

# **Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives of Inclusive Education in New Zealand**

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## Declaration

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This Thesis/Dissertation/Research Project **entitled:**

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is submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the Unitec degree of

Master of Applied Practice.

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I confirm that:

- This Thesis/Dissertation/Research Project represents my own work;
- The contribution of supervisors and others to this work was consistent with the Unitec Regulations and Policies.
- Research for this work has been conducted in accordance with the Unitec Research Ethics Committee Policy and Procedures and has fulfilled any requirements set for this project by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee.

Research Ethics Committee Approval Number: 2017-1076

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## **Abstract**

This research examined early childhood teachers' perspectives of inclusive education in New Zealand from an internet survey of a small group of teachers. The research literature review focuses on the description of inclusive education in New Zealand in early childhood, following general description of policies supporting inclusion in early childhood. According to the literature review there are many challenges and strategies that have been encountered in providing an inclusive education. Consequently, it can be considered thought-provoking to determine and comprehend our knowledge of how early childhood teachers find inclusive education in practice. A interpretative qualitative approach methodology was employed for this research. The process included an internet survey questionnaire that had been sent out to early childhood teachers of one of the biggest early childhood organisations. Interview and focus group were excluded from the research due to sensitivity of the topic and the mobility and closeness of the early childhood sector, having in mind the connections and that everyone has been acquainted with one another. The findings indicated that there is not one common definition of inclusive education, respectively; different teachers have different understanding of it. Even though all the teachers were qualified, most of them still showed a great level of commitment with the goal to upgrade their knowledge to support inclusion. Teachers have mentioned the strategies they have already used and strategies they think can make inclusion more successful. Teachers have experienced numerous challenges and have tried different strategies to overcome the challenges; however, there are expectations and changes that they think will further support inclusive education. They have shown respect for children with special needs and their extended community and, hence, included the parents in supporting their children's development delays. It can be concluded that the teachers have been working effectively in providing successful inclusive education. However, the quantitative survey approach was one of the limitations of this research that might have not provided an entirely realistic picture of teacher's perceptions and feelings.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

**ECE – Early Childhood Education**

**EIT - Early Intervention Teachers**

**ESW – Education Support Workers**

**MOE - Ministry of Education**

**NZ - New Zealand**

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The following chapter, provides an overview of this thesis on early childhood teachers' perspectives of inclusive education in New Zealand. This introduction includes a general overview of information about inclusive education policies, its research background, defined aim and research questions. It also provides an overview of all the chapters of the thesis.

This organisation has childcare centres from Whangarei to Invercargill, operating more than 260 childcare centres. They believe in responsive relationships and follow the New Zealand curriculum for early childhood: *Te Whāriki*. The research was carried out in, New Zealand, where all children are entitled to attend their choice of early childhood, regardless of any physical or intellectual impairment. Aotearoa New Zealand has legislation and philosophical frameworks that provide structural support for the implementation and practise of inclusive education. Inclusive education in early childhood in New Zealand has been practised for many years now, underpinned by an inclusive curriculum document, with teachers being a central factor for its successful implementation (Winter, 2007). Therefore, it should be considered highly valuable to investigate and discover how early childhood teachers believe and feel while providing inclusive education to children from birth up to 6 years of age.

Childcare centres in New Zealand have existed for over 100 years and are characterised by choice and diversity (Meade & Dalli, 1992). Parents have the right to choose early childhood services according to their preferences and attendance is not compulsory except for families receiving government income benefits . They have a wide range of choices to make from privately owned and state run kindergartens, community owned centres and services run by corporations, playcentres, home-based services, Te Kōhanga Reo (Maori immersion) or Pacific Islands early childhood centres etc. Early childhood services are not zoned like schools; therefore, parents are not restricted to certain geographical areas. All early childhood services are obliged to follow early childhood regulations from 2008, (Ministry of Education, 2017), the licensing criteria for early childhood education, and use *Te Whāriki* the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017).

## ***Te Whāriki* - The early childhood curriculum**

The most important document for early childhood teachers in New Zealand is *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum which was introduced in 1996 and revised again in 2017. *Te Whāriki* sits comfortably within a context of legislation and policy that supports the rights of children with disabilities. It is planned and implemented in cooperation with the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi to be inclusive and suitable for all children and expects that special needs will be met as children will learn together in all early childhood education settings.

When children are identified by early childhood teachers as children with special needs, they are referred to special education service which is related to Early Intervention Service (EI). The Early intervention service staff works with the child, family, and early childhood teachers where a child is enrolled (Macartney & Missy, 2013). The Education Support Workers (ESW) works in conjunction with early childhood teachers in order to provide inclusive education for children with extreme needs. The Education support workers staff works under the guidance of an early intervention specialist, and as part of a team of parents, whānau, specialist education practitioners, educators, and health professionals. This team works together to develop an Individual Plan to support the inclusion of each child in the service (Ministry of Education, 2000).

## **Background of the research**

Being an early childhood teacher myself for the past nine years, I have been passionate about the quality of education that the country provides to all the children under their care. Through this time, I have experienced numerous changes in inclusive practise and increasing enrollment of children from diverse cultural groups (Ministry of Education, 2019). During my time it has been an interesting fact to notice that there

has been an increase in the number of referrals made to the Ministry of Education for early intervention support. I have been reflecting the gathered knowledge and practice whilst providing an inclusive learning environment for all children with different development levels and different backgrounds. The question that I have been repeatedly asking myself- *Am I really providing an inclusive learning environment for children with special needs?* – was the cornerstone. It was also followed by many others such as:

- Why is this journey stressful for me?
- Are there other teachers out there who feel the same?
- What are the challenges they face? How do they overcome these challenges?
- Is there a specific trend that can be identified from the data collected in relation to challenges?
- What are some strategies applied by centres that provide inclusive environment?

There is a tangible gap in the knowledge that needs to be identified, reflected on and responded to, so that inclusion is not stressful for teachers and children as well. My interest in inclusive education became more intense after taking on a leadership role and experiencing different approaches, beliefs, knowledge and attitudes early childhood teachers and early intervention teachers had while providing an inclusive education. It became quite challenging as the number of children with special needs increased in my centre with less support from the Ministry of Education and rather than being passionate about it, due to the enlisted circumstances, I started feeling that providing support and quality care to children with special needs was more of a burden than my sole responsibility. Therefore, through this research I aimed to explore early childhood teachers' thoughts, perspectives, and experiences with inclusive education from a range of different teachers. I discovered that a lot of research has been done about inclusive education and policies for special needs education however, little attention has been given by researchers about early childhood teachers' perspectives of inclusive education.

This research project will help identify challenges for teachers around providing inclusion. The data will also help identify strategies used for inclusion and support

provided to children with special needs. All gathered information can then be used to improve the practice, as well as to contribute to the pool of research information on this topic.

The key stakeholders of this study are the following:

- Early childhood teachers - who are involved in providing inclusive education on a daily basis;
- Early intervention teachers - who work closely with early childhood teachers to support them to provide inclusive education for children with special needs;
- Parents - being the most informative and valuable people who could support their children with continuous collaboration with other professionals; and
- Management of early childhood centers - who could provide an inclusive environment for the children and their extended community to support the development delay.

## **Research Aims and Questions**

### **The aim of the research:**

1. To find out how a small sample of New Zealand early childhood teachers provide inclusive learning environments for children with special needs.
2. To find out the thoughts and impressions of a small sample of New Zealand early childhood teachers about inclusive education.

**Research Questions:**

1. What does inclusive education means to New Zealand early childhood teachers?
2. What are the challenges faced by New Zealand early childhood teachers while providing inclusive education?
3. What are strategies used by New Zealand early childhood teachers for providing an inclusive environment?

### **Thesis Organisation:**

The thesis is presented in six chapters.

- Chapter One - presents an overview of the research and rationale for the study. The research questions forming the framework and the aim of the research are highlighted and chapters are outlined.
- Chapter Two - is a review of relevant literature. This chapter outlines research and literature that exists in relation to inclusive education in early childhood. It further elaborates on the policies that support inclusion for children with special needs. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the challenges to inclusive practice that early childhood teachers are facing daily and the possible strategies that can promote inclusive education.
- Chapter Three - outlines the research design. It discusses the interpretive methodology and survey as the best approach that was suitable for this qualitative research. With the integration of theoretical framework, alongside data analyses, reliability and validity of the research is discussed.
- Chapter Four - the findings of the survey are presented in relation to the key themes which emerged from the data. These themes show teachers' understanding and commitment of inclusive education. Furthermore, it presents the challenges teachers' have faced, the strategies they have already used and what are their thoughts on making a center more inclusive.
- Chapter Five - discusses the findings and the topics that emerged from the survey data in relation to the literature and to the initial research questions.
- Finally, Chapter Six - presents the conclusion and overview of the research in relation to the research questions. The limitations that were identified are discussed in detail, with recommendations for future research and for improving practice.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

In this chapter, I present the literature review findings from researchers from Aotearoa New Zealand. The literature review is limited to Zealand researchers so that I could relate and evaluate on the background of the research as well as achieve the aim of the research. Therefore, I looked through the journals, websites, library database and books to search what other authors from New Zealand had to present about inclusive education. The following literature review focuses on the description of inclusive education in Aotearoa New Zealand in early childhood, with a general description of policies supporting inclusion in early childhood. It further highlights challenges that were presented by other researchers in relation to providing inclusive education. Finally, the strategies that have been used to promote successful inclusive education has been stated.

### **2.1 Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education is where children with special needs and children from other background can all contribute to the regular curriculum areas, as well as daily learning and development. Authors like Ballard (1998) explain inclusive practice in four different aspects: firstly, where children with special needs are included in the learning and development with their peers; secondly, parents and whānau of children with special needs are supported and valued; thirdly, children with special needs are shown respect and given the same rights as other children through role-modelling to all parents and children; and lastly, parents of children with special needs are supported through transition to school to attain inclusion.

Furthermore, according to Moffat, Laureta and Rana (2016) altering the environment and teaching practise to support individual needs is exactly what inclusive education is. Moffat (2011) also states that teachers encourage fairness and societal righteousness, and attempt to provide a sense of belonging for children and their family in an inclusive environment. Inclusion has been practiced in early childhood setting for a very long time, but there is still a question of becoming successfully inclusive. Teachers come with different teaching philosophy, culture and different



understanding about inclusive education which can cause quite a challenge when trying to provide an inclusive learning environment for children.

The Education Review Office (ERO) is part of the Ministry of education that assess how early childhood education centres of Aotearoa New Zealand's provide quality education, and makes the assessment report accessible to the public. The Education Review Office (2016) defines inclusive education in early childhood education as being the position where children with special needs are included in all daily activities at the centre and all their noticed differences are responded to. The doctoral thesis research by Purdue (2004) was based on three case studies, where evidence was based from the investigation of how early childhood centres supported children with special needs, the teachers needed to analyse obstacles for children with special needs and provide strategies to eliminate these obstacles (Purdue, 2006). This definition also relates to Booth and Ainscow's (2002) description of inclusion as growing involvement, reorganising cultures, policies and practices and the learning contribution of all. This statement is also supported by authors like Higgins, MacArthur and Morton (2008) that inclusion does not "entail a one-size-fits-all mainstream" approach. Furthermore, inclusion, as described by Winter (2007) is a commitment to all children, to have the right to success by learning alongside their peers irrespective of their differences. Purdue (2006) aimed to investigate how and why some early childhood centres practised inclusion and some excluded children, also confirms that early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand has a "commitment to all children" according to the laws and policies.

Special Education (MOE, 2000a) in early childhood describes inclusion as:

- continuous;
- a pathway to a compassionate, mutual relationship; and
- including beliefs, "resources", cooperation, and "curriculum."

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education (2017) requires children with special needs to be included, cared, and valued as a unique individual. Hence, all early childhood services should provide inclusive education where children with special needs are encouraged and involved in all curriculum areas.

## 2.2 Early childhood curriculum

*Te Whāriki*, the first Aotearoa New Zealand bi-cultural curriculum document, is designed to provide inclusion and states that all children in early childhood services will learn together and special needs will be supported with provided Individual Plans (Ministry of Education, 1996). The curriculum was updated and published again in the year 2017, with the goal to support the growing diverse culture of Aotearoa and learning objectives of children and whānau, the extended community in question. *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 2017) also describes that inclusion is considered for all the children and it states for “gender and ethnicity, diversity of ability and learning needs, family structure and values, socio-economic status and religion” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.13). *Te Whāriki* (2017) further states that “children should experience an approachable and inclusive curriculum that offers meaning and purpose” (p.13). Children should be able to feel a sense of belonging where their culture, language and parents are included in the curriculum assessment.

This statement is supported by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of development, by defining different levels of influence on the children and their families. Both versions (1996 and 2017) of *Te Whāriki* draws on Bronfenbrenner’ theory and explains that “children’s learning is located within the nested contexts and relationships of family, community, and wider local, national and global influences” (p 60). The *microsystem* level of theory consists of all people who are in direct contact with the child such as family members, childcare providers, religious communities and peers (Winter, 2007). The *mesosystem* level is consisted of the inter-relations between home, school and neighbourhood. The *ecosystem* level does not involve the learner himself but has a substantial effect on it, such as school policies, for example. The *macrosystem* level consists of the bigger cultural world immediate to the learner, such as government policies, cultural customs and beliefs (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2010). This means that no child can be supported without the knowledge about the child itself and the influence of the environment surrounding him. *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 2017) also mentions that when teachers make connections between culture, knowledge, and community it enhances the child’s learning and development on a high level providing inclusive education. This is supported by Macartney (2016) where

he states that the curriculum requires centres to be responsive to children's and families' rights to be involved, appreciated, perceived and to belong.

