

**The self-efficacy and confidence of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students in understanding the learning needs of children with autism: Findings from a focus group discussion**

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**Abstract**

This research explored influences on self-efficacy and confidence for ITE students when teaching children with autism. Self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1997), is a person's perception of their capacity to carry out a course of action which will enable their attainment. The language of confidence was adopted when considering how ITE students experience self-efficacy. Qualitative data from interviews and a focus group discussion were analysed adopting an interpretative approach. Initial thematic analysis revealed the perceived importance of first-hand experience to develop knowledge and confidence, echoing Bandura's (2006) argument that self-efficacy is developed through mastery experiences. The interrelated influence of emotional competency was also identified as pervading the discourse (Bunăiașu, 2018). Interpretative analysis of the group discussion identified an increase in the perceived confidence of participants. Findings therefore support Bandura's claim that talking develops self-efficacy and confidence through vicarious and persuasive experiences (Bandura, 1997). The vicarious experience enabled through the focus group appears to have supported emotional competence. Consequently, confidence and self-efficacy appear to have increased, when reflecting on teaching children with autism. Further research is needed to explore whether such experiences in focus group discussion can potentially inform pedagogical approaches to develop self-efficacy, confidence and emotional competence.

**Key words**

Self-efficacy; confidence; teacher education; autism; emotional competence.

**Introduction**

Internationally and in the United Kingdom, teacher education has typically followed a model whereby programmes are structured around higher education (HE) taught content and school-based professional practice (Butler and Cuenca, 2012; Van Ginkel et al., 2016; Aitken et al., 2017). In 1978, the Warnock Report first argued that children with special educational needs should be educated with their peers and integrated into mainstream schools (Warnock, 1978). By the 1990s, the Department for Education and Schools (DES) had introduced the idea that training teachers needed to know how to support children's learning for those with educational needs. Golder, Norwich and Bayliss (2005) noted that when focused on teaching children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), the perception of a disconnection between theory and reality can be crystallised, with Initial Teacher Education students (ITE) reporting a lack of preparedness. Concurrently, the Department for Education in England (DFE) reported that twenty-eight percent of children in England with Education and Health Care (EHC) plans were identified with autism (DFE, 2018). This study, therefore, aimed to explore why ITE students in the institution felt a lack of confidence when preparing to teach children with autism and how self-efficacy could be increased.

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Confidence, according to Stankov, Lee, Luo and Hogan (2012:747) is the certain belief that a behaviour will result in a successful outcome. However, Sniezek (1992) observed that in the common discourse of confidence, uncertainty or lack of confidence is also expressed. When uncertainty about confidence is articulated, there is an overlap between confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Bandura defines self-efficacy as the perception in one's capacity to attain certain outcomes (Bandura, 1997:3). This study, therefore, aimed to explore how ITE students experience self-efficacy when preparing to teach children with autism, through the discourse of confidence. Interviews and a focus group discussion were thematically analysed to investigate how ITE students experience self-efficacy. Four themes emerged: Students' beliefs that experience of teaching children with autism should come first and knowledge later; their own sense of responsibility for teaching children with autism in their classes; the emotions experienced, both positive and negative and the importance of knowing the individual child. The emotional responses were further analysed adopting Bunăiaşu's (2018) emotional competencies of a teacher, revealing a correspondence between the themes identified initially and the emotional competencies. The process of participating in the focus group appears to have influenced the emotional responses of the students and increased their sense of self-efficacy and confidence.

### **Literature Review**

The view that Initial Teacher Education providers do not embed the importance of adapting teaching to meet the needs of those with SEN was highlighted by Golder, Norwich and Bayliss (2005). Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) introduce the concept of 'pathognomonic' and 'interventionist' teachers (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden 2000:281). A pathognomonic teacher considers a child's disability to be inherent within the individual whereas 'interventionist' teachers attribute the child's difficulties to an interaction between the child and their environment. Findings of Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) indicate that the attitude of student teachers to inclusion can have implications for how they adopt inclusive practices and their confidence in doing so. Inclusive attitude is emphasised in 'The Profile of Inclusive Teachers' produced by the European Agency for the Development of Special Needs Education (2012), where valuing learner diversity is the first standard in the profile (European Agency for the development of Special Needs Education, 2012:11). The student teacher with a pathognomonic approach, for example, may have a disempowering response to a child with SEN. If the need is viewed as internal to the child, the student teacher may have little confidence that they are able to have impact upon the child's learning. However, the National Curriculum in England (DFE 2014) contains an 'inclusion statement' which states that the curriculum must be adapted and accessible to children with SEN.

