

## Literature Review

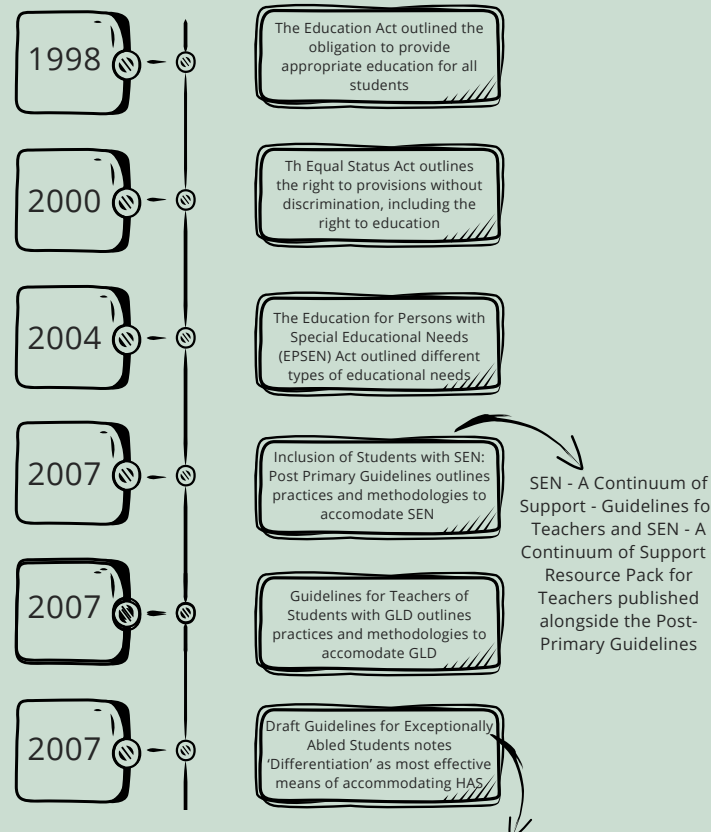
### Acronyms & Abbreviations

- HAS - High Ability Student
- SEN - Special Educational Needs
- GLD - Generalised Learning Difficulties
- NCCA - National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

### Inclusion in the Irish Education System

With the diversification of classrooms, including gender, ethnicity, learner ability and socioeconomic backgrounds, educators must equip themselves with the necessary tools to meet learner needs (1). The creation of inclusive classrooms, that support equitable opportunities for all learners, requires continued engagement with evidence informed practices (2 & 3).

Fig. 1: Graphic depicting some of the major publications in relation to inclusion in the Irish Education System



While Educational policy in Ireland has seen improvements to the inclusion of SEN and GLD in Irish schools, it failed to represent an often-forgotten cohort of students (4). HAS were not formally recognised in Irish Education until the 2007 'Draft Guidelines for Exceptionally Abled Students' (5). These guidelines provided broad suggestions for teachers, indicating differentiation as the most effective inclusion tool, however the lack of statutory obligation to enforce the guidelines prevented large scale uptake, and thus support of HAS (6).

## Methodology

A pragmatic approach was taken to ensure that rich and valuable insights were obtained. For this study, a qualitative approach would result in a misrepresentation of the whole population, while a purely quantitative approach would fail to incorporate a range of unique experiences of teachers. Encompassing both methodology types, a mixed-method approach was carried out to obtain a broad overview of teacher awareness of HAS, coupled with comprehensive insights of teacher experiences.

- Quantitative: The aim for the survey was to obtain 30 responses (n=30) from the general teaching population, however only 15 (n=15) were obtained during the data collection window
- Qualitative: 2 teachers (n=2) were interviewed for this study.

## Differentiation

The concept of differentiation is one which embraces the diversity found within a classroom, to bolster motivation and engagement (3 & 7), extending across all levels of the learning experience, from instruction, content, student participation and how students demonstrate their understanding (8). Differentiation is not about changing the quality of the content, but instead providing tools to make the material accessible, and appropriately challenging for all students (8 & 9). Effective differentiation would achieve the support HAS require to excel in post-primary settings. However, effective differentiation is not guaranteed, and can in fact be hindered by teacher capabilities, school supports and the curriculum requirements (6).