Teachers are expected to assess and implement plans to nurture each child irrespective of gender, age, capability or developmental delays and the main goal of teachers is to experience and understand the diversity within a safe and supportive community (Nuttall, 2003). *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 2017) also explains that teachers, families, whānau and communities should collaborate to discover and remove "any physical, social, or conceptual barriers" in order to support an inclusive education (p.13). *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 2017) has mentioned learning outcomes for all the five factors: Well-being, Belonging, Contribution, Communication and Exploration - so that teachers can plan, evaluate, and support assessment for children's progress adequately. Therefore, irrespective of having different centre philosophies and theorists to guide them, all centres should be providing inclusive education. The early childhood services will develop philosophy and strategies to completely embrace children with special needs (Ministry of Education, 1996). *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 2017) "supports commitment that all children will be encouraged "to learn with and alongside other children by engaging in" meaningful experiences (p.13). This involves teachers to promptly observe and support children's "strengths, interests, abilities and needs" and, deliver extra support when needed for "learning, behaviour, development or communication" (MOE, 2017, p.13). *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 1997) also explains that it is important to create a supportive environment where teachers reflect on teaching strategies so that any obstacles for children to fully participate will be eliminated, in order to provide an inclusive curriculum.

*Special Education 2000* is one of the policies that support children with special needs in the early childhood setting as well as the school system was introduced in Aotearoa New Zealand Government in 1996. It includes five following components:

1. Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS)
2. Severe Behaviour Difficulties
3. Speech-Language Difficulties
4. Special Education Grant
5. Early Childhood, with the aim of the program to enable:

- Better access to early childhood services for children with special education needs;
- A variety of programmes to provide parents with the choice; and
- A solid foundation for learning during the school years, providing greater long-term benefits (Ministry of Education, 2000. p.6).

### **2.3: Early Intervention**

Early intervention supports children from infants to young children age who are considered children with special needs due to various reasons. These services are provided by the Ministry of Education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Progressively, Aotearoa New Zealand authorities have been working towards early intervention for children with special education needs more inclusively, identifying how important it is to include children with special needs in early childhood mainstream and community settings.

Alongside early intervention, it has acknowledged the importance of including parents in making decisions for their children as one of the strategies where families and early intervention will “share responsibility and work collaboratively” (Alliston, 2007, p. 4). Early intervention assumes that the earlier the child is identified and starts getting support, the greater the effect will be and hence will give a better chance for families to get involved with education or health services. However, in-order to be identified at an earlier stage with development delays professionals such as early childhood educators, general practitioners and Plunket nurses need to have the knowledge and skills necessary to identify these delays whilst involving the families (Alliston, 2007).

According to the Ministry of Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations from 2008, all early childhood services are obligated and required to:

- Consistently plan, implement, and evaluate programmes using *Te Whāriki* as their main guide to support children's knowledge and progress;

- Produce moderate attempts to work in close collaboration with parents and whānau in order to make decisions about the child to support his/her development; and to
- Obtain more knowledge and instructions from experts to support learning and development, while working collaboratively with parents and whānau (Ministry of Education, 2017, pp. 33-34).

The Education Review Office assessed 268 early childhood services in the year 2011. The Education Review Office discovered that 91% of the centres were supporting children with special needs to be competent and confident learners. The report identified distinctive features of the ‘very inclusive’ (44%) or ‘mostly inclusive’ (49%) education services that had enrolled children with moderate to severe special needs. These features were the following:

- “where children with special needs were accepted as competent and positive learners;
- with very inclusive methods and structures practised;
- evaluation and support provided with extra aid; and
- collaboration with parents and early intervention paraprofessionals were evident” (Education Review Office, 2016, p.11).

## **2.4 Challenges for inclusion**

Cheuk and Hatch (2007) mentioned challenges in practice, for inclusive education such as adult-to-child ratio, lack of skills and knowledge, lack of funding and parent’s anticipation that have made some teachers feel stressed and helpless and some consider inclusion a burden. Macartney (2016) also mentioned that childcare centres have difficulty in “recognising and responding positively to disability and difference” due to less staff to provide quality care for children who need support (p.4). This was also mentioned by the Education Review Office (2012) that centres face challenges while productively providing an inclusive education for children with special needs to be capable and “competent learners” (p.24). However, early childhood

teachers understand that in order to support children with special needs, there are challenges such as lack of knowledge about disability, skills, training, and resources even though they accept the principle of inclusion (Purdue, 2004). This is also mentioned by the Education Review Office (2016) that even centres that were not very inclusive, their teachers had the attitude for inclusion but lacked the knowledge and skills to identify the interest and strengths and provide an in-depth planning and assessment documentation. This is also mentioned by Purdue (2009) as one of the major barriers to inclusion where teachers “lacked the understanding” of how to include all children in the curriculum (p.138). Furthermore, Education Review Office (2012) also stated that teachers were not able to support children with special needs due to their own knowledge and skills or due to adult-to-child ratio.

Aotearoa New Zealand has been gaining an increase in multicultural population and this affects the increase in the diversity of children and teachers in early childhood services (MOE, 2017). Therefore, teachers need to respect, understand and work with a diverse group of children and family, whilst not ignoring their own beliefs, this becomes a challenging factor for teachers as mentioned by Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Madden, Purdue, & Surtees (2009).

Even though educators show a positive attitude towards inclusion and understand the expectation of policies and legislations, it can be quite challenging when applying them in practice. Purdue (2009) states that inclusion differs in practice, in every service, even though they all follow the same legislation, policy and curriculum. This is because every centre develops its own philosophy. However, Stark, Gordon- Burns, Purdue, Rarere-Briggs and Turnock (2011) states that teachers should be including inclusive practices in their philosophies. The inclusive practice of any centre depends on the teaching team, their experience, knowledge about inclusion and the overall impact of the community where the early childhood centre is based.

According to Purdue, Ballard and MacArthur (2001) teachers and managers often found physical access and challenges in accessing when supporting children with special needs. According to Purdue (2009) resources are a major factor in determining the inclusion of children with special needs and their family at the early childcare centres. Teachers can identify the barriers to inclusive education and

removing these can be a challenge. For example, if the environment does not support children with physical literacy than it becomes a challenge for teachers to support a child with delayed gross-motor skills. According to Gordon-Burns, Purdue, Rarer-Brigs, Stark, and Turnock (2010) teachers did not have the expertise and skills to provide appropriate strategies or reflect on their environment to provide inclusive education. Education Review Office (2016) also identified that 49% of centres that were mostly inclusive, but not entirely inclusive, showed that they lacked the following:

- documentation to support a shared understanding across the service and sustainability of good practice;
- limitations in the physical environment; and
- poor adaptation of the curriculum (p.11).

Working collaboratively means that early childhood teachers need to engage with the early intervention paraprofessionals and the whānau, as each of their contributions carries a lot of value for the wellbeing of the child. Education Review Office (2012) discovered that for services that were not very inclusive, working collaboratively was a major challenge. This was also identified by the Education Review Office (2016) as teachers were not able to support children without Education Support Workers (ESWs) due to lack of relevant facts and information. In childcare centres where this kind of practice was not very supportive, collaboration with ESWs and early childhood teachers was a challenge especially, early childhood teachers' ability to support children with special needs in absence of ESW. All this was related to either knowledge or adult-to-child ratios. The challenge was more obvious in the absence of ESWs when there were more than one special need children who needed additional support from the teachers, while they also had to support 10 other children as the ratio is one teacher to 10 children. Furthermore, Macartney and Morton (2009) presented a case study in Aotearoa New Zealand about a child, who was not accepted in the centre unless accompanied by early intervention teachers or her mother. In the review done by Education office in 2011, (Education Review Office, 2016) it was noticed that early intervention professionals were expertise to support early childhood teachers to gain the knowledge and skills to support the children with special needs

instead they were given the sole responsibility of the child with special needs. Macartney (2008) also states that teachers can give their responsibility to ESW and not connect or communicate with children with special needs adequately. On the other hand, MacArthur, Dight and Purdue (2000) noted that early intervention professionals can take the responsibility of the child and exclude early childhood teachers which can lead to disconnection of child and early childhood teachers. This reflects on the teacher's knowledge, confidence to work with children with special needs and ability to work collaboratively with early intervention teachers (MacArthur & Dight, 2000, p.41). Education Review Office also stated that even though early childhood centres are inclusive they still face the challenge of bringing the parents on board that their child needs support which affects in getting early intervention professionals support and funding hence a challenge to work collaboratively (Education Review Office, 2016).

Education Review Office found that even though centres were practising inclusive education it was still challenging when transitioning children with special needs. It becomes more difficult when there is a lack of collaboration and valuable information is not shared (Education Review Office, 2016). These show that it becomes very important for all the adults to share the same vision, to communicate, respect and understand each other's views in order to support "the child as a confident and competent individual" (MOE, 2017. p.12). Furthermore, Alliston (2007) mentions that the transition of children with special needs to school should include collaboration between early childhood teachers, early intervention teachers and primary school. The most important factors that should be considered during the transition are "planning and preparation for children, families and professionals, effective communication, collaborative partnerships, and practical supports" which should be continuous (p.114).

However, there are numerous challenges rising when involving the special education services for support of the child with special needs. These challenges were identified by the leaders and the managers of the early childhood services, like the following:

- delay in getting "funding" for the child after making a referral;



- children who need Education Support Workers (ESWs) did not meet the special education “funding criteria”;
- funding for ESWs not provided for all the hours that the child attends;
- ESWs are not funded for school holidays, which made it difficult for children to attend childcare as they needed a high care; and lack of Special Education support during the transition to school (Education Review Office, 2016, p. 17).

Macartney (2016) also mentioned that early childhood centres and families have to wait for a long time for early intervention, support, staff and information.

### **Strategies for improvement of inclusion**

There are many strategies to support inclusive education, but it all depends on the educator’s knowledge, attitude, confidence and skills. Even Moffat, Laureta, and Rana (2016) mentions that there is no doubt that even with inclusive philosophies and policies, settings will not be inclusive without effective teachers. Education Review Office (2016) states that inclusiveness in early childhood centres identifies that teachers need to go beyond an inclusive philosophy to inclusive action. It will make sure that all teachers are knowledgeable and can use strategies to support children with special needs and their family.

Teachers understand children’s rights and that children with special needs should receive high quality education alongside other children, but how successfully can they provide quality education depends on the strategies to overcome the challenges. As Purdue (2006) explains that teachers who believe in inclusive education are efficient in identifying and removing obstacles to learning and participation for children with special needs, which involves adjusting the curriculum and environment, reflecting teaching strategies, and collaborating with other adults to make sure child meets his/her learning and development needs.

If teacher’s view is negative towards inclusion, then children with special needs and their family can be viewed as undesirable, as well (Purdue, 2004). Therefore, it is of extreme importance to confront the unfavourable attitudes of

teachers, children and parents towards special needs, rather than only including children with special needs in the program (Education Review Office, 2016). According to Macartney (2012) the biggest challenge for children with special needs is the negative attitude of the society towards difference. Therefore, it becomes very important for all the adults to share the same vision, to communicate, respect and understand each other's views to support the child - as a confident and competent individual. Teachers who promoted inclusion also supported promoting inclusion of special needs children by talking and explaining to other parents the importance of participation of children with special needs elaborating on children's rights, sense of belonging and learning opportunities. (Stark, Gordon- Burns, Purdue, Rarere-Briggs, & Turnock, 2011). *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 2017) also requires teachers to empower children, provide holistic development and a sense of belonging for children and whānau.

Avramidis and Norwich (2002) concluded that when teachers gain the skills to implement the inclusion policy and encounter the success of their hard work, they become more positive towards inclusion. It means that teachers need to notice and recognise the barriers, with providing appropriate teaching strategies to support inclusion for all children, irrespective of race, gender, culture, and development level. Park and Turnbull (2003) recommended improvement of the delivery of integrated services including enhancing family centeredness, "respecting cultural and socio-economic differences", and including family in the programme planning. Teaching inclusively requires cultural responsiveness to children and families as well as nurturing intercultural competence and learning of children.

In spite of how knowledgeable or confident early childhood teachers are, for them to provide inclusive education they can not do it on their own, they need a team of teachers, paraprofessionals and whānau. According to Education Review Office (2016) a teaching team is not limited to early childhood teachers only but includes, whānau, early intervention paraprofessionals and the community. According to Lieber, Wolery, Horn, and Tschantz (2002) collaboration of all the adults affecting the child with special needs is very important. Dunn (2008) states that when adults work collaboratively and share valuable information, they enhance successful inclusion.

Result of study by Moffat (2011) showed that collaboration and partnership are key factors for successful inclusion. Dunn (2008) also emphasised the importance of partnership and collaboration for successful inclusive education. When adults can successfully collaborate with each other than it becomes important Education Review Office (2016) to look further than philosophy and reflect on the teacher's ability and plan of action that can contribute to the inclusion of children with special needs and their whānau.

The Ministry of Education's Special Education policy (2000) states that "partnership between students' families/whānau and education providers is essential in overcoming barriers to learning" as one of their seven principles. Parents are more knowledgeable when it comes to their child and its specific characteristics, therefore, they should be respected as being a valuable member of the teaching team (Gordon-Burns, Purdue, Rarer-Brigs, Stark, & Turnock, 2010). According to findings from research done by Moffat (2017) teachers at early childhood centres used strategies such as being "very approachable", shared information with other teachers and parents, and had "open-door policies", supported whānau to develop a sense of belonging (p. 62).