An example of how pathognomonic practice can have implications for teaching approaches, whether unconsciously or proactively, is the consideration of impairments related to autism. Wing and Gould (1979) clarified identification of autistic spectrum disorders by outlining three areas of impairment, now commonly recognised as the triad of impairments (Wing and Gould, 1979:11). The purpose of their clarification was to ensure that those who might previously have been excluded from identification with autism owing to differing criteria, would now be identified and have their needs mitigated. The approach was that of medical diagnosis, therefore, clarifying the impairments to seek treatment. The Autism Education Trust (2018) however, adopts the language of difference instead of difficulty or impairment as well as recognising the preference of some of those with an identification to be referred to as autistic. The disempowerment experienced by a pathognomonic teacher can be heightened by the medical approach to autism, producing feelings of not being expert enough or not having enough knowledge. The language of 'difference', however, could encourage an interventionist response whereby getting to know the individual child predominates.

The connection between knowledge of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and depression, and the emotional response of student teachers was researched by Kikas and Tomošćuk (2016). Lack of knowledge negatively correlated to negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, shame, in the student teachers. Kikas and Tomošćuk argue that increased knowledge, will therefore increase the positive emotions and interactions between pupils with ADHD and depression and the student teachers. A key area of research is whether there is a specialist pedagogy for children with SEN, as outlined by Norwich and Lewis (2007) or whether notions of specialism for SEN in teacher education create a discourse of 'expertism' (Robinson, 2017) resulting in student teachers feeling inexperienced when teaching children with SEN. Lewis and Norwich (2007) developed a continuum of pedagogic need, ranging from general differences to unique differences for the individual. Their research was conducted employing experts in different areas of SEN. However, by conducting the research utilising different specialist experts in different SEN, the findings are filtered through the observations of those experts. Robinson (2017), argues that by adopting the language of expertise, training teachers inevitably feel under-prepared, inexperienced and novice when teaching their children with SEN. A pathognomonic attitude is exacerbated because the student teacher considers others as having the expertise to support a child with a specific medical diagnosis. By planning meaningful experiences for student teachers, so that they respond to the needs of specific individuals, confidence in teaching children with SEN increased.

Bandura maintains that self-efficacy is embedded within social learning and is influenced by four sources: performance attainments or mastery, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and physiological state (strength or vulnerability). Clark and Newberry (2019) applied Bandura's framework of mastery experiences, vicarious experiences and persuasive experiences to enhance student teacher self-efficacy. According to Bandura, self-efficacy appraisal of perceived capabilities acts as a proximal determinant to behaviour, thought patterns and emotional reactions (Bandura, 2006). Additionally, successful attainment provides an influential source of efficacy information. Inefficacious judgements dwell on personal deficiencies and imagine potential difficulties as more challenging. Bandura's point here relates to Robinson's (2017) argument that expert discourse in the world of SEN can engender student feelings of inadequacy and creates the perception that teaching children with SEN is more formidable.

The emotional responses of teachers were recognised by Bunăiaşu, (2018) as essential to self-efficacy. Her categories of emotional competency for teachers were based on the theory of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996). They include cognitive (knowing the emotions of yourself and the students), methodological (how to motivate the students), networking and communication, and managerial (managing the emotional classroom environment). Bandura (2006) noted in relation to self-efficacy, that one could not be all things, a sentiment which is mirrored in the world of SEN, where the breadth of understanding across a broad range of need is extensive. He points out the perceived locus of control is also highly influential on perceived capability, whether outcome contingencies are dependent on the person's perceptions of the outcome as a result of their actions or outside influences. The locus of control argument is resonant of the pathognomonic or interventionist teacher. Where the locus of control is situated with outside influences, the pathognomonic teacher will consider the difficulty as internal to the child and out of their control. Alternatively, interventionist teachers will view the locus of control to support the child as integral to themselves. The implication is that by knowing the needs of the individual child, they can intervene appropriately.