### 'High Ability'

High Ability and/or Exceptionally abled, are terms use to describe individuals who exceed the expected ability of those within their age groups (10). On a normal distribution of ability, they reside in the top 10% of the population (6).

| Characteristics                      | Positive Behavior   | Negative Behavior   |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Learns rapidly/easily                | Memorizes and masters basic facts quickly                   | Gets bored easily, resists drill, disturbs others, underachievers |
| Reads intensively                    | Reads, uses library on own                                  | Neglects other responsibilities                                   |
| Perfectionist                        | Exceptional accomplishments                                 | Intolerant of mistakes, reluctant to try new things               |
| Long attention span                  | Sticks with task of personal interest                       | Resists class routine, dislikes interruptions                     |
| Imaginative, curious, many interests | Asks questions, gets excited about ideas, takes risks       | Goes on tangents, no follow through, disorganized                 |
| Works independently                  | Creates and invents beyond assigned tasks                   | Refuses to work with others                                       |
| Alert, observant                     | Recognizes problems   | Impolitely corrects adults  |
| Highly verbal, extensive vocabulary  | Fluent with words and numbers, leads peers in positive ways | Leads others into negative behaviors, monopolizes discussion      |

Table 1: Characteristics and associated behaviours of High Ability Students

### Inclusion of HAS

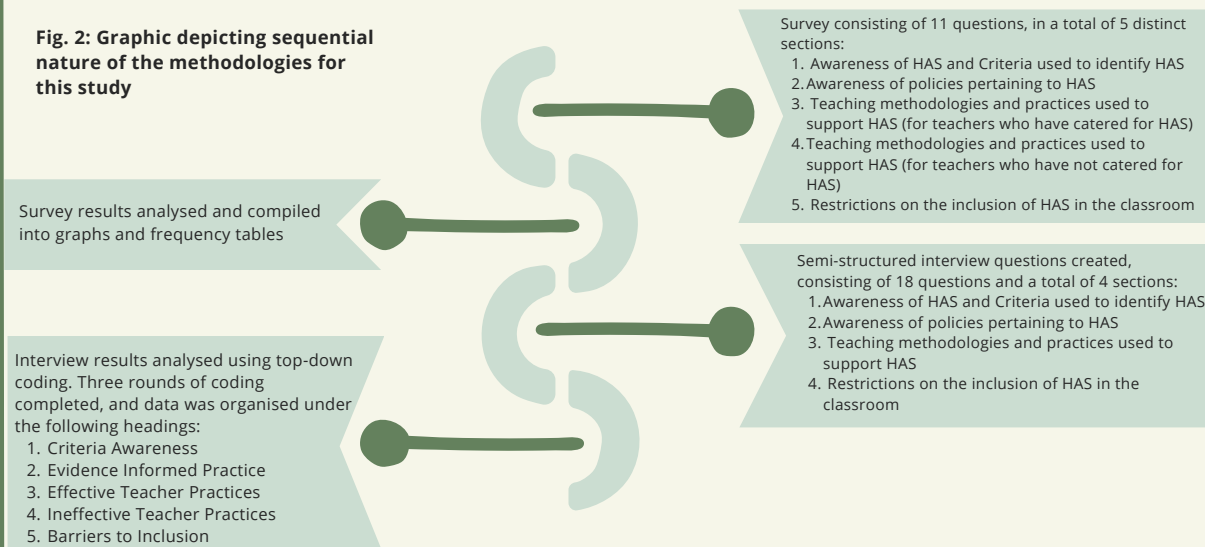
Within mainstream education, HAS often fail to develop their full potential, underachieving as a result of disengagement and boredom (1, 11 & 12). Educators often to take the position that HAS, 'will do fine', given that they tend to develop an understanding of material easier than other students. This perception, coupled with the inadequacy of the curriculum with regards to challenge, can leave HAS being left under-stimulated and frustrated (1, 11 & 12).