Carr (2001) states that when a child takes an interest in the environment and develops a relationship with others, reflects the child is experiencing a sense of belonging and well-being. Therefore, teachers need to reflect on the environment, to support the child's culture and dispositions. All the enlisted will lead teachers to reflect on their own knowledge and skills, and to request for professional development in-relation to creating a stimulating environment, where the environment acts as the 'third teacher'.

The research findings from Moffat (2017) showed that teachers always attended relevant professional development to support inclusive education. According to Purdue (2006) teachers who provide inclusive education take the full responsibility of the children with special needs in their care, making sure that they are fully involved in the curriculum, learning, participating, developing alongside other children. Which leads to teachers reflecting on their own knowledge and skills, and to request for professional development. Furthermore, professional training may also affect the

teacher's attitudes towards providing inclusive education, as they seem to have a more positive attitude and accept the child as an individual. Macartney & Missy (2013), recommended that teachers need support to identify barriers to learning and development of children with special needs and further need professional support about inclusive education which should be continuous and reflective of teacher's thoughts and practice.

### **In conclusion**

It can be concluded that there are policies and curriculum for early childhood that support inclusive education. According to the literature review, there are many challenges and strategies that can be applied to provide inclusive education. However, teachers need to think beyond the policies when providing inclusive education. The Education Review Office (2012) recommends that researchers should focus on finding the reasons why some settings are not inclusive and what could be done to overcome it and make the inclusion work. The next chapter will include the explanations on the chosen methodology, with separate subchapters on method, participants, data collection and analysis, ethical consideration etc.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the stakeholder engagement and how this supports the research design and method. A description of the research tool Survey monkey (questionnaire) is provided. The methodology, including data analysis, reliability and validity of the data and the ethical considerations of the research project are given.

### **3.2 Stakeholder engagement**

The purpose of this project is to explore how early childhood teachers feel about inclusive education and how they provide successful inclusive education in early childhood centres. According to the literature review, many challenges have been identified such as lack of collaboration between adults, scarce availability of resources, environment as a barrier, early childhood teacher's knowledge and skills and negative attitude of teachers/ communities towards children with special needs. On the other hand, strategies such as collaboration between adults affecting the special needs child, an inclusive/welcoming environment and confident, effective and knowledgeable teachers and professional development have been identified through the literature review. The focus of this research is: 'What is early childhood teachers' perspectives, what are the challenges and strategies they have used and what are their thoughts about promoting inclusive education?

The main stakeholders of this research were identified: the centre manager where the researcher is employed as an early childhood headteacher, early childhood teachers, and early intervention teachers. The purpose of engaging with the centre manager was to inform and get permission to discuss the research with other teachers at the centre. This engagement also supported him to reflect how this centre and teaching team provide and support inclusive education.

The purpose of engaging with early childhood teachers was to get information about how early childhood teachers feel when providing inclusive education and what

support they think they needed. Furthermore, this engagement also refined the research questions and provided a critical view of the aim of the research. This gave the researcher a clear idea of the research topic was feasible and if early childhood teachers would be willing to take part as participants.

The purpose of engaging with early intervention teachers was to gain more information about their perspectives of how well they collaborate with early childhood teachers while providing inclusive education. The researcher was able to gain the knowledge as what kinds of support early intervention teachers can provide early childhood teachers and what was their feeling about early childhood teacher's knowledge and confidence when working with children with special needs. This also gave the researcher a clear indication of the research aim and research questions.

The manager, early childhood teachers and early intervention teachers were very supportive and keen for the researcher to research inclusive education. The early childhood teachers felt that inclusive education was becoming a challenge and that they needed more help but were not willing to discuss their issues in front of other teachers which supported the researcher to decide upon the most appropriate method for data collection.

The review of the literature supported the researcher to develop her knowledge about inclusive education and the policies that supports inclusion. It also helped the researcher to realize how different researchers have been interested in different aspects of inclusive education. Any finding from the data collected would be shared with the early childhood teachers and managers of the organisation. The early childhood teachers would reflect on their practice and gain more valuable information as to how to provide successful inclusive education. The managers will be able to support their childcare centre at extensive length to provide inclusive education as well as identify gaps and provide relevant professional development for the whole teaching team to support inclusion.

The researcher chose only one research tool; survey (questionnaire) after having a worthwhile stakeholder engagement. The data gathered through an internet survey was influenced by teacher's beliefs, perspectives of inclusive education.

### **3.3 Aim, and Research Questions**

The aim of the research was: to find out how a small sample of New Zealand early childhood teachers provide inclusive learning environments for children with special needs and to find out the thoughts and impressions of a small sample of New Zealand early childhood teachers about inclusive education.

The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What does inclusive education means to New Zealand early childhood teachers?
2. What are the challenges faced by New Zealand early childhood teachers while providing inclusive education?
3. What are the strategies used by New Zealand early childhood teachers for providing an inclusive environment?

### **3.4 Outcomes and Outputs / Benefits of study**

The intended outcome of this project is to identify how early childhood teachers feel when providing inclusive education and what are the challenges they have faced. It also aims to find out which strategies early childhood teachers have used for successful inclusive education.

The findings should inform the ECE teachers on how to use strategies for the challenges they face, and they should be able to reflect on their practice and the knowledge they have. They should be able to identify the knowledge they need for providing a successful inclusive education.

For the researcher personally, I should be able to carry out this research based on my need for the identified stakeholders and reflect on my practice of providing inclusive education. I should be able to share the knowledge and strategies with other early childhood teachers and childcare centres.

### **3.5 Sample Selection**

This research was conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand, the participants for this research were teachers in early childhood centres that belong to an umbrella organisation employing over 4500 permanent teachers, (includes qualified teachers, teacher-in-training and caregivers). This organisation has childcare centres from Whangarei to Invercargill, operating more than 260 childcare centres. They believe in responsive relationships and follow the New Zealand curriculum for early childhood: *Te Whāriki*.

Teachers in this organisation are supported through their teacher registration and professional development is provided by the professional services managers of the company. The researcher has been part of this organization's teaching team for the past nine years and as a team leader holds the responsibility to identify the challenges faced by teachers and request for support from the management. As the researcher had a good knowledge about the organisation it was easier to talk to the team members and the management about the research. The management had been supportive of the research and permission was sought to upload the questioner on the organizations Facebook which was accessible to permanent teachers of the organisation.

### **3.6 Research Methodology**

#### **3.6.1 Study Design**

This is educational research which seeks to find early childhood teachers' perspectives of inclusive education. It uses an interpretive research design and adopts survey method which provides both qualitative and quantitative data, hence uses a mixed-method approach.

Authors like Mukherji and Albion (2010) state that "research is about asking questions and seeking information to answer the questions that we pose. Mutch (2013) states that educational research falls under the social science category because it



focuses on people, places and interpretations. The two concepts that underpin social science research are ontology and epistemology. Firstly, *ontology* is about what people's ideas and principles are about the experiences which they might not even be aware of. For example, one of the author's ontological positions based on personal experience and knowledge is that inclusive education is encouraged and supported by the early childhood curriculum and policy. Secondly, *epistemology* is about how people know that knowledge, such as epistemological position, comes from the experience as an early childhood teacher. It can be stated here that inclusive education was understood and practised in various ways and the challenges faced by early childhood teachers, therefore, are numerous. These two mentioned ontological and epistemological positions influenced the main research question of the thesis: what does inclusive education mean to New Zealand early childhood teachers and what are the challenges faced by New Zealand early childhood teachers while providing inclusive education?

This is an interpretive study which seeks to find early childhood teacher's experiences and beliefs of inclusive education. According to Mukherji and Albon (2010) states that "interpretivism is a position that emphasises gaining a detailed insight into an issue as opposed to being concerned with being able to make generalisations" (p.23). The reason for choosing this method was to understand early childhood teachers' view and beliefs, through their teaching experience while providing inclusive education. According to Mutch (2013) interpretive research describes and interprets social situations and often a synonym for qualitative study (p.6).

Furthermore, it is a qualitative approach that was used to explore how inclusive education is practised with emphasising the way teachers explain and make sense of their teaching experiences. As Mutch (2013) explains it, qualitative research focuses on uncovering the lived reality of research participants. Qualitative research data involves more words and description compared to quantitative research data, which involves numbers and figures. According to Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, and Rachel (2014) qualitative research is quite broad and it includes a wide range of approaches and methods, where the volume and richness of qualitative data are often highlighted areas.

Unlike quantitative analysis, which is statistics-driven and largely independent of the researcher, qualitative analysis is heavily dependent on the researcher's analytic and integrative skills and personal knowledge of the social context where the data is collected, with the emphasis on understanding a phenomenon, rather than predicting or explaining (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 113).

In this research question, the knowledge the researcher was seeking was within the minds, beliefs and experiences of early childhood teachers. It is entirely about their teaching philosophy, their values and pedagogy which surrounds their perspectives of inclusive education. The participants interpreted their world through their experiences and beliefs, which were “personal, subjective and unique” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Therefore, it was important to consider the types of questions that the teachers should be asked so that they could interpret their opinions in a wide logical manner and with the highest level of clarity and understanding.

The improvements in understanding of children and early childhood education guide the paradigm of the research. Mukherji and Albion (2010) argue that the way we conduct the research is influenced by the paradigms within which we operate. Paradigm is a systematic logical connection created by our experience and beliefs of the world. Each paradigm is influenced by beliefs that combine knowledge, relationships and experience about those beliefs (Mac Naughton, Rolfe, & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010)

A mixed-method was considered as it addresses both the ‘what’ (numerical and qualitative data) and ‘how or why’ (qualitative) types of research questions. This is particularly important if the intention of the researcher is really to understand the different explanations of outcomes (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) of a teacher's experience and understanding of inclusive education. Bryman (2007) suggests that mixed methods researchers must create their research in such a way that the questionnaire includes a few closed questions, which provide quantitative data of facts, and few open-ended questions, which provide qualitative data about beliefs. Many authors have produced information about using mixed methods for gathering qualitative and quantitative data. Greene (2008) comments on the wide agreement in

the mixed methods, a research community that methodology 'follows from' the purposes and questions in the research rather than vice versa.

It is always challenging to find a way to adopt a method that could provide qualitative and quantitative data and hence answer the research question. However, after a lot of consideration about the early childhood setting and the research topic, the best methods selected were as discussed further in the chapter.

### **3.6.2 Method**

#### **The rationale for choosing a mixed-method approach**

When looking for the best method for this research, a lot of different factors were considered, starting with a method that will support early childhood teachers to participate in the research without feeling pressured or judged. A method that will not add to their workload, rather that will encourage them to speak their mind freely was also considered important. Also, a method that will not develop conflicts at the workplace or any unpleasant situation between colleagues, as the research is of a sensitive issue. Once the best method approach was selected, the next step was to compile the most valid questions for the research.

When implementing the best method for conducting qualitative research, an online survey was found as the most suitable. According to Denscombe (2014) surveys have emerged in recent times as one of the most popular methods in methodology for social research. A survey in this specific case was directed at finding teachers' perspectives of inclusive education and providing successful inclusive education. It supported the researcher to collect relevant facts and opinions, which reflects the strength of the survey approach (Denscombe, 2010).

Furthermore, surveys depend on written information provided by participants by answering the questions supplied by the researcher. Early childhood teachers could take part in the survey in their own time and at their comfort area, which goes in line with providing honest informative data in the best possible way. Survey does not

require personal, face to face interaction - it requires participants to understand the questions by reading and providing honest answers when "social climate is open enough to allow full and honest answers" (Denscombe, 2014). Interviews and focus group were considered at first, as Denscombe (2014) states since surveys do not lend themselves so well in studying issues in depth

However, interviews and focus groups were rejected later as part of methodology due to the sensitivity of the topic and the mobility and closeness of the early childhood sector, where everyone seemed to know each other. Those close connections could affect the validity of the provided results. Precisely for these reasons, an anonymous survey was the most appropriate and valuable strategy to use for this interpretative methodology. Some of the advantages of this chosen method in using surveys are that the physical absence of the researcher allows greater objectivity, as well as insuring complete anonymity of the participants. When the topic is of a sensitive issue, then the indirect contact, remote and impersonal such as internet surveys can encourage people's willingness to answer openly and honestly (Denscombe, 2014).

Therefore, the most appropriate internet survey was surveyed Monkey for this research. Survey monkey saved time, recourses, and allowed wider geographical coverage without additional costs. It also sped up data processing as it had options to categorise the data in different ways that were easier to compare, read and analyse. The data was arranged in two different ways. One way was where individual participants questions and answers were categorised. The other one was to get all the participants responses under individual questions.

This survey Monkey type was preferred over Google Form, which is another internet survey. The reason for this is because survey Monkey provided 15 different types of questions, compared to nine different types provided by Google Form. Another beneficial difference was that survey Monkey provided twenty-four-seven email support to researchers, whereas Google Form has no help centre dedicated to them.

The Survey Monkey software provided a unique web address (URL) for the survey that was sent out in an email and social media posts. All the teachers needed to do was simply click on the link to participate – they would be directly taken to the survey questionnaire (See Appendix No. 2 for the questionnaire). Once the teachers finished the survey, they could come directly to the researcher's Survey Monkey account, where the data could be retrieved. The core of the research questionnaire will be discussed in the next part of the chapter in more detail.

### **Rationale and design of the survey questions**

The information from a survey questions tends to fall in two broad categories: 'facts' and 'opinions' (Denscombe, 2010). The questions used in this particular survey were mostly in the 'opinion' category and investigated teachers' views and beliefs about inclusive education. The survey questions included a variety of questions to stop the respondents becoming bored and falling into a pattern of answers so that the researcher could achieve a more detailed and honest opinion. Denscombe (2014) states that researchers need to be aware that questions on certain topics can be awkward for respondents to answer and, for this reason, it might be likely to produce answers that are not honest or lead to items being missed altogether as respondents simply avoid them.

