher, to which participants emailed the researcher directly to volunteer. The school was approached due to all children attending receiving a statement of SEN or EHOC, this allows for the research to adequately investigate the aim of this study as they teach SEN pupils daily. In addition, SEN covers a wide range of needs and complexities so using the sample will allow for wider coverage. It was deemed appropriate to focus on SEN as a whole rather than an individual disorder as research suggests a high comorbidity rate among child psychiatric disorders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years teaching SEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Overview of Participants

Data Collection Process-
On the school grounds in either an empty classroom or dining area, the semi structured interviews were conducted. Due to the nature of the interviews a semi structured interview schedule (SSI) was produced using Willig (2008) guidance (See Appendix 3). Whilst producing the SSI the research was also considerate of the study’s aim, along with relevant topic areas. These topic areas were based on prior research in relation to teaching and SEN children such as (Lopez & Corcoran 2014) study on SEN pupils relationships with teachers and (Cancio et al. 2013) work on SEN teacher’s support in their workplace. From this a focus on building relationships with pupils, challenges and rewards and personal impact were chosen as a focus. These entailed 4 main categories in which the questions were split into the first being general background knowledge, then challenges and rewards, building relationships and personal impacts. All questions were open ended with the hope of gaining maximum response and detail from the participants.

Ethical Consideration-
Ethical approval was granted on 13/12/2017   Reference - 9781
All participants were given an information sheet before the interview began and signed a consent form enabling the interview to start (See Appendix 1&2). Each interview was recorded on an audio recorder. All audio recordings were transferred on to a password protected computer with the password known only to the researcher and their supervisor. All participants were given up to two weeks to withdraw their data from the study. Any information that could give away the participants identity was changed using pseudonyms.

Method of Analysis-
Due to the several categories explored within the teachers experience a thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate method. A thematic analysis can successfully investigate human experience explored in detail as it permits theoretical freedom in its flexible approach providing detailed yet complex accounts of the data (Nowell, Noris, White & Moules 2017). Once thematic analysis was chosen Braun & Clarke (2006) six phase approach was conducted. The first stage entailed familiarisation with the text. This required reading through the transcribed interview numerous times to gain a better understanding of the participant’s answers. The second stage entailed coding the entire data set. The codes summarised the participant’s answers, capturing description and perspectives in relation to the data. The third step used the codes to derive themes from the data. The themes were derived by focusing on clustered meanings in the codes and reoccurring elements which were discussed. Keeping the research aim in mind, the fourth step entailed reviewing the generated themes against the data set and codes to ensure a good overview is provided. The fifth step ensured the themes generated had comprehensive titles and were distinctly defined reflecting the data set. Furthermore, the final step using the themes to write up a detailed report. A thematic analysis was chosen for the flexibility, with each theme representing the articles at a semantic level (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield 2015).
Chapter 3 – Results

The following chapter discusses the five core themes and six subthemes obtained from the data during thematic analysis. This can be seen in Figure 1.

![Thematic Map of core themes and sub themes](image)

Figure 1 – Thematic Map of core themes and sub themes
Each theme displayed in figure 1 will be explored further with supporting quotes obtained from the data set.

**Teacher pupil relationship is vital –**
The first theme derived from the data set highlights the importance of a teacher pupil relationship for SEN children. Many participants describing this as “the most important thing” (Zoe, page 3 line: 126). Whilst some explained “it’s always important whatever school you’re in to be honest but here it’s really important” (Amy, page 4 lines: 168-169) suggesting a stronger relationship with SEN pupils crucial.

One of the reasons a relationship is important is the control and ability it gives a teacher. Whilst SEN pupils are unable to learn as quickly as other pupils, once a pupil is familiar and trusts a teacher they begin to work better with in the classroom. In her interview Amy discussed the ability a relationship with a pupil gives her, such as being able to try more demanding pieces of work.

“but if you’ve got the relationship with them you can do anything, so you can do in the lesson you can do more ambitious and difficult things” (Amy, page: 4 lines: 176-177)

Expanding on this Sam also expresses his feelings of vitality towards having a relationship with pupils. He explains that he has higher expectations of the pupils if he has a relationship with them, as they should be able to sit and listen to him. He also discusses negative past experiences which many of the pupils have had, suggests their challenging behaviour.