### Aims

- To identify key practices used to include HAS in post-primary classrooms
- To develop an understanding of the positives and negatives of such practices
- To gain an insight into the barriers to including HAS in post-primary classrooms

This study took a sequential approach whereby the results of the survey directly influenced the questions posed during two semi-structured interviews. Note: both the survey and interview questions were piloted and adjusted accordingly prior to sampling and data collection.

Fig. 2: Graphic depicting sequential nature of the methodologies for this study



## Key Findings - Survey

9 of the participants stated they had previously catered for HAS in their classrooms, and shared their experiences on the most effective and the least effective teaching practices they have employed to do so.

| Most effective teaching practice or methodologies | Frequency (No. of mentions) |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Varying assessment                                | 4                           |
| Problem solving                                   | 4                           |
| Giving students ownership over their own learning | 3                           |
| Differentiated worksheets                         | 3                           |
| Providing suitable materials                      | 2                           |
| Diversifying materials                            | 2                           |
| Tiered questioning                                | 2                           |

Table 2: Table outlining the frequency in which teaching practices or methodologies arose when asked, 'What are the most effective teaching methodologies you have used to accomodate HAS?'

| Least effective teaching practice or methodology | Frequency (No. of mentions) |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Additional work                                  | 6                           |
| Following standard ciriculum                     | 4                           |
| Tiered questioning                               | 4                           |

Table 3: Table outlining the frequency in which teaching practices or methodologies arose when asked 'What are the least effective teaching methodologies you have used to accomodate HAS?'

All participants shared what they believe to be the largest barriers to the inclusion of HAS in the classroom

| Barrier to the Inclusion of HAS     | Frequency (No. of mentions) |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Lack of time during the class       | 15                          |
| Lack of time to prepare materials   | 15                          |
| Large class sizes                   | 7                           |
| Finding level appropriate materials | 6                           |

Table 4: Table outlining the frequency in which barriers to the inclusion of HAS

## Discussion

Due to the small scale of this study, and small number of teachers surveyed and interviewed, the results cannot be said to represent the whole population, however, results aligned with relevant literature, which would indicate this study acts as a strong foundation from which to build off.

### Criteria Awareness:

- The findings from this study suggest that while teachers are aware of HAS, there might be a limited understanding of the criteria which defines HAS. This could be a consequence of the omission of HAS from prominent education legislation, such as the EPSEN Act (2004) (13), and subsequent guidelines outlining supports for SEN (14).

### Evidence Informed Practice:

- There are mixed reviews on the only guidelines pertaining to HAS in Irish Education (5), however data collected in the interviews suggest that a more active approach to providing information on pedagogical supports for HAS may result in greater uptake from teachers. The non-descriptive nature of the guidelines is named as a deficiency, and subject-specific worked examples are proposed as an alternative