Mutch (2013) also advises setting successful questionnaire pilot (trial) and to ensure questions in the questionnaire are clear and unambiguous for the benefit of the participants. Therefore, before applying for ethics approval to the Ethics committee, two early childhood teachers were requested to answer the survey questions. Both teachers provided positive comments and were supportive of the variety of questions, as well as the topic. They mentioned that due to the increase in the number of children who need special care at the centre, and the challenges they face, the research topic was very practical. The length of time that took to answer the questionnaire was approximately 15-20 minutes, as they both had different computer skills.

## **Participants and data collection**

The participants for this research were teachers in early childhood centres that belong to an umbrella organisation employing over 1700 teachers. With permission and support from the organization's Head of Professional Services Manager (PSM), the survey was sent through the company email to all the teachers in Auckland. Initially, participants seemed reluctant to take the survey and the target of 40 responses were not met. It is possible that even with the use of 'Survey Monkey' to provide anonymity, teachers had a lingering feeling that any electronic response could be traced to the individual. After a month only 4 participants responded therefore, permission was sought from the PSM to post the survey on the organization's Facebook page.

The survey was put out to all permanent teachers who were registered members of the company's central Facebook page. Finally, 41 participants responded and were either fully qualified or teachers-in-training (3<sup>rd</sup>-year student teacher). Since anonymous survey method was used for data collection, being a participant included everyone doing it without the additional need of giving consent. The data was then stored in an electronic folder protected with a password before it was used for data analysis, as discussed in the next part of the chapter.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Following data collection, the data were analysed and interpreted to conclude the research questions. Of great importance is the fact that data collection and analysis can proceed simultaneously which helps the researcher correct potential flaws or even change original research questions. Data analysis is based on the transcribed version of participants (early childhood teachers) responses to the survey. As the questionnaire provided both qualitative and quantitative data, a variety of styles could be used for data analysis, such as numerical, graphs and words. The responses need to be coded and categorised after the questionnaires were collected and then analysed thematically. By employing the qualitative data analysis methodology, the data was first categorized and labelled, in the process known as open coding (Mutch, 2013). The data was read as the whole document and then sentence by sentence to

highlight words that were different, repeated and relevant. These codes were then organised under categories.

Thematic analysis is a “qualitative strategy that takes its categories from the data, unlike quantitative strategies (such as constant analysis), with pre-determined categories” (Mutch, 2013, p. 164). Under each of these, subcategories emerged with similar connections. These categories were presented using tables and graphs to get a clear picture of what matters the most to early childhood teachers.

Another aspect of data analysis is that it is very important to analyse qualitative data the same way the participants feel (Mukherji & Albon 2010) which was a challenge as the overruling of the researcher's ideas and opinions over the participant's ideas and opinions had to be avoided at all costs. Data were organized into categories while keeping an open mind, without changing the meaning of the data. The researcher avoided preconceived ideas such as her own beliefs and challenges through her teaching experiences when categorizing the data to provide valid and honest data analysis. Denscombe (2014) also states that when analysing the data, it is important, to be honest, and ethical and "avoid any temptation to manipulate the data". Keeping ethics in mind the entire research process, other aspects were also considered such as validity and reliability, as discussed below.

### **3.8 Validity**

Mutch (2013) states that validity means that the study measures what it sets out to measure, which means research question should be sharp and focused, with research design allowing the researcher to gather and analyse data that will confirm the hypothesis as it is stated.

The most important aspect was to consider that questions were reliable and measured what the researcher was looking for. The questions were drafted and discussed with early childhood teachers. The feedback was reflected upon and a final set of questions were prepared. These questions were given to teachers as a pilot questionnaire. Once the researcher was satisfied with the way how the questionnaire

provides information and answers the objectives of the research, then it was submitted for ethics approval.

Moving to the next step, it was analysing the data with validity. The data were analysed as accurately and precisely as possible, being careful not to change the originality of the ideas stated by the participants. The data was coded and then was studied several times before identifying the most important codes and making the connections to the categories. As Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls and Rachel (2014) state one of the essential strengths of qualitative research is that researchers display outstanding connections between the ideas and conclusions they develop, with good evidence as examples extracted from the data. Along with the validity of the research, it is also important to consider the reliability of the research.

### **3.9 Reliability**

Reliability in qualitative research gives a different explanation compared to quantitative research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). In any research, the findings need to be precise and accurately exhibit the idea that was researched, so that if the research is reproduced using a similar approach, the findings are similar, which proves the reliability of the research (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Rachel, 2014).

Additionally, Cohen et al. (2011) also state that in qualitative research, reliability can be regarded as the fit between what researcher record as data and what occurs in the natural setting being researched. Using the survey Monkey which was anonymous, the survey supported the participants to honestly write their perspectives of inclusive education. However, considering the sensitivity of the topic, if the research was replicated, the data might not be the same - as Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, and Rachel (2014) explains: other factors may exist which will affect its potential for "replication." Such as early childhood teachers' belief had taken another turn, newly graduated teachers might have been taking special needs course during their study. The location of the centre and the community make a big influence of the education system of any childcare centre alongside the management, which can keep changing hence providing different data.



Having that in mind, the reliability of the findings depends on the potential repetition of essential characteristics of the raw data and the rectitude with which they have been categorised. To be confined to the reliability of the research, researchers need to be ethical throughout their research – which is why the ethical issues were also considered throughout the research.

### **3.10 Ethical issues**

The ethical issues were considered throughout the entire process of research. Hesse-Biber (2017) explains that the ethical honesty of the researcher is to make sure that the whole process of the research is reliable and the findings are fair and legal. Ethics approval was gained from the Unitec Research Ethics Committee (UREC) to protect all human participants, including the researcher, participants and Unitec. Once the approval was granted by UREC, it was important to be open, honest and transparent to participants about the reason for conducting the survey. Therefore, all participants were informed about the purpose of the research and participation was voluntary. Denscombe (2014) states that social researchers are expected to conduct their investigation in a way that protects the interests of the participants, as well as ensures that participation is voluntary and based on informed consent. Since this research adapted survey Monkey, taking part in the survey was considered the same as giving consent and participants were not forced to take part in the survey.

Ethical issues were also considered while formatting the questionnaire to make sure questions were free of jargons. The questions were clear, short and straightforward, to avoid any confusion. No questions were asked outside the scope of the research to avoid invading privacy or waste participants time. Mutch (2013) suggests that if the participants are treated with consideration, fairness, and respect, the researcher will continue acting ethically.

Once the data was collected it was stored securely with a password protected digital folder which will be only accessible by the researcher. After a period of 5 years (2023) all the data will be deleted. The researcher made sure that data analysis was honestly presented without the interference of the researchers' ideas and beliefs. With adequate information, data was treated in confidence, with no disclosure of information

that could result in harm to research participants or others. Hesse-Biber (2017) also state that deliberation of ethics must be a serious part of the infrastructure of the research process, from the beginning, on to the analysis and then to the publication of the findings. Therefore, the researcher made sure that the presentation of the data is accurate. The researcher has taken consideration of all the possible ethical issues from the beginning to the publication of the findings.

## **Summary**

This chapter has outlined and discussed the research design and the reasons for adopting the survey as the best method for the research in question. After justifying the reasons for using an internet survey, survey Monkey was seen as the best approach considering the early childhood setting as the main topic. The process of the data analysis, of teacher's perspectives and challenges, has been discussed as well. Furthermore, reliability, validity and the ethical issues, employed throughout the research, were examined and presented. Data findings from the survey will be discussed and presented in the following chapter. The purpose of the following chapter is to outline and discuss the design of the research. Firstly, the research methodology that best suited is discussed. Secondly, the method that was used for data collection is discussed in detail. Thirdly, discussion of the data analysis of teacher's perspectives is outlined. Fourthly the reliability and validity associated with the research are discussed. Lastly, ethical issues, related to conducting this research are outlined.

## **Chapter Four: Research Findings**

This chapter analyses the data gathered through the previously explained Survey Monkey. The following chapter is divided into five main topics: first, defining the background of how the data was gathered; second, more information on teachers teaching experience in early childhood; third, how teachers commitment and understanding of inclusive education stands; fourth, naming challenges faced while providing inclusive education; and finally, enlisting the strategies that could make inclusion more successful. These topics are further divided into subtopics so that the data can be explained explicitly.

### ***4.1. The Background***

The Survey Monkey link was sent out to early childhood teachers in the central Auckland area and was accessible to the 600 members of the ECE organisation's Facebook page. Only 6.7% members (forty-one participant) responded, who were either fully qualified or held teacher-in-training positions (3<sup>rd</sup>-year student teacher). The survey response was read as a whole document and then sentence by sentence to highlight words that were different, repeated and relevant. These codes were then organised under categories. These pre-determined categories were drawn from the literature review; definitions of inclusive education challenges for inclusion and strategies for improvement of inclusive education. Under each of these, subcategories emerged with similar connections. These categories and subcategories were best presented using tables and graphs to get a clearer picture of what matters the most to early childhood teachers.

#### ***4.2: Teachers teaching experiences in early childhood education***

***Table 4.2: represents teachers teaching experience in early childhood education***

<b>Years in teaching</b>	<b>Number of teachers</b>	<b>%age of teachers</b>
<b>1-5</b>	9	22%
<b>6-10</b>	17	41%
<b>11-15</b>	4	10%
<b>16-20</b>	3	7%
<b>21-25</b>	3	7%
<b>26-30</b>	2	5%
<b>30+</b>	2	5%
<i>No mentioning the No. of years</i>	1	3%
<b>Total</b>	41 teachers	

#### ***4.3. Teachers Commitment and Understanding of Inclusive Education***

To find out how the teachers have been gaining extra knowledge, they needed to support inclusion. They were asked to mention workshops or extra courses they attended about inclusive education, so they can answer the question of what are their thoughts and believes about inclusion. The data was analysed and categorised under the following three topics:

1. Teachers attendance of workshops/courses;
2. Teachers understanding of inclusive education; and
3. Factors that supported teachers to provide successful inclusive education.

**Table 4.3.1: represents teachers attendance of workshops/courses**

<b>Courses</b>	<b>Number of teachers attended</b>	<b>%age of teachers attended</b>
<b>Incredible Years</b>	18	<b>44%</b>
<b>Autism</b>	7	<b>17%</b>
<b>Learning difficulties</b>	1	<b>2%</b>
<b>Sign-language</b>	1	<b>2%</b>
<b>Language delay</b>	1	<b>2%</b>
<b>Special needs</b>	1	<b>2%</b>
<b>No workshops or Professional developments attended related to inclusion.</b>	10 (2 teachers work with under two-year-old and 8 teachers work in over twos and have quite several working experiences as well)	<b>25%</b>

Majority of the teachers - 18 of them (44%) - attended Incredible Years courses. Incredible Year is a six-month course provided by the Ministry of Education's Special Education Team. The course content includes behaviour management and positive guidance. The next favourable workshop was attended by 7 teachers (17%) on topics such as Autism. However, 10 teachers (25%) did not attend any course or professional development that was related to inclusive education, with no reasons provided in the survey as the answer.

Six teachers (15%) mentioned they attended professional development provided by their centre managers, which included a variety of workshops to support

teachers with knowledge of inclusive education. Mostly, teachers attended one or two workshops, however, one participant (2%) specifically mentioned all the courses she had attended: workshops on cerebral palsy, developmental delay, autism, Downs Syndrome, behaviour management, sign language, non-violence crisis intervention and Incredible Years.

#### **4.3.2 *Teachers understanding of inclusive education***

Teachers were asked what they understood and thought of the word inclusive education. From this question, three main themes emerged about their understanding and belief of inclusive education:

- A. children's rights;
- B. family and whānau involvement; and
- C. resources and curriculum, as described below.

##### **Children's rights**

Twenty-three teachers (56%) stated that inclusive education means to value every child as a unique individual and provide equitable opportunities for learning, irrespective of race, religion, ability, gender, parental sexual orientation or any other factor. One teacher mentioned (2%): "Seeing children for who they are, where they are at and providing support to provide equity". One teacher (2%) mentioned that "inclusive education is for everyone, not just the ability but for the challenged, those that need special care". Three teachers (7%) believe that inclusive education is an education system that enables children to contribute to their fullest potential. Only one teacher (2%) mentioned that "under the treaty, we should guarantee participation, protection and partnership for children and their families" even though early childhood is bound by a bicultural curriculum strongly supported by the Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

### **Family and whānau involvement**

Out of the 41 responses, only four teachers (10%) mentioned that inclusive education is an education system that is accessible to parents and children with equal opportunities. One teacher (2%) mentioned that “inclusive education means education where all children access the wealth of social, emotional and educational learning opportunities in a way that supports them to be fully involved in society”. Finally, 36 teachers (88%) did not mention whānau or family involvement as an understanding of inclusive education.