“I think it is pretty vital if you want them to learn anything um you can’t expect them to sit and listen particularly when they’ve had such bad experiences in other schools if you haven’t then taken the time to develop a relationship with them” (Sam, page: 3 lines: 102-104)

In addition, Dan expresses the additional strength in the relationship needed between a teacher and an SEN pupil. Showing what sets the line of work apart from mainstream teaching.

“I found that quite challenging and interesting that you had to kind of work that you have to build a much stronger relationship I think with them because with because of their complexity” (Dan, page:3 lines:146-148)

**Building Trust –**
Following on from the relationship theme, building trust was discussed by participants as an important element, as it is in any relationship, but participants expressed this as an ultimately harder task. Due to their complexities and backgrounds SEN children can find it difficult to trust other people. One of the key parts of building trust that was discussed is the pupils realising that the teacher “has their best interests at heart” (Sam, page:2 lines:77-78).
During her interview Kate suggested that once trust is built within the classroom the children become easier to manage. She suggests that they need to feel that you are looking out for them to have the ability to build a relationship. For example:

“building a relationship with them once the children trust you and they know that um whether they want to do the work or not they know you’ve got their best interests at heart its i- much easier to manage the environment so its building relationships really that’s the key” (Kate, page: 1 lines: 39-43)

Building on what Kate has said, Dan shows how trust gives a teacher an ability to gain conversation with the child, which in turn can build a relationship:

“yeah it is that its building that you can build that level of trust find the way in find the interest go off at the tangent” (Dan, page: 5 lines: 214-215)

Hostility-
This theme captures participants experience of pupil reactions when building relationships. Throughout the interviews participants express they have experienced negative reactions to their efforts of building relationships. Hostility was suggested as a characteristic portrayed regularly by pupils with other participants discussing similar characteristics such as “push you away” (Kate, page:2 lines:89-90)

Zoe does express individuality in the pupil’s reactions and characteristics shown, however each of the different reaction she suggests are all negative with much aspects of hostility.

“yeah I think it depends on the child some of them can be really hostile and really try and push you away um some of them become violent um some will just completely shut down and not talk um or kinda walk away from you” (Zoe, page:3 lines: 108-110)

Adding to this Dan expresses the way the pupils protect themselves from the teacher’s efforts due to their complexities or/and past experiences.

“usually very defensive obviously um protective closed in um () failing that they have no interest in anything” (Dan, page: 5 lines: 227-228).

Interests –
This theme compresses the importance of finding pupils individual interests which was discussed by all participants. This was frequently addressed as a way to engage with their work and build relationships. As popular fashion changes, it is important that teachers stay on top of the latest trends so that they can optimise engagement from all pupils.

Amy discussed how she subtly listen to try and find any suggested interest that she can use within her lessons. What was clear through her interview is that due to the nature of the children when they are asked what their interests are many refuse to answer or say they do not have any interests.
“so I’m spending the whole time eves dropping, because the minute they say I’m trying to get clues from them as to what they’re gonna engage in but without asking, them if I just say what do you like they will probably say nothing so I’m trying to trying to hook in to their interests” (Amy, page:3&4 lines:150-156)

When exploring the way Kate builds relationships, she suggests using interests as a way to gain conversation with them and eventually a relationship. Along with joke making she suggests interests as a way to calm down a situation and build conversation up.

“um I mean there is many many different strategies, um initially trying to talk to them, make a joke, find out what their interested in try and turn the situation around from a negative into a positive” (Kate, page:2 lines:61-63)

Similarly, Dan discusses the way he listens to what the pupils mention in conversation and goes and looks up on the internet what they have discussed. This is to gain a better understanding of the topic, so he can use this in conversation.

“they will express themselves they’ll show slightly more interest in something else and then you probe that and you build that up and you build the questions up and you go INT: yeah
DAN: oh yeah and then you get them in also I end up you end up I even like ill even end up I will go on YouTube and I will look at something if somebody’s mentioned something I don’t know about It”(Dan, page:4 lines:190-195)

Later in his interview he discusses an experience of this, when he knew what brand the children were talking about which left them shocked. This gave him the ability to continuously make conversation and build a repour with the children.