This literature review has identified a range of affective influences on self-efficacy of ITE students when teaching children with autism, including the concepts of pathognomonic or interventionists attitudes, the locus of control and the discourse of expertism in relation to autism and SEN. These influences, in turn, impact upon confidence and self-efficacy by allowing students to feel diminished

in their knowledge and experience, viewing others as more expert than themselves and managing emotional responses. The aim of this research was, therefore, to explore how ITE students describe their feelings and experience of self-efficacy and confidence when teaching children with autism.

### **Methodology**

This study considers how student teachers perceive their confidence and self-efficacy when preparing to teach children with autism. A critical realist (Bhasker, 1975) philosophy was adopted through grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Oliver (2012) and Bunt (2018) have argued that the critical realist paradigm and grounded theory perspective complement each other on epistemological and ontological views. Oliver (2012) points out that critical realist grounded theory moves from individual actions to reasons to rules to structures. Attention to the individual meaning making is 'an integral step to understanding causal mechanisms' (Oliver, 2012:381). The individual meaning making of the ITE students when considering their self-efficacy and confidence was central to the chosen methodology.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two ITE students and an experienced teacher. A focus group discussion was held without the researcher present. Transcripts from both interviews and focus group were analysed through continuous coding and comparison of concepts to develop themes. Initially two students were invited to be interviewed. Initial analysis of the data revealed to the researcher that the positive relationship which had developed between the researcher and the students during the year meant that a demand effect was created (Orne, 1962). Subsequently, a focus group discussion was held without the presence of the researcher and recorded by the participants. By removing the presence of the researcher, the demand effect was reduced.

The interview involved six semi-structured interview questions and a sorting activity of statements related to feelings of confidence (see appendix 1). The sorting activity was developed to prompt reflection and discussion connected to their feelings of confidence when teaching children with autism (see appendix 2). The focus group discussion and interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield and Terry, 2018), using descriptive codes and analytic codes. Initial analysis revealed that emotional response pervaded the discourse. Therefore, the researcher further analysed the qualitative data adopting the conceptual framework of the emotional competence of teachers (Bunăiașu, 2018).

Ethical considerations were taken into account according to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines (BERA, 2018) and the Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) ethical guidelines for research (CCCU, 2016). Informed consent was sought, informed through a detailed outline about the research in an information sheet and consent forms signed. It was explained to all participants that their data would be kept confidential by anonymisation. Additionally, participants were notified that there was an intention to publish the report. It was also pointed out that they had a right to withdraw any time up until a given date by which time data would have combined in analysis.

### **Findings**

To explore the research question, how do ITE students experience their feelings of confidence when teaching children with autism, thematic analysis was employed (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield and Terry, 2018). Interviews and the focus group discussion were recorded and transcribed. Descriptive codes were identified from the transcripts, interpreted by the researcher into axial codes which in turn were grouped into themes (see appendix 3: thematic analysis).

Theme 1

*The defined roles of professionals in Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision can influence feelings of responsibility for the progression of children with autism.*

Theme 2

*Knowing the individual child can influence how student teachers respond to children with autism and counteract the disadvantages of labelling.*

Theme 3

*Positive and negative emotions can influence confidence when teaching children with autism.*

Theme 4

*Insights into how to support children with autism in the classroom develop first from experience and then knowledge.*

Theme 1: The defined roles of professionals in Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision can influence feelings of responsibility for the progression of children with autism.

One of the key ideas analysed was the notion that the specialised roles assigned to help support children with autism can impact on feelings of confidence. By line 4 of the focus group discussion, a participant was referring to specific personnel in the school to whom she had turned to seek knowledge about children with autism. Notably, the knowledge was referred to as 'given', implying the passive receiving of the knowledge by the recipient. The specific provision and roles seemed to give the ITE students a feeling that they were not experienced enough to teach these children. The researcher therefore interpreted these comments initially as disempowering. For example, the participant in interview 1 claimed that:

We weren't good enough for most, like... to teach him. That's not how ...its kind of ...you're not very experienced like, ... that sort of thing'

(Interview 1: line 27- 29).