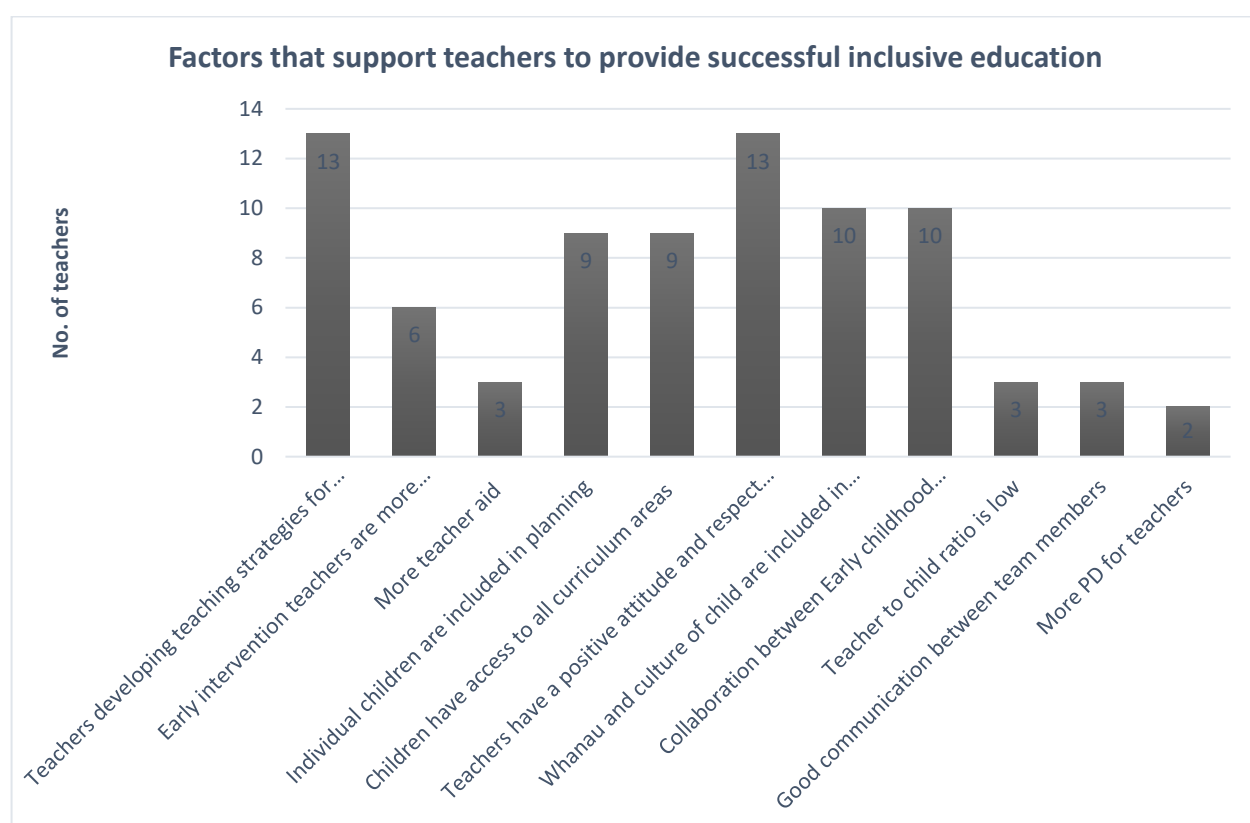
### **Resources/curriculum provided to children**

Nine teachers (22%) stated that inclusive education is providing a curriculum and environment that caters everyone’s needs, teaching them in a style that they all can relate to. Additionally, 32 teachers (78%) did not mention anything about the curriculum or providing resources as an understanding of inclusive education.

#### 4.4 Factors that support teachers

**Figure 4.4. shows the factors that support teachers to provide successful inclusive education**

Teachers were asked to give an opinion about factors that they think would support them to provide successful inclusive education. The responses were categorised under the most repeated factors.



As indicated by the graph, the most favourable factors were developing teaching strategies for special needs children and having a positive attitude and respect for these children, as identified by 13 teachers (32%). Whānau and culture of children are included in the centre and collaboration between early childhood teachers, where whānau and early intervention teachers were mentioned by 10 teachers (24%) as a factor for providing a successful inclusive education.

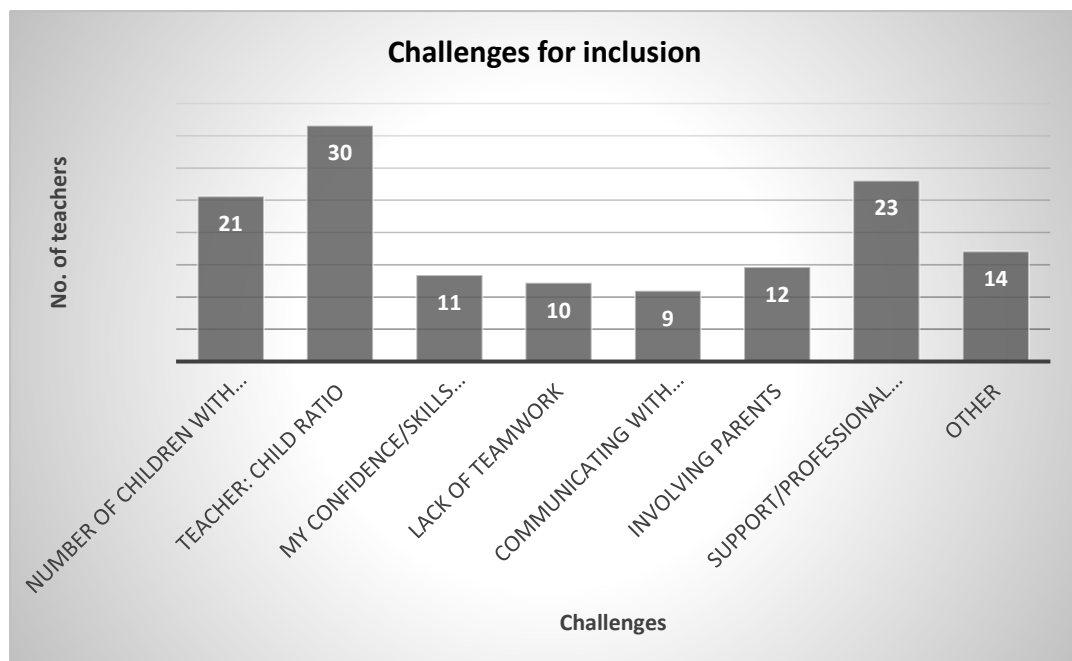
Only 2 teachers (5%) mentioned that more PD will support successful inclusive education. One teacher (2%) mentioned that “role modelling to children to accept



difference is a pathway to successful inclusive education”. Another teacher (2%) mentioned that successful inclusive education is when communities are informed and have an understanding of inclusion. Only 3 of the teachers (7%) mentioned that low teacher-to-child ratio will support successful inclusive education. Overall, 100% of the teachers responded to this question.

**Figure 4.5: Represents challenges for inclusion**

The next logical step of the research was to find out what are the challenges early childhood teachers faced while working, to be inclusive with children with special needs. They were given a range of choices to select from, as shown in the graph.



Thirty teachers (73%) identified the teacher-child ratio as a challenge when it comes to providing inclusive education. Twenty-three teachers (56%) mentioned that getting support and professional development was a challenge. Twenty-one of the teachers (51%) mentioned that the number of children with special needs was a challenge.

Eleven teachers (27%) mentioned that their confidence and working with children with special needs was a challenge. Very few teachers, the exact number of nine (22%), mentioned that communicating with parents was a challenge, and 12 of

teachers (29%) mentioned that involving parents to support their child with special needs was a challenge.

Under the option 'other', more challengers were enlisted by the participants, such as:

- A teacher mentioned inconsistent rules within the centre;
- A teacher mentioned the centre environment;
- A teacher mentioned negative attitudes towards special needs child;
- Three teachers (7%) mentioned it is a long waiting time to get any help from the Ministry;
- A teacher mentioned fewer hours was provided by support workers;
- A teacher mentioned they do not have time to support communication delay due to the ratio; and
- A teacher mentioned getting parents to understand their child needs special support.

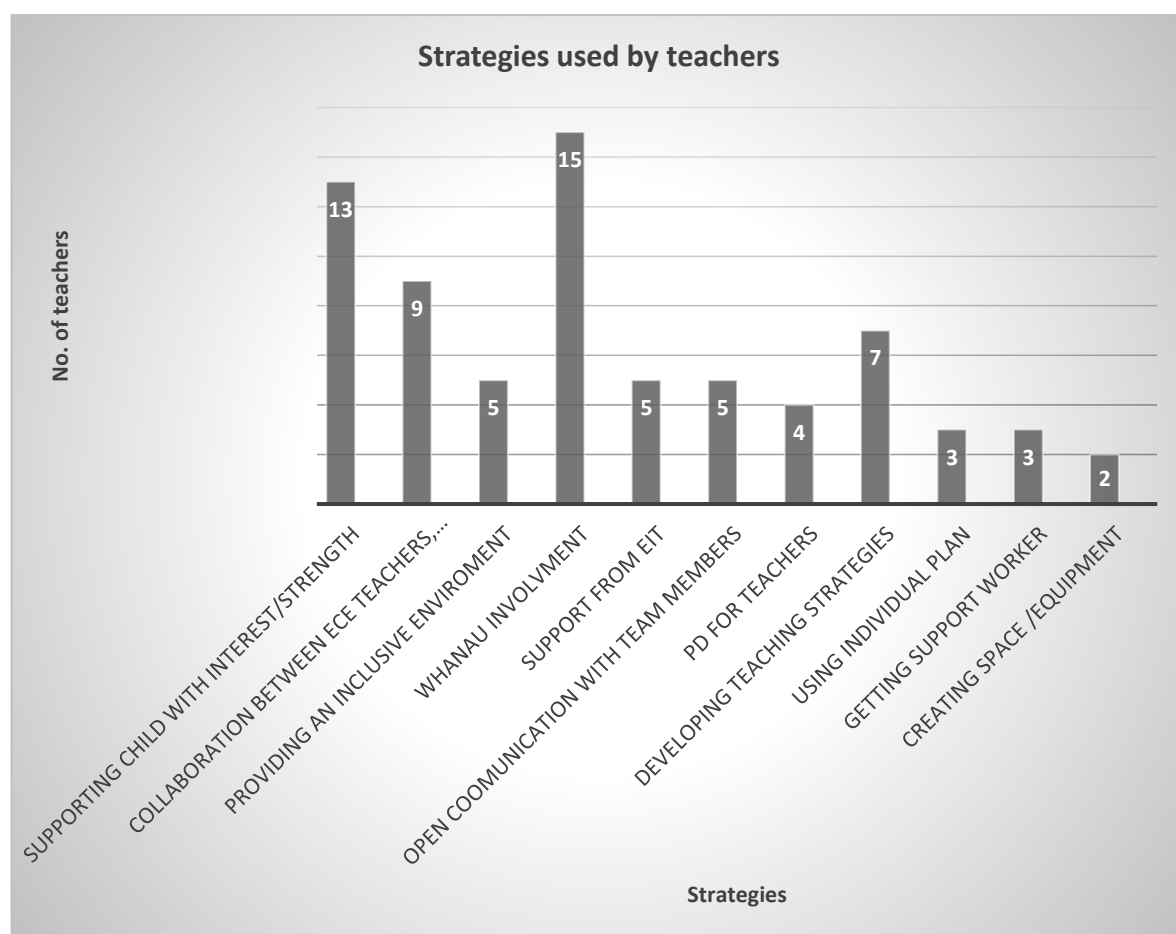
#### ***4.6. Strategies for Inclusive Education***

Teachers were asked to mention the strategies that they have used to support inclusion during their practice in providing inclusive education. The responses were categorised under 5 sub-categories:

- 1) strategies used by teachers;
- 2) factors that supported teachers to maintain an inclusive education;
- 3) support provided to early childhood teachers to develop an inclusive education;
- 4) early childhood teacher's expectations from early intervention teachers; and
- 5) changes that could make the centre more inclusive.

**Figure 4.6.1: represents strategies used by teachers**

Teachers were asked to mention the strategies they have used while providing inclusive education to children. The most common strategies mentioned by teachers to create an inclusive environment when working with children with special needs are presented in the chart. However, teachers also mentioned a few specific strategies that are listed under the topic: specific strategies.



According to the data, whānau involvement was mostly used as a strategy as it is mentioned by 15 teachers (37%). Secondly, supporting an individual child with interest and strength was mentioned by 13 teachers (32%). Third, nine teachers (22%) have used collaboration between early childhood teachers, early intervention teachers and whānau as a strategy to create an inclusive environment.

Getting help from support worker and using individual plan was used by only 3 of the teachers (7%). Creating space and equipment to provide an inclusive environment was mentioned by the least number of teachers – only 2 (5%).