“And I happened to know what it was and then I said and they said do you know Mr Taylor and I said and they were completely dumbfounded about that and now they come and show me on phones and say look that’s gone for two thousand pounds” (Dan, page:5 lines:204-207)

Preparation-
Participants enraptured the vitality of planning the right lessons for each class. This includes pupil’s interests and a variety of resources to gain maximum engagement from all class members. All participants emphasise the “effort”(Amy, page 2 line: 62) they put into preparation, making sure they are “heavily resourced” (Kate, page 1 line:30). Due to the complexities of SEN pupils, each individuals needs must be catered for in order to successfully teach a full class of children. Participants discuss how “you need to think a little bit more when you’re preparing so that they can assess the lesson”(Kate page 1 lines:31-32).

In her interview Amy discusses preparation as the key to stopping disruptive behaviour from pupils during teaching time. She highlights the large amount of time and effort she puts into planning to make sure there is as little disruption as possible. Making the lessons engaging for all pupils reduces the chance of distraction and therefore reduces disruptive behaviour.
“well I try and stop it in planning the lesson in the first place.... so um I just assume if I assume that everyone wants to learn and if I assume everybody can learn so its my job to give them something they can do so I put quite a lot of effort into planning what they’re going to actually do and I try and find thing they’re gonna be interested in” (Amy, page: 2 lines: 58-63)

Sam conveys the challenge of incorporating different needs of each pupil into one lesson to ensure they are all learning adequately. He details how he uses their interests in his planning and changing this frequently to engage the pupils.

“um, also taking an active interests in their interests, gearing lessons in their interests, making sure you differentiate lessons so that () um you take into accounts their learning needs to some pupils will learn better if their, um ,doing practically doing things some will be better if their looking some will be better if their listening and trying to take that into account” (Sam page: 2   lines:86-90).

**Freer Curriculum**

One factor that sets apart SEN teaching to mainstream teaching is the autonomy teachers have in planning their lessons. Derived as a subtheme, the participants discussed their enjoyment in the ability to plan their lessons to their ideas without having to follow strict academic guidelines which occur in the mainstream curriculum.

As it is difficult to get pupils to engage with the lessons, using a variety of different topics and themes to suit their interests is most successful.

During Kate’s interview she details her ability to be creative with her lesson preparation. Earlier in her interview she mentions her experience teaching in a mainstream school, however later she expresses her enjoyment in not being restricted by rules and regulations of the mainstream curriculum.

“ummm, I mean now that I do, I feel its much free’er with the curriculum, you are able to be quite creative I think in mainstream you can be a bit constricted, um, so it can b- I mean like today we’ve done a whole day on like selling items and making Christmas crafts and things and you can do that to a degree in mainstream but not the same in special ed so yeah more creative I think” (Kate, page:1 lines:19-24)

Similarly, Amy expresses her enjoyment in the “autonomy” (Amy, page 5 line:255) of the curriculum. In addition, she also adds in her interview, the interest of other staff and faculty members in her ideas for the curriculum, which she enjoys.

“one of the reason I like this, I like this because um you can sort of do it in your own way and if you have an idea people are interested in it and in mainstream you have to kind of () It feels like you’ve just got to do things in a certain way all the time and I think you have more autonomy here” (Amy page:5 lines:252-255)

**Supported in the Workplace**

Each participant expressed a feeling of support within the workplace. A community spirit was felt throughout all the interviews. Due to the current shortage in special education
teachers there is an expressed importance on the support a workplace gives to help stop this from occurring. The amount of support a special education teacher is given by the workplace should also be of significance due to the difficult environment they work in. Whilst much of the support discussed was from the head teachers and other forms of leadership, participants did discuss the support they receive from fellow teachers, they discussed how they were “all supportive of each other” (Kate page 3 line: 129).

In his interview Dan puts a lot of emphasis on the support he has felt within the school. He also highlights that SEN is a lot more challenging than in mainstream work so extra support is needed.

“so, I found it probably the most supportive place to work staff wise, um, its its almost its its a lot more vocational as in this is a vocation because it is so um challenging and because and you could just work in a mainstream school” (Dan, page:2 lines:62-65)

During her interview, Amy adds to how the support is given. She discusses the different pathways available for the teachers, both informal and formal routes. She also touches on how teachers can get emotionally effected during work so the support within the school helps reduce this.