However, the assigning of roles influenced more positive feelings of confidence because there was a clear sense that they were not alone. Notwithstanding the feeling of lack of expertise, all participants in the focus group and the interviews acknowledged that they felt ultimately responsible for supporting the learning of children with autism in their classes. During the sorting activity, this was placed near the top or at the top.

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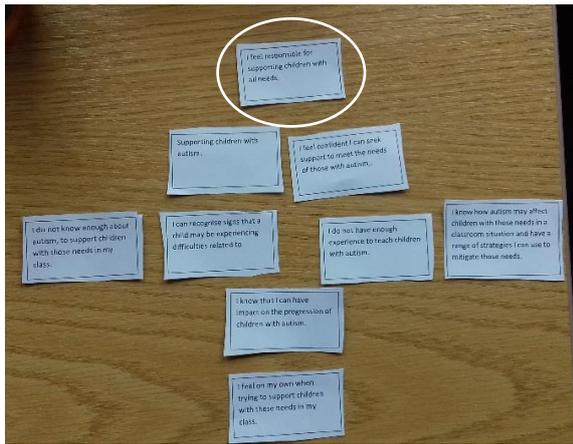


Figure 1. Interview 1.

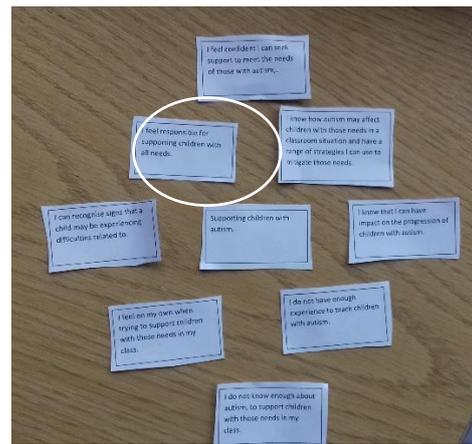


Figure 2. Interview 2.

Where supporting children with autism is concerned, they felt that they were responsible as teachers but that the responsibility is shared with the specialists within and outside the school and the parents.

Theme 2: Knowing the individual child can influence how student teachers respond to children with autism and counteract the disadvantages of labelling.

A recurrent thread through the discourse was that knowledge about how to support children with autism comes through knowing the individual child and this can counteract the negative consequences of a label of autism.

...you see body language and you see how they talk to you and what makes them tick and what doesn't...and you don't know that unless ...unless you just ...get in there  
(Participant 1: line 281-283).

Knowing the individual children, therefore, enabled individual responses to the behaviour presented and their differences in learning. There was implicit understanding that a teacher can create the learning environment where children respond to others with acceptance.

Theme 3: Positive and negative emotions can influence confidence when teaching children with autism.

Both positive and negative feelings were expressed about the possibility of teaching children with autism. A participant in the focus group discussion, for example, reflected upon her feelings about teaching a lesson the following day:

I've got a math lesson maths. I've got do tomorrow. Yeah, just me. Yeah, thank you. And I've got three or four autistic children either diagnosed or being or not yet. And it is a bit scary  
(Participant 1:line 505-507).

However, during the following thirty lines of discussion amongst the group, she convinced herself that in fact, she knew the children well, how they were likely to respond and that she knew how to respond to them. She wondered if her nerves were in fact linked to teaching the whole class (a relatively new development in their progress as year 1 BA beginner teachers).

At the beginning of the focus discussion, all apart from participant 2 professed feelings of not having enough experience and knowledge to feel confident about teaching children with autism. However, by midway, the negative feelings were changed to more positive ones. The change appeared to be influenced by listening to each other sharing experiences and approaches.