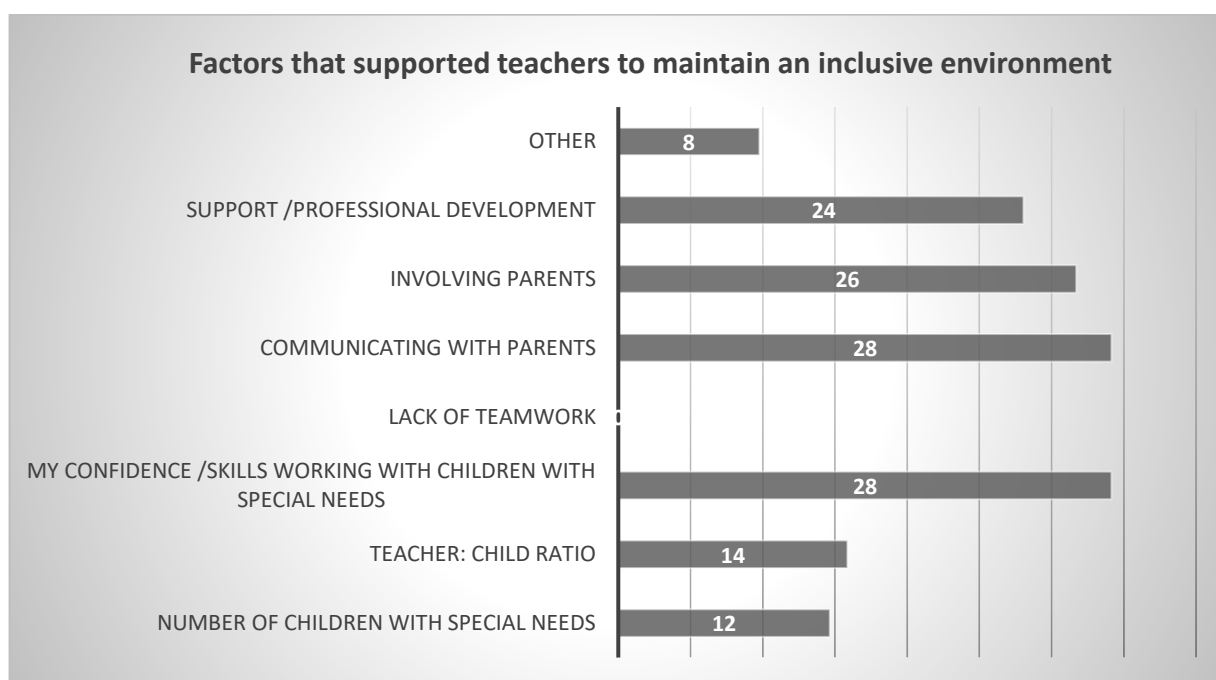
### **Specific strategies:**

These specific strategies were mentioned by each of the teachers that participated, in addition to the most common strategies that are previously mentioned in the chart. A number of them are enlisted as relevant to the research:

- Catering to the learners learning styles, audio, visual, tactile, or kinaesthetic and encourage emotional intelligence;
- Being clear with giving instructions and give heaps of time to transition from one stage to next;
- Rewarding good behaviour in a way that everyone is rewarded for positive behaviour;
- Appreciating, acknowledging, accepting differences, encouraging kindness and friendship;
- Providing a solitary space where children can go to when they need quiet space;
- Special needs children are not separated during the learning experiences but are supported and encouraged to be part of the learning experience;
- Providing supporting games around social competency with role play and puppets;
- Role model, finding strength and letting others know;
- Home visits before starting day-care for special needs children;
- Internal reviews, reflections, and positive guidance is revisited and reviewed regularly;
- The ratio needs to be one to one to support the special needs child; and
- Trying new ways to support according to each child's unique set of circumstances.

**Figure 4.6.2: represents factors that supported teachers to maintain an inclusive education**

Teachers were given options to choose factors that have helped them to maintain inclusive education.



It was indicated that communicating with parents is a major factor that helped develop and maintain inclusive education, as this factor was selected by 28 teachers (68%). It was also evident that teachers confidence/ skills working with children with special needs were also one of the major factors as it was also mentioned by 28 teachers (68%). Involving parents in supporting children with special needs was another favourable factor, as it was selected by 26 teachers (63%). Lack of teamwork was not a factor that was helping maintain an inclusive environment as 0% of the teachers selected that option.

Professional development was another factor selected by the majority of teachers – 24 of them (59%). Teachers have not given a high priority to teachers-to-child ratio and the number of children with special needs as a factor that helps to maintain an inclusive education, as it was selected by 14 (34%) and 12 teachers (29%), respectively.

However, under the option 'other', one teacher mentioned that research and huge support from the research team helped maintain an inclusive environment. Two teachers (5%) also stated their personal experience ("My own extensive experience of autism spectrum disorders through having a son with Aspergers") or experience ("I have a background of 20 years working in a disability sector") have helped develop an inclusive environment.

One teacher (2%) mentioned that "openness and willingness to listen and take on board suggestions" has helped maintain an inclusive environment. Any kind of answers such as "that is too hard" or similar was excluded since there is always another way, but the most important thing that is the number of special needs. Any more than two severe behavioural needs is extremely challenging" to maintain an inclusive education. One teacher (2%) mentioned that all options given are very important regarding the aspects to maintain an inclusive environment for children.

#### ***4.6.3 Support provided to early childhood teachers to develop inclusive education***

When asked what kind of support was provided to teachers by early intervention teachers and other paraprofessionals, none of the teachers mentioned any other paraprofessionals, except early intervention teachers and speech therapists. Eleven teachers (27%) felt that they were not supported by early intervention teachers.

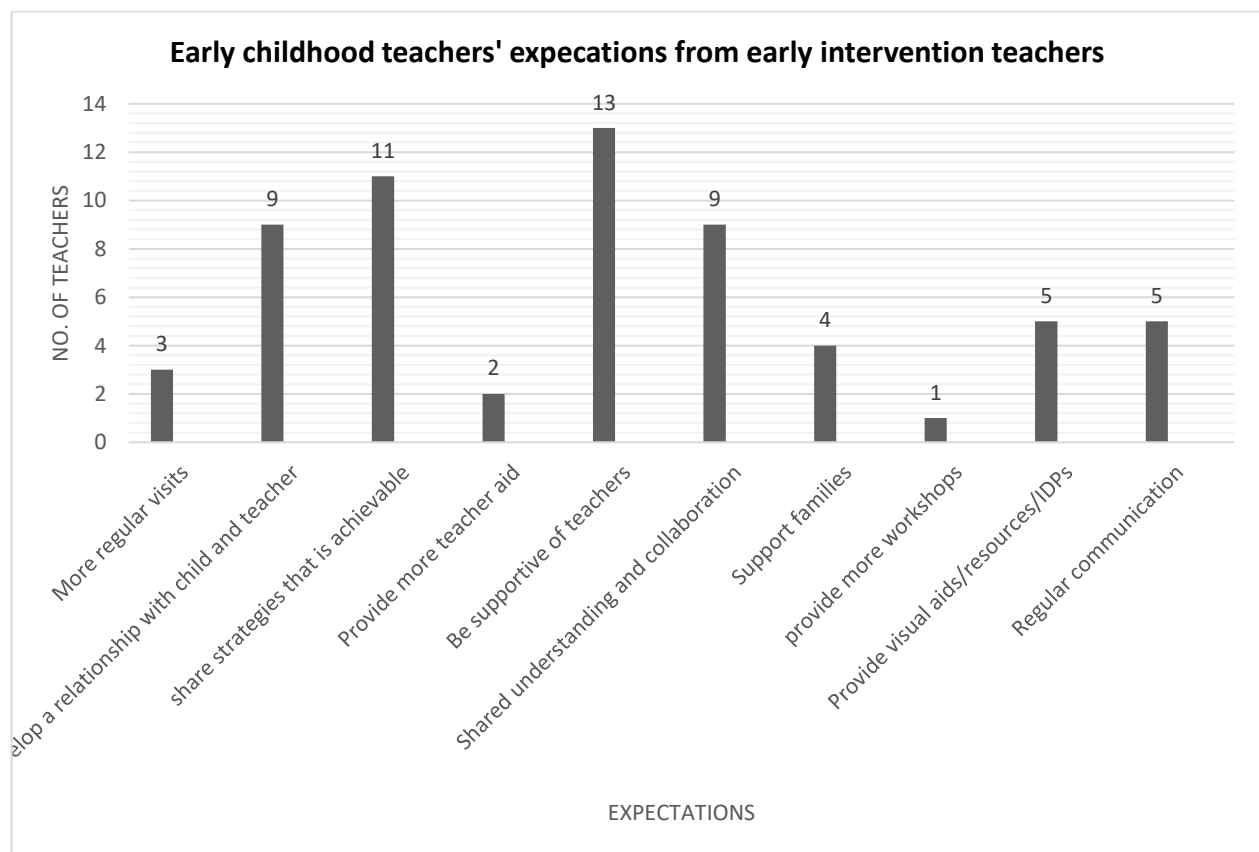
However, a large number of teachers (73%) have been helped and supported to provide inclusive education. They have enlisted certain ways how they were helped and supported, such as:

- Nine teachers (22%) mentioned that they were provided professional development by early intervention teachers together with speech therapists;
- Fourteen teachers (34%) stated that they were given Individual Development Plan and action plans by early intervention teachers to support children with special needs;
- Five teachers (12%) mentioned that they were provided resources such as visual cards to use as part of the action plan by speech therapist;

- Two teachers (5%) included that they were supported with involving parents and whānau in developing the action plan; and
- Two teachers (5%) were taught sign languages by a speech therapist to support children with speech delay.

**Figure 4.6.4: represents early childhood teachers' expectations from early intervention teachers**

Teachers were asked to mention their expectations from early intervention teachers when working towards providing inclusive education. The data gathered was analysed under the most common themes.



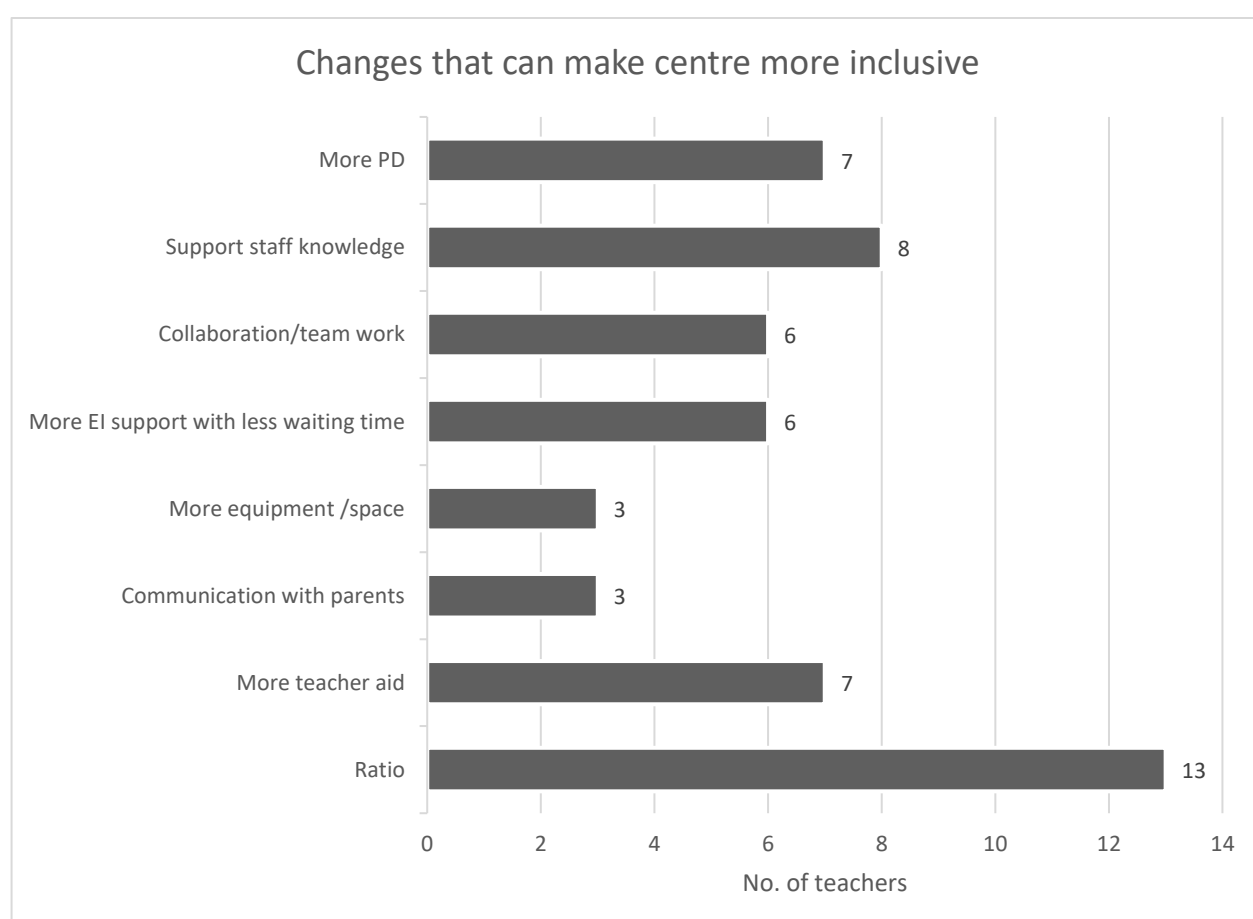
It was indicated by the majority of teachers, 13 of them (32%), that they needed early intervention teachers to be supportive of early childhood teachers. Secondly, 11 teachers (27%) wanted early intervention teachers to share achievable strategies. It can be noted that early childhood teachers should be developing relationships with children with special needs and their whānau, as indicated by 9 of teachers (22%).

Early intervention teachers should also develop a shared understanding with early childhood teachers, as mentioned by 9 of teachers (22%).

Teachers did not want more workshops or teacher aid, as selected by one (2%) and 2 teachers (4%), respectively. It can be noticed that only 3 teachers (7%) expect more visits, however, 5 teachers (12%) expected regular communications and provision of visual aids/resources/ IDPs.

**Figure4.6.5: represents the changes that could make a centre more inclusive**

Teachers were asked to suggest two changes they could make for a more inclusive centre for children with special needs. The data were analysed in a chart.



It is indicated that most of the teachers would like to change the ratio to make a centre more inclusive, as mentioned by 13 of them (32%). Ratio was the biggest



challenge faced by teachers in the previous data (challenges faced by teachers). Eight teachers (20%) mentioned that they want to increase the support given to extending staff knowledge. Seven teachers (17%) mentioned that more teacher aid, as well as more professional development, needs to be given to make a centre more inclusive. Three teachers (7%) wanted to increase communication with parents to make a change for a centre to be more inclusive. The same three teachers (7%) wanted more equipment/space to make a centre more inclusive.