“yeah () um because you can talk to anyone and you can just go and say what the problem is um and we have debrief every- we have formal ways of doing it, so we have debrief every day which is really important because sometimes like you’re emotionally effected by whatever it is, so you got to talk about it, um no in general I’ll just go, I could talk to the head if I wanted” (Amy, page:5 lines:239-243)

Sam adds that there is a hierarchy in the school which he is able to go to for support, He talks about how the head teacher is also accessible if he needed support from him.

“I feel that um as a class teacher there’s many job roles that are senior to me and people that I can turn to for support so I have a hub leader who’s in charge of our 4 classes and then there are also um deputy head or assistant head that um I can turn to and there is also the head teacher himself” (Sam, page:3 lines:136-139).

Enjoy teaching SEN-
What was apparent across all interviews is how much the participants “enjoy being a teacher” (Zoe, page 4 lines:166-167). Obviously, this should be a significant factor in any job, however due to the nature of SEN teaching, this is particularly important to reduce stress and give an overall better experience.

During her interview, Kate expressed the huge amount of enjoyment she gets out of her job. She does mention that she gets tired, but this does not stop her from getting maximum rewards from teaching SEN.

“I love my job, um, I’m I’m tired you know, we can all think its tiring and stuff but I wouldn’t want to do anything else I think the children are fantastic, they’re funny, you know the
things they come out with are really funny the staff are brilliant you know we’re all really close here and we all work incredibly hard um yeah I love my job, its fantastic” (Kate, page:2 lines:71-75)

Whilst Sam does not highlight as much enjoyment as Kate, he does explain that he is happy in his current position and does not wish to change his job any time soon.

“I’m happy in my position at the moment as a class teacher I don’t think I’m ready at the moment to take () more responsibility or to take a higher position in the school um so at the moment I’m happy as I am” (Sam page:3 lines:141-143).

Not enough Time
This subtheme is defined by the participant’s feelings of time constriction on their work. A variety of factors contribute to this shortage, with the main being government funding cuts. Due to minimal funding given to schools there have been cut backs on the number of teachers they financially have the ability to employ. This has led to the current teachers having to teach larger classes.

Dan discusses the funding problem during his interview portraying an anger towards this. He expresses an inability to do his job properly, because he is not able to manage time effectively.

“I don’t think the funding’s there to actually, um there are loads of things we could be doing, but I think it will seem because we’ve had cuts and everything and things like that, it seems you’re not being able to really do you job as well and you could do () and that’s not through will and that’s not through management, it’s just the fact that () there aren’t enough staff cause the one thing the most important thing is to a teacher is time and it’s the only thing, you can’t really buy the only way you buy it is by having more teachers” (Dan page:2 lines:80-87).

Amy discusses the difficulty in managing a class that she is unable to see more than once a week. This is due to the large number of classes on the minimal amount of teachers employed. She encapsulates the main problem as relationship building as you need time to be able to do this.

yeah well I’ve got a class now that is difficult, it’s probably the hardest one because I only see them once a week ....so that’s not very and they’re sort of they’re sort of, and the class of the same age the I have got twice a week, I feel completely different about um so yeah it’s hard to form a relationships when you only see them for an hour ... um, so it all takes longer “ (Amy page:3 lines:136-143).

Social/ Emotional Support-
This theme encapsulates how SEN pupils rely on their teachers for additional support. The social aspect is of particular importance to SEN pupils as their disabilities often defect their ability to socialise with their peers. With regards to emotional support participants discuss the importance of the pupils “self-esteem building up” (Sam page 2 line:80) with the teachers support helping with this.
Zoe expresses the importance of a teacher and how a pupil sees them as an influential adult in their lives. She highlights the amount in which her pupils rely on her for emotional support as many of their needs effect their self-esteem and confidence.

“yeah I think they rely on you more so for emotional support then they do so for academic cause you’re there for academic but they see you as um like a really important adult um so they see you as someone as close to where there parents are but they also see you as help” (Zoe page:3 lines:142-145).

Furthermore, Kate discusses the large extent her pupil rely on her for both social and emotional support.

“INT: um do you feel your pupils rely on you for support other that academic support? KATE: hugely emotional social huge yeah “(Kate, page:3 lines: 119-121).