**Table 1.** Changes from negative to positive expressions of confidence.

Expressions of lack of confidence	Expressions of increased confidence
Total number of lines - 606	
<p>also the subjects I do is what they don't really do ... (Participant 5: line 46 – 'they' = children with autism taken out for intervention)</p> <p>Yeah, I can't say I'm very confident (Participant 1: line 226-227)</p> <p>I don't feel confident at all, .....whatsoever at all (Participant 5: line 239-240).</p>	<p>I don't feel like very confident, but I'm not scared (Participant 4: line 273-274).</p> <p>It's just like, okay, let's find new strategies that are ... we might not have had to think about before (Participant 4: line 275-276).</p> <p>...how can I adapt what I've just said so that you understand it? (Participant 1: line 287).</p> <p>...always someone that you can talk to yeah, it's not like 100 percent my responsibility as a teacher, but you know, you shared so... (Participant 1: line 307-309).</p> <p>...it's all about collaboration... (Participant 2: line 301).</p> <p>...I think it's common sense to a large degree.. (Participant 2: line 443).</p> <p>...I know how to react, yeah..it is...but I am wondering now whether it is just the whole class.. (Participant 1: line 535-536 – context = whole class teaching for the first time causing anxiety more than having children with autism in the class).</p> <p>It is just experience, isn't it? Yeah, getting over the hurdle (Participant 1: line 588).</p>

Notably, participant 2 went on to say that teaching children with SEN was one of the reasons she chose to become a teacher. The researcher interpreted this as a reflection on her teacher identity or teacher persona, the reason for wanting to teach embedded within wanting to support different needs in the classroom. Throughout the focus group discussions and interviews, therefore, although expressions of feeling not confidence were evident, these were counteracted by a pragmatic recognition that meeting different needs is part of the job of being a teacher. There was an evolving realisation that responding to different children, including those with autism was enabled through getting to know the individual children and this aspect was not particularly worrying, for example participant 4 stated that:

...won't be scared of it because it's teaching (Participant 4: line 353).

Theme 4: Insights into how to support children with autism in the classroom develop first from experience and then knowledge.

During the focus group discussion, there was an initial feeling expressed that they did not have enough experience to feel confident in teaching children with autism. However, this was later qualified by an acceptance that as beginner teachers, this was inevitable and likely to be a continuous experience. One participant stated that:

Yeah, you will always have not enough experience in a way. You always have to, you know, gain more and more and more. I always feel I am still much like I'm still learning because I think it helps them as well

(Participant 5: line 326-328).

Consequentially, feeling that they did not have enough experience was not necessarily going to hamper how they responded to and supported children with autism in their classes. Feelings were expressed that they did not have enough knowledge, but they could not have extensive knowledge at this early point in their course. A focus group participant expressed that:

Yeah because it's not enough but it's a starting point (Participant 2: line 496).

In their view, understanding develops through first-hand experience and both knowledge and experience create the feelings of confidence in teaching those with autism. Their perceptions echo with Bandura's (2006) argument that self-efficacy is developed through mastery experiences, first-hand practical experiences.

#### **Analysis through the conceptual framework for the emotional competency of the teacher**

The research aimed to draw connections between descriptions of feelings related to confidence when teaching children with autism and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006). Bandura identified that self-efficacy produces emotional reactions (Bandura, 2006). Feelings, therefore, were integrated throughout the research findings and thus were closely related to Bunăiaşu's (2018) conceptual framework for the emotional competency of the teacher. Bunăiaşu (2018) developed her conceptual framework of the emotional competency of the teacher from Goleman's (1996) concept of emotional intelligence. The four aspects of the emotional competency of the teacher were evident in the comments of the participants when considering teaching children with autism.

Bunăiaşu's (2018) four elements of the emotional competency of the teacher were cognitive, (knowing their own and other's emotions), methodological, (knowing how to motivate others), networking and communication and managerial, (understanding how to deploy strategies to respond to the emotional need in the class). The four themes in this research do not map directly onto the four aspects of emotional competency for the teacher, although participant responses do associate with each element of the framework. These correlations support Bunăiaşu's (2018) argument that emotional competency pervade all elements of teaching competencies. Interview and focus group transcripts were therefore re-analysed applying Bunăiaşu's emotional competencies.