## **Conclusion**

The above-mentioned findings indicate that there is not one common definition of inclusive education since different teachers have a different understanding. Even though the teachers were qualified, most of them still showed a commitment to upgrade their knowledge to support inclusion which is considered positive. Teachers have mentioned the strategies they have already used and strategies they think can make inclusion more successful. Teachers have experienced numerous challenges and have tried different strategies to overcome those challenges, however, there are expectations and changes that they think will further support inclusive education. That data will be discussed in-depth under the discussion chapter further on.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The following chapter discusses the data presented in the previous chapter. It discusses teachers' understanding of inclusive education. It also explicates what factors make inclusion success and what challenges are associated with it. The findings of the research are compared with literature and with the New Zealand early childhood curriculum document. It seeks to answer the following research questions with providing a coherent review of the research: What does inclusive education mean to early childhood teachers? What are the challenges faced by teachers while providing inclusive education? What are the strategies for providing an inclusive education? The chapter is divided into the following sections, based on common themes from the survey findings:

1. Teacher's qualification and experience promote a positive attitude towards inclusion
2. Professional development supports inclusive education
3. Teaching strategies and inclusive environment support inclusion
4. Collaboration and communication support inclusion
5. Teacher-child ratio can be a challenge for successful inclusive education.

### **5.2 Teacher's qualification and experience promotes a positive attitude towards inclusion**

After the insight in the data collected, it can most likely be concluded that qualification and teaching experience both have a positive influence on teachers' understanding of inclusive education. All the teachers who took part in the survey were qualified or in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of training with a wide range of teaching experiences and they all had a positive attitude towards inclusive education. Their perceptions of inclusive education were: first, that inclusion is a child's right to education, and they should be valued as an individual irrespective of race, religion, ability, gender and sexual orientation. These results validate what other researchers (Purdue, 2006; Nuttall, 2003; Winter, 2007) say about inclusion - that it is a commitment to all children

irrespective of who they are. Second, a majority of the teachers (56%) mentioned that inclusive education means to value every child as a unique individual and provide equitable opportunities for learnings. Third, some teachers (7%) believe that inclusive education is an education system that enables children to contribute to their fullest potential. Fourth, some of the teachers (5%) believe that inclusion is supporting children to socialise and be respected and accepted by peers. Lastly, a teacher (2%) believe that inclusive education is an education system that caters for all children's needs not necessarily just children with a label/diagnosis. These understanding of inclusive education by teachers is validated by researchers Ballard (1998); Moffat, (2011); Purdue, (2006); and Winter, (2001) where they mentioned that children with special needs to be respected, included in the curriculum with equal opportunities alongside their peers. According to the data of teachers' understanding of inclusive education it can be seen that even though different teachers have a different perception of inclusive education, they all show a positive attitude towards inclusive education. This result is validated by MacArthur et al. (2003) and Purdue (2004) - when teachers have a positive attitude and believe in equal rights for children and family, they meet the educational needs of the children.

It seems that teachers' confidence and experience promote inclusive education. It was astonishing to notice that a great number of teachers (68%) believe that their confidence and skills while working with children with special needs has helped maintain an inclusive environment. Some of the teachers (5%) also mentioned that to maintain an inclusive environment, their personal experience and years of teaching experience have made an enormous difference in the way they support inclusion, as one teacher mentioned: "I refuse to accept that it is too hard". This is validated by Avramidis and Norwich (2002), where they mention that when teachers gain the skills to implement the policy and encounter the success of their hard work, they become more positive towards inclusion.

One interesting point noticed from the teachers' understanding of inclusive education was that out of 41 teachers, only one teacher (2%) mentioned Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the importance of partnership and equality. The reason this point becomes quite thought-provoking is that early childhood teachers should be practising

the Tiriti of Waitangi daily. However, majority of the teachers (98%) did not mention the Tiriti of Waitangi in the whole survey Te Tiriti o Waitangi | the Treaty of Waitangi is New Zealand's founding document and New Zealand is increasingly multicultural. The Treaty is understood to be inclusive of all immigrants to New Zealand, whose welcome comes in the context of this partnership. It is mentioned in *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 2017), that early childhood educators should respond to the changing diverse population of Aotearoa New Zealand "by valuing and supporting the different cultures represented in their settings" (p.3).

### **5.3 Professional development supports inclusive education**

From the gathered data that was analysed, all teachers were qualified or nearly qualified (3<sup>rd</sup>-year students) in early childhood; however, it was found that they attended courses and professional development to support them and extend their knowledge about inclusive education. This indicates their dedication and commitment towards children with special needs in their care. The gathered data also showed that most of the teachers have attended more than one course, however, *Incredible Years* is a course that was attended by most (44%) of the teachers. This result is validated by Moffats' (2017) research findings, where all teachers were registered in the *Incredible Years* programme and this showed the teacher's commitment towards children with special needs as well as refining their knowledge of inclusive education. *Incredible Years* is a course for training teachers and parents for nurturing children's social, emotional, and academic competence, provided by the Ministry of Education and Auckland Kindergarten Association (The Incredible years, 2014). This course is designed to support children from the age of three to the age of eight with five principles incorporated. They are the following: "Principle One - Promoting supportive relationships with students and parents; Principle Two - Teachers using research-based classroom management strategies; Principle Three - Individualisation of students learning goals; Principle Four- Teachers start nurturing students early and build a secure learning foundation; and Principle Five - Teachers develop support networks" (Webster-Stratton, 2012, pp. 25-30). The principals of *Incredible Years* are closely related to the understanding of inclusive education of early childhood teachers furthermore these principals support and promote inclusive education.

However, according to research data the reason why *Incredible Years* course was attended by most of the early childhood teachers, can not be detected, it can be assumed that teachers were requested by the early childhood management or the teachers themselves requested for incredible course knowing the knowledge they lacked in supporting children with special needs. This leads to the further research interest of how effective this course is about providing successful inclusive education. *Incredible Years* course is guided by the principals that promote inclusion, hence teachers have been taking courses that is relevant to their need to develop inclusive education. This is also mentioned by Moffat (2017) where she mentions that teachers have stated they always attended relevant professional development opportunities to support inclusion and this included attending positive child guidance courses (p.63). Therefore providing professional development which is in line with current thinking helps promote inclusion (Purdue, 2004).

The data showed that teachers felt that more professional development (17 % of respondents) could make a centre more inclusive. Therefore, teachers have upgraded their knowledge (73%) in specific areas that would best support them and the children with special needs. However, 56% of teachers mentioned that getting support and professional development was a challenge. Macartney (2016) validated this by stating that "professional development for teachers and teams to guide and support inclusive thinking and practices is scarce" (p. 3). However, there hasn't been many literature reviews that could validate that getting professional development is a challenge for early childhood teachers.

It seems likely that there are teachers who reflect on their knowledge and attend courses to support and promote inclusive education. It was analysed that most of the teachers (59%) have mentioned that staff knowledge should be supported to make a centre more inclusive, as they indicated that support from professional development and other courses has helped them to maintain inclusive education. This shows that there are teachers who are more likely to reflect on their knowledge and are efficient in attending courses that support successful inclusive education. This result is validated by Hamilton and Vermeren (2016) where they stated that according to their participants' response most early childhood teachers were passionate and

were supportive of children with special needs. Macartney and Missy (2013) also validates the above result and recommended that teachers need support to identify barriers to learning and development of children with special needs and further need professional support about inclusive education which should be continuous and reflective of teacher's thoughts and practice.

#### **5.4 Teaching strategies and inclusive environment supports inclusive education**

The early childhood teachers in this research project to believe that developing teaching strategies for children with special needs and including them in individual planning will support inclusion. Most of the teachers (32%) stated that that they need to develop teaching strategies to support inclusive education. This is validated by Purdue (2006) where he states that teachers need to analyse obstacles for children with special needs and provide strategies to eliminate these obstacles. It seemed mostly likely that teachers were more knowledgeable of teaching strategies and have used it to support children with special needs. As teachers mentioned quite a lot of, specific strategies such as using audio, visual, tactile, or kinaesthetic tools, can be applied to cater to children's learning style. Teachers mentioned that they need to give clear instructions and give enough time to transition from one stage to next. Another teacher mentioned that children with special needs need to be rewarded for good behaviour in a way that everyone is rewarded for positive behaviour. These results are consistent with earlier research by authors like Moffat (2011) who mentioned that positive praising supported children's "learning and inclusion" (p.109).

A teacher mentioned that children with special needs should be appreciated, acknowledged, accepted with differences, and encouraged to develop friendships. This strategy seems to be supporting children with special needs to be more confident and respected among their peers, hence learning and developing with equal opportunities as validated by Ballard (1998); Winter (2007) and Moffat (2011). Its thought-provoking to notice that only one teacher mentioned this strategy but its

validated by three researchers, which indicates that it is a valuable strategy for providing inclusive education.

Furthermore, it was astonishing there was only one teacher who stated that children with special needs should not be separated during the learning experiences but are supported and encouraged to be part of the learning experience. This seemed to be a valuable strategy for inclusive education since it is validated by Higgins, MacArthur, and Morton (2008) where teachers should, teach in a style that all children can relate to. Higgins, MacArthur, and Morton (2008) also mentioned that inclusion does not “entail a one-size-fits-all mainstream” approach.

Surprisingly only one teacher mentioned that they could home visit children with special needs before they start day-care so that there is a better understanding of the child as well as a trusting relationship can be developed. This result is authenticated by Education Review Office (2016), that this strategy is a good practise where teachers visit child’s home to develop relationships that would provide a better and easier transition for the child. Another important point mentioned by only one teacher was that internal reviews, reflections, and positive guidance should be revisited and reviewed regularly by the whole teaching team so that everyone is on the same page when it comes to supporting the children. This result is validated by the Education Review Office (2016) recommendations that states how early childhood teachers should develop “shared understanding” for inclusive practise (p.31). However, it is interesting to note that only a few teachers (17%) have used teaching strategies, compared to 32% of teachers who believed that developing teaching strategy would support children with special needs. This arises a question for future research, why are teachers not able to implement their understanding and knowledge in practice when providing inclusive education.

Furthermore, teachers (32%) have used a child's interest and strength to support the child with special needs. Seven percent of the teachers have used the individual plan created by the early intervention teachers. This indicates that teachers can identify children's strength and weaknesses and support their development. *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 2017) also states, that teachers need to "effectively respond to the strengths, interests, abilities and needs of each child and, at times, provide them with

additional support about learning, behaviour, development or communication" (p.13). When considering learning, teachers need to reflect and assess how this aspect is interrelated with different aspects and the way it "supports children's strength" (MOE, 2017, p.19).

Results show that some teachers (12%) also believe that providing a curriculum and environment that caters to everyone's needs where all children have access is part of providing inclusive education. Only two teachers mentioned that each child with additional needs should be able to actively participate in the program and are included in all learning opportunities. Another teacher mentioned that an inclusive environment is the one that allows for inclusive education and provides a strong sense of confidence and competence for all children - an environment that allows everyone to participate at their level. *Te Whāriki* (2017) also states that providing an inclusive environment requires modifying the environment and teaching strategies, as needed to eliminate obstacles for partaking and learning. This shows that 66% teachers don't consider that providing a curriculum and environment might support inclusion, however, nothing was mentioned about the challenges of providing an inclusive curriculum and environment. The Ministry of Education (2000) and *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 2017) supports the idea that inclusion is where all children are included and encouraged in the curriculum. However, according to Purdue, Ballard, and MacArthur (2001) teachers and managers often found physical access a challenge in accessing when supporting children with special needs. Furthermore, Gordon-Burns, Purdue, Rarer-Brigs, Stark, and Turnock (2010) also stated that teachers did not have the expertise and skills to provide appropriate strategies or reflect on their environment to provide inclusive education. Education Review Office (2016) also identified that 49% of centres that were mostly inclusive, but not entirely inclusive, showed that they lacked the following:

- documentation to support a shared understanding across the service and sustainability of good practice;
- limitations in the physical environment; and
- poor adaptation of the curriculum (p.11).



Interestingly, only nine teachers (22%) mentioned that all children should have equitable access to resources, to ensure that all children can access the curriculum and participate at their level. This shows that 78% of teachers haven't considered providing resources as a strategy. However, according to Purdue (2009) resources are a major factor in determining the inclusion of children with special needs and their family at the early childcare centres. Purdue (2004) also states that teacher's face challenges such as lack of knowledge about disability, skills, training, and resources even though they accept the principle of inclusion. Therefore, it can be concluded that teachers need to reflect on the environment, the resources available for inclusive education to support child's dispositions and interest.

### **5.5. Collaboration and communication support inclusion**

It can be concluded that collaboration with parents that is: communicating with them and involving them in the inclusive education were two factors of inclusion that was a high priority for teachers. As the result indicated that 63% of teachers believe that involving parents is a factor that supports inclusion and 68% teachers believe that communicating with parents is another factor that supports inclusion. The above result also validates one of the seven principles of Ministry of Education's Special Education Policy (2000) that "partnership between students' families / whānau and education providers is essential in overcoming barriers to learning".

Furthermore, teachers (24%) have shown an understanding that to provide successful inclusive education whānau and culture should be included in the centre and collaboration should be maintained between early childhood teachers, early intervention teachers and whānau. It can be concluded that teachers also believe that collaboration of all the adults affecting the child with special needs is very important for successful inclusive education. Therefore, open and consistent communication with all the adults in their lives is important. This understanding of teachers is supported by *Te whāriki* (MOE, 2017) that inclusive education is where teachers will collaborate with "families, whānau and community" discover and remove all barriers to learning (p.13).

Results from the present study have shown that teachers (10%) believe that inclusion is an education system that should be accessible to parents and children with equal opportunities. Teachers also mentioned that children and their parents need to be valued, listened to, to understand what matters to them and what they value important for inclusion. These results are authenticated by researchers such as Gordon-Burns, Purdue, Rarer-Brigs, Stark, and Turnock (2010) who also believe that parents are more knowledgeable when it comes to knowing their child - therefore, they need to be respected as being a valuable member of the teaching team. Park and Turnbull (2003) also validate teachers understanding and recommend improvement of the delivery of integrated services including enhancing family centeredness and including family in the program planning.