Violence-
This theme shows the violence and aggression special education teachers can be subjected to. Depending on the individuals disorder or complexities pupils can show more aggression to their teachers or whoever is around them. Many get frustrated at themselves in which they display violence to express this. Kate discusses how she had an experience where she was not able to control a child behaviour due to the pupil “really disliking” (Kate, page2 line:100) her.

In Zoe’s interview she explains an experience she has had with a child who became aggressive. She describes him as “manipulative” (Zoe page 2 line:54) due to his actions and tricking her into thinking he is engaging with the lesson before turning to violence.

“then try and hurt you straight away or somebody else or he will bring things into school that he wants to hurt you with like rocks or something” (Zoe, page 2 lines:55-56)

Later on, in her interview she describes a pupil that will “lash out” (Zoe, page 2 line:122) at her at any attempt to make a relationship with them. She explains how unpredictable his behaviour can be.

In addition Sam explains an experience he has had with a pupil who he has had difficulty in getting to engage in the classroom. He explains the stages of reactions of the pupil:

“initially he will swear at you, um he becomes very, um verbally aggressive if touched, he will become physically aggressive, um he will () cause damage in the classroom at times” (Sam page 2 lines:66-68).
Summary of Results-
Overall the results displayed above have highlighted the versatile and challenging job in which special education teachers have. The theme based around relationship between teachers and pupils was salient in the way the participants emphasised its importance. The violence that the teachers are exposed to is also noteworthy as their job may compromise their safety at times. In addition, the support and enjoyment that they have in their jobs is something that is of importance to the future of special education teachers. The effort in which the participants put into their job was echoed across all interviews from relationship building to lesson preparation. The constant focus on the individual pupils is evident.
Discussion –

The aim of the current study was to explore the experiences of teaching SEN children. This study used five special education teachers who worked in an SEN school. This sample group was chosen due to the wide range of complexities SEN cover, with these more likely to be experienced in an SEN school. Nevertheless, these forms of teachers are frequently overlooked in current literature with the majority focusing on mainstream teachers with SEN pupils included in their classrooms. Therefore, this study hoped to bridge the gap in the current research context, whilst also expanding on any existing literature such as (Langher, Caputo & Ricci 2017; Little & Kobek 2003; Lopez & Corcoran 2014). In order to adequately gain in-depth data to investigate this aim, a qualitative data collection process needed to be conducted. This study used five semi structured interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted on the data collected and various themes became apparent; teacher pupil relationship is vital, social/emotional support, support of workplace, violence and interests. Several subthemes were also derived from the data set these were; building trust, hostility, freer curriculum, and preparation, enjoy teaching SEN and not enough time. The findings of the present research expressed the support the special education teachers have within the workplace contrasting much of the current literature context. Significantly the finding of violence and social support shows the diversity of the teaching role and its difference to the mainstream world. The results detailed highlight some of the important factors in the special education teacher’s experience. It was particularly clear that relationship building was of particular importance in this area of work and benefits the teachers who participated in this study. However, it was equally as evident that the teachers are subject to violence and hostility from their pupils. Despite this all teachers express enjoyment in their job.

Teaching SEN children has a reputation for being one of the most challenging jobs within education. The unpredictable nature of the children’s behaviour combined with the exposure to hostility and aggression can cause stress and emotional exhaustion for a teacher (Pepe & Addimando, 2013). Throughout all interviews what was prominent was themes of enjoyment teachers had in their jobs and the support they had from their colleagues and management within the school. Whilst the challenge of the job was discussed, the interviews all echoed the colleague and administrative support through the schools, with many discussing the pathways they have taken for support. This challenges the current preconception that there is a lack of administered support for special education teachers (Prather-Jones 2011, Skaalvik& Skaalvik 2007), whilst the shortage of special education teachers blamed on the lack of support (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013). The participants were of a variety of ages and had different amounts of teaching experience. However, all participants felt supported within the workplace, something which has been suggested as a time and experience problem (Otto & Arnold 2005). Supporting their colleagues was also highlighted in the interviews, a community spirit was felt throughout which may contribute to the enjoyment of their jobs (Langher, Caputo & Ricci 2017). Stress was merely touched upon during the interviews however this is not to say that the participants do not feel this, questions could have been added to the interview schedule to explore this topic adequately.