### Effective and Ineffective Teacher Practices:

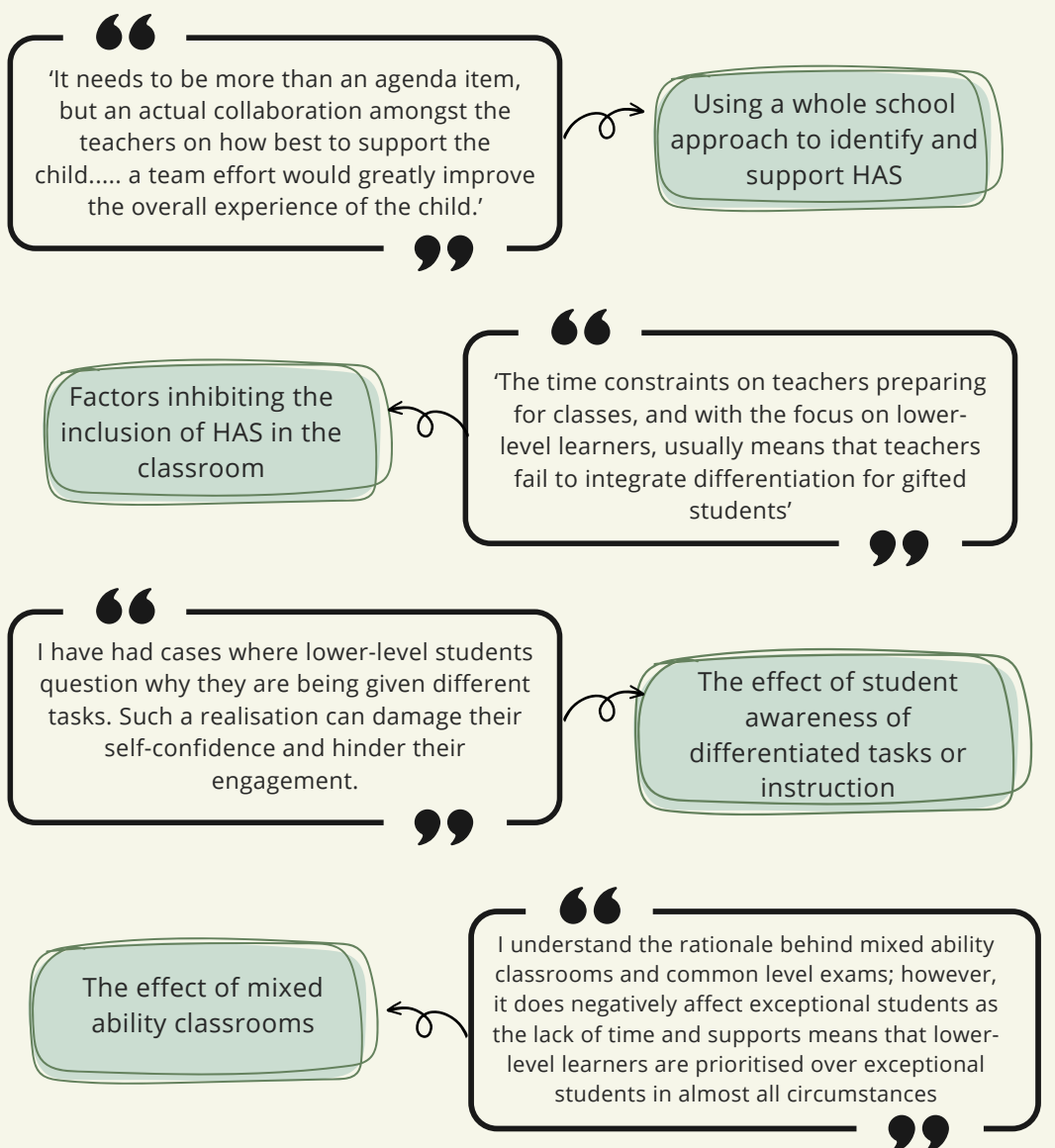
- Variation in resources, activities and assessments dominated the findings in terms of effective methods in supporting HAS. Participants discussed the benefits of allowing HAS to explore more complex material, engage in activities with a problem-solving approach and providing appropriate challenges for such students.
- The prescription of additional work to HAS can yield negative results. This aligns with the research that HAS can often feel punished when additional work is given, a consequence of finishing early, which can result in disengagement (6 & 15)

### Barriers to Inclusion:

- Time was declared by all participants as a barrier to the inclusion of HAS, pertaining to resource curation, completion of curriculum and providing in class support. The concept of in class support was readily mentioned by participants, specifically the focus on supporting lower-level students or students with GLD over HAS.
- While both interviews commended the new JC Science Specification, they stated that while the common level and paper closes the gap between lower level and mainstream students, it fails to provide inclusive content for HAS.

## Key Findings - Interview

Fig. 3: Graphic depicting key quotes and relevant areas, collected during the interviews for this study



## Conclusion

This study gathered valuable insights into teachers experiences accommodating HAS, however, more detailed research would be required to draw strong, clear and concise conclusions around the provision for HAS in Irish post-primary schools. Such research might consider the following topics:

1. A comprehensive review of the most effective differentiation practices used to support HAS
2. A subject specific review of accommodations for HAS
3. Comprehensive guidelines on how to use the JC framework to support an equitable classroom
4. Worked examples and resource templates to support teachers in accommodating HAS in their classroom.

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