#### *Emotional Competency (Cognitive) and theme 'knowing the individual'*

The cognitive emotional competency relates to how a teacher can recognise their own emotions and the emotions of the pupils in their class and respond accordingly. At significant points in the focus

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group discussion and interviews, participants described critical moments when they had understood the emotions of a child with autism and the insight this understanding had given them, enabling an appropriate response. For example, a focus group participant described:

...but the fact that he said that he was exploding inside of his head...it kind of gives you a wow..., like it's not just you can't cope because she's talking too much

(Participant 1: line 202-206).

The process of participating in the focus group discuss seemed to enable reflection on their own emotions when considering teaching children with autism. When considering their emotions, the participants of both the group discussion and the interviews described feeling not confident but not scared:

I don't feel like very confident, but I'm not scared. It's like no, it's not something that I'm like. Oh my gosh, I can't do it. It's just like, okay, let's find new strategies that are..... might not have had think about it before

(Participant 4: line 273-276).

*Emotional competence (methodological) and theme 'knowledge insights develop from experience'*

The idea expressed by participants that knowing how to motivate and support the child with autism stems from getting to know the individual themselves, interrelates with the methodological emotional competence. Once again, there was a change in emotional response during the focus group. Towards the beginning of discussion, participant 4 observed:

...you have like twenty nine thirty other children in the class that don't have autism. Yeah, you've got to teach them unified strategy what is going to work with them and the child who is autistic. I don't feel confident at all, ...Whatsoever at all

(Participant 4: line 237-241).

However, as the discussion progressed on methodological decisions made to motivate and engage children with autism, negative feelings changed to more positive ones.

*Emotional competence (networking and communication) and theme 'role of others'*

The emotional competency of networking and communication is the closest to corresponding to the theme of 'the role of others'. The participants repeatedly stated that they did not feel alone when supporting children with autism and named the roles of professionals they would approach for help, 'I don't feel like that (alone) because of the SENCO and the TA and class teacher.' (Participant 5: line 305-306 – brackets inserted by researcher). Participant 2 confirmed this perception of collaboration, 'It's all about collaboration...' (Participant 2: line 310). Furthermore, the focus group participants reassured each other by insisting that seeking help by networking with others was a strength, similar to Bunăiașu's (2018) argument that capability to network and communicate facilitates emotional competence in collaborative working.

*Emotional competence (managerial) and theme 'positive and negative feelings'*

The theme of positive and negative feelings about teaching children with autism pervades all the emotional competencies for the teacher. However, when the participants discussed specific strategies and approaches relating to managing the classroom and the needs of the child with autism, the discussion crystallised the realisation that they were already adopting different approaches. Participant 4, for example discussed a girl with autism in her class who would struggle with group work. She went on to identify how a whole class approach was developed with her in mind, where group work for the whole class was carried out on the floor. This response to an individual need

resulted in a whole class approach, not detrimental to the rest of the class, as the participant identified, *'everybody's involved...'* (Participant 4, line 268-269).

### Discussion

This study aimed to explore how ITE students experience confidence when considering how to support children with autism. The story expressed by the participants was one of not feeling wholly confident but not particularly scared or worried. They expressed a pragmatic realisation that they were starting out on their careers and would not have enough experience or knowledge but were open to gaining both. The focus group and interviewees did not feel alone, the *'defined roles of others'* theme indicated the range of people they felt able to consult for help and advice. The participants expressed both positive and negative emotions but as the discussion progressed within the group and the interviews, the process increased a sense of confidence and self-efficacy. This process of sharing insights into understanding the needs of individual children also encouraged a more enabling, interventionist attitude (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, 2000), evidenced in the *'knowing the individual'* theme. The *knowledge develops through experience* theme explored how the participants felt experience will develop knowledge and both together will build confidence. Ultimately, they felt responsible for supporting the progress of children with autism.