One of the most prominent themes derived from the data set was the teacher pupil relationship is vital. Much of the current literature focuses on mainstream teachers and their relationship with non-SEN pupil. Relationships between teachers and SEN pupils have
only been touched upon in the current literature, despite an emphasis on its importance (Lind, Poppen & Murray 2017). Lopez & Corcoran (2014) were one of the only studies found to explore teacher’s perceptions of their relationships with SEN pupils. Some of their themes echoed this study such as the importance of trust between the teacher and pupil, whilst also considering the individuality of the pupils and their interests which was similarly found during the current studies analysis. The discussion around loco parentis (Power-deFur & Orelove 1998) is also highlighted in the current study. Although there was no discussion on the participant’s feelings of guardianships they did express the perceptions of the children’s feelings towards them as similar to a parent. Lopez & Corcoran (2014) study was conducted on teachers who had SEN pupil included in their classrooms. Therefore this study extended on their findings, to show the difference and similarity of perceptions of relationships in the two forms of teachers. The emotional and social support which SEN pupils rely on from their teachers was also documented throughout the transcripts. The extra security needed by the pupils is apparent in investigations, Self-confidence and esteem can also be built up by teachers as more frequently SEN pupils these are low (Little & Cobaks 2003). This was also something participants discussed throughout and the importance of given extra attention to this.

Whilst exploring the subtheme of ‘not enough time’ it was apparent that this was reflective of the recent funding epidemic which has affected the UK (The Guardian 2018). Teachers expressed their inability to complete their work to the highest standard due to being restricted on the time they were able to spend with their pupil and time spent preparing lesson. This is echoed by the funding crisis effecting the amount of staff employed by the schools. Teachers are expected to teacher bigger class sizes and in shorter days without the help of teaching assistants (The Guardian 2018). This is pensive of the frustration of the participants that they are unable to build intricate relationships with individuals pupils due to being stretched. This study highlights the importance of more government funding that should be given to the SEN sector, reflecting the problems which the current campaigns are asking to be changed. The rewards and challenges of teaching SEN children were also explored within the data however no common theme was able to be produced due to the individuality of the answers. In addition, violence in the school from SEN pupils was not found to be investigated in current literate this could be discussed in future investigations.

With all research comes the question of limitations and their effect on the data. Only one researcher was used to analyse the data set, this could lead to biases in analysis and missing significant data due to only one point of view being used. In order to gain a different perspective on the data and reduce the opportunity of bias two researchers should be used if a similar study was to be carried out. Moreover, whilst the number of participants does not directly affect the investigation the current study only had the ability to use five teachers due to their teaching hours, for future studies the ability to gain more teachers or incorporate teaching assistants into the study may give broader selection of results. Direction for future research can give the ability to expand on the current research and give a more in-depth analysis of special education teachers. Due to this area being overlooked, future research would greatly benefit the current literature. Investigating special education teachers in specific sample groups such as by their gender could give better in-depth analysis of whether there are differences in experiences. This may be due to pupil’s preferences or feelings towards a certain gender. Age could also be investigated, this could
also affect experience, and pupil’s reactions towards teachers. It could be hypothesised that pupils would behave better to younger teachers as they may be more relatable. Using more define samples gives more detail to the topic area getting a better understanding of the experiences special education teachers have in such a versatile workplace. The current financial crisis could also be explored in more detail. Future research on this may include using this time as a reflection on the difficulties for the special education teachers.

In conclusion, the present study draws attention to the versatile and challenging environment in which special education teachers work in. Despite the suggested shortage of teachers, this area of literature has been frequently overlooked. Whilst these findings cannot be generalised, the current study should entice researchers to investigate further their experiences. These findings should promote special education teachers as it explores the enjoyment of teachers and their supportive workplace. In line with this the current findings should encourage government attention and funding to the area to help these teachers do the best job they can and help SEN pupils get the education they deserve.