It was a concern to notice that only (2%) teachers believe that communities should be informed and understand better about inclusion to promote positive attitude for inclusive education. Furthermore, its astonishing that only (2%) teachers believe that positive attitude and respect for children with special needs and their families and parent involvement, where families feel valued, supported, and heard, will promote successful inclusive education this understanding of teachers is validated by Purdue (2004) where he supports that if teacher's view is negative towards inclusion, then children with special needs and their whānau can be viewed with a “negative sense” as well.

Education Review Office (2012) discovered that for services that were not very inclusive, working collaboratively was considered a major challenge. However, from this survey, it was concluded that teachers have been involving whānau for supporting children with special needs and understand the importance of this strategy. Teachers mentioned (68%) that involving parents and communication helped them maintain an inclusive environment. Only a few teachers out of all questioned (7%) wanted to increase communication with parents to make a centre more inclusive as they have been using this strategy successfully. This result is validated by Dunn (2008) and Moffat (2011) that when adults work collaboratively and share valuable information, they enhance successful inclusion.

On the other hand, in some cases teachers (22%) found it challenging to communicate with parents to make them understand their child needs special support. This result was validated by Education Review Office that even though early childhood centres are inclusive, they still face the challenge of bringing the parents on board that their child needs support which affects in getting early intervention professionals support and funding - hence a challenge to work collaboratively (Education Review Office, 2016).

There are challenges in getting early intervention support to provide inclusive education. From this survey, it was analysed that teachers (17%) found it was a long wait getting support for special needs children from the Ministry of Education. This result is validated by the Education Review Office report (2016) where the managers and leaders have mentioned one of the challenges precisely is the delay in support from the Ministry after the referrals were made.

Teachers mentioned (17 %) that more teacher aid could make a centre more inclusive, whereas one teacher (2 %) wanted teacher aids to be trained so that there is consistency in practice for all children. Surprisingly only one teacher (two %) mentioned that another challenge is that support workers were provided only a few hours to support teachers who were not adequate. This result is validated where Education Review Office report, states that leaders and managers have mentioned one of the challenges was funding for support workers – which was not provided for all the hours that the child attended (MOE, 2016).

It seems likely that early childhood teachers understood that they needed support and collaboration with early intervention teachers to provide inclusive education. Teachers (27 %) wanted early intervention teachers to share strategies that were feasible with shared understanding. Some of the early childhood teachers (23 %) think that early intervention teachers should develop a relationship with each child with special needs and whānau. Teachers (15 %) wanted more support from the early intervention but with less waiting time as an important determinant. Authors like MacArthur and Dight (2000) validates that teacher's knowledge, confidence to work with children with special needs and its ability to work collaboratively with early intervention teachers supports inclusion on a high level.

## **5.6. Teacher-child ratio can be a challenge for successful inclusive education**

The fact that the teacher-child ratio is important for inclusive education can be easily stated, however, the data analysed was contradicting. Teachers believe that the teacher-child ratio can be a challenge when providing inclusive education. Consequently, 73 % of the teachers mentioned that teacher to child ratio is a challenge for inclusive education. The majority of the teachers (51 %) mentioned that the number of children with special needs was a challenge when providing inclusive education. Furthermore, Cheuk and Hatch (2007) validate this result, where they have mentioned the adult-to-child ratio as a challenge in practice.

However, when teachers were asked about their understanding of successful inclusive education, only a few of them (seven %) mentioned that a low teacher-child ratio will support successful inclusive education. On the other hand, more teachers (34 %) believe that a low ratio will be a contributing factor to maintain an inclusive education. Furthermore, the same 32 % of teachers think that changing the ratio will make a centre more inclusive. These results are validated by earlier research conducted by Moffat (2011) where she states that having “lower ratio promotes inclusion” (p.109).

Teachers have encountered that when they have more than two severe behavioural needs, that situations are extremely challenging to maintain an inclusive education. Only one teacher mentioned that teachers did not have the time to support communication delay due to ratio. On the other hand, when teachers were asked what strategies they have already used to support inclusion, only one teacher mentioned that ratio needs to be one to one, to support the child with special needs so that he feels included and appreciated. These results are validated by the Education Review Office (2012) with results where they also concluded that teachers were not able to support children due to their knowledge or adult-to-child ratio. Furthermore, the research conducted by Moffat (2011) has recommended that the government should

be looking at a low teacher-child ratio, as lower ratios worked well in providing an inclusive education according to her research.

It can be concluded that early childhood teachers can identify ratio as a challenge, however, they have not been able to alter the ratio to maintain an inclusive education or have not used the low ratio as a strategy. This contradicting result recommends for further research.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusions**

This chapter provides an overall overview of the conducted research by answering the defined research questions. It also outlines the limitations and recommendations that arose from analysing the data.

### **Review of the Research**

*What does inclusive education mean to early childhood teachers?*

First of all, it was great to conclude that teachers believe in providing inclusive education and have a positive attitude towards it. Different teachers have a different understanding of inclusive education, and this comes down to their teaching experience and confidence to work with children with special needs. They have also shown that they believe in reflecting on their knowledge and upgrading their skills with professional development, which is relevant for them to provide a successful inclusive education. Teachers have indicated that children's rights to education and using different teaching style/strategies to provide an inclusive environment is very important for inclusive education. Furthermore, they believe and understand the importance of the involvement of parents and working in collaboration with early intervention teachers, in providing inclusive education and consider all these factors highly important.

*What are the challenges faced by teachers while providing inclusive education?*

It was also rewarding to conclude that most of the teachers have been reflecting on the challenges and working on strategies for overcoming them. Teachers are still facing the challenge to bring parents on board when they want to refer a child with special needs. However, they have been collaborating with parents to provide inclusive education. Another challenge they faced was that they wait for too long to get any support from the Ministry of Education and they do not get enough hours of support for workers with children having special needs. Teachers find it a challenge to collaborate with early intervention teachers when it comes to sharing strategies. Also, early childhood teachers still need shared understanding and achievable individual

plan from early intervention teachers. One interesting point that has to be mentioned was made by only one of the teachers - they want early intervention teachers to develop a relationship with children with special needs and their whānau. According to the researcher's experience, this is a very important point as she believes that with an honest and trustful relationship we can fully support any individual, either a child with special needs, his whānau or the early childhood teachers. As the relationship is one of the principals of *Te Whāriki* and states that "children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things" (p.21) therefore early intervention teachers should develop a relationship with the child to provide support.

Another challenge that teachers have mentioned is the teacher-child ratio, which can be a challenge when providing inclusive education. However, they have not given any strong views about it or strategies that they have used to overcome this challenge. According to the literature review, it was seen that the ratio can be a challenge when providing inclusive education.

#### *What are the strategies for providing an inclusive education?*

Teachers have been working out strategies for providing inclusive education. They have been reflecting on their knowledge, as well as reflecting on ways that they can provide a successful inclusive environment for the children with special needs. Teachers have been using children's interest and strength to provide learning that involves all the curriculum areas. The major strategy that they have been positively working on is a collaboration with parents and early intervention teachers. It seems that teachers have used parent involvement and valued their contribution to providing inclusive education. The data also showed that teachers have been using the strands of the curriculum and have a good understanding of using the curriculum for providing inclusive education. The researcher found that using the survey has not given an in-depth and rich result and hence limited the discussion as well. This will be further discussed under the next topic.

## **Rationale for a survey**

The limitations of using survey this particular research are that it is an internet survey, so the answers were not discussed in great depth, neither was any clarification requested from any of the participants, which was a downfall to providing a rich qualitative discussion. However, the information gathered can be used for in-depth research studies.

The survey was limited to early childhood teachers who worked for one big organisation, therefore, it did not include teachers from other companies, either from community kindergartens where ratios are different.

Another limitation was that only qualified teachers and 3<sup>rd</sup>-year students (teacher-in-training) took part in the survey hence provided only one aspect, of inclusive education. An internet survey was used via Facebook, so it reached out to teachers who were members of that Facebook page only. It can be safe to state that this research does not include perspectives of children and whānau about inclusive education provided by early childhood teachers/centres, which is a path where research could be continued.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations for future research developed in this research are the following findings and discussions raised in this study:

- It would be beneficial to find out how do centres support teachers when they have more than two challenging children in one room without support from the Ministry of Education;
- It would also be interesting to find out if teachers and management change the ratio in their centre if they cannot provide quality care for special needs children;
- Due to the shortage of qualified teachers in the early childhood sector, it would be beneficial to answer how are children with special needs and their parents affected by less qualified teachers;



- When it comes to supporting the qualified workers, is it important for them to know the curriculum and inclusive education? Should they be qualified to some extent related to child development?
- How well do early intervention teachers know the family and child when they develop their plan? Another question to be answered is are they contributing to the child's learning and assessment such as writing learning stories?
- And finally, to answer if the teachers can fully implement their understanding and knowledge in practice when providing inclusive education, or some challenges hinder them to provide quality education?

## **Summary**

Overall the study has answered the research questions and has shown that teachers have different understanding and explanation of inclusive education. It has also identified the challenges that teachers have been facing and the strategies they have used.

The research has discovered early childhood teachers' perspectives of inclusive education in early childhood. According to the literature review provided in this research, inclusive education is still challenging even though lots of policies have been written. There has been a great shift in involving children with special needs in the mainstream educational system.

Most qualified teachers likely appear to have a positive attitude and are confident while providing inclusive education. They have shown respect for children with special needs and their whānau and hence, included the parents in supporting their children's developmental delays. They have been reflecting on their own practise and knowledge whilst taking part in professional development. They have also been reviewing strategies to overcome the challenges for successful inclusive education. It is most likely to state that the teachers have been working effectively in providing successful inclusive education, by promoting it, widening it and adapting to its downfalls.

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## **Appendix No. A**



**How early childhood teachers and early intervention teachers collaborate while providing inclusive education in New Zealand?**

**Researcher/s Name: Pratika Singh**

**Address: 16 B Aotea Rd. Glen Eden. 0602**

**Phone number: 0212055186**

**Email: [pratikasingh@yahoo.com.au](mailto:pratikasingh@yahoo.com.au)**

I Pratika Singh, Agree to treat in absolute confidence all information that I become aware of in the course of transcribing the interviews or other material connected with the above research topic. I agree to respect the privacy of the individuals mentioned in the interviews that I am transcribing. I will not pass on in any form of information regarding those interviews to any person or institution. On completion of transcription, I will not retain or copy any information involving the above project.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if we disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which we will have access.

Signature: ..... Date:  
.....

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: ####**

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from **(date) to (date)**. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 8551). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

## Appendix No. B

### Survey for early childhood teachers

#### General Information

1	How many years have you been working as an early childhood teacher?
2	What is your highest academic qualification?
3	Is your teaching qualification in ECE, Primary or Secondary teaching?
4	Which age group do you work with?
5	<p>Have you done any study or professional development in special education or behaviour management? Yes/No</p> <p>Any details of this study or PD you can give are appreciated e.g. approximate date, level and duration of course etc:</p>

6	What do you understand by inclusive education in ECE?
7	<p>What is a successful inclusive education in your opinion?</p> <p>Please give up to three examples.</p>

8	<p>What are some of the strategies you have used to create an inclusive environment when working with children with special needs (either in your current centre or in the past):</p>
9	<p>What are the challenges you face while working to be inclusive with children with special needs?</p> <p>Select all that apply:</p>



1	1	<p>In what ways have you been supported in your teaching by early intervention teachers and other paraprofessionals such as speech-language therapists and physiotherapists?</p> <p>Comment:</p>
2	1	<p>What are your expectations of early intervention teachers?</p>



3	1 Suggest two changes that you think could make your centre more inclusive of children with special needs?
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**Thank you for your co-operation.**

## Appendix No. C



### **Participant Information Form**

My name is Pratika Singh. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Applied practice degree, at the Unitec Institute of Technology and I am seeking your help in meeting the requirements of my research project which forms a substantial part of this degree.

**Research Project Title: Early childhood teachers' perspectives of inclusive education**

The aim of this project is:

1. To discover how New Zealand early childhood teachers provide inclusive learning environments for children with special needs;
2. To define a sample on how New Zealand early childhood teachers feel about inclusive education;
3. What are the strategies used by New Zealand early childhood teachers for providing an inclusive environment?

Your participation is requested in the following manner:

- To respond to the survey to the best of your ability. It will take approximately 25 mins.

Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in the final thesis. Data collected is completely anonymous. For this reason, your participation in the survey will be seen as consent to use the information. Once you submit the survey no one will be able to identify and remove your information if you change your mind. You do not have to answer any or all of the questions. Your participation is purely voluntary and there is no way for anyone to tell whether you have responded or not. Data will be kept for 5 years and then destroyed by the researcher. The raw results of the research activity will not be seen by any other person in your organization and are available only to the researcher and the research supervisor.

A summary of findings will be provided to all the Best Start centres in Auckland on completion of the project and the final thesis is available from the regional manager on request.

Hoping that you find this invitation to be of interest, if you have any queries about this research, please contact the research supervisor at Unitec New Zealand:

**The name of the supervisor:**

Maureen Perkins

Phone number: 02 1048 2206

E-mail: [mperkins2@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:mperkins2@unitec.ac.nz)

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: **2017-1076**

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from **3/11/2017** to **3/11/2018**. If there are any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, please contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 8551). Any issues raised will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, with parties informed of the outcome.