An initial point of discussion within this study was student teacher attitudes to inclusion (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, (2000), exploring the idea that attitude to inclusion relates to how teachers respond to children with pervasive developmental disorders. These attitudes can be interventionist or pathognomonic. The essence of the argument which is connected to this study is the recognition that the belief in a successful outcome underpins the interventionist attitude. Early in the focus group discussion, there was evidence of a pathognomonic view influencing one of the participants who referred to a couple of children receiving intervention outside the classroom and commented that *'they're really like, they're really lovely as well...'* (Participant 4, line 48). However, as soon as the conversation turned to individual characteristics and developing an understanding of how to respond to those characteristics, an interventionist attitude became apparent. This was most evident in the discussion about how responding to children with autism in an understanding way, based on a developing knowledge of autism, was the 'job' of the teacher, interpreted as a 'teacher persona' by the researcher. The reiteration of expressions of responsibility for supporting children with autism also corresponds to the observations of Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000), who identified that feelings of responsibility correlated positively with increased inclusive instruction.

A further theme developed was whether increased subject knowledge of pervasive developmental disorders influences self-efficacy. Golder, Norwich and Bayliss (2005) identified that increased knowledge developed through first-hand experience enabled the ITE students to feel more prepared when teaching children with SEN. Findings in this study also develop the idea that first-hand experiences of children with autism enable better understanding of the child and how autism may present. The participants expressed the view that experience is the starting point for deeper understanding and increased knowledge. Findings of this study correspond more with those studies who identified increased experience as increasing knowledge, understanding and confidence when teaching children with SEN (Golder, Norwich and Bayliss, 2005; Richards, 2010). Feelings of inadequacy were expressed by the students at the beginning of the discussion, reflecting Robinson's (2017) argument that the discourse of expertism creates these feelings and a potentially pathognomonic attitude. However, the participants countered this argument by expressing that although they felt responsible for the teaching of children with autism, they did not feel alone, because there were others with expertise to support them.

Underpinning findings related to attitude and experience are the emotional competencies which Bunăiaşu (2018) argues interrelate with all other teaching competencies. Bunăiaşu (2018) maintains that the conceptual framework for the emotional competency of the teacher will influence practical teaching competencies. This interconnected relationship was identified between the themes in this study and emotional competencies of the teacher. The research findings emerging from the participant descriptions of their experience of confidence, through the lens of emotional competence, have implications for how ITE institutions can develop confidence and self-efficacy when teaching children with autism. Findings from the analysis suggest that by developing emotional competency, ITE institutions can influence the confidence of training teachers when they teach children with autism.

### **Conclusion**

The aims of this study were to explore ITE student views about both their self-efficacy and feelings of confidence when teaching children with autism. Grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was adopted to analyse qualitative data. Qualitative data focused on interpretations of the self-efficacy and confidence of the ITE students, so that attention to individual meaning making underpinned understanding causal mechanisms (Oliver, 2012). Initial thematic analysis of the interviews and questionnaires resulted in an emergent focus on how emotions interrelate with perceptions of confidence and self-efficacy. Consequently, the emergent themes from this study interconnected with the emotional competency of the teacher (Bunăiaşu, 2018). Additionally, the process of the focus group appeared to also increase perceptions of confidence. Subsequent research could explore how focus group discussions can be embedded in ITE programmes related to SEN. The discussion group could provide vicarious and persuasive experiences developing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and emotional competence (Bunăiaşu, 2018) thus increasing self-efficacy and confidence of ITE students when teaching children with autism.

### **Research implications**

The findings from this research highlight some interrelated concepts, which could inform the practice within ITE institutions to develop student teachers' self-efficacy and confidence when teaching children with autism. The focus group discussion was a vicarious experience, developed around the participants imagining teaching children with autism and consequently, reflecting on mastery experiences undertaken to date (Bandura, 1997). Findings and analysis within this study suggest that increased confidence in teaching children with autism can be developed through facilitating emotional competency (Bunăiaşu (2018) within focus group discussion.

There were a number of limitations within this project. This study was small scale and findings can only be applied to the participants involved, within the research setting. Reflexive analysis (Shaw, 2010) carried out during the process of thematic analysis highlighted how the language of the sorting activity cards was adopted by some participants but questioned by others. The researcher therefore reflected that leaving semi-structured questions open to allow for the participants to choose their own expression may have produced different responses. The researcher perceived demand characteristics (Orne, 1962) taking place, where the participants appeared to want to please the researcher by responding in the 'right' way in their view.