Reflexive Analysis-

With all qualitative studies in an attempt to remove bias reflexivity is needed (Cutcliffe, 2003). Throughout the research process my role of the researcher was influenced by my own experience with SEN children, and preconceptions of the role of a special education teacher. My experience with SEN children influenced my decision to investigate this topic area. In addition, my role of the research was influenced by my interest to work within the SEN field in the future. This also influencing my rationale of gaining better awareness of this area of education. My own interest into this research topic could have impacted the research and analysis and overall providing a certain level of bias. Due to my experience with SEN the themes derived could be influenced by my own interpretation. However, I believe that there is minimal bias in this study due to myself having no experience teaching. Although I am able to sympathise with some of their experiences overall, I am not able to compare my own experience to this. I also made myself aware of the bias that I could impose and frequently referred back to my analysis to check this. Whilst producing the semi structured interview schedule I was able to produce questions relevant to the study whilst also using my own experience to make them detailed and relevant. During the interview my own interest and experiences allowed me to be constantly engaged in the participant’s responses. In addition, my own interest and experience with SEN children allowed me to connect more with the current study and research into finding adequate information and looking at all perspectives in the participants answers.
References-


Appendix-

Appendix 1- Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: The exploration of teaching children with special educational needs

Participant information sheet

The study

This study aims to investigate teacher’s experiences of working with special educational needs (SEN) children. I am investigating areas such as the relationships the teachers feel they build with their pupils, as well as experiences they have and the teacher’s personal feelings. Teachers have been proven in research to be critical in a child development so I feel it is important to investigate this from their perspective.

What would happen if you agree to participate?

If you agree to participate you will be asked to attend a semi structured interview which will last approx. 45 minutes answering questions on your experience teaching.

Exclusion criteria

You will need to be a permanent teacher over the age of 18 that is currently working in a special educational needs school.

Potential Risk

There are no potential risks from taking part in this study.

Potential benefits

This interview will give you opportunity to reflect on your time as a teacher which can be beneficial to your practice. You may also feel rewarded from helping contribute towards a final year project.
Withdrawal, anonymity and confidentiality

For confidentiality you will not be asked your name at any point in the interview, you will only be required to fill out your age and gender on the consent form. Any identifying details will be changed to protect the identities of the participants and any pupils that are mentioned. During the interview you will have the right to withdraw at any time. You can leave the interview at any time. You can also pause the questions or not choose to answer any of the questions in the interview. Your data can be withdrawn from the study up to two weeks after the interview has taken place. All data will be kept confidential with the recordings of the interview kept on a password protected device known to only myself and my supervisor.

Extra Support

If you require any extra support please visit –

The National Union of Teachers - https://www.teachers.org.uk/

The Samaritans - https://www.samaritans.org/
Appendix 2- Participant consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Reference Number:
Participant Age and Gender:
Title of Project: The exploration of teaching children with Special Educational Needs. Name of Researcher:

Participant to complete this section: Please initial each box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before leaving the interview, without giving any reason.

3. I agree to take part in the above study.

_______________________________________   ___________________  
Signature of Participant  Date

_______________________________________   ___________________
Name of person taking consent  Date

Signature of person taking consent
Appendix 3- Semi structured interview schedule

Interview Schedule-

General Information
1. How long have you been teaching for?
   a. How long have you been teaching at this school for?
   b. How long have you been working with children with special educational needs (SEN)?

2. What training in SEN have you had?

3. What made you want to teach children with SEN?
   - experiences
   - personal

4. How did you feel when you first started teaching children with SEN?
   - scared
   - excited

Experiences
5. Can you tell me about your first few weeks working at the school?
   - challenge you
   - kind

6. What do you find the most challenging aspect of your job?
   a. Why do you think you find this the most challenging?

7. Can you describe a time that you found challenging
   - Who was involved?

8. How do you deal with challenging behaviour from pupils?
   a. How do the children respond to this?
   b. How did you feel about this?

9. Can you describe what you find the most rewarding aspect of your job?

Relationships with children

10. Can you describe how you go about building a relationship with each pupil?
    a. What are some of the characteristics some children show?

11. Can you describe a time where it has been difficult to build a relationship with a pupil?
12. How important do you think it is that you build a relationship with a pupil?  
   a. How do you think this affects a pupil?  
      - positive or negative

13. Do you feel your pupils rely on you for support other than academic?  
   - social  
   - talk about problems outside of the classroom with you  
   a. Can you give me an example of this?

14. Do you see a difference in the children when you build relationships with pupils?  
   - Change in behaviour  
   - Academically

**Personal Impact**

15. Has working with SEN children had a personal impact on you?  
   a. Do you often feel stressed whilst at work?  
   b. Is your job rewarding?

16. Do you feel you have enough support within the school?

17. What do you perceive to be your future career goals?