### Recommendations for further research

Expressions of confidence or lack of confidence, presented in Table 1. demonstrate how through the process of holding the discussion group, the comments of the group themselves appeared to encourage each other. Analysis revealed that initial expressions of lack of confidence during the focus group discussion developed to indicate increased confidence towards the end. Discussion of the results and findings of this study indicate that emotional competence interacts with confidence and self-efficacy when considering teaching children with autism. Further research could explore how focus group discussion as a pedagogical approach develops knowledge of emotions, methodological understanding of emotions, networking and managerial competency. These elements of emotional competency may strengthen confidence and self-efficacy because the focus group discussion provides vicarious and persuasive experience (Bandura, 1997).

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1.** Semi- structured interview questions.

#### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

##### Sorting activity

1. In your teacher training so far, what knowledge and experience have you gained about supporting children with autism.
2. Can you sort these statements to form a diamond (see example), demonstrating how you would prioritise these statements in relation to your feelings of confidence when teaching children with autism:
3. Did you find the coverage of pervasive developmental disorders such as autism helpful? If so how? If not, why not?
4. Where do you go to seek further information about autism?
5. Are there particular people you would seek support from when teaching children with autism.
6. Do you have any worries about teaching children with autism? If so, what are they? If not, can you explain why you feel confidence in these areas?

**Appendix 2.** Sorting Activity.

I feel responsible for supporting children with all needs.

I feel confident I can seek support to meet the needs of those with autism.

Supporting children with autism scares me.

I feel on my own when trying to support children with these needs in my class.

I know that I can have impact on the progression of children with autism.

I do not know enough about autism, to support children with those needs in my class.

I do not have enough experience to teach children with autism.

I can recognise signs that a child may be experiencing difficulties related to autism.

I know how autism may affect children with those needs in a classroom situation and have a range of strategies I can use to mitigate those needs.

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**Appendix 3.** Thematic Analysis.

Descriptive Codes		Axiol (analytic codes)	Themes
Other colleagues Knowledge given Roles assigned to others Roles of others disempower Role of TA Not alone	OC KG RA ROD TA NA	Impact on confidence when teaching children with autism of the roles of others.	The defined roles of professionals in SEN provision can influence feelings of responsibility for the progress of children with autism.
Feel responsible Shared responsibility	FR SR	Responsibility	
Not diagnosed Autism not physical Perceived preconceptions Not seen Future concerns Labelling Separation Not knowing a person with autism Social acceptance Exclusion	ND ANP PP NS FC L S NK SA E	Impact of labelling, preconceptions and exclusion of children with autism	Knowing the individual child can influence how student teachers respond to children with autism and counteract the disadvantages of labelling.
Responding to difference Responding to behaviour Age response to difference Cannot know another's perspective	R to D R to B AR CK	Responding to children with autism (student teachers and other children)	
Individual characteristics Knowledge through knowing the individual Knowing backgrounds	IC KKI KB	Impact on confidence of knowing the individual	
Scary Not confident but not scared Not confident	S NC but NS NC	Personal emotions and feelings about teaching children with autism	Positive and negative feelings and emotions can influence confidence when teaching children with autism.
Common sense Confident Not an issue Teacher persona Not worried but open to it	CS C NI TP NWO	Positive emotions and feelings about teaching children with autism	

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Descriptive Codes		Axiol (analytic codes)	Themes
Experience-understanding	E-U	Impact of experience on confidence	Insights into how to support children with autism in the classroom develop firstly from experience and then knowledge.
Not enough experience	NEE		
Not expert teachers	NET		
Experience-knowledge-confidence	E-K-C		
Specific experience	Sp E	Impact of knowledge on confidence	
Specific knowledge	Sp K		
Knowledge insight	KI		
Not enough knowledge	NEK		
Wider impact of specific knowledge	WISK		
Integrated subject knowledge	ISK		
Experience-Knowledge-Confidence	E-K-C		
Basic knowledge starting point	BKSP		
School provision	SP		
Specialist provision	Sp P		
Provision in time	P in T		
Strategies	S		
Knowing how to provide	KH